



| Brief |

How Unrest in France and Europe benefits its Adversaries

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: High

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Cybersecurity, Geopolitical

December 13, 2024

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 10:00 (EST) on December 13, 2024**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

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Executive Summary

On December 4, 2024, France's Assemblée Nationale (the lower house of parliament) voted to remove Prime Minister Michel Barnier from office after just three months. Barnier's tenure was not only the shortest in the history of the French Fifth Republic but also came after France experienced its longest-ever period without a government.¹ A PM replacement has been named,² but the political dynamics that created this paralysis and dysfunction are not expected to change for the foreseeable future. Therefore, further short-lived governments are likely, leaving France poorly suited to address major domestic political issues.

The causes of the lack of political stability are almost entirely domestic. However, France is the European Union (EU)'s second-largest economy, and its domestic political paralysis (coupled with similar political malaise in the largest economy, Germany) likely indicates that they will be unable to resolve their domestic political instability in the near term. This is likely welcome news for Europe's geopolitical adversaries, such as Russia and China. Without strong political leadership from France and Germany, the EU is very unlikely to effectively address issues like increasing defense spending, improving the

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¹[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2024/12/5/frances-macron-to-address-the-nation-after-barnier-submits-resignation](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/5/frances-macron-to-address-the-nation-after-barnier-submits-resignation)

²[hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/france/20241213-fran%C3%A7ois-bayrou-named-french-prime-minister-as-macron-seeks-stability](https://www.rfi[.]fr/en/france/20241213-fran%C3%A7ois-bayrou-named-french-prime-minister-as-macron-seeks-stability)

competitiveness of its economy, and devising a detailed plan ahead of what are anticipated to be weaker economic and military ties with the incoming U.S. presidential administration.

Details

In France, the president chooses the prime minister, who then runs the government. France's lower house of Parliament controls most domestic matters, including approving domestic legislation (such as spending bills or changes to the Constitution). However—unlike the president—the prime minister must answer to Parliament, and Barnier was officially removed from office for passing the 2025 budget without Parliament's support. Barnier's budget was immediately nullified after Parliament voted him out in a no-confidence vote on December 4.³

- The budget proposed by Barnier was considered an austerity budget made up of USD 63 billion worth of tax increases and spending cuts.⁴
- At the behest of President Emmanuel Macron, Barnier was mandated to address France's six percent budget deficit and debt-to-GDP ratio of 112 percent—both well above EU limits and therefore subject to fines. Barnier's budget aimed to close the deficit shortfall in seven years as required by EU law. He also aimed to address unemployment above seven percent and economic growth around one percent by removing benefits and raising the retirement age to bring people back to work.⁵

Barnier's proposals were deemed unacceptable to the recently empowered opposition blocs in Parliament, who made large gains that moved them into power positions after snap elections were held in June 2024 which automatically removed Barnier's predecessor from office.⁶

- The June 2024 elections ended with Macron's coalition losing over 100 seats in Parliament. The elections created an almost three-way tie between the Nouveau

³ [hXXps://www.npr\[.\]org/2024/12/04/nx-s1-5215686/france-prime-minister-barnier](https://www.npr.org/2024/12/04/nx-s1-5215686/france-prime-minister-barnier)

⁴

[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/europe/france-turning-point-amid-budget-uncertainty-finance-minister-says-2024-12-03/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-turning-point-amid-budget-uncertainty-finance-minister-says-2024-12-03/)

⁵ [hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/france/20240619-france-targeted-in-eu-crackdown-on-excessive-spending](https://www.rfi[.]fr/en/france/20240619-france-targeted-in-eu-crackdown-on-excessive-spending)

⁶ [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/world/live-news/france-election-runoff-results-07-07-24-intl/index.html](https://www.cnn[.]com/world/live-news/france-election-runoff-results-07-07-24-intl/index.html)

Front Populaire (NFP) coalition (182), Macron and Barnier's Ensemble coalition (168), and the Rassemblement Nationale (RN) party (143).⁷

- All three parties are well short of the 289 needed to form a majority in the 577-seat National Assembly. As a result, any prime minister would need the support of their own bloc plus at least one of the two blocs in the opposition (most likely NFP and RN). If two opposition blocs unite, they will always be able to unseat the bloc that forms a government (most likely Ensemble) until new elections are held.

