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## HOW THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FRANCE AND ITALY REACHED ITS BREAKING POINT

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When we think of frosty diplomatic relations between states, members of the European Union dont typically come to mind. And yet the word frosty is exactly what the relationship between Italy and France has become. In fact, frosty may too tepid of a description.

The Italians can be stubborn people. But so can the French. And for the first time many Europeans can remember, the stubbornness is compounded by two governments in Rome and Paris that are at each others throats on some of the biggest issues of the day. On one side is Italian deputy prime ministers Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, two fierce nationalists who consider the French government to be a collection of anti-Italian snobs. On the other side is French President Emmanuel Macron, a centrist politician who is as exacerbated as he is angry with the populist crop of Italian leaders he has to interact with on a weekly basis. The fact France and Italy share a border doesnt make the situation any more congenial.

Deputy premier Di Maio triggered the latest kerfuffle this week, when the Italian traveled to the outskirts of Paris to meet with the leaders of the Yellow Vest protest movement. The Yellow Vests are the decentralised, grassroots army of angry pensioners, factory workers, and small-town Frenchman and Frenchwomen who have taken to the streets to shout about their frustrations with the gilded and insulated French political class that Macron represents. Italys populist government sees the Yellow Vests as kindred spirits and comrades-in-arms; the French political elite view the same protesters as a mob of anarchists and revolutionaries who torch police cars and aim to overthrow the system.

Through apology speeches, tax cuts, and town-hall debates across the nation, Macron has spent the last few weeks using his powers of persuasion to divide and conquer the protests. It has been rough going for Macron, who is booed and jeered at in some of these meetings. So the last thing the Élysée wants is a senior official of a neighbouring country to give the Yellow Vesters more inspiration. This, of course, is what Di Maio did. He posted a photo with the anti-Macron demonstrators on his Instagram account, with a caption that drove the French to breaking point: This is the picture of a beautiful meeting, first of many to come, where we talked about our countries, social rights, the environment and direct democracy. The wind of change has crossed the Alps. I am repeating. The wind of change has crossed the Alps.

This is one indignity the French couldnt ignore. Paris has recalled its ambassador from Rome in retaliation for what the Macron administration has called Italian interference in French domestic

affairs. For several months now, France has \*[become](#) the target of repeated accusations, baseless attacks and outrageous remarks, the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. The most recent intrusions constitute a further, unacceptable provocation. They show a lack of respect for democratic choice by a nation that is our friend and ally.

If YellowJacketGate put a stain on an otherwise blemish-free and vibrant French-Italian relationship, Macron likely would have given Rome a pass for this indiscretion. But Di Maios trip to Paris this week is just the latest shot fired in what has been a rhetorical war between the two neighbours ever since the Italian populists swept into power. The French and Italian governments have been duking it out on migration, European Union fiscal rules, Libya, and the direction of the continents politics. The personality clashes and grade-school insults havent helped. At this point, it wouldnt at all be surprising to learn that Salvini throws darts at a picture of Macrons face during his leisure time. The same could be said of Macron, who has been quite clear that his number-one priority this year (outside of outlasting the Yellow Vests) is strangling Salvini-style nationalism before it acquires de facto veto power in the European Parliament.

Thus far, the French have registered their disapproval through traditional diplomatic channels. Before Paris recalled its ambassador from Rome, the French Foreign Ministry asked Italys top diplomat in the country for an explanation of Di Maios jarring comments about French colonisation of Africa [—](#) one of Romes more bizarre rants. Salvini and Di Maio, however, arent much for conventionality and diplomatic protocol. While Paris sends letters of protest, Salvini tweets obnoxious comments about France being a nation of hypocrites. The two governments are talking past each other, much like young siblings scuffling in the sandbox for the biggest shovel.

If Macron is not yet going to bed at night dreaming of sabotaging Salvini and Di Maios political careers (and vice-versa), we are quickly barreling towards that point. The three men are letting their personal feuds negatively affect one of the more important bilateral relationships in the EU. They can either check their pride and ego at the door and show the courage to call a truce, or continue their campaign of spiting one another until one gets voted out of office.

As long as Salvini or Di Maio is in a position of power, its difficult to imagine the French-Italian brawl breaking up without someones nose being broken.

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