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# RIVAL PARTNERS OF THE WEST: FRANCE AND ITALY

Tolga SAKMAN

Italy and France, the two great powers of Europe: the founders of the EU, the Union's second and third largest economies, the largest populations, the strongest armies... The political parties and figures that came to power recently found or manufactured many reasons to base the conflict of the two countries. As a result, these two neighbors started to come face to face in many areas as each other's rivals.

The **5-Star Movement** (Movimento 5 Stelle) and the **Northern League** (Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania), which won the majority in the 2018

elections in Italy, adopted Eurosceptic, anti-globalization and anti-immigrant movements with their populist right-wing politics. Nationalist discourse sharpened with the economic and immigrant crises. In France, Emmanuel Macron, who came to the Presidency in 2017, and his party **The Republic Forward** (La République En Marche) adopted European supporter and liberal policies with the tradition of central politics. But Macron's style of politics, whose rhetoric has always been harsh, is a new approach. He has positioned himself in the center enough to say that Europe needs French power and that France's

influence should increase with a reform, otherwise they may even leave the union.

The confrontation between the two countries is essentially based on this difference of political opinion. Both governments agree on the idea that Europe needs reform. However, both of them offer quite the opposite suggestions to each other. The two countries are moving rapidly to fill the gap created by the losing the power of Chancellor Merkel in Germany, the locomotive of Europe, and Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. In a Europe where there is no Britain and Germany has lost its position, the deep distress experienced not only in the Union politics but also in the intellectual bases and common vision, is tried to be filled with ideological instruments.

When we look at the five main conflict points that have been experienced recently, we can see that the foundations of the problem go way back and that the crisis is more about existence and awareness than dual politics.

### 1. Migration

The Italian peninsula is where the refugees from Africa first set foot in Europe with the Central Mediterranean route. By securitization of this sociological, economic and political issue, Italy wanted to share all its responsibility with Europe using diplomatic channels. France, one of the first to react to this, highly blamed Italy on the issue and made proactive attempts at possible political actions by Italy across the EU. Although France describes the discourse of Italy not to accept immigrants as inhumane, its restriction of immigration admission in EU norms and strict

admission/return conditions caused many immigrants to stay in the Mediterranean.

Italy's response to these developments about France was a historical approach: The Italian comments that "France, which left its current wealth source ex-colonies in poverty and disorder, destabilizes the region economically and politically with the same colonialist approach" criticized not only France but also the historical ties of Europe. Thereupon, France's reaction was to remind Italy's colonial past.

### 2. Yellow Vests (Gilets jaunes)

Yellow Vests have actually been one of the most tangible issues of tension between France and Italy. The underlying of the protests called Yellow Vests, which have become an area of the French and Italian governments' efforts to steer European politics with their political positions, contain economic and political demands references to the welfare state norm.

Italy's open support for long-standing actions as a security threat to France and affecting social life as well as politics has led to the evolution of rivalry to hostility between the two countries. After the speeches of the 5-Star Movement in the Italian government describing the arrival of its ideological circle in France and containing messages of support for the Yellow Vests, a meeting was held with some of the leaders of the protest. This move was seen as an unacceptable provocation by France and caused a diplomatic crisis with the recall of the French Ambassador in Rome.

The Yellow Vests protests, which are still going on today, are seen as a step that

France has managed with a controlled crisis and the periphery contacts the center to prevent an explosion.

### 3. Libya (North Africa)

Libya has strategic ties with Italy as its former colony, as well as its geographical proximity and maritime neighbor. France, on the other hand, sees Libya as a useful and economic door in the area of influence in Africa, as well as its domination of Libyan politics for its strategy in the Mediterranean.

While Paris officially supports the UN initiatives to end the conflict in Libya, it also does not hide its support for Haftar. France, which will gain a strategic gain in the region with Haftar's takeover, also cooperates with actors such as Egypt, UAE and Russia for this purpose. Rome, on the other hand, is seeking a political solution under the leadership of Government of National Accord (GNA) Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj, with the idea that issues such as immigration and terrorism, which are threats to him, will end with the arrival of calm and stability.