This makeup of Parliament will remain until at least June 2025, at which point France can hold new parliamentary elections. If the present trajectory continues, it is likely that any new election would result in a similarly divided Parliament; there is a roughly equal chance France will have temporary or short-lived prime ministers like Barnier until a new president is elected in 2027.

Going Forward

The NFP had insisted that, as they won the most seats in snap elections, Macron should have appointed a prime minister from their coalition.⁸ This has been the typical pattern in French politics—however, their lack of a majority (or even near-majority) is unusual, and presented Macron with an excuse to not support an NFP candidate. He instead chose an ideological ally in Barnier that was easy for the much larger opposition to vote out of power. Macron has seemingly done the same thing by appointing fellow Centrist François Bayrou to replace Barnier.

- By choosing a similar candidate to Barnier, another short-lived government is likely, as the new PM can be expected to encounter similar issues with the opposition and ultimately fail.
- Macron is unlikely to ever appoint a PM closely aligned with the other blocs, although one more palatable to the NFP is possible. His strategy will likely be one of triangulation, trying to find a candidate at the perfect spot to hold loyalty from enough of his party and NFP to be stable.

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[hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/france-election-results-2024-map-constituencies-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-p-en-live-new-popular-front-national-rally/](https://www.politico.eu/article/france-election-results-2024-map-constituencies-emmanuel-macron-marine-le-p-en-live-new-popular-front-national-rally/)

⁸ [hXXps://jacobin\[.\]com/2024/08/france-macron-nfp-left-govern](https://jacobin[.]com/2024/08/france-macron-nfp-left-govern)

- Macron could resign, which would permit new elections ahead of the June 2025 deadline, but there is almost no chance of that happening. He has explicitly rejected calls to do so.

Macron will likely face continued calls to resign or appoint a PM from an opposition bloc, especially if further PMs are removed. However, in both cases he would likely be handing over political power to his political adversaries, who would very likely win the next election.

- A victory for either party in parliamentary or general elections would likely be swiftly followed by a reversal of many of Macron's legislative accomplishments. Both NFP and RN have campaigned on overturning Macron's changes to pension ages, paid for by a reversal of Macron's tax cuts for the wealthy. With both blocs supporting the proposals, Macron's policies would likely be overturned.

Therefore, the most likely scenario is that France enters 2025 without a budget and a roughly even chance that Bayrou is not approved before 2025. The French Constitution allows for special measures known as "Loi Speciale" that can avert a U.S.-style government shutdown, allowing taxes to be collected and certain programs to be funded. Loi Speciale has never been used before and should be considered an austerity budget.

- The procedure authorizes only the minimum spending the government considers vital to continue providing public services—in an amount not greater than what was earmarked in the 2024 budget.⁹ With Macron and Barnier already forecasting what they would like the 2025 budget to be, their interpretation could see mass spending cuts below even the 2024 levels.

While helping bring down France's budget deficit and reduce spending, there is a roughly even chance Loi Speciale-induced spending cuts could prompt protests across France by impacted sectors like pensioners, public transportation, healthcare, and utilities.¹⁰

⁹[hXXps://www.cnews\[.\]fr/france/2024-12-10/quest-ce-que-la-loi-speciale-presentee-en-conseil-des-ministres-ce-mercredi](https://www.cnews.fr/france/2024-12-10/quest-ce-que-la-loi-speciale-presentee-en-conseil-des-ministres-ce-mercredi)

¹⁰

[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2024-12-02/what-happens-if-french-government-falls-after-budget-showdown](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-02/what-happens-if-french-government-falls-after-budget-showdown)

Physical Security

Background

Overall, France has experienced significant political unrest and polarization in recent years directly related to government spending plans.

