



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Macron's reconciliation with Eastern Europeans



French President Emmanuel Macron had many warm words for the EU's Eastern partners at a security forum in Slovakia, trying to bridge differences in the determination to support Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression.

Addressing leaders and experts, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, at the GLOBSEC security forum in Bratislava, Macron used flattery and had no difficulty admitting a mistake, let alone addressing the audience with great respect.

“We didn’t listen enough to you and your calls for your history and painful memories to be acknowledged”, he said during a 45-minute speech, in which there was much that Eastern Europeans were pleased to hear from the French leader.

This performance, which could be described as a courtship, is a significant and convincing Macron’s step to “iron out” the perception of France in the former socialist part of the EU, where it is considered an arrogant, disinterested, and conceited “old” member of the Union.

This attempt at rapprochement must have been well received, regardless of the exaggerated sweet talk of the French leader.

Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine the EU states that emerged from the former Soviet bloc have definitely confirmed that they exist as a bloc within the Union, which, apart from recent common history, has uniform visions of the future of Europe, particularly regarding Russia.

From the start, their attitude towards the Russian invasion was harsh and uncompromising, and as such, due to the strategically important position of each

member of the bloc, became dominant among Europeans.

Courting the influential bloc

France and Germany hesitated for a long time and even looked for a chance for Putin if he stopped the aggression.

That is why Macron travelled to Eastern Europe to the forum in Slovakia, with the idea of reconciliation with the bloc that formed the Western mainstream of total aid to Ukraine from the start, together with the UK and the US.

His “courtship” has little to do with emotions. This is about the need to smooth out all misunderstandings with the influential group, and for France to strengthen its positions with partners that will be useful to France to maintain its influence in Europe and among its Atlantic partners.

Macron and the Eastern Europeans will participate in the NATO summit in Lithuania in just over a month, where the issue of Ukraine's defence will dominate, including its future status concerning the Alliance.

While the majority of Eastern Europeans are in favour of Ukraine's entry into NATO, Macron tried not to contradict their advocacy in Bratislava, even though he offered a model according to which Kyiv would be equally supported by Western partners, but still without membership in the Alliance in the foreseeable future.

“We have to build something between Israel-style security guarantees and fully-fledged membership”, said Macron.

Bratislava as a culmination

Macron's thaw with Eastern Europeans only culminated in Bratislava. The French leader has been changing his image in the continent's east for some time.

His statement at the recent G7 summit in Hiroshima, where he warned that a "frozen conflict" should not be allowed in Ukraine, is exactly what the Eastern bloc, the EU, and NATO, have been advocating from the start.

Among the partners in the East, Macron's announcement that France will train Ukrainian pilots on its modern planes was a significant impulse for the American "green light" to supply Ukraine with modern Western fighter jets.

Eastern European partners have a reason to accept Macron's "gifts," regardless of previous confrontations, Russia, and his earlier views on NATO (that he experienced brain death), which he retracted in Bratislava.

"I had a harsh word for NATO in December 2019. But today I could say that Putin has woken it up with the worst kind of electroshock", said the French President.

Support for the Strategic Autonomy concept

Although disagreements and some old wounds will remain even after the forum in Slovakia, the leaders of Eastern Europe were convinced that France could be an influential promoter of their strong resistance to Russian expansionism.

Macron will expect something in return, which was probably the goal of his mission in Slovakia. He expects the support of Eastern Europeans for his Strategic Autonomy concept that advocates greater political and security reliance of Europe on its own resources, and less dependence on the US.

Eastern European countries are not particularly fond of Macron's strategy as supporters of the alliance with the US and the UK, which intensified during the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

But the French warming of relations, including Macron's performance in Bratislava, also means that Paris is not giving up on gathering allies for its project and has been making quite a few concessions.

"I think there is a Western and an Eastern Europe, an Old Europe and a new one; there is only one Europe ... with a will to build unity", President Macron told his Eastern European partners.

Although it seems like a cliché, this represents his realistic view of the intra-European alliance, which the former members of the Eastern bloc fought for themselves, and which France will have to reckon with.