Of course, Libya is part of the wider power game. France is trying ways it knows to prevent instability from spreading to both its former colonies in neighboring Algeria and Morocco, where unemployed youth are concentrated, and to the Francophone African countries on the south. The jihadists fighting in Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, where there are thousands of French soldiers for "Operation Barkhane", can continue their activities with the money they get from smuggling weapons, drugs and people. Italy's efforts to establish defense cooperation with Libya's neighbors Tunisia

and Niger are also suspicious of narrowing France's sphere of influence.

Italy considers France's approach to Libya and the countries of North Africa in general as 'neocolonial' and the Italian government criticizes France's foreign policy as "The real problem with France is that we talk openly and broadly about how they treated their former colonies in Africa." France is extremely disturbed to opening of the financial methods and educational hegemony that have been used since the independence of its colonies up for discussion.

### 4. Commercial Dispute-Competition

The French government wants to realize the high-speed train project that will cut the travel time between Lyon and Turin in half. But in Italy, the failure of government partners to agree on the project for economic reasons prolongs the process. Economic reasons stem not only from the cost of the project, but also from the decrease in regional human mobility and road transportation and the possibility of an increase in imports. It also includes economic-political issues such as the protection of Italian industry and tourism, the contribution of EU funds to the national economy instead of such international projects.

The French government decided to expropriate the Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard when the Italian Fincantieri firm's claim to the shipyard on the Atlantic coast of France, one of the largest shipyards in the world, but the EU competition agency accelerated the agreement on the sale. This shipyard, which does not only civilian but also military production, had a place in the French security architecture.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the face masks that Italy needed and imported from China would come via France. The French government's sudden decision to "stop exporting health products" and seizing masks for a while created a humanitarian problem besides the economy and caused a great reaction in the Italian society.

### 5. Leonardo da Vinci

The Italian government did not find it appropriate for France to lead the ceremonies for the 500th anniversary of the famous artist's death. Although some of the artist's works in Italy were brought to Paris and the commemoration ceremonies held in Paris were accepted by the previous government, the 5-Star Movement made the conditions difficult by thinking that Leonardo was an Italian. According to Italy, France actually wanted to lay claim on the artist by hosting the ceremonies. But in the end, the French President Macron's proposal of co-hosting with his Italian counterpart eased the process.

As can be seen, the policies of the two countries, which aspire to reshape Europe, on the economy, the state, the international system, society and the individual contain deep similarities and deep differences. Even though they fought on opposite fronts, they made good use of the timeline of civilization allotted to them with the same vision in the national progress path and in the international system building. These two societies, divided by ideological camps, will first lose their mutual trust and then their security in their place and history.

Both of France, with its deep-rooted state history and democratic movements, that lived the French Revolution and affected politics not only in Europe but in the World and Italy, with the social construction and diplomatic achievements for acquired to create its unity, that experienced and help to live Renaissance have a place in world history with their civilized qualities as indispensable parts of Western culture. If we take the French and Italian societies that have prospered with the development of their states as examples in the West, we can interpret their colonial histories, economic cooperation, political harmony, the value they give to people, the way they handle art today. This change has come to a point where democratic politics, developed economy, developed education/culture norms, which are the pillars of the welfare society on which Western culture is in fact, can be discussed.

The need for reform in Europe, which both countries have mentioned, has actually entered a process that is likely to be experienced not only in politics but in many layers of the civilized atmosphere they are in. The consumption of ideas that direct the West, may cause a new horizon to emerge in the line of civilization.



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CENTER for DIPLOMATIC AFFAIRS and POLITICAL STUDIES

+90 216 310 30 40 info@dipam.org

+90 216 310 30 50 www.dipam.org

Murat Reis Mahallesi Gazi Caddesi No:69  
Üsküdar/İstanbul

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Tolga SAKMAN** is the Founding Chairman of DİPAM. After graduating from the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Kocaeli University, he completed the International Relations Master Program of the War Academies Command Strategic Research Institute (SAREN) with his thesis on "Analysis of the Participation Processes of the Turkish Diaspora in the European Political System: Germany, Holland, Belgium". Between 2012 and 2018, he worked as an expert at a think tank and as the Director of the National Defense and Security Institute. SAKMAN, who worked as a lecturer at a university between 2016-2018, continues his doctorate program at Istanbul University. [tolga.sakman@dipam.org](mailto:tolga.sakman@dipam.org)