



| Brief |

Continued Backlash over Pension Reform Expected in France

B-2023-05-22b

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Social Unrest

May 22, 2023

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 12:00 PM (EDT) on May 19, 2023*; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

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Executive Summary

Since January 2023, France has been gripped by union strikes, protests, and violence on the streets due to President Macron's centerpiece domestic reform that raised the retirement age from 62 to 64 years. The ZeroFox Geopolitical Working Group has been monitoring these events, in addition to assessing how upcoming major world events such as the French Open tennis tournament and Summer Olympics in 2024 could serve as the backdrop for more intense social unrest. In addition to street protests, opponents of the reform have also engaged in a variety of tactics aimed at "bringing France to a halt" and inflicting economic damage in order to attract greater attention to this issue. Their methods have included work stoppages at major ports and refineries, cutting off electricity to private homes and businesses, and sporadic attempts to block vehicle traffic along major roads, all of which exacerbate already existing supply chain problems within the country.

Details

After several rounds of protests, the reform was approved by the Constitutional Council on April 14, 2023. The Council also declined a proposal for a national referendum on the issue, for which most of the opponents to the reform had hoped. Pension reform was signed into law by President Emmanuel Macron on April 15, 2023, and it will enter into force in September 2023.

Analyst Commentary

In a speech two days after signing the pension reform into law, President Macron gave himself 100 days “to heal the country” after weeks of protests asking his government to open talks with unions on a wide range of issues. Macron gave few details about the process roadmap. During Macron’s speech, protesters gathered around the country banging saucepans to symbolize that if the president did not listen to them, they would make enough noise to “drown him out.”¹ Speaking immediately after Macron’s speech, Laurent Berger—the head of France’s largest union, the CFDT—said unions would be ready to talk with the government only after Labour Day on May 1, following what he called a period of “decency” to let workers’ anger calm.²

December 2019	• First attempt at pension reform shelved due to large-scale protests and the start of the Covid Pandemic
January 10, 2023	• Second attempt at pension reform announced
March 11, 2023	• Senate passed the pension reform in a 212 to 195 vote
March 16, 2023	• President Emmanuel Macron invoked Article 49.3 of the French Constitution to push through pension reform without a direct vote in the National Assembly
March 20, 2023	• The French government survived two no-confidence motions filed by opposition groups in the National Assembly
April 14, 2023	• Reform approved by the Constitutional Council, which also declined a proposal for a national referendum on the issue
April 15, 2023	• Pension reform signed into law by President Emmanuel Macron and will enter into force in September 2023

Timeline of Pension Reform Events

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

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[hXXps://www.radiofrance\[.\]fr/franceculture/podcasts/journal-de-7-h/journal-de-7h-du-mardi-18-avril-2023-411723](https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/journal-de-7-h/journal-de-7h-du-mardi-18-avril-2023-411723)

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[hXXps://www.bfmtv\[.\]com/economie/economie-social/social/le-secretaire-general-de-la-cfdt-laurent-berger-pro-met-un-des-plus-gros-ler-mai-de-ces-30-ou-40-dernieres-annees_AV-202304300240.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/economie-social/social/le-secretaire-general-de-la-cfdt-laurent-berger-pro-met-un-des-plus-gros-ler-mai-de-ces-30-ou-40-dernieres-annees_AV-202304300240.html)

Since the onset of the protests in January 2023, there has been a gradual decline in the number of participants but a concomitant increase in violent incidents, especially after President Macron used Article 49.3 to push through reform without a direct vote.

According to Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, 2,500 fires have been lit by protesters, and nearly 300 public buildings have been vandalized since mid-March 2023.³

Demonstrators also broke into the Paris headquarters of several private companies on April 13, 2023.⁴ The rise in violence led the Council of Europe to express concern and criticize the French police for “excessive use of force” on March 28, 2023.⁵ Another round of nationwide strikes and demonstrations occurred on May 1, 2023 (International Workers’ Day).⁶

First Round	• January 19, 2023
Second Round	• January 31, 2023
Third Round	• February 7, 2023
Fourth Round	• February 11, 2023
Fifth Round	• February 16, 2023
Sixth Round	• March 7, 2023
Seventh Round	• March 11, 2023
Eighth Round	• March 15, 2023
Ninth Round	• March 23, 2023
Tenth Round	• March 28, 2023
Eleventh Round	• April 6, 2023
Twelfth Round	• April 12, 2023
Thirteenth Round	• May 1, 2023
Expected Fourteenth Round	• June 6, 2023

Timeline of Protests

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

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[hXXps://www.lefigaro\[.\]fr/actualite-france/plus-de-1000-policiers-gendarmes-et-sapeurs-pompiers-blesses-depuis-le-16-mars-selon-darmanin-20230402](https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/plus-de-1000-policiers-gendarmes-et-sapeurs-pompiers-blesses-depuis-le-16-mars-selon-darmanin-20230402)

