EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Quagmire quandaries

Agriculture and environmental protections continue to prove highly controversial amongst stakeholders and decisionmakers in the wake of renewed farmers' protests and the European Parliament's adoption of the Nature Restoration Law this week.

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Conservatives vs. Conservation

The Green Deal continues to cause controversy amongst European conservatives, as *la Repubblica* reports on the recent vote on the Nature Restoration Law. The law, which seeks to restore at least 20% of the EU's land and marine areas by 2030 and all ecosystems by 2050, still passed, even though many among the right-wing European People's Party allied themselves with the far right and the group ECR (of which Georgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy are members) to fight against it. Farmers' lobbies have been hard at work in the last months to push back against the legislation, with much-discussed demonstrations. Not all the EPP parliamentarians voted against the law, raising the question of the potential future alliance of the biggest political group with the conservatives and far-right after the EU elections in June. This veering to the right is ringing alarm bells in the European Parliament, with a socialist MEP expressing his "bitterness at the lack of loyalty of a part of the EPP, which has chosen to go towards the extreme right despite many elements being were introduced precisely at their request".

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Restoration rebellion

The Nature Restoration Law proved to be as divisive at home in Ireland as it was in the European Parliament following its adoption on Tuesday, writes *Independent*. Though Sinn Féin stands firmly against the law, which was reflected in the vote against it from its sole MEP Chris MacManus, nonetheless a senator and EU election candidate for the party Lynn Boylan praised it – as did MacManus last June, for that matter. The EPP group also opposed the law, but its five Irish MEPs from Fine Gael broke ranks in an upset to vote in favour. The results were hailed by Green MEPs and organisations such as the Irish Wildlife Trust, who said it was "a substantial step forward on the way to restoring our degraded ecosystems". The Irish Farmers Association, on the other hand, complained of unanswered concerns. Unlikely voice of reason and supporter of the law Mick Wallace attempted to assuage anxieties: "Farmers and landowners should not fear the regulation, but should instead welcome the opportunities it will provide." Now it is up to Member States to begin work on nationally-tailored legislation.

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Wheeling, not dealing

On Monday, farmers once again took to the streets of Brussels to demonstrate their displeasure with European agricultural policy ahead of the Agriculture Council meeting. 900 tractors contributed to prevent EU employees from entering their workplaces and disrupt Brussels traffic, *The Brussels Times* reports. In an attempt to address the discontent of the farmers, the European Commission has proposed postponing the requirement to leave 4% of arable land fallow each year and impose restrictions on certain Ukrainian agricultural imports. However, the farmers were not impressed, leaving their trade union representatives exasperated with the violence conducted. To identify the main sources of concern, the Commission will launch an online survey in March aimed directly at farmers. The Agriculture Council meeting also showed political will to respond effectively to the concerns of the farmers. However, the paper does not address the issue of fair income and the fact that the CAP currently favours large-scale agri-businesses at the expense of small farmers – some of the core issues in the recent demonstrations. As the tensions increase, farmers and EU institutions continue to talk past each other.

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Border brawl

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has indicated that Ukraine may take "retaliatory measures" against Poland if they do not resolve border blockades initiated by protesting farmers by the end of March, *Notes from Poland* reports. As the blockades continue, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky invited Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to meet at the border to discuss how to end the protests, referring to the situation as a matter of "national security". However, Tusk declined to meet before the already scheduled meeting in Warsaw in March. Additionally, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal was left waiting at the border when Polish leaders did not show – a clear contrast to last month's statements by President Tusk indicating that Poland was Ukraine's no.1 ally in the battle against evil. In an effort to resolve the conflict, Prime Minister Shmyhal outlined a five-step plan, including Ukraine's acceptance of the restrictions proposed by the European Commission on Ukrainian agricultural exports. Despite previous statements by Ukrainian officials stating that the six-month blockade has hit the Ukrainian economy and their ability to defend themselves, Shmyhal expressed gratitude to the Polish government for its clear stance on letting military equipment, humanitarian aid and medical supplies across the border.

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