

Macron's Attempt to Exploit Algerian Gas Unlikely to Succeed

Analysts believe Algeria is not able to replace Russian gas.

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Amid the search for diversification of energy sources, France seems ready to resume some of its colonial ties with Algeria. The African country is an important gas producer and can help Europe with supplies at this time of widespread shortages as consequence of anti-Russian sanctions. However, it remains to be seen whether it is in the Algerian interest to play this role of "substitute" for Russia that France wants it to play.

Last week of August French President Emmanuel Macron made an official trip to Algeria seeking to meet with local authorities in order to advance discussions on various strategic topics. As expected, the main issue of the meetings was the bilateral cooperation in gas supply. The French leader praised the North African country for its productive capacity and applauded Algerian's role as a European ally, which many analysts have interpreted as a form of "testing the waters" for new energy contracts.

Macron's visit lasted three days, ending on August 26, after several meetings between the French president and local leaders, including politicians, businessmen, artists and athletes. On the last day of the visit, Macron and his Algerian counterpart, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, announced the formation of a cooperation pact, whose objective would be to achieve a "new, irreversible dynamic of progress" in bilateral ties, but there was no specific mention about gas.

Macron tried to evade claims that his mission in Algeria would simply be to reach new sources of gas. According to him, the diplomatic objectives went beyond the mere search for gas, including a series of relevant topics. However, the almost unanimous opinion among experts is that Paris tried to show a gesture of diplomatic goodwill in the hope of receiving some kind of benefit in the gas supply in return. This type of opinion seems really justified when we remember the recent tensions between the two countries.

Last year, Macron showed a very different attitude towards Algeria than he does today. In

September 2021, the French president stated that the government of the North African country foments hatred against the French people and even questioned the existence of Algeria as a nation, in a statement that showed many neocolonialist and racist elements. The case generated a serious crisis in bilateral relations, with the rupture of diplomatic relations and the banning of French aircraft from Algerian airspace. Months later, relations were re-established and reached a greater degree of stability, which was largely due to the French effort to seek new strategic partners. Now, with the gas crisis, this French effort seems even greater.

However, not all experts believe that the French project will succeed. For example, Dr. Farid Benyahia, a renowned Algerian political scientist and expert on geopolitical, economic and energy issues, believes that the gas partnership between France and Algeria will not be promising as Paris plans to obtain a satisfactory amount of energy to supply not only the country's basic needs, but also the French re-industrialization project announced by Macron last year. And this seems to be a demand that goes beyond Algeria's productive capacities.

Furthermore, he points out that the rise in gas prices is not exclusively due to the conflict in Ukraine but is also related to the European project of transition to green energy. The sanctions have exacerbated a pre-existing problem and created an unsustainable situation, in which the small Algerian gas supply will not be enough to reverse the scenario of rising prices.

“The energy security problems in France, and in Europe as a whole, did not begin with the start of the Russian special operation in Ukraine and the subsequent drop in gas and oil supplies, but long before that (...) Soaring energy prices in Europe were primarily caused by the high cost of the [green] energy transition as well as the recovery of the global economy after the Covid-19 crisis”, he says, adding that the most coherent alternative would be to invest in nuclear energy, which has not been carried out efficiently, with most of French reactors being close to ending activities.

“[If Macron wants to pursue his reindustrialization project], the growth in electricity consumption could reach 90%. Most French reactors will reach the end of their lifecycle by 2040 (...) [So], It will be difficult for Emmanuel Macron to find alternatives to gas, oil and Russian coal”, he concludes.

In addition, experts consulted by Bloomberg also say that even if Macron manages to advance the negotiations initiated during his visit, it is unlikely that the state company that controls gas production in Algeria will commit to increasing supplies to France, given the current production capacity: “Even if Macron manages to make amends during his visit, Algeria's state-run energy company, lacking investment, says it doesn't have the capacity to provide more to France in the short term”, Bloomberg says.

Since the beginning of this year, Algeria has increased gas exports to Italy, due to a new agreement. The volume has already reached the mark of 13.9 billion cubic meters, representing a growth of 113% in relation to what was previously destined for Rome. In recent months, the country has also signed agreements with Turkey and opened space for Chinese companies to start new exploration projects on Algerian soil. In fact, to meet French demand, the African country would have to reduce the supply to its current partners, as the Algerian reserves do not produce much surplus.

It is curious to note the arrogance of France in trying to suddenly reverse the entire

diplomatic crisis initiated by Macron's neocolonialist stance just to gain advantages in a moment of energy shortages. Paris thinks that Algeria must stop serving its current partners in order to meet a new French demand, which reflects France's colonial mentality. Simply, Macron continues to think that Algeria is still a French colony, which must be available to serve the "metropolis" at any time. However, his plans are likely to fail and once again the only alternative left for Paris will be to decline its aggressive stance towards Russia.

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