

EUROPE

France Recalls Ambassador to Italy in Protest at Yellow-Vest Meeting

Move follows Italy's deputy prime minister meeting near Paris with activists from French antigovernment group



Italian Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio met Tuesday with yellow-vest activists on the outskirts of Paris. PHOTO: ANDREW MEDICHINI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Matthew Dalton

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PARIS—France recalled its ambassador to Italy on Thursday in protest after Italy's deputy prime minister met near Paris this week with prominent members of the antigovernment yellow-vest movement, opening a rift between the longtime European allies without precedent in the postwar era.

The meeting followed a string of criticisms leveled against French President Emmanuel Macron by members of the Italian government, a coalition between the anti-immigration League party and the antiestablishment 5 Star Movement. In December, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini called Mr. Macron a “laboratory product.”

“For many months, France has been the target of repeated accusations, baseless attacks, outrageous declarations,” the French foreign ministry said Thursday. “This is unprecedented

since the end of the war.” It was the first time France had recalled its ambassador to Italy since the end of World War II.

The dispute shows how tensions over globalization and immigration are spilling over national borders, roiling politics across the European Union ahead of the bloc’s parliamentary elections in May.

Mr. Macron is a champion of EU institutions and policies, from free trade to the bloc’s moderate stance on immigration. Mr. Salvini and other members of the Italian government have pushed a crackdown on immigration, while waging a monthslong battle with the EU executive arm in Brussels over Italy’s national budget.

The yellow vests, known for the reflective safety vests, or gilets jaunes, they wear during weekly protests, are challenging Mr. Macron’s plans to remake the French economy. Comprising largely supporters from France’s far left and far right—not unlike the Italian government—the yellow vests are skeptical of the EU and opposed to Mr. Macron’s free-market agenda.

On Tuesday, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio met on the outskirts of Paris with yellow-vest activists who are preparing to run candidates in the European elections. “The wind of change has crossed the Alps,” Mr. Di Maio wrote on his Facebook page.

“The latest interferences constitute an additional and unacceptable provocation,” the French foreign ministry said. “They violate the respect that democratically and freely elected governments owe each other.”

On Thursday Mr. Salvini said he is happy to meet with Mr. Macron and the French government. He made three demands: France should stop pushing back into Italy migrants trying to cross into France; turn over Italian militants who are living in France; and stop subjecting Italians who work in France to excessive border checks.

“We don’t want to fight with anybody, and we aren’t interested in polemics,” he said. “We are concrete people and we defend the interest of Italians.”

—*Eric Sylvers contributed to this article.*

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