EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

House of cards

As global leaders continue to push to secure their seats, we take a look at the latest political and diplomatic developments in Europe and across the pond.

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Madame President

Ursula von der Leyen denounces Viktor Orbán's "so-called peace mission" in Moscow and pleads for a strong Europe as she seeks to secure her next term as European Commission President, writes Le Monde. "I will never accept that demagogues and extremists destroy our European way of life, and I am here today ready to lead the fight with all democratic forces," she said in a speech to the European Parliament ahead of the vote in Strasbourg on Thursday. Von der Leyen did not hold back her criticism of Orbán either. The Hungarian prime minister had provoked the anger of European leaders by going to Moscow on 5 July to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin and has been particularly criticised for having taken this initiative without any consultation with his EU counterparts and in breach of the European position of total support for Kiev and isolation of Moscow. Ahead of the vote, Ursula von der Leyen had to meet the – sometimes contradictory – expectations of the various groups to secure the needed 361 votes majority. This has caused tension both left and (far) right.

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Cold shoulder

Ursula von der Leyen's condemnation of Viktor Orbán's latest activities does not come without consequences. Angered by Orbán's globetrotting since Hungary assumed the Council of the EU presidency on 1 July, von der Leyen said Commissioners will skip informal Council meetings hosted by Budapest and instead send bureaucrats, Balkan Insights reports. Hungarian government officials condemned the European Commission's decision on Monday stating that the Commission cannot cherry-pick the institutions (and Member States) it wants to cooperate with. Why the cold shoulder? Well, bilateral meetings on their own would not necessarily cause an international diplomatic crisis. However, when you decide to do so under the impression that you're representing the EU on a "peace mission" to help negotiate a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine by displaying the bloc's flags and logos – without any sign-off from the institution in question – you piss off an EU leader or two. Alejandro Esteso Pérez, a political scientist and researcher, described Orbán's actions as "trolling his EU counterparts, as he is playing not only with the ambiguity of (not) representing the EU vis-à-vis authoritarian leaders, but also through this 'surprise factor' where we did not find out about these meetings until a few hours before they took place." If there's one key take away for the newbie Hungarian Presidency, it should be that not all surprises are good surprises.

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Thick as thieves

Europe and Ukraine continue to side-eye their American partners after former US President Donald Trump nominated his running mate in the presidential campaign this week – JD Vance, Ohio Senator and staunch critic of the EU, Germany, and Ukraine. Contrasted against Trump's former VP Mike Pence, Vance would bolster, rather than hinder, the convicted felon's isolationist and authoritarian policies, and some of his views are even more radical than Trump's, writes Austrian outlet Die Presse. "I don't really care what happens to Ukraine," he wrote in 2022, and recently penned an op-ed in The New York Times arguing that the defence of Ukraine was a lost cause and waste of US money, and a "distraction" from competition with China. Further, he's aligned with Trump on Middle East policy, likely to give Israel carte blanche to continue its decimation of Gaza and the Palestinian people. Vance, like Trump, is also a fan of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and a Eurosceptic, echoing many of the standard anti-EU talking points, and overall not in favour of strong transatlantic ties. While the vice president doesn't necessarily dictate policy, Vance is a young firebrand looking to further Trump's agenda, and none of that looks good for Europe.

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Blow after blow

As pressure continues to mount on US President Joe Biden to drop out of the race, he also came down with his third bout of COVID-19 on Wednesday, writes *NRK*. Biden and his team insist that he'll continue with his duties in quarantine and that his symptoms are mild, but it only adds fuel to the fire of many Democrats who want to replace him on the ticket. US news reported this week that Senate Majority (Democrat) Leader Chuck Schumer, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and current Speaker Hakeem Jeffries have all talked to the president about stepping down from his re-election campaign – not just because of his abysmal polling against Trump, but also arguing that Biden leading the ticket could hurt down-ballot Democratic candidates as well, especially for the House of Representatives and the Senate. Biden reportedly continues to react defensively, insisting on staying in the race. With myriad developments of late, the Trump campaign seems to keep getting stronger by the day.

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