

Macron in Serbia: business above all

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During President Emmanuel Macron's official visit to Belgrade from 29 to 30 August, Serbia and France signed several cooperation agreements in areas such as environmental protection, agriculture, the utilisation of critical raw materials, modern technologies, artificial intelligence, and nuclear energy. The highlight of the visit was the signing of a contract for the purchase of 12 Dassault Rafale fighter jets, valued at a total of €2.7 billion. This marked Macron's second visit to Serbia, the first having taken place in 2019.

The purchase of French fighter jets should not be interpreted as a shift in Belgrade's foreign policy, which continues to maintain close ties with both Beijing and Moscow. On 4 September, during a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin reaffirmed that Serbia has no intention of joining NATO and remains Russia's "strategic ally" and "partner". Macron's visit provided President Aleksandar Vučić not only with an opportunity to divert attention from the ongoing mass environmental protests, which have been taking place in the country for several weeks, but also to position himself as a key EU partner in the Western Balkans. While the two leaders addressed Serbia's EU accession prospects, this appeared to be more of a formal gesture – there is little expectation that Serbia, as a candidate country, will align with EU sanctions against Russia or implement the necessary, yet politically challenging, reforms.

Commentary

- **Serbia is leveraging the modernisation of its armed forces to seek favour with foreign partners.** President Vučić is carefully balancing relationships with the EU, Russia, the USA, and China to advance Serbia's interests. The purchase of 12 French Dassault Rafale fighter jets is a significant milestone for the country, which identifies as neutral, as it marks the first instance in which its air force will operate Western systems.
- **Contrary to the French government's expectations, the purchase of the fighter jets does not necessarily represent a 'strategic shift and closer ties with the EU'.** In recent years, Serbia has also acquired military equipment from China (the HQ-22 air defence system and the CH-95 drones) and Russia (the Krasukha electronic warfare system and the Repellent anti-drone system). Given Serbia's policy of balancing between Western and Eastern powers, and its close ties with Moscow and Beijing, concerns have arisen that Serbia may grant Russia and China access to advanced Western technologies. Another indication that this purchase is politically motivated is its significant cost for Serbia, whose defence budget in 2023 amounted to €1.9 billion.

- **The Serbian government is considering the construction of a nuclear power plant**, as indicated by the memorandum of cooperation signed during President Macron's visit between EDF, France's largest nuclear power plant operator, and Serbia's Ministry of Energy and Mining. Serbia is actively working to lift the ban on the construction of nuclear power plants, with EDF seen as a potential contractor for the project. The choice of technology supplier – between France, China, the US, and Russia – will likely serve as a tool in President Vučić's strategy of political manoeuvring, a hallmark of his governance.
- **President Macron's official visit provided an opportunity for the Serbian president to divert public attention from domestic issues**, particularly the widespread protests against lithium mining, which have persisted for several weeks. Vučić once again hosted a high-ranking representative from a key EU country – following German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Belgrade in July – and uses such events to counter accusations of authoritarian governance. The Serbian government hopes that the agreements signed during Macron's visit will help to mitigate French criticism regarding electoral fraud, media restrictions, and the declining standards of the rule of law.
- **From France's perspective, the key achievement was the signing of a cooperation agreement on the exploration and extraction of critical raw materials**. Less than a month prior, Serbia and the European Union had signed a similar agreement (see: '[The Serbian-EU partnership in procuring critical raw materials](#)'). Additionally, France and Serbia concluded agreements for the construction of a wastewater treatment plant in Veliko Selo and for the provision of a loan to Serbia's power grid operator, Elektromreža Srbije.
- **For President Macron, the visit to Serbia provided an opportunity to underscore the continuity of his active international policy**, despite lacking a parliamentary majority and delays in forming a new cabinet. By doing so, Macron is also sending a message to Western allies that fostering cooperation with countries sympathetic to Russia and China is crucial in offering them a political alternative. Additionally, he aims to demonstrate that France remains a significant player in the Western Balkans. Macron's visit to Belgrade, alongside the sale of the fighter jets, serves as a reminder to the Russian government of its increasing isolation. While the French public generally supports policies that promote export growth, there is far less enthusiasm for EU enlargement. However, It is widely recognised that Serbia is unlikely to join the EU in the near future.