

Emmanuel Macron slams UK government as he sets French EU presidency agenda

Macron called for a united Europe, with France set to assume the rotating EU presidency. He voiced distrust in the UK government and said he didn't want to "politicize" sport ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

With France set to start its six-month stint in the rotating EU presidency, Emmanuel Macron spoke on Thursday of a budget rethink within the bloc, took a swipe at the post-Brexit British government and said he planned remote talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin next week.

Macron also said that France would not be following in the footsteps of the United States, UK, Canada and Australia, by conducting a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics, set to take place in February 2022.

The French leader said his priorities for the European Council presidency were encapsulated within the motto: "Recovery, power, belonging" as he seeks a "strong, fully sovereign, and united Europe."

France's aim was "to move towards a Europe that is powerful in the world, free in its choices and in charge of its own destiny," Macron said at a news conference in Paris.

France takes on the rotating presidency as Belarus stands accused of engineering a refugee crisis on EU borders, amid global calls for a tougher stance on China over human rights issues, during renewed tensions with Russia over Ukraine, and as post-Brexit relations with the UK — not least Franco-British ties — become more and more strained.

Macron on EU budget

The French president said it was possible the bloc would need to go beyond the initial €750-billion coronavirus recovery package.

Macron, speaking a day before hosting Germany's new Chancellor Olaf Scholz, said he would use France's six-month presidency to convene an extraordinary

summit of the bloc's 27 member state leaders in Paris, on March 10 and 11..

To be held just a month before France's presidential election, Macron said the EU gathering would help define a new European growth model in the wake of the pandemic.

Germany's Scholz supported the original COVID stimulus package but he is wary of any joint borrowing mechanism becoming permanent.

Macron also said the new budget rules must help boost investments in the digital sector. "For that we must start building a budgetary and financial framework that is credible, simplified and transparent," he said.

One aspect, he stressed, will be discussing whether budget stimulus is enough, while also defining whether some national investments can be allowed to go beyond the bloc's allowance.

Macron also believes the EU should try to work towards a common, decent EU minimum wage.

Macron on the UK government

Meanwhile, relations with the UK remain strained over fishing rights, migration and security because the British government cannot be trusted, Macron said.

"The problem with the British government is that it does not do what it says," Macron said, albeit swiftly adding how much he "loved Britain" and "its people."

But "I have an overwhelming desire to have a [British] government that wants to work with us in good faith," Macron said.

Regarding recent tensions over migrant crossings and a row over the granting of British fishing licences to French fishermen, Macron said he wanted the issues resolved before a Paris-imposed deadline on Friday, even though London says it is not working to such a timetable.

Referring to the UK's part in arranging the sale of US-designed submarines to Australia at the expense of French ones, Macron said this was "not the most obvious sign of friendship," before adding that this formulation was an "understatement."

Last month 27 people drowned as they crossed the Channel, heading to Britain from France, and Macron said the UK's policies were to blame, suggesting Britain's economic model was based on illegal labor.

Macron on Russia

Macron said he planned to hold a meeting next week with Russian President Vladimir Putin "online" as he seeks reassurances over the Kremlin's intentions in and around Ukraine.

The French president also said he would be speaking next week with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Tensions between the EU and Russia have escalated in recent months amid reports of Russia amassing troops near its border to Ukraine. This is further compounded by Moscow's close relationship with Minsk, with Brussels accusing Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko of engineering a migration crisis aimed at destabilizing the bloc.

Macron on Beijing Winter Olympics diplomacy

Macron also highlighted the need to avoid "politicizing" sport ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games, which are set to begin on February 4 — indicating that the EU might not be following the diplomatic boycott of the Games.

Several countries have said they will not be sending officials to the event in the Chinese capital, but Macron said he was "in favor of action that has a useful outcome."

"To be clear: You either have a complete boycott, and not send athletes, or you try to change things with useful actions."

Canada is the latest country to announce a diplomatic boycott of the event, joining Australia, Britain and the United States in doing so. China has described the boycotts as "political posturing" and said the countries who opt for this policy will "pay the price."

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