
MACRON UNVEILS NEW EU VISION TO TACKLE POPULIST SURGE

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EU leaders should reopen the treaties after the European Parliament (EP) elections in May to tackle migration and security challenges, French president Emmanuel Macron has declared.

The European "Renaissance" should also defend EU values against "nationalist retrenchment" he added, in a direct appeal to all "citizens of Europe" on Monday (4 March).

"By the end of the year, let's set up ... a Conference for Europe in order to propose all the changes our political project needs, with an open mind, even to amending the treaties", Macron said.

In the new-model EU, migration ought to be controlled by a European Council for Internal Security, the French leader suggested.

This would enforce "stringent border controls" and "solidarity" on distribution of asylum seekers, he said.

And a new European Agency for the Protection of Democracies ought to protect EU elections from outside interference, he added.

The agency would enforce a ban on "funding of European political parties by foreign powers," Macron said.

There should be a new EU defence treaty with a Nato-style "operational mutual defence clause", he also said.

A European Security Council, which would include the UK, should be created to take collective military decisions, he added.

A European Climate Bank would "finance the ecological transition" to having zero carbon emissions by 2050, he went on.

"A minimum European wage appropriate to each country and discussed collectively every year", should also be created, Macron said.

The French president framed the reforms as a "political and cultural reinvention" of the EU at a moment of high risk.

"In a few weeks' time, the European elections will be decisive for the future of our continent," he warned.

"Never has Europe been in so much danger," he added, referencing the divisive "symbolism" of Brexit and broader "nationalist retrenchment" in Europe.

Macron denounced nationalist parties as "anger mongers, backed by fake news, [who] promise anything and everything".

"We cannot let nationalists without solutions exploit the people's anger", he said.

The French leader's appeal, published in multiple EU languages, won immediate approval from Belgian prime minister Charles Michel.

"I've been calling for some time for a new European elan", he told Belgian newspaper Le Soir on Tuesday.

It also won favour from the leader of the liberal MEPs in the EU parliament, Guy Verhofstadt, who has offered to ally with Macron's new EP group.

"Macron calls for a European renewal! He is right! We need to recast the EU so it is capable of delivering security and prosperity for Europe's citizens," Verhofstadt said.

Macron, last year, already positioned himself as the scourge of populist and nationalist parties in Europe.

"If they want to see me as their main opponent, they're right," he said in Copenhagen in October, referring to Italy's far-right deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini and Hungary's nationalist leader Viktor Orban.

The French president's talk of "danger" comes amid polls indicating that anti-EU parties were on course to win 153 seats out of 705 in the EP election in May.

Four out of the five largest individual parties in the next EP were also predicted to be from the eurosceptic side.

Fresh appeal

Macron's "Renaissance" appeal marks the second time he has presented an overarching vision of Europe's future.

The German chancellor, Angela Merkel's, promise to leave politics in 2021 has increased his status as an EU figurehead.

But his first EU reform speech, in Paris in 2017, which called for deeper eurozone integration, stalled amid German scepticism.

His subsequent appeals for deeper EU defence integration were also blunted by Germany.

Macron spoke out on Monday amid a popularity crisis at home, following months of violent protests in French cities over social inequality.

His approval rating rose by five points compared to December in a survey by the Viavoice pollster out on Monday.

But that still put the figure at a dismal 28 percent, the poll said.

And Macron still appeared "not to understand the seriousness of the political and social crisis" in the country, 65 percent of French people also said.

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