Has Macron Closed Algeria’s Skies for France?

Emmanuel Macron, the eighth president of France, during his four and a half years in the Elysee Palace has shown himself to be a very active politician, and sometimes even very controversial as are his numerous public speeches.

After becoming President of France, Macron refused the annual traditional interview on the day of the national holiday, July 14. As Le Monde was told by Macron’s entourage, “the president’s thoughts are too complicated to play cat and mouse with journalists.” Then the French media reacted to this with a note in the left-wing Marianne under the heading: “Nous Pas Comprendre Le Président Macron” (“We don't understand President Macron”).

The following statement by Emmanuel Macron at the summit of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation did not go unnoticed either: “I always say: ‘Present me the woman who decided, being perfectly educated, to have seven, eight or nine children.’” And, even though Macron specifically spoke about African women, many women in the West joined in on the anti-Macron online campaign spearheaded by the hashtag #postcardsforMacron and began sharing photos of their large families.

In early September 2017, President Macron said in Athens about the demonstrations that were then taking place in France that he was determined not to cede anything, “neither to slackers, nor to cynics, nor extremists.” And after that, accusations were piled on him for having ties with “an international banking family” and not caring about his people or even “despising ordinary people.”
Vladimir Putin became the first foreign leader invited to France after Macron’s election, and one of the results of this meeting in Versailles at the end of May 2017 was the creation of the French-Russian civil society forum “Trianon Dialogue.” Since then, the French leader has visited Russia three times and in August 2019, he expressed confidence that the parties “will be able to create a new security architecture between the EU and Russia together,” thereby stating the need for the European Union to establish a “strategic partnership” with Russia as the majority of the French want it. But all this did not prevent Emmanuel Macron from then accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin of seeking “the collapse and dismantling of the EU,” and stating that “Russia cannot be a model” for Europeans. Macron made fiery speeches at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum declaring the need to develop trade and economic relations with Russia, and then closed the French trade mission to Moscow created specifically to promote said relations.

And now, Macron’s public statements, instead of the restoration of relations with Algeria planned by Paris, have led to their sharp aggravation.

Relations between these two countries have been quite complicated and strained in recent decades, and there are still a number of unresolved problems that arose after the bloody war of independence. One of them is the fate of Algerians who fought on the side of France and were forced to leave Algeria, because otherwise they would have been threatened with death. In January, Benjamin Stora, a historian and specialist in the modern history of Algeria, presented to President Macron a report the latter had commissioned, with proposals for reconciliation between the French and Algerian peoples aimed at “restoring truth and accuracy with regard to the actions of France during the colonization and the war in Algeria.” The publication of the report was eagerly awaited, primarily because of the explosiveness of the chosen topic, which could awaken old passions, despite the fact that Algeria has been an independent state for almost 60 years. However, even back then, in January of this year, a communique published on the official website of the presidential administration reported that President Macron was not going to “express regret or apologize” for France’s colonization of Algeria in 1848-1962. However, it was noted that Macron “will comment on the report when the time comes” and will take part in 2022 in the events dedicated to the 60th anniversary of the end of the war in Algeria in 1962.

And so in early October, in his address to descendants of the Algerian Harkis who fought on the side of the French during the War of Independence, Emmanuel Macron spoke very critically about the history and political system of Algeria, thereby describing the North African state as governed by a “military-political system” and pointing to the creation of an Algerian national history based around the “discourse of hating France.” He described Algeria’s political system as “tired” after a protest movement in 2019 that has rocked the country.

In response to these statements, Algeria on the same day recalled its ambassador from Paris “for consultations” and banned French military aircraft from crossing its airspace. Moreover, Algeria has recalled its ambassador to France for the second time in the last 18 months. The previous time, in May 2020, Algeria was very critical of a film shown by French channels France 5 and La Chaîne Parlementaire about the Algerian protest movement “Hirak”, whose actions led to the resignation of President Abdel-Aziz Bouteflika in April 2019. Last year, the Algerian authorities revoked the accreditation of several French TV channels “for bias in covering opposition marches” in Algeria.

According to the statement of Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune published on October 3 by his press service, Mr. Macron’s words insulted the memory of people who died “during the colonial rule” of France in Algeria.

Algerian parliamentarians have been trying for 15 years to pass a law demanding an apology from Paris for its past policy, which in Algeria is equated with genocide. Such actions of the Algerians were provoked by a law adopted by their French colleagues recognizing the “positive role of colonization.” Although this law was later repealed, until that moment Algeria had broken the Friendship Treaty with France.

As a sign of special attention to the memory of the dead, of which according to the Algerian authorities there were about 5.63 million “martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the sake of resistance to the French colonialists,” last year President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared May 8 as the National Day of Remembrance in honor of the Algerian uprising of 1945. Since then, France has not officially apologized to Algeria, although regrets over the mistakes of the colonial past were still heard, including in certain statements by Emmanuel Macron when he was still a presidential candidate.

The author would not like to think that this scandal will have serious political or economic consequences for the bilateral relations, since Algiers and Paris have too much in common, including close economic cooperation. However, both countries cannot just leave the past behind.
As for the current behavior of Paris, it more and more clearly gives the impression of a growing hysteria pushing the French ruling elite to not always adequate actions. As a result of all this, as well as outright blunders in the formation of national policy, recently one can increasingly see failures in the actions of the Elysee Palace, which is desperately fighting to retain its place in the geopolitical top of the planet’s leading actors. And very often this happens, unfortunately for Paris, on the initiative and under direct non-overt pressure from the United States. Thus, it was on the instructions from Washington that Paris withdrew from the Mistral-deal with Russia, despite heavy losses, both political and for the shipbuilding industry of the country. Now a similar situation has repeated itself, albeit with regard to France itself, against the background of Washington’s creation of the AUKUS alliance and the “submarine crisis,” which caused serious political and economic damage to Paris.

The crisis in relations with Algeria has been exacerbated through the aggravation of the situation in Mali, whose authorities are leaning towards cooperating with Moscow instead of Paris. Similar processes have been taking place recently in the Central African Republic, as well as in some other Francophone States in Africa.

Without a doubt, all these events will affect the sentiments of French voters regarding both Macron himself and the course of the upcoming new election race in France. And in these conditions, the policy of Paris, of course, should be more calibrated, as indeed the public statements of President Macron.

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