



France's Government Reshuffle

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- To counter France's rising far right, President Emmanuel Macron tapped 34-year-old Education Minister Gabriel Attal as the prime minister to replace Elisabeth Borne, in office since President Macron's May 2022 reelection.
- Attal becomes France's youngest-ever prime minister and will rely on a partially reconfigured government team made up of strong political personalities drawn primarily from the centre and centre-right.
- With the reshuffle, Macron hopes to reset a troubled second term following mass protests of his pension reform and bitter divisions within his own camp exposed by a recent immigration bill.
- The reorganisation leaves intact the government's key business priorities – including foreign direct investments and an ambitious €50 billion investment plan to decarbonize French industry – but Macron's grand economic and social ambitions will need to be reconciled with the reality of France's dire financial situation.
- Attal's new team will also lead the campaign for the European elections against Marine Le Pen's far-right Rassemblement National (RN), which is currently leading the polls.

Elisabeth Borne's departure: a premiership marked by struggles, reforms, and political turbulence

This reshuffle puts an end to the premiership of Elisabeth Borne, which has been marked by political and social unrest since 2022. Lacking an absolute majority in Parliament, Macron's centrist alliance has been forced to resort to Article 49.3 no fewer than 23 times. The constitutional procedure allows bills to be passed through a vote of confidence rather than a vote on the legislative text.

Political tensions reached a climax in December 2023 in the context of the parliamentary debate on the reform of immigration law, which underwent significant changes to secure support from right-wing parties, raising the ire of the left-leaning supporters of the President.



Macron's bold choice: a new political dynamic with a rising star as prime minister

Attal's profile differs from President Macron's previous prime ministers, who were all technocrats who had spent most of their careers in public administration or local government.

Attal comes from a political background and represents the new generation brought to power in Macron's first presidential election victory. A former Socialist Party activist who worked for ministers under former President François Hollande, Attal joined Macron's 2017 campaign in its early days. Following his election as an MP at age 28, he also served as the spokesperson for Macron's parliamentary majority.

He quickly joined the government and began climbing the ministerial ranks, first as a junior education minister (2018-2020), then government spokesperson (2020-2022), budget minister (2022-2023) and finally education minister (2023-2024). It is in his recent and brief tenure of the education portfolio that Attal has made the strongest public impression, through his clear and a firm approach to issues such as combating bullying at school.

Interviewed on TF1's evening news after the announcement of his government on 11 January, Attal pledged a laser focus on 'results, results, results', from a ministerial team '200% committed to meeting the expectations of the French people'.

In a context of political instability, Attal has the potential to appeal to centre-left MPs and voters, as a former Socialist, while being appreciated by the centre-right for his 'firm' stance on issues such as the ban on religious symbols in schools. Even the far right sees Attal as a serious adversary; the RN spokesman has accused him of 'tapping into [our] stock of ideas'. Macron also clearly hopes to benefit from Attal's status as the most popular minister – his 40% approval rating contrasts with the president's own 25% – to lift his own political fortunes.

A new government leaning toward the centre-right

While Attal is himself a former Socialist, his government includes mainly centre-right figures.

Unsurprisingly, Macron and Attal decided to keep senior ministers from the previous government, including Bruno Le Maire (Economy & Finance), Gerald Darmanin (Interior), Sebastien Lecornu (Defence), Christophe Béchu (Environment) – all former members of the centre-right Republican Party.

Among the newcomers are other key centre-right figures: Rachida Dati, former minister under President Sarkozy, who becomes culture minister, and Catherine Vautrin, former minister under Jacques Chirac, who becomes labour & health minister.

Some civil society figures from the previous government also remain in office, including the charismatic lawyer-turned-Justice Minister Eric Dupont-Moretti and Sylvie Retailleau who continues on as higher education minister. Amélie Oudéa-Castéra becomes education minister, replacing Attal, but also retains Sports in her portfolio – a highly political position in the run-up to the 2024 summer Olympic Games.

Other members of the new generation brought to power by Macron are also joining the government, such as Stéphane Séjourné, 38, who becomes minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs. He had previously been chairing the Renew group in the European Parliament since 2021.

Junior ministers are expected to be appointed next week.



The government's agenda: 'rearming' France, tackling unemployment, and addressing societal issues

The government reshuffle should not fundamentally change the French government's liberal stance on the economy, which has remained constant since 2017.

With regards to future economic reforms, President Macron has already announced a new law introducing 'massive simplification' for 'all economic sectors', aimed at enhancing job creation – in a follow up to previous legislation he brought forward as Economy minister in 2015.

Minister Le Maire recently stated that a new legislation would be introduced in spring 2024 to boost France's attractiveness and consolidate the country's position as the top destination for foreign investment in Europe following Brexit. Of note, this contrasts with a decree issued in 2023 further extending the list of economic sectors subject to foreign investment control in France.

The new government is also expected to implement several of President Macron's commitments on societal issues, such as constitutionalising the right to abortion, and a law on end of life. Macron has also pledged to focus on 'rearming' the country and improving public services for the remaining three years of his term.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal is expected to set out his agenda in more detail through a policy-focused speech in Parliament in the coming days.

However, the reshuffle will not improve the government's chances of implementing far-reaching reforms and Attal will still have to negotiate with opposition parties to advance his legislative agenda, with a centrist alliance roughly 40 votes short of an absolute majority in Parliament. Even though the appointment of additional right-wing figures is yet another attempt to woo votes from the Republicans, this strategy has failed to work so far.

The new government will also have to manage both international instability and domestic tensions while preparing for the highly scrutinised Paris Olympic Games this summer.

What Macron's reshuffle means for business

The new French government will continue to treat foreign direct investments as one of its top priorities, at a time when many financial institutions still plan to strengthen their presence in France following Brexit. Paris has been performing well in this context, with 5,500 new finance professionals relocating to the city post-Brexit.

This is also illustrated by one of Attal's first appointments: His new chief of staff, until now head of the French Treasury, has a background in investment banking and knows economic issues inside out. He also served as Bruno Le Maire's chief of staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government will also continue to roll out its ambitious €50 billion investment plan to decarbonise French industry and ensure its sovereignty, handing out substantial subsidies to companies and start-ups involved in producing innovative technologies and strategic materials, or participating in the relocation to France of the manufacturing of essential products.

However, Macron and Attal will still have to contend with France's financial situation: Public debt has reached record levels in 2023, at more than €3,000 billion, and stricter control is needed to avoid a downgrade by rating agencies – and the subsequent fallout.



European elections in sight

The main challenge facing Attal and his team will be the difficult task of finding the right positioning to weaken Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* in the June 2024 European elections, with the RN currently leading the polls at 29%, and Macron and Attal's *Renaissance* lagging behind at 19%.

This election will be a symbolic first political test for Attal, especially as the RN is now led by Jordan Bardella, 28, who many see as Attal's nemesis in the forthcoming 2027 presidential elections.

Furthermore, with the appointment of Stéphane Séjourné, who was supposed to lead the presidential party in the European elections, Macron and Attal will have to move fast to find him a replacement.

To continue the conversation



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