- In early January 2024, farmers in the south of France began a series of demonstrations and road blockades to protest against environmental regulations and cuts to agricultural subsidies. These actions gradually spread to the rest of the country, culminating in a “siege” of Paris, with farmers blocking major motorways leading into the capital between January 29 and February 1, 2024.¹¹
- During the first half of 2023, the country witnessed at least 14 rounds of nationwide strikes and protests against President Macron’s centerpiece domestic reform, which raised the retirement age from 62 to 64 years.¹³ Large-scale demonstrations brought between 500 thousand and 1.3 million people out onto the streets from January to June 2023 and turned violent in mid-March.¹⁴
- In 2018, Macron instituted a scheme to increase fuel taxes. The move sparked months of protests against the price increase by workers across the political spectrum that morphed into wider protests over economic inequality and the cost of living known as the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes).¹⁵ These protests occurred weekly until the COVID-19 pandemic limited public gatherings. Yellow Vests demonstrations still occur regularly, including during protests against raising the retirement age and in support for farm workers.¹⁶

¹¹

[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2024/jan/29/french-farmers-drive-tractors-towards-paris-in-blockade-threat](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/29/french-farmers-drive-tractors-towards-paris-in-blockade-threat)

¹²

[hXXps://www.rfi\[.\]fr/en/france/20240213-leading-french-farmers-union-warns-motorway-blockades-could-resume](https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20240213-leading-french-farmers-union-warns-motorway-blockades-could-resume)

¹³

[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030_6157310_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/live/2023/01/10/reforme-des-retraites-en-direct-le-gouvernement-propose-de-decaler-l-age-legal-de-depart-a-64-ans-en-2030_6157310_823448.html)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*¹⁵

[hXXps://www.bfmtv\[.\]com/auto/d-ou-vient-le-gilet-jaune-devenu-symbole-de-contestation_AN-201812140062.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/auto/d-ou-vient-le-gilet-jaune-devenu-symbole-de-contestation_AN-201812140062.html)

¹⁶ [hXXps://reporterre\[.\]net/Reforme-des-retraites-et-ecologie-les-Gilets-jaunes-font-leur-rentree](https://reporterre.net/Reforme-des-retraites-et-ecologie-les-Gilets-jaunes-font-leur-rentree)

Further bouts of political protests are very likely as a result of France's continued political divisions. All three of the political movements described above were against increased costs or budget cuts perceived as targeting the working class. If Macron does manage to appoint a PM who can pass a budget, austerity measures will likely be imposed on pensioners in the form of reduced retirement benefits, as well as higher consumer prices. These groups may also be inclined to protest if Loi Speciale limits their retirement pay or reduces subsidies for the agricultural sector.

France's political paralysis already left its government unable to adequately block a key trade agreement signed on December 6, 2024 between the EU and the Mercosur states of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. French farmers have already begun protesting the deal, which they believe will allow greater imports of cheaper agricultural products from outside Europe.¹⁷

Promoting Unrest Abroad

The factors contributing to the recent bouts of violent protests and political unrest in France are almost entirely domestic. However, ZeroFox has observed social media users based outside of France and likely supporters of Russia promoting the protests, likely in an effort to highlight unrest in an EU state that is backing Ukraine.

In one instance, an X account that frequently posts pro-Russian content, @SlavFreeSpirit, used images of anti-Mercosur protests to highlight the political dysfunction in France. The user has thousands of followers, and most of the account content is critical of the EU and NATO and supportive of Russia. ZeroFox also identified nearly identical posts from other X users, indicating they may be part of a coordinated campaign or bot activity.¹⁸

