EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Influence and intervention

Refreshingly, this week's politics did not focus exclusively on migration issues. Intervention and influence ran like a red thread through European conflicts and political developments, from the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, to the BRICS summit in Russia, to the elections in Moldova, to the wrangling over the Italian-Albanian migration deal.

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Intervention

As if dealing with Russia isn't already disastrous enough, imagine throwing North Korea into the mix. Unfortunately, that might be the new reality in Ukraine. US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin said on Wednesday that there is reliable information about the presence of North Korean troops in Russia, Austrian newspaper *Kurier* reports. NATO also says it has "proof" that North Korea has sent soldiers to Russia. "If these troops are intended for fighting in Ukraine, this would represent a significant escalation of North Korea's support for Russia's illegal war", NATO spokeswoman Farah Dakhlallah said this week. Austria is also protesting against the looming intervention of North Korea in Ukraine. North Korea's ambassador was summoned to Austria's Foreign Ministry early Wednesday evening. According to South Korean intelligence, North Korea has already sent a total of 3,000 soldiers to Russia. The troops are reportedly located in military facilities in Russia, where they are presumably being prepared for use against Ukraine. The intelligence service assumes that North Korea will send a total of 10,000 soldiers to Russia by December.

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Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer

It's *supposedly* not only North Korean soldiers that will be arriving in Russia these days. Russia's claim that UN Secretary-General António Guterres will arrive in the country on Thursday is stirring up tempers in Ukraine, writes Norwegian news outlet *NRK*. This week's BRICS summit is drawing world leaders like China's Xi Jinping, India's Narendra Modi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian to Russia. Amongst the names in the list of what sounds like the class of everyone's worst nightmare is a name that stands out for other reasons: UN Secretary-General António Guterres, which is not well-perceived in war-torn Ukraine. The last time Guterres visited Russia was in 2022, just after Russia had launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine. The UN chief then asked Russia to end the war. The BRICS organisation is described in Russia as the most important alternative in a world ruled by the West. An "engine for a new world order", writes the Putin-friendly Russian think tank Valdai Club. One may wonder where the leader of a flagship "western ideology" organisation like the UN fits into this equation. Perhaps we are looking at the perfect example of "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer".

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Nice try, Vladimir

Moldovans went to the polls last Sunday to vote in presidential elections and a referendum on enshrining EU membership as a national goal in the country's institutions, according to Bulgarian news outlet *BalkanInsight*. Incumbent President Maia Sandu (42.18 percent of the vote) and former Prosecutor-General Alexandr Stoianoglo (26.17 percent of the vote), running on behalf of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of Moldova, will face off in a second round of presidential elections next month, it emerged on Monday, with 98.87 percent of the votes counted. In third place was the populist leader of Our Party, Renato Usatii, with 13.76 percent. In the second round, anti-EU and pro-Russian candidates are likely to join forces to back Stoianoglo against Sandu. In what can be seen as a massive defeat for our most famous dictator, Vladimir Putin, Sunday's referendum delivered a narrow majority for the 'yes' camp. With 98.96 percent of votes counted, 50.28 percent of voters were in favour of including EU integration in the constitution, while 49.78 percent were against. The 'yes' camp said it had won the referendum thanks to the votes of the Moldovan diaspora, who turned out in large numbers, and despite foreign influence. The general inspector of police reported that the pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor tried to influence the elections through large-scale falsification and bribery of 130,000 voters in what Maia Sandu rightly called "an unprecedented attack on freedom and democracy" - nice try, Vladimir.

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Oh no, you can't do that mate

The Italian-Albanian migration deal, which was praised by centre-right and far-right politicians and received much publicity last week, is facing some problems, according to Greek news outlet *Ekathimerini*. The deal, which only last week during the EUCO meeting was hailed as an "innovative idea", "an example of out-of-the-box thinking" and something that should be examined by Member States, has been partially overturned. The first 12 migrants sheltered in Albanian centres were sent back to Italy after judges in Rome rejected their detention on the grounds that their countries of origin – Bangladesh and Egypt – were not safe enough to send them back. In what can be seen as juridical circumvention, the Italian government then passed a decree shortening the list of countries considered 'safe' by law, meaning that Rome can send migrants back to those countries if they don't win asylum in a fast-track procedure – a dangerous move that reminds us all too well of Italy in the 1920s and Meloni's role model. Von der Leyen, on a regional tour in Tirana, Albania this Monday, was reluctant to say much, describing the Italy-Albania deal as a "bilateral agreement" that the EU would not comment on but only monitor – what happened to your enthusiasm, Ursula?

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