

Macron woos tech world, pledges French 'startup nation'

June 15 2017, by Angela Charlton



French President Emmanuel Macron holds a roboter as he visits the Vivatech, a gadgets show in Paris, France, Thursday, June 15, 2017. French President Emmanuel Macron is shaking hands with robots and encouraging entrepreneurs as he unveils his strategy to transform the country from a land resting on the laurels of its past into a "startup nation." French Minister of State for the Digital Sector Mounir Mahjoubi, left. (Martin Bureau/Pool Photo via AP)

French President Emmanuel Macron is inviting the world's innovators,

engineers and business-builders to come to France as he tries to transform this country from a land resting on the laurels of its past into a "startup nation."

In a first step, the French government on Thursday launched a "French Tech Visa," a fast-track four-year residence permit for entrepreneurs and their families if they meet certain criteria.

Echoing his call for U.S. climate scientists to come to France after President Donald Trump pulled out of the Paris climate agreement, Macron said Thursday—in English: "At a time when some people think that walls are a solution, we do think that openness is the right path, because the challenges we face are global.

"We want the pioneers, the innovators, the entrepreneurs of the whole world to come to France and work with us on green technologies, food technologies, artificial intelligence, on all the possible innovation."

It may be a hard sell. Tech entrepreneurs say France notably needs easier financing for startups and more flexibility in labor laws. Macron agrees—and is making those changes a pillar of his vision for reinvigorating the world's sixth-largest economy.

"I want France to be . a nation that works with and for startups, and a nation that thinks and moves like a startup," he said at a Paris gadget show called Vivatech, where he chatted with a robot in English and studied French startups that measure pollution neighborhood-by-neighborhood or use artificial intelligence to predict which buses or subway trains have available seats.

Richard Bruzzo, who works for Paris-based MIP Robotics, which makes "collaborative robots" for everything from artisan jewelers to major multinationals, said France doesn't do enough to support its own tech

innovators. He was disappointed to see French companies "buy foreign robots that are four times more expensive than ones manufactured locally."

He said he hoped French politicians would help cover the costs of conferences or "putting people in touch, like they do with the big industrial conglomerates."

Increased labor flexibility was what Jocelyne Wasselin, the CEO of Grenoble, France-based Enerbee wanted out of the new government.

Wasselin said it is constraining to oblige her company, which builds motion-based energy generators for connected devices, to designate an official employee representative given that it only employs just over a dozen people.

In a country known for high labor costs and regulation, Macron said government should be a "platform and not a constraint."

However, his plans to peel back labor protections worry French unions and traditional workers, who fear being left behind in a [startup](#), robot-obsessed nation that has less and less need for old-industry skills.

While Macron wants tech investment he also wants to pressure online giants like Google to pay taxes in countries where they make money.

He acknowledged that France has not always embraced business.

"We love entrepreneurs as long as they don't succeed too much. Then we are jealous, ... we stigmatize them and we tax them. That's over," he said—to huge applause from a like-minded crowd.

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