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## Notre-Dame's Reopening: A Moment of National Unity and Diplomatic Success Amid Political Turmoil

*By Paco Milhiet*

### SYNOPSIS

*Five years after a devastating fire that shocked France and the world, the medieval Notre-Dame Cathedral, a jewel of French culture, reopened its doors on December 7, 2024. The ceremony offered President Emmanuel Macron an opportunity to showcase French culture and "savoir-faire", enhancing the country's international image while fostering a deep sense of national pride amid a deepening political crisis.*

### COMMENTARY

Built in the middle of the 12th century, [Notre-Dame de Paris](#) is one of the most iconic monuments in Europe and a major worship site for the Catholic community worldwide. Its history is intricately intertwined with that of France, having hosted the arrival of the [Holy Crown](#) in 1239 (the crown of Jesus according to the Christian tradition), the [coronation](#) of Napoleon I in 1804, the triumphal [entry](#) of Charles de Gaulle in 1944, and the funerals of several presidents of the French Republic.

The cathedral also inspired numerous artistic works, including Victor Hugo's novel [Notre-Dame de Paris](#), published in 1831; Disney's animated film [The Hunchback of Notre Dame](#) produced in 1996; and, more recently, [Notre-Dame](#), a book by British bestselling author Ken Follett.

For years, Notre-Dame was visited annually by some 13 to 14 million people, making it one of the most visited monuments in Europe. On April 15, 2019, a huge [fire](#) broke out, destroying the cathedral's roof and 13th-century frame, the [spire](#) designed by famous architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, and several vaults forming the ceiling. The tragedy sparked considerable emotion in France and around the world.



Credit: [Thomas Sereda](#)

### **An Iconic Monument That Symbolised French Soft Power**

After five years of restoration work, Notre-Dame Cathedral reopened its doors on December 7, 2024. The restoration project combined ancestral French “savoir-faire” with modern technology. More than [2,000 craftsmen](#), known as *Compagnons*, participated in the restoration. The dedication and talent of carpenters, roofers, engineers, restorers, stonemasons, glaziers, and other tradesmen enabled the restoration to be completed ahead of schedule.

French President Emmanuel Macron played a [significant](#) role in this achievement. His determination, personal commitment, and setting a deadline despite criticism ensured that the monumental project was completed successfully.

During the reopening ceremony, nearly 40 heads of state and multiple international personalities were present, including [Donald Trump](#), on his first trip abroad since his

re-election, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Prince William, Jill Biden, and Elon Musk. On the sidelines of the ceremony, President Macron held [trilateral talks](#) with Presidents Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, suggesting that France could be part of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Ukraine. This diplomatic initiative showcases the [soft power](#) of France's cultural heritage, which is one of the reasons why the country remains the [world's leading tourist](#) destination.

### **Notre-Dame's Reconstruction a Political Metaphor for Emmanuel Macron**

Much like the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games' [political truce](#), President Macron found a respite from the political turmoil afflicting the nation with the restored Notre-Dame's inauguration. Following the dissolution of the National Assembly (the parliament's lower house) on June 9, 2024, France has been experiencing chronic instability. The latest government led by Michel Barnier was censured on December 4, a few days before Notre-Dame's reopening, leaving France without a government and Macron in an uncomfortable position.

Emmanuel Macron [offered](#) the French people and political parties a model for dealing with the political crisis: restoring Notre-Dame Cathedral as a national emblem. He declared, "We are a nation of *compagnons*, of builders, capable, when united, of resisting and rising again (...) Let us restore politics as we have restored the cathedral".

However, it is uncertain whether the President's appeal will have the desired effect, as the reality is more down-to-earth: France is facing an unprecedented political crisis since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958.

### **Domestic Political Crisis Obscures a Diplomatic Success**

On June 9, 2024, following [European elections](#) won mainly by the far-right in France and a political setback for the President's party, Macron decided to dissolve the National Assembly. The legislative elections on June 30 and July 7, 2024, resulted in a [highly divided](#) Assembly. The three main blocs – the radical left, the centrist bloc, and the far-right – were far from achieving an absolute majority.

After several months of "Olympic political truce", Michel Barnier, a consensus figure from the right and the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, was appointed Prime Minister in September 2024. However, less than three months later, his government fell on December 4 after a vote of [no confidence](#) due to disagreements over pension reform. It was the first time since [1962](#) that a French government had been censured, deepening the ongoing political crisis.

In practical terms, the state budget for 2025 has yet to be approved despite the country facing a [historic](#) deficit and public debt. The National Assembly is more divided than ever, leaving the President in an inextricable situation. Macron faces two unpalatable options: either form a coalition with the far-right, which would contradict his European commitments, or open the door to the left by accepting their primary demand to abandon the 2023 pension reform. Both scenarios would effectively signify a significant defeat.

This political chaos has led an increasing number of parliamentarians to call for the [President's resignation](#), even though his term runs until 2027. President Macron [rejected](#) this demand in an address to the nation on December 5, stating that he would “exercise his mandate until the end”.

However, since legislative elections cannot be triggered before June 9, 2025, the President must appoint a new Prime minister. The latter faces the strong possibility of an immediate no-confidence vote by the National Assembly, further undermining the President's position.

## **European Consequences**

The political upheavals in France could hardly have come at a worse time for the European Union (EU), which urgently needs leadership to address challenges ranging from Donald Trump's re-election to the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, [internal disagreements](#) regarding a free trade agreement with the Mercosur (the Southern Common Market), and growing trade rivalry with China.

To make matters worse, Germany, the other major power in the EU, is grappling with an economy that is slowing down along with its own political disorder. The tripartite coalition in power since 2021 collapsed on November 6 following the dismissal of Finance Minister Christian Lindner, triggering [legislative elections](#) scheduled for February 2025.

While Notre-Dame has risen from the ashes, France and the EU may be stepping into a period of political purgatory.

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