EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Big moves

This week, we take a look at recent developments in Austria, the Middle East, Ukraine, and the change of leadership at NATO, featuring reporting from Austria, Cyprus, Italy, and Finland.

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Kick(l) to the curb

Austria's national elections on Sunday 30 September saw a major victory for the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), which won 28.9% of the vote, ahead of the ruling ÖVP (26.3%), the social democratic SPÖ (21.1%), the liberal NEOS (9.1%) and the Greens (8.2%). *Der Standard* examines the resulting difficult coalition negotiations and the special role of the Federal President in the subsequent government formation. President van der Bellen has a special role to play here, as he gives the task of forming a government to the party with the most votes. So far, he has not given the task to the right-wing populists of the FPÖ, and it is unlikely that he will do so. In the past, van der Bellen has repeatedly indicated that he would not simply hand the job to FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl, as it is important to him that the cornerstones of liberal democracy are respected when forming a government. One can only agree with the president on this point, as the far-right populist Kickl, whose party was founded by former Nazis, does indeed very much lack these qualities and would do well to read the Austrian constitution. The ruling chancellor of the conservative ÖVP, Karl Nehammer, on the other hand, is putting pressure on the FPÖ to get the job. According to the daily *Der Standard*, Nehammer's calculation is that Kickl can only fail because no one wants to form a coalition with the FPÖ. But then he would no longer be able to tell the story that he was prevented from the start. Since van der Bellen is still taking his time, this plan does not seem to be working. It remains to be seen whether the Austrian right will be part of a government again, and whether the normalisation of the far-right in Europe will take another fatal step.

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Not if, but when

After long and repeated warnings of further escalation in the Middle East, nothing seems to stand in the way of a regional conflagration following Israel's elimination of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah and Iran's subsequent missile attack on Israel. In its article, the Cypriot newspaper *Philenews* highlights the possible objectives of an Israeli response to the Iranian missile attack. According to the article, the question is not if, but when and how Israel will retaliate. The Israeli army has several targets at its disposal, but it is the timing that matters. The objectives of such an Israeli counterattack can be divided into three categories. First, Israel has an interest in attacking Iran's military installations. In pursuing this goal, it may also intend to eliminate several senior Iranian military officials, even in the centre of the Iranian capital. In addition to military strikes, Israel is likely to choose to hit Tehran with economic weapons, targeting key manufacturing sites. If Israel chooses to strike at these points, it will certainly hurt Tehran, but it will dramatically increase the risk of civilian casualties. Iran's nuclear programme is the third pillar and has been a constant and important objective for every Israeli government for decades. This could be the beginning of a close back-and-forth between Israel and Iran and could further aggravate the situation between Israel and its proxy forces in Lebanon. It is difficult to maintain hope for a peaceful solution these days, as diplomatic mediation seems to have failed.

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At what cost

On Wednesday, the Ukrainian military confirmed its full withdrawal from the front-line Donbass city of Vuhledar, after over two years of vigorous defence against at least four Russian offensives since it launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, writes Italian newspaper *Il Post*. A coal mining town once home to 14,000, the civilian population is down to 107 and the area has been bombed to rubble. It is a significant and symbolic loss for Ukraine, though its loss in itself is not thought to change the course of the war. Nonetheless, it sits in a strategic location between two fronts, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia, making it useful for supply routes to both, and its hilltop perch allows for control of communication lines in the surrounding areas. In previous attacks, Russians were repelled from the town with severe losses and were unable to breach Ukrainian defences; new tactics and weapons, along with restraints on how the Ukrainian military can use Western weapons, gave Russian troops enough of an advantage this time that they were able to take the town. Now, Russia gloats, but considering the losses all around, it is something of a pyrrhic victory.

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Changing of the guard

Finnish outlet *Kauppalehti* reports on Tuesday's rotation at NATO, in which former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte took over as Secretary General from outgoing Jens Stoltenberg after 10 years in the post. In his first press conference in the role, Rutte laid out three priorities: keeping defence manageable through investments and Member States' defence budgets, strengthening partnerships, and increasing support for Ukraine – on the latter, Rutte is of the mind that Ukraine can use Western weaponry to attack military targets in Russia, but leaves it to each member to draw its own lines bilaterally with Ukraine. Concerning Ukraine's membership to NATO, Rutte rather pivoted to reiterating support in its defence against Russia, but that there was progress over the summer at the NATO summit in Washington. Nonetheless, he is optimistic about American and European support for Ukraine going forward, regardless of who wins November's US presidential election; he said he has been in touch with both candidates. For his part, Rutte agreed with some of former US President Donald Trump's criticisms of other NATO members and has taken them into account, such as all Member States meeting 2% of GDP defence spending. After 14 years as Dutch prime minister, Rutte is no stranger to the world stage; as ever, he has set pragmatic goals for his time with the alliance.

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