⁴ [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/04/06/business/blackrock-office-stormed-paris-protests/index.html](https://www.cnn[.]com/2023/04/06/business/blackrock-office-stormed-paris-protests/index.html);

⁵ [hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/europe/french-pension-protesters-flood-lvmh-headquarters-paris-2023-04-13/](https://www.reuters[.]com/world/europe/french-pension-protesters-flood-lvmh-headquarters-paris-2023-04-13/)

⁶ [hXXps://www.tflinfo\[.\]fr/societe/manifestations-reforme-des-retraites-violences-policieres-le-conseil-de-l-europe-critique-la-france-2252028.html](https://www.tflinfo[.]fr/societe/manifestations-reforme-des-retraites-violences-policieres-le-conseil-de-l-europe-critique-la-france-2252028.html)

[hXXps://www.lemonde\[.\]fr/politique/live/2023/05/01/1-mai-en-direct-les-manifestations-ont-reuni-sept-a-dix-fois-plus-de-monde-qu-en-2022-sur-fond-de-contestation-de-la-reforme-des-retraites_6171635_823448.html](https://www.lemonde[.]fr/politique/live/2023/05/01/1-mai-en-direct-les-manifestations-ont-reuni-sept-a-dix-fois-plus-de-monde-qu-en-2022-sur-fond-de-contestation-de-la-reforme-des-retraites_6171635_823448.html)

Ongoing unrest also has the potential to disrupt and delay preparations for the next Olympic Games, which are scheduled to take place in Paris from July 26 to August 11, 2024. Since the signing of the pension reform into law, a slogan has emerged on social media: No retirement, no Olympics #PasDeRetraitPasDeJO. The aim is to advocate for disruptions to the planning and execution of the Games if the president does not retract the legislation.⁷ Currently, this slogan has not yet taken off in a tangible form in terms of potential actions and is not endorsed by major labor unions. However, sporadic social media commentary promotes actions such as blocking the building sites of the Olympic Village or registering to volunteer during the Games and then failing to show up.⁸ Of note, there have been online suggestions to target other notable events that will take place before the 2024 Olympics, including the Roland-Garros French Open from May 28-June 11, 2023; the Tour de France from July 1-23, 2023; the Rugby World Cup from September 28-October 28, 2023; and even the Cannes Film Festival from May 16-27, 2023.^{9 10}

The symbolic 100 days that President Macron gave himself will “expire” around July 14, 2023, and coincide with the Bastille Day celebrations, which also could lead to additional disruptive activity. In an attempt to revitalize his presidency, President Macron has also been pushing other economic measures that could guarantee better working conditions and pay for France’s middle class. The plans include new factory construction and tax breaks to secure foreign investment.¹¹ However, Macron’s promotion of the plans also gives protesters an opportunity to challenge him publicly. On May 15, 2023, a relative of

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[hXXps://www.tf1info\[.\]fr/societe/reforme-des-retraites-pas-de-retrait-de-la-loi-pas-de-jo-la-menace-contre-paris-2024-qui-divise-2254324.html](https://www.tf1info.fr/societe/reforme-des-retraites-pas-de-retrait-de-la-loi-pas-de-jo-la-menace-contre-paris-2024-qui-divise-2254324.html)

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[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/sport/2023/apr/26/games-fakers-olympic-pseudo-volunteers-plan-to-disrupt-paris-2024-saccage](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/apr/26/games-fakers-olympic-pseudo-volunteers-plan-to-disrupt-paris-2024-saccage)

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[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2023-04-24/french-union-pursues-pension-fight-with-threat-of-power-cuts](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-24/french-union-pursues-pension-fight-with-threat-of-power-cuts)

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[hXXps://www.euronews\[.\]com/2023/03/10/students-protest-pension-reform-in-france-as-union-cuts-power-to-stade-de-france-in-symbol](https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/10/students-protest-pension-reform-in-france-as-union-cuts-power-to-stade-de-france-in-symbol)

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[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2023-05-11/macron-sets-out-plan-to-accelerate-france-s-industrial-revival](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-11/macron-sets-out-plan-to-accelerate-france-s-industrial-revival)

Macron was attacked after a televised speech promoting the new measures.¹² Visits to factory grounds or business meetings with potential investors are also likely to be targeted.

Recommendations

Due to increased violence between protestors and law enforcement, it is advisable to avoid demonstrations and areas with significant police activity. Unions and anti-government groups typically announce the dates of nationwide actions several weeks in advance; ZeroFox recommends checking security alerts concerning France regularly. In addition, due to the wide-ranging transportation disruptions that accompany these events, it is not advisable to travel within the country or book international rail and plane tickets that involve French connections. Given the break-ins at the corporate offices of private companies, businesses with a physical presence in Paris or other large cities may benefit from implementing enhanced security measures on days of national strikes and demonstrations.

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65613894>

| Appendix: 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.