EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Top dogs

As an agreement on EU and NATO top leaders seems to be approaching, we look at the recent political developments across the bloc.

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Von der lead(en)

EU leaders punted their final decision on the bloc's top jobs to the end-of-June European Council, but the contours of a deal returning Ursula von der Leyen as European Commission chief were apparent following their talks in Brussels on Monday, *Times of Malta* reports. Far-right gains in EU-wide elections earlier this month, which triggered snap polls and political upheaval in France, have focused minds around the positions helming the bloc – negotiated with an eye to geographic and political balance. But even though von der Leyen's second term seems like a safe shot, no consensus was reached during Monday's dinner. Reason to worry von der Leyen? Apparently not. "We will not have a rerun of 2019, when it was a big tombola, and everything was up for grabs for three days," said Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. If, as expected, von der Leyen ultimately pockets enough leaders' votes, she can set about choosing her Commissioners, but she will have one more hurdle to pass: the new European Parliament has to approve leaders' picks and Commissioner candidates. And for that von der Leyen has been putting on her charm left and (hard) right – literally.

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Rule of Rutte

After months of negotiations, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis has withdrawn his candidacy for the post of NATO Secretary General, clearing the way for the outgoing Dutch head of government Mark Rutte, writes German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Romania was the last member of the alliance to announce that it would give up its opposition to the outgoing Dutch head of government after months of blockade with Hungary, Slovakia and Turkey recently doing the same. Hungary recently gave up its resistance after Rutte agreed to Hungarian demands, including consideration for their concern regarding pressure to participate in a planned NATO mission to coordinate arms deliveries to Ukraine. With current Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stepping down in October, the road to finding his successor has not been a steady one. A consensus is required within the defence alliance for the appointment of a new Secretary General. This means that none of the current 32 NATO states may raise an objection to the candidate. Stoltenberg has himself gone on several diplomatic missions in the past months to ensure that the process moves along. Now that no one stands in Rutte's way, he could now be officially presented as Stoltenberg's successor as early as next week – and give Stoltenberg a well-deserved break with it.

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To make or not make Europe great again

With the Hungarian Presidency just weeks away, Hungary promises to be an honest broker and facilitate concrete steps towards enlargement – under a populist banner, writes newspaper *Balkan Insights*. Hungarian European affairs minister, Janos Boka, presented to the media the government's official programme, stressing its vital interest in maintaining a "strong and competitive" Europe. Yet the deep suspicion among many in Europe about the motives and policies of Hungary under the populist Viktor Orban were hardly assuaged when Boka revealed the official theme of the Hungarian presidency as a slightly reworded campaign slogan of former US President Donald Trump, "Make Europe Great Again". Some parties within the EU had even wanted to strip Hungary of its stint in the presidency as punishment for its continual vetoes over aid to Ukraine, its cosying up to Russia and its democratic backsliding. One step towards stability could be a softening of the Hungarian government's stance on a number of EU priorities, and recent events might have facilitated a (slight) step in the right direction. Firstly, Orban appears to have been forced onto the back foot by the recent EU Parliament elections failing to deliver the hoped-for decisive shift to the hard right. Secondly, the meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Budapest last week, where Orban publicly dropped his veto threats against military aid package for Ukraine, also suggest the Hungarian prime minister is feeling devoid of allies and needs to rectify his policies. Yet, the Hungarian Presidency could face strong headwinds and hard scrutiny as the only EU country facing an Article 7 procedure – so much for making Europe great again.

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Football and far-right

French far-right leader Jordan Bardella urged voters to give his alliance a clear majority in snap polls to be able to act unhampered as Prime Minister, while criticising footballer Kylian Mbappé for urging a vote against extremes this week, *Le Monde* reports. Macron's risky gamble to gain a better hold over the lower chamber in the aftermath of the European elections has caused the left and right to form eleventh-hour alliances to garner more votes in the elections just weeks before Paris hosts the Olympics in July and August. Also happening this summer? The EURO 2024, where Les Bleus have decided to provide an unexpected political statement between matches. Football superstar Kylian Mbappé urged France to vote against "extremes" this week. That did not sit well with Bardella who stated that "when you have the luck to have a huge salary, be a multimillionaire, the chance to travel in a private jet, I am a little annoyed to see these sports figures giving lessons to people who struggle to make ends meet." As both young men fight for victories in and for France, it is clear that the two F's - football and far-right – don't align.

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