EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

Merry Crisis

Forces shift and disruption continues both at home and abroad. Victory in Syria begets anti-migrant rhetoric in Europe, governments in Germany and Romania scramble for stability, and the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party recalls the Soviet Union in brutal crackdown on the opposition.

This is the last EU Headlines of the year – happy holidays and see you in January.

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It is (not) time to say goodbye

Last week, after thirteen years of civil war, a consortium of rebel groups succeeded in toppling the regime of long-time dictator Bashar al-Assad and sending him fleeing to Russia. As a result of the war, thirteen million people have had to leave their homes, according to the Italian media outlet *Il Post*. Of these, over six million have sought refuge abroad. One million and 300 thousand Syrians have made a long journey: 700,000 to Germany, almost 100,000 to Austria, 87,000 to Sweden, and 65,000 to the Netherlands. Most of them arrived between 2015 and 2016, in what was defined as a "migration crisis", which was partly alleviated by the decision of Germany, led by Mutti Angela Merkel, to take in the majority of Syrian asylum seekers. Now these refugees are faced with the choice of whether or not to return. While the political situation has thankfully changed dramatically – but is still far from safe, with Israeli forces engaged in targeted military actions – the economic and infrastructural situation in Syria remains catastrophic. The country's economy is in shambles, the majority of the population lives below the poverty line, and the water system and public health network are almost entirely in need of reconstruction. And while the EU rightly calls any assessment of Syria's security "premature" and believes that the conditions for "safe and dignified returns" are not in place, a number of Member States, including Germany, have announced the suspension of the examination of asylum applications from Syrians, and certain right and far-right forces in EU Member States have engaged in a controversial debate calling for all Syrian refugees to return home immediately. This debate is particularly relevant in Germany, which is holding elections in February next year. The far-right AfD candidate for chancellor has already said that "they should all go back immediately", while the more modest parties are hardly trying to distinguish themselves from the far-right, with the Christian Democrats (CDU) proposing to offer "a charter flight and 1,000 euros" to all those who want to return. Pro-democratic forces in Germany and across Europe must not allow the far-right to capitalise on the faith of Syrian refugees once again and expand their inhumane narratives.

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A fresh start

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has sacked his finance minister, Christian Lindner, amid fierce disagreements over the fiscal politics of the EU's largest economy. According to the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*, Scholz registered the vote of confidence in the Bundestag on Wednesday, which will be tabled next Monday. There will be no surprises in the vote, as Scholz does not have at least half of the 733 votes that would keep him in power and prevent early elections. The vote of confidence is the sixth such vote in German history and will hopefully be the last for a long time. Unlike in the past, the result appears to be preordained, with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) supporting Chancellor Olaf Scholz, while opposition parties including the CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD, the Left Party and the Alliance of Sahra Wagenknecht plan to vote against him. In particular, some AfD MPs may unexpectedly support Scholz, seeing him as a better option than CDU leader Friedrich Merz, who polls suggest could succeed Scholz as chancellor. This scenario echoes historical precedents, such as Willy Brandt's 1972 vote to trigger early elections. Germany's constitution allows for such a move if the chancellor loses a vote of confidence and requests the dissolution of parliament. Similar strategies were used by Helmut Kohl in 1982 and Gerhard Schröder in 2005 during periods of political instability. Monday's vote will follow a structured procedure, including a speech by Scholz, a debate and a vote. While Scholz is unlikely to secure an absolute majority, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will then dissolve parliament, paving the way for new elections, set for 23 February. As a German himself, this Headlines author hopes for a smooth and fast process that does not further undermine trust in politicians and established parties and that does not give the far right any chance to gain more ground from this government crisis.

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The persistent offender

It's been a chaotic few weeks in Romanian politics: In case you missed it, far-right, pro-Russia candidate Calin Georgescu came from behind to win the presidential election in an upset victory at the end of November, amid massive speculation that his campaign was boosted on social media by Russian bots, and the country's constitutional court has since annulled the election results. Amidst this tumult were parliamentary elections, in which the far-right continued to surge but no clear majority was won. Hungarian newspaper *Index* reports that now, four centre-left to centre-right parties are forming a pro-EU majority coalition, dedicated to public investment, reforms, reducing public spending, and quickly forming a government above all. The coalition will consist of ruling parties social democrat PSD and national liberal PNL, along with liberal-progressive USR and finally RMDSZ, who represent the Hungarian minority in Romania. In finer detail, the parties of course each have their own priorities, but are united in countering the disruptive far-right forces surging in Romania and throughout Europe. Kelemen Hunor, president of the RMDSZ, has suggested that the four parties should present a joint presidential candidate in the re-run of the presidential election as none of the mainstream candidates individually made it to the second round. The article does not clarify the positions of the other parties on that spicy nugget, but needless to say, it will be an interesting way forward in Romania.

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Georgian nightmare

For two weeks, thousands of Georgians have been protesting against the pro-Russia Georgian Dream government in Tbilisi, following suspicious electoral results in October and the subsequent announcement that the country would suspend EU accession talks and set aside its goal of joining by 2028. The decision was an outrage and an insult to the years of work that has been done in the country toward the goal of EU membership, and the situation now echoes that of the early 1990s when Georgia left the Soviet Union, writes Portuguese newspaper *Publico*. The government is now under fire from human rights organisations and Western countries as over 400 protestors and opposition politicians have been beaten and detained, something that rights groups say is without recent precedent in the country. Police are rounding up protestors for reasons such as "participation in acts of group violence" and putting them in pre-trial detention, including two pro-EU opposition leaders, and the Georgian ombudsman reports that 225 detainees said they had been mistreated and 157 had visible injuries. Some protestors that clashed with police have justified their self-defence in the face of tear gas and batons. Police further claimed to have found materiel for making bombs at opposition headquarters, which the opposition parties decry as planted evidence. In an even more dystopian turn, masked men in all black have been attacking opposition politicians, journalists, and activists, their association and motivations conveniently concealed. The West watches, seemingly paralysed with concern, as violence and oppression continue to surge.

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