EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Jingle Bell

Now that we have officially entered the Christmas season and are allowed to blast Mariah Carey, there is not much reason to be merry and ring the jingle bells. The EU faces serious challenges as its second-largest economy sinks deeper into political crisis and the former EU Justice Commissioner faces serious allegations. Our efforts to find a rising star in all this are hampered by the fact that Putin continues to interfere, and the Georgian government is becoming increasingly authoritarian.

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The show does go on

It's been a year for French President Emmanuel Macron, and it's not over yet. French opposition politicians brought the government down on Wednesday, throwing the European Union's second-biggest economic power deeper into a political crisis that threatens its capacity to legislate and rein in a massive budget deficit, writes *The Irish Times*. "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer" is starting to sound like the political mantra this year, when far-right and left-wing lawmakers joined forces to back a no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Michel Barnier and his government. France now risks ending the year without a stable government or a 2025 budget. And this is not only bad news for France. This political turmoil will further weaken a European Union already reeling from the implosion of Germany's coalition government, and weeks before US President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House. What now? The re-opening ceremony of the Notre Dame Cathedral on Saturday might speed things up, with sources claiming that Macron would like to install the new PM before this. Despite a country in deep crisis, the show does go on.

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Tear gas or gaslighting

The Constitutional Court of Georgia refused on Tuesday to invalidate the parliamentary elections won at the end of October by the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, writes French newspaper *Le Monde*. In mid-November, President Salome Zurabishvili and opposition groups filed a petition with the Constitutional Court seeking to have the election results annulled. The rejection, revealed on Tuesday, was not welcomed by the thousands of Georgians who have been demonstrating every evening in the capital Tbilisi since last week. They accuse the government of pro-Russian authoritarianism and of having put on hold the ambitions of joining the European Union. Protesters were met by the police with tear gas and water cannons, in an attempt to limit the crowd. President Salome Zourabichvili, who personally supports the movement, has commented on X that the use of police force is "disproportionate". These accusations were also supported by the Commissioner for Human Rights, Levan Ioseliani, who reported "acts of torture" by the police against the protesters, after having visited those placed in detention. The government, on the other hand, did as any good gaslighter would do, and reassured the citizens that they had just simply "misunderstood".

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The persistent offender

Unfortunately, foreign interference in local elections linked to Russia has been a recurring theme in this newsletter, and the saga continues. The recent Romanian presidential election highlighted TikTok's growing influence in European politics, causing alarm across the EU, as Austrian news outlet *Kurier* points out. Calin Georgescu, an obscure nationalist candidate who admires Putin, used TikTok's reach to secure a surprise victory in the first round. His campaign skirted the EU's new social media control tool, the Digital Services Act (DSA), which requires the removal of hate speech and the labelling of political propaganda. Georgescu's TikTok videos, which contained humor and subtle propaganda, were viewed 150 million times and spread rapidly. Some of the content included fabricated claims, such as that Ukrainian refugee children in Romania received more state support than locals, fueling social division. These messages were spread not by real TikTok users, but by virtual characters called 'bots'. The system responsible for buying these bots is, with astonishing likelihood, that of the shirtless-horse-riding, dog-loving Russian dictator. The EU suspects the same foreign interference and has raised concerns about the misuse of TikTok as a propaganda tool, questioning TikTok's top lobbyists in the European Parliament. Despite TikTok's claims of compliance with EU regulations, including the removal of over 1,000 bots and the deployment of a monitoring team in Romania, critics argue that the platform has failed to act swiftly. This new episode of foreign influence highlights the challenges of enforcing digital governance in the face of sophisticated manipulation. As Georgescu advances to the run-off, the EU is grappling with the limits of its regulatory framework, its enforcement and TikTok's growing role in shaping political landscapes.

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Reyndersgate

Didier Reynders, the EU's former Justice Commissioner and the Commission's most prominent fighter for the rule of law – with a great capacity for pissing off the Hungarian government – is facing allegations of money laundering. The Belgian newspaper *The Brussels Times* reports that the National Lottery has confirmed that concerns about money laundering in 2022 led to the investigation of Belgium's former EU commissioner. These concerns led to what *The Brussels Times* called a "bombshell investigation" on Tuesday, with Reynders being questioned and his properties searched by the Belgian police over suspicions of money laundering, made through the purchase of lottery tickets by the senior figure of the French-speaking liberals MR. The Financial Information Processing Unit noted suspicious transactions over a long period involving a "relatively significant" amount. Specifically, Reynders is suspected of buying "e-tickets", which are vouchers ranging from €1 to €100, available at various points of sale and transferable to a National Lottery gaming account. The winnings were credited to the former minister's National Lottery digital account and then transferred to his current account. Not very surprisingly, no EU official has commented on the allegations since the raid. If these allegations are true, the already battered credibility of the EU will take another serious hit, with illiberal leaders like Orbán having a field day. It is safe to say that Reynders has bet on the wrong horse and may be in for some unpleasant times.

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The European Movement International
Place du Luxembourg 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

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