¹⁷

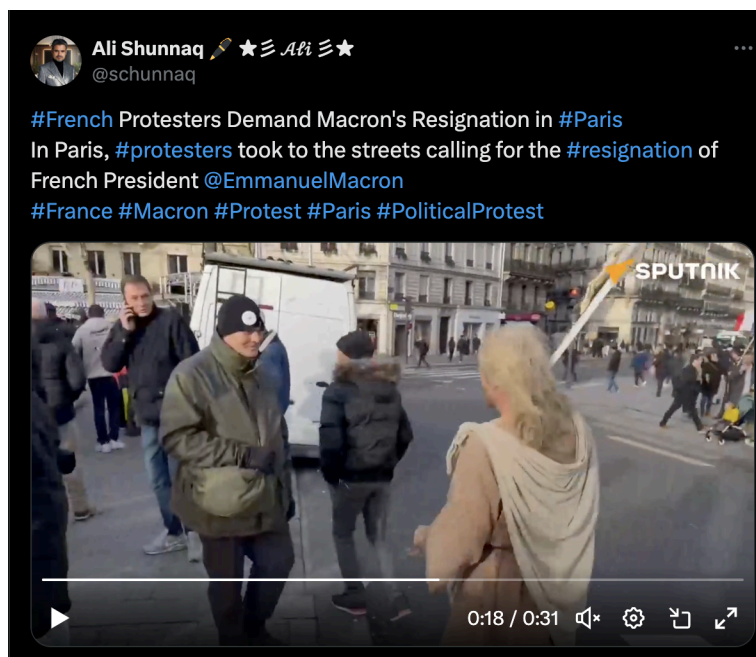
[hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-farmers-back-streets-mercotur-talks-fuel-discontent-2024-11-17/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-farmers-back-streets-mercotur-talks-fuel-discontent-2024-11-17/)

¹⁸ [hXXps://x.com/Alexand36635968](https://x.com/Alexand36635968)

**Post by @SlavFreeSpirit highlighting police violence against protesters in France**

Source: [hXXps://x\[.\]com/SlavFreeSpirit/status/1864767271597433217](https://x.com/SlavFreeSpirit/status/1864767271597433217)

ZeroFox has also observed increased coverage of France's political dysfunction in Russian media, which is then spread by pro-Russian social media users.

**X user reposts Sputnik news broadcast on anti-Macron protests in early December 2024**

Source: [hXXps://x\[.\]com/schunnaq/status/1865436157221244955](https://x.com/schunnaq/status/1865436157221244955)

Regionwide

The EU is suffering many of the same problems as France, led by weak economic growth and industries that are being out-competed by China and the United States.

France's political paralysis has left it unable to currently play a leadership role in Europe. Instead many of the issues have not been adequately discussed or in some instances smaller states like Hungary have assumed leadership positions they otherwise would not have. France or Germany—the two largest European states by population and economic size—have historically taken the lead on core EU issues. However, the crisis in France comes alongside a similar malaise in Germany, where Chancellor Olaf Scholz called snap elections for February 2025.¹⁹ Scholz is very likely to lose the elections and is therefore unlikely to lead major reforms across the EU in the meantime. Without a politically-stable France or Germany, the EU's ability to address and respond to ongoing geopolitical issues will very likely remain hindered.

- Since Russia's war in Ukraine began in February 2022 and the EU opted to stop buying energy from Russia, it has been paying a premium for alternative energy supplies.²⁰ This caused a large price increase in EU energy costs, which trickled across the wider economy and contributed to a major cost-of-living crisis that continues today.²¹
- China's support for Russia has also seemingly stiffened EU resolve to find alternatives to the Chinese market—impacting EU consumers who find alternatives more expensive and harming key EU sectors (like farming and luxury goods) that rely on Chinese consumption. In June 2023, the EU published an update on its trade position that included “derisking” its trade with China by “reducing critical dependencies and vulnerabilities, including in EU supply chains, and diversifying where necessary.”²²

The EU is also very unlikely to be able to come to a resolution regarding certain politically sensitive reform measures that are deemed critical to EU economic and military security with a leadership vacuum in both France and Germany.

