

# [***Opinion: Why Macron wants you to see his bulging biceps***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BM5-8GV1-JBSS-S000-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Paris (CNN) &#8212; Were they real? Most people's first reaction when viewing French President Emmanuel Macron's moody black-and-white [*boxing photos*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/21/world/emmanuel-macron-boxing-photos-scli-intl/index.html) this week was to question their authenticity. Had the bulging presidential bicep, veins popping, been swollen artificially?

On social media, some wondered if they were AI-generated or the result of creative photoshopping. But the images were from the president's personal photographer. Asked about the cynics questioning her work, she dismissed them.

The social media meme factory cranked into action. Macron was [*mocked up as Popeye*](https://www.sudouest.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/macron-muscles-saillants-en-train-de-boxer-quel-message-derriere-ces-nouvelles-photos-virilistes-du-president-19039335.php), the spinach-eating sailor superhero. He was compared to "Raging Bull" Jake LaMotta. Less flattering photos of his arms were located and placed side-by-side. "Your profile picture vs real life," wrote one. Real boxing coaches critiqued his technique.

But the images invite much larger questions. Why has he done this? And why now?

The first part of the answer is that the 46-year-old has always been adept at making himself the center of the conversation. Since his first steps into ***politics*** in 2014, the self-styled [*"disruptor"*](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2018/04/16/macron-the-president-and-philosopher) knew how to harness the power of provocation. Politicians fear nothing more than irrelevance.

He's always been sporty too. His [*soccer days*](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1J60N7/) are long gone and he finds little time for his beloved tennis, but he has boxed in the gym at the presidential palace since winning power in 2017, sometimes taking aides or bodyguards as sparring partners.

Getting the French moving is one of his current "national causes" ahead of the Paris Olympics this year. In January, he posted a video online, boxing gloves slung over his shoulder, urging French people to do [*30 minutes of exercise a day.*](https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8r9ur9)

But the photos said something larger. This was Macron pumped up, ready for a fight, with teeth gritted. Everywhere he looks at present, the centrist sees battles - most of them slipping away from him. The "Rocky" president might be in good shape physically, but he's politically and diplomatically pinned in a corner.

His second term in office, won two years ago with minimal campaigning, was immediately embroiled in [*the country's worst protests in decades*](https://www.france24.com/en/france/20231228-riots-protests-and-climate-uprisings-2023-was-a-tumultuous-year-in-france) and has drifted since. Despite all-offense against the anti-immigration party of far-right leader Marine Le Pen in recent months, the polls keep getting worse.

Le Pen's party is on track to [*win elections for the European parliament*](https://www.politico.eu/article/french-far-right-poised-record-surge-eu-parliament-election-poll-shows-bardella-national-rally/) in June again, with a possible [*10 point winning margin*](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2024/03/11/european-elections-poll-far-right-13-points-ahead-of-macron-s-camp-gap-widening_6606410_5.html). No serious commentator excludes the idea of her succeeding Macron in 2027 anymore. By some estimates, she and her protege, 28-year-old Jordan Bardella, [*are the second- and third-most popular politicians in the country.*](https://www.politico.eu/article/can-anything-stop-the-french-far-rights-new-leader/)

The French economy is also on the slide, risking a blow-out of public finances. Macron convened senior ministers and allies for dinner this week, [*urging them over a seafood buffet*](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2024/03/21/a-moins-de-trois-mois-des-europeennes-emmanuel-macron-pris-dans-la-nasse-du-deficit-public_6223185_823448.html) to find ways to cut spending.

Bigger foes loom to the east and west. Many observers concluded the cliched boxing photos were a message to the black-belt judoka in the Kremlin, Russian President Vladimir Putin, a master of the staged display of male virility, whether it be [*bare-chested horse riding or spearfishing.*](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/5972503/Hunting-shooting-and-fishing-with-Vladimir-Putin-Russias-man-of-action.html?image=16)

Macron has plenty of previous form in this domain too, once posting a video of himself being lowered onto a [*nuclear submarine by helicopter.*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-40502027)

Having spent months trying to avert war in Ukraine by sweet-talking Putin, Macron has transformed himself into Europe's alpha defense hawk in recent months. Long gone are the days when he worried about [*"humiliating"*](https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-putin-ukraine-invasion-mistake/) the former KGB man and would chide Eastern European nations as [*"war-mongers".*](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/emmanuel-macron-ap-ukraine-russia-french-b2157541.html)

In late February, Macron [*refused to rule out sending troops to Ukraine*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/27/europe/france-macron-troops-ukraine-intl/index.html), sending a shockwave through European capitals. At the same time, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a political punching bag at home whose perceived weakness infuriates Macron, was refusing to deliver long-range missiles to Kyiv.

Like leaders across the EU, Macron is also preparing for the possible return of Donald Trump to the White House. The French leader concluded that strength was the only language his bulky US counterpart understood during his first term in the White House. [*Handshakes between the two men*](https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/28/politics/emmanuel-macron-donald-trump/index.html) were akin to wrestling matches, Macron once squeezing Trump's knuckles so hard they turned white.

By temperament, the former investment banker is a risk-taker. By instinct, he likes being on the front foot. He might appear to be on the ropes, with problems mounting in Paris, Kyiv and Washington, but he wants us to know that he'll keep on swinging.

Opinion by Adam Plowright

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