EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

The Bogeyman

As EU leaders gather in Brussels for the European Council summit, migration remains high on the agenda, dominating both the preparations and the summit, and not just because of a new migration deal between Italy and Albania. Right-wing narratives continue to fuel the political discourse and artificially inflate the issue of migration, while EU leaders seem unable to recognise and address the real crises, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

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Peer pressure

Continuing the crackdown on migration sweeping across Europe in recent years, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced on Saturday a new strategy for handling migration and asylum claims that experts warn violates international and Polish law and has been met with condemnation from four left-wing government ministers, writes *Notes from Poland*. Poland has granted more residence permits to non-EU citizens than any other Member State over the past seven years, but apparently did so without a "comprehensive strategy" in place, which this law seeks to address. The law places an emphasis on the concept of "security", once again demonising migrants and asylum seekers as potential threats; asylum claims can be suspended if "immigrants threaten to destabilise the state." The language is partly seen as a response to the so-called "hybrid war" between the West as a whole and Russia by way of Belarus, the latter of which has been encouraging third-country migrants to cross the border into Poland. There is also an aspect related to integration and social cohesion, as well as an effort to entice Polish emigrants back to their home country. The European Commission was compelled to remind Poland of international and EU law after it was announced, but the measure must be approved by the cabinet, parliament and president before taking effect and, surely, facing challenges from the EU and its courts.

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A special relationship

Italy has begun its new strategy of "outsourcing" asylum seekers to non-EU countries this week as a group of migrants, originally bound for Italy, arrived in the Albanian port city of Shëngjin via the Italian navy, writes Spanish outlet *El Mundo*. The group, composed of 10 Bangladeshis and six Egyptians, was processed in one of Albania's two Italian-run migration centres and face a month of interviews and legal procedure to determine whether they are allowed to continue on to Italy – the first to be processed abroad under a new deal between the two countries. Though Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni touts the policy as "outsourcing" the issue elsewhere, the article points out that the term is not really accurate; rather, Italy is still investing in and handling this procedure, it's simply doing it on foreign soil. Though many EU Member States are interested in replicating such an arrangement, it is partially borne out of the unique relationship and history between Italy and Albania, who share strong economic, political, and cultural ties; the latter in particular holding a longstanding affection for Italian culture. Further, the deal will see Italy paying Albania up to €800 million over the next five years, and the Albanian head of government describes the deal as exclusive. The ongoing European Council summit will show just how desperate EU leaders are to continue sending migrants away.

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Love letter from Ursula

The Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* examines Commission President von der Leyen's new initiative on migration policy, which she outlined in a letter to Member States in preparation for this week's European Council summit. In her letter, she supports solutions such as the Italian-Albanian deal as an "innovative idea" and calls on Member States to "explore ways related to the idea of setting up return hubs outside the EU". While it is not very surprising to see Ursula von der Leyen also buying into far-right narratives, her blatant support for outsourcing the asylum process, an obligation under international law, to third countries that have serious problems with upholding democratic values is staggering and must be strongly rejected. In her letter, as *De Standaard* further analyses, von der Leyen announced that her new Commission will table a new proposal to replace and strengthen the current Return Directive. It is also possible that this will include the legal basis for the "return hubs", as the previous European Parliament could not agree on a common position on this issue. Now that the European Parliament is much more right-wing, this would have a better chance. It is therefore more important than ever for progressive pro-European forces in the European Parliament to stand up for a humane and European values-based approach to migration.

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The time is now

The Croatian news outlet *Novilist* focuses on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and in particular on Zelensky's "victory plan", which has sparked widespread debate in recent days. According to *Novilist*, President Zelensky said in his presentation to the Ukrainian parliament this Wednesday that the war could end next year at the latest if his plan is implemented immediately. But its implementation, which comes at a critical time for the Ukrainian military as it heads into winter, depends on urgent action and unity among Ukraine's partners – something that should go without saying, given that Ukrainians defend our democracy every day, but sadly does not. Zelensky's plan entails five main points, including increased and concrete arms assistance. Another, and probably more controversial, point is the call for an unconditional invitation to NATO membership, which the new NATO chief Mark Rutte has endorsed but called for a careful process to full membership. In his plan, which Zelensky will present to EU lawmakers alongside the EUCO meeting this week, he sees the West's role as investing in Ukraine's natural mineral resources and defending them against Russian attacks. It is now up to the EU and Ukraine's other allies to review his plan and take immediate and substantive action, an endeavour that seems rather hopeless now as EU leaders are caught up in a seemingly never-ending back-and-forth over new migration policies.

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