¹⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-germany-snap-election-what-happens-now/>

²⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/eu-needs-alternatives-russian-energy-heres-plan>

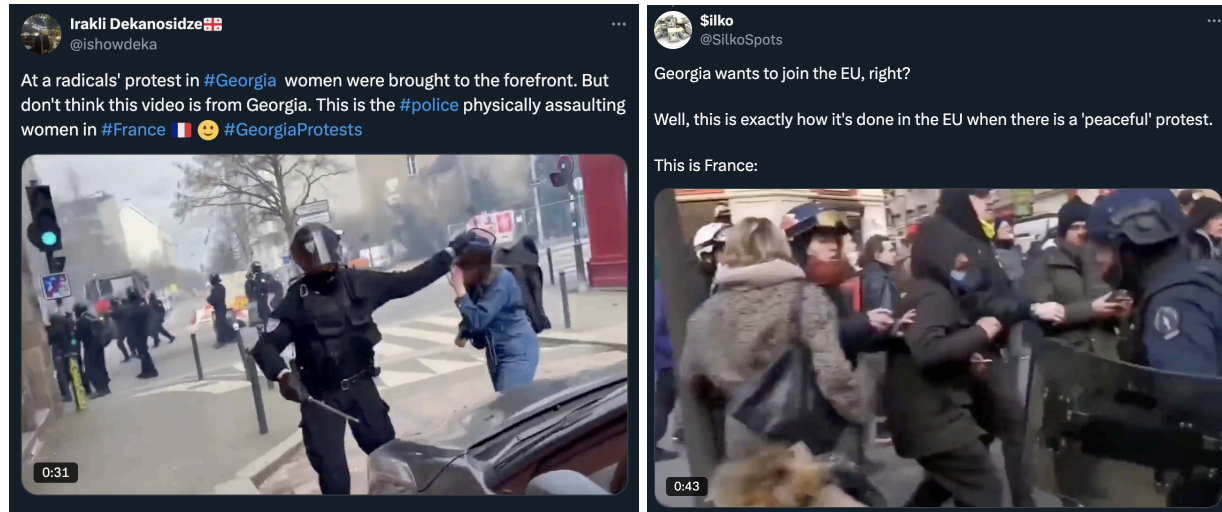
²¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2022/12/helping-europe-households-Celasun-lakova>

²² https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en

- This includes developing a united policy to respond to likely new U.S. tariffs and finding money to spend on defense and back Ukraine. In order to address these goals, the EU would likely need to approve common borrowing via eurobonds or develop a new EU investment fund in order to find the money to invest in defense, technology, and energy subsidies.
- These ideas require risk-sharing with other EU governments, increased financial contributions to the EU, and further reforms to the EU energy market or pension systems. Even if smaller EU economies were focused on addressing these issues, the bulk of the funding would have to come from France and Germany; outside investors would be very unlikely to support these initiatives if they felt Germany and France may not be on board.

Because neither country is in a position to lead the types of reforms needed to enhance Europe's competitiveness and productivity, the EU would almost certainly wait for a return to political stability before attempting to address these issues.

In the meantime, ZeroFox has observed online efforts to promote the unrest in France—often comparing it to unrest in Georgia, where pro-EU protesters have clashed violently with security forces over the government's growing ties with Russia.



**Posts criticizing police actions in France during protests
(with comparisons to Georgia and the EU), implying hypocrisy/harsh treatment in
handling peaceful demonstrations**

Sources: [hXXps://x\[.\]com/ishowdeka/status/1865448023054074150](https://x.com/ishowdeka/status/1865448023054074150)

[hXXps://x\[.\]com/SilkoSpots/status/1864723537270874417](https://x.com/SilkoSpots/status/1864723537270874417)

With each day that France and Germany remain in political paralysis, the chances of addressing the EU's many challenges gets smaller. By the time the EU is realistically able to address the issues, the current solutions may be inadequate. This incentivizes France and Europe's adversaries to attempt to exacerbate the underlying domestic and regional issues on social media.

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%