

Why Macron Gave Putin Such a Warm Welcome in France

Pourquoi Macron a-t-il si bien accueilli Poutine en France?

It's impossible for Russia to return to the G7, but it's also impossible for the group to solve many problems important to it without Russia. France's relationship of trust with the Russian leadership, and the opportunity to represent Russia behind the scenes at the group's gatherings, are an important diplomatic asset that France would hate to lose.

French President Emmanuel Macron's hosting of his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at his summer residence in southern France this week was in stark contrast to their previous meeting in the cold and publicly accessible Versailles. Putin arrived with flowers for Macron's wife, and complimented the hosts on their house and sunbathers. Macron acted amiably and even posted in Russian on his Facebook page, again in contrast with Putin's first state visit to France, when the French president chastised his guest over the activities of Russian state-funded media in France. Both the Russians and the French noted the warm atmosphere of the summit, which lasted for four and a half hours.

[Protest-ridden Moscow](#) may be surprised by the warm welcome: after all, the pro-European part of the Russian capital is escalating its relations with Putin, while Europe itself appears to be moving in the opposite direction. Macron's behavior may seem misplaced, but he simply has his own agenda.

So far, European politicians don't view the Moscow protests as a particularly important item on meeting agendas for several reasons. The regional nature of the protests doesn't seem serious enough for them to get involved, even if the discontent occasionally reaches a federal level. Besides, the West isn't just tired of Putin, but also of the protests directed against him. The Western political world understands that the latest protesters will clamor for a bit, and then go home as usual.

In addition, Western governments have doubts as to the anti-Putin opposition's ability to competently fill government vacancies during a hypothetical regime change after twenty years in the wilderness. Europe fears a potential loss of control in an enormous neighboring country. While civil society is maturing and the regime is wilting, Putin and his government are the only representatives Russia has in the international arena. Accordingly, many would be happy with a mixed transition in which reformers from inside the regime unite with select critics from outside of it, without a loss of control.

In the meantime, Putin is responsible for maintaining the equilibrium between his regime's security faction, which seeks to undermine Western interests, and its economic camp, which would like to cooperate on issues of mutual interest. This is precisely why Putin was invited to Macron's picturesque European residence in the Fort de Bregancon: the best way to remind the Russian government about civil rights is to remind it of its European identity and mission. Arrogant preaching doesn't work with the governments of developing countries, whether democratic India or authoritarian Russia.

Foreign concern about domestic civil rights is only possible if the countries share an identity. That is just how Macron is trying to frame the issue, with his statements that Russia is a European country, with a full place in the European family. This, it is implied, is why Russia should observe European principles such as freedom of speech and expression.

Macron believes he has already done a lot to ensure that Russia remains part of Europe. "France has done everything it could for Russia to return to the [Council of Europe](#)," he said at the meeting. "And since France chairs

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the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, we managed to use this opportunity to take the necessary measures.”

From a strategic standpoint, European governments don't want to fully lose Russia to Asia. They don't want a Finnish-Chinese border—once the subject of a Soviet-era joke—to become a political and economic reality.

In addition, as long as the question of Russia's international image remains on the agenda, reminders about human rights abuses matter: one of the reasons the [imprisoned Russian journalist Ivan Golunov](#) was released so quickly is that his arrest had [put a dampener](#) on an important international event, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

For its part, the Russian leadership simply wants to make sure that foreign governments don't use the issue of civil liberties against Russia in their foreign policy. These suspicions are Russia's main reason and excuse for curtailing such freedoms. If Western governments want results on this issue, they must tread a very fine line between ignoring Russia's domestic affairs and framing the question in a way that doesn't exacerbate the Kremlin's suspicions.

The political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky once wrote that Russia is too heavy a piece to be removed from the game board. Continuing that metaphor, Russia can't be swallowed up, either, though it can easily swallow up other pieces. Trying to exclude Russia from the game altogether will make it start playing its own game, the rules of which will be uncoordinated and unpredictable. For this reason, it's better to include it in the game wherever possible.

Macron is trying to do that on behalf of Europe on the issues of the Iran nuclear deal and climate change. While U.S. President Donald Trump is unilaterally abrogating the multilateral treaty with Iran and leaving the Paris Agreement on climate change, Russia remains in both, alongside Europe. Both sides should take advantage of this cooperation.

The United States also [unilaterally withdrew](#) from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, so it's important for Europe that Russia should not deploy its intermediate-range missiles near European borders. Likewise, if Europe wants to keep playing its own game in Syria, it needs to use the diplomatic formats created by Russia involving other countries in the region and the Syrian opposition.

One of Macron's predecessors, Nicolas Sarkozy, successfully mediated an end to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. More recently, François Hollande was a key mediator in the Minsk agreements aimed at ending the war in Ukraine, along with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This creates an incentive for Macron to achieve the implementation of the Minsk agreements, or to work toward another resolution to the Ukraine conflict. Russia in turn trusts France as a mediator more than other Western powers, and the [new Ukrainian government](#) elected with a strong mandate for peace creates a favorable context.

As the host of the upcoming G7 summit on August 24–26, Macron wants to bring some exclusive content to it. The outcome of his conversation with Putin, or even just his contact with the Russian leader, may do the trick.

The current political situation in Europe is favorable to a more active French role. Britain's decision to leave the EU makes the UK an Atlantic rather than Euro-Atlantic power. Germany is weaker now, as is Merkel, and it is unlikely

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that her relationship with Putin can be repaired. Besides, the country is preoccupied with the transfer of power to the next chancellor. But France has never lost its aspirations to political greatness.

Every French president tries to remind the world that France is a sovereign power capable of conducting independent and active foreign policy. Putin, meanwhile, has consistently talked to the French—and this time was no exception—about their shared wartime victory, fueling this attitude even further.

Russia feels much more comfortable in the G20 format, where it's not the only developing or authoritarian country, and not a junior partner. Its return to the G7 is impossible, but it's also impossible for the group to solve many problems important to it without Russia. France's relationship of trust with the Russian leadership, and the opportunity to represent Russia behind the scenes at the group's gatherings, are an important diplomatic asset that France would hate to lose.