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## MACRON RELAUNCHES HIS BID FOR EU LEADERSHIP

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Halfway between his election last year and next year's European elections, French president Emmanuel Macron is trying to relaunch his bid for EU leadership.

He will do so in Strasbourg and Berlin this week, with a much-awaited speech at the European Parliament and a meeting with German chancellor Angela Merkel.

He will also hold a town hall-like debate in Epinal, eastern France - one of the so-called 'citizens consultations' he proposed last year to revive the European project and bridge the democratic deficit ahead of the EU elections.

Macron was last year hailed as a fresh EU 'saviour' after defeating far-right candidate Marine Le Pen for the Elysee Palace.

But after a series of domestic reforms and wide-ranging EU proposals, the French leader faces social discontent at home and growing doubts over his capacity to get other leaders to follow him.

In his speech to the MEPs on Tuesday, he will insist on the "urgency to act" and will "defend the European model in a difficult world," a French presidency source said.

"It's now that Europe's fate is being decided," Macron said in a TV interview on Sunday.

He said that the EU would "move forward with those who want to move forward" and that "those who will not follow will have to accept to stay on the margins."

The warning was mainly aimed at countries that are increasingly turning against the EU consensus and norms of liberal democracy, such as Poland and Hungary.

But it was also directed at some countries who are wary of his more ambitious plans, such as an eurozone budget, more financial solidarity between members states, or taxation for internet companies.

### German resistance

Worryingly for Macron, the strongest resistance to his plan could come from Berlin, where Merkel's CDU party and its CSU ally are increasingly voicing scepticism over plans to create a European Monetary Fund and to establish a European deposit insurance mechanism to protect savers' bank

accounts.

Although the two plans were initiated by the EU before Macron took them, their rejection would signal a clear rebuttal of the French president's more ambitious proposals for the longer term.

In Berlin on Thursday, Macron and Merkel will try to overcome their differences in working session that is planned to last four hours.

The objective for the French leader is to have a roadmap for the future of the eurozone by June.

"We are working on the basis of the [Macron's] proposals," the French source said. "We are in a spirit of discussion and compromise."

In Berlin, officials insist that "no one ever gets what he would like ideally" and that - as usual between France and Germany - both sides will have to climb down in certain areas.

### **The Tartar Steppe**

"We're keeping our cautious optimism" about the two leaders' capacity to find common ground that would lead to a new EU momentum, an EU official said.

The discussions between Macron and Merkel "seems to be intensifying," noted a EU diplomat. "We're waiting, we hope it will lead to something."

But seen from Brussels, the Franco-German relationship is "a bit like the The Tartar Steppe," the diplomat quipped, referring to a novel by Dino Buzzati where a desert fortress officer spends his life waiting for the Tartars to come.

The question for Macron is whether he can find the leverage to convince Merkel to be more flexible despite her domestic difficulties with a coalition it took her six months to build.

"We'll see if Merkel recovers her freedom and inspiration," said Jean-Dominique Giuliani, the chair of the Robert Schuman Foundation, a Paris-based think tank.

"Immobilism is not an option," he said, insisting that the window of opportunity to relaunch the EU "will close very quickly with the European elections."

"Macron is putting France back on course, he shows that France plays by the European rules," he noted. "If immobilism continues, he is capable of thumping the table."

In the longer run, Macron faces another challenge, which will be highlighted when he speaks at the European parliament on Tuesday.

### **Not a campaign speech**

A newcomer in politics, he came to presidential power after France's two main parties, the Socialist Party and the centre right Republicans, crumbled amid scandals and political failures.

He then obtained a strong majority in parliament to govern with almost no opposition. . But at the

EU level, Macron is still looking for political friends and allies, in particular in the European Parliament - there are currently no MEPs from his Republic on the Move (LRM) party.

Officially, the French leader will not have political gamesmanship in mind when he addresses the parliament.

"It will not be a campaign speech. It will not be about camps, parties or political movements," the French presidency sources insisted.

But through his call for action, Macron will insist that the situation across the EU is still "very worrying".

"I see Europe democracies where the people are in a fatigue. Democracies that are getting used to weakness, inequalities, anger," he warned on Sunday.

For the French president, the political developments in Poland, Hungary, or Italy show that like in France, a 'political reshuffle' will have to take place at the EU level.

"What is at stake is not how the groups [in the EU parliament] will be reshuffled, but to show the real divide, between those who support the European project that is reformist and ambitious, and those who reject it," the source said.

### **'His fate is at stake'**

Amid rumours of alliances with some liberal parties such as Spain's Ciudadanos or with the Danish Social Liberal Party of EU competition commissioner Margrethe Vestager, LRM is making contacts in different countries.

But it will be difficult for Macron to destabilise the main parties in the EU parliament, in particular the centre right European People's Party (EPP), which is expected to remain the largest group in the assembly.

While Macron's capacity to lead in Europe will depend on his 'firepower' in the EU parliament, his capacity to win MEPs will depend on his delivery of EU reforms he promised last year.

"He bet everything on the European elections," the Schuman's Foundation Giuliani noted. "His fate is at stake, he must have results."

Macron, who has been nicknamed Jupiter in France because of his conception of a strong leadership, admitted on Sunday that "no one is all-powerful in a democracy as ours."

On the EU stage, he still has to show some strength.

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Kaynak/Source: