



March 11, 2019

Foreign Affairs

EUROPE – US

Rich, scandal-hit and anti-immigrant: Czech leader Babiš to meet Trump

Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš will become the first Czech Republic leader in years to be hosted by a US president. Babiš is a successful tycoon and the second-richest man in the Czech Republic, but his fitness for office has been questioned amid accusations that he fraudulently obtained EU funds for his business empire and has multiple conflicts of interests. Besides a shared experience of political scandal and an appetite for financial profit, the two are also prone to anti-immigrant rabble-rousing – a subject both have exploited to build a political base. *[The Guardian, March 6, 2019]*

Weber says EU won't be blackmailed by Trump

Manfred Weber, the center-right candidate to be the next European Commission president, urged the EU to hit back hard if Donald Trump hikes tariffs on European cars. "As Europeans, we will not be blackmailed," Weber said in a speech in his home-state of Bavaria. Weber continued with: "America must know that if it starts a trade war with Europe and levies car duties, also on our products from Lower Bavaria, then we will have to respond." *[POLITICO, March 6, 2019]*

EUROPE – RUSSIA

Eyeing Russia, EU on high alert for cyberthreats to upcoming European Parliament vote

With the upcoming European Parliament elections shifting into high gear, security officials are preparing for potential attempts by Russia-linked hackers to sway the vote — and potentially deepen divisions in the bloc. "There's a strong likelihood that people will try to manipulate the debates and falsify the European election results," the EU's security commissioner, Julian King, told France's Alsace newspaper last week. The elections are forming into a clash between populist and euroskeptic movements on the one hand, and pro-European internationalists on the other. *[The Japan Times, March 4, 2019]*

Pence asked Merkel to provoke Russia by sending warships to Crimea

The U.S. pressured German Chancellor Angela Merkel last month to conduct a naval maneuver in Russia's backyard aimed at provoking President Vladimir Putin. U.S. Vice President Mike Pence urged Merkel to send German warships through a narrow channel between the Crimean peninsula and mainland Russia to show Putin that Western powers won't surrender their access to those waters. However, the German leader refused, due to reservations from Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. *[Bloomberg, March 7, 2019]*

EUROPE – EAST ASIA

Italy may become largest economy yet to back China's Belt and Road

Italy may be about to formally endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative, becoming the largest economy yet to back the massive global infrastructure project. If it signs its agreement with Beijing, Italy would be the first member of the G7 group of advanced economies to officially back the initiative, with the US, Japan and the UK all reluctant to come on board. *[CNN, March 6, 2019]*

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urges EU to stay 'independent' in dealings with Beijing after US warning to Italy

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has urged Europe to stay "independent" in its dealings with China and called for strong ties amidst increased US pressure. Wang's comments follow a backlash over reports that Italy is planning to sign up an agreement backing China's Belt and Road Initiative, and pushing for a more unified EU approach when dealing with China. Wang continued with: "We believe that as one of the major forces in the world, Europe will proceed from its own fundamental and long-term interests. [Europe] will surely maintain independence, stability and enthusiasm in its China's policy." *[South China Morning Post, March 8, 2019]*

EUROPE – MIDDLE EAST

Germany won't classify Iran ally Hezbollah as terrorist

Germany will not follow Britain's lead in declaring Iran-backed Hezbollah a terrorist organization, a decision that may fuel tensions with Saudi Arabia and the United States. Minister of State Niels Annen told weekly news magazine Der Spiegel that the Shi'ite Muslim Islamist movement remained a relevant factor in Lebanese society and the European Union had already added its military wing to a list of proscribed groups in 2013. *[Reuters, March 8, 2019]*

German ban on arms exports to Saudis spurs pushback

According to German business leaders, foreign manufacturers are increasingly turning their backs on German components out of concern over Germany's strict export policies. The German government this past November decided to stop exporting all military equipment to Saudi Arabia. The move came in reaction to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist who had been critical of the Saudi government, and the move is viewed by business professionals as a moral decision, not political. The ban on exports recently got extended until March 9. *[Spiegel Online, March 6, 2019]*

EUROPE – ISRAEL

70 years of transcripts from UK's parliament show clear 'obsession' with Israel

The true scale of the debates on Israel in the UK's parliament has now been revealed by the researcher and blogger David Collier. Using Hansard — the official transcripts of proceedings in parliament — Collier has uncovered what he claims to be "astounding results" underlining the "total obsession with Israel" in Britain's legislature. Collier discovered that Israel has been referenced 17,667 times between January 1, 1946 and January 20, 2019. The search pulled up mentions in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. *[The Times of Israel, March 6, 2019]*

EU court rejects Hamas appeal, reinforces its status as terror group

The EU General Court rejected an appeal by the terrorist group Hamas, which claimed it is "a lawful political movement". The court ruling read: "In today's judgment, the General Court looks into each of the arguments made by Hamas and rejects them in their totality." As a result, "the decision to extend the freezing of Hamas funds is confirmed." *[The Jerusalem Post, March 8, 2019]*

Internal Affairs

EU POLITICS

May 'did not understand EU when she triggered Brexit'

Theresa May and her circle of advisers did not understand how the European Union works, and consequently followed a negotiating strategy in 2016 that was doomed to fail, the former UK ambassador to the EU Sir Ivan Rogers said. Rogers elaborated that the people around the prime minister at the start of the article 50 process "didn't know very much about European councils or that much about the EU". *[The Guardian, March 5, 2019]*

'Brussels awaits London move in Brexit talks

The Brexit talks remain locked solid, but Brussels expects London to make a move with a new text laying out changes to the controversial Northern Ireland backstop. For all the spin from U.K. ministers that this week's negotiations are inching toward changes to the Brexit deal, the view from Brussels is far more pessimistic. They see no meaningful progress in recent days — but with a delay to Brexit day looking increasingly likely they feel the pressure is now on the U.K. to shift its position. *[POLITICO, March 7, 2019]*

Macron seeks support across Europe for election campaign

Emmanuel Macron's party launched a campaign to win support across the Continent ahead of May's European Parliament election — even though it's only running in France. The initiative builds on Macron's call for a new "European Renaissance" published in newspapers around Europe this week. It invites people to back Macron's vision of Europe by signing a petition on bespoke websites for each of the bloc's 28 member states. The campaign underscores Macron's ambition to build a political movement across Europe, bypassing existing parties in other countries and upending the traditional group structure in the European Parliament. *[POLITICO, March 7, 2019]*

Germany's Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer sets out EU reform agenda

In the first serious German response to French President Macron's proposals for a "European Renaissance", The leader of Germany's ruling Christian Democrats has set out an agenda for reforming the EU. In a text to the Die Welt am Sonntag, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer proposed abolishing the second seat of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, an idea that the Élysée Palace has long rejected, demanded a permanent seat for the EU in the UN Security Council and said EU bureaucrats should be forced to pay income tax. *[The Financial Times, March 10, 2019]*

Far-right parties poised to double seats in EU Parliament: poll

A new poll released by Germany's Bild newspaper, conducted in six countries in late February and early March, showed the far-right Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (ENF) was likely to win 67 seats in the European Parliament election in May. Currently, the ENF group holds 37 seats. *[Deutsche-Welle, March 8, 2019]*

EU Greens to conservatives: Change to get a deal

European Greens launched their European election campaign with a pledge to fight climate change and corruption — and a warning for the Continent's conservatives. The party's two lead candidates, Bas Eickhout and Ska Keller, presented a 12-point manifesto for the European Parliament election in May that includes traditional green demands to fight climate change, invest in a sustainable economy and improve public transport. The manifesto also stresses human rights, with a promise to "stop arms exports to dictators and warning parties." *[POLITICO, March 6, 2019]*

DOMESTIC POLITICS

May could lose Tuesday's Brexit vote by huge margin, Times says

Theresa May's aides are increasingly concerned that Tuesday's vote on her Brexit deal could result in an even worse humiliation than she endured in a similar vote in January, the Sunday Times reported. The majority against the government then was 230, the biggest defeat for a prime minister in more than a century. In theory, should Parliament reject her deal, it would then be offered a vote the following day on whether to take the prospect of a no-deal Brexit off the table. The Times said that second vote could be canceled. *[Bloomberg, March 10, 2019]*

Estonia's Center Right wins election, but Far Right does well, too

A center-right party that held the prime minister's office in Estonia for over a decade won a general election Sunday, while a far-right populist party emerged as a big winner despite snubs from traditional power brokers. The euroskeptic and populist party won 18%, which translates to 19 seats in the 101-seat Parliament. Martin Helme, one of the party leaders, said he saw the party's gains as part of a trend in Europe and other parts of the world. "I think Estonia is no different than almost all other countries in Europe, where there's a serious public demand for political parties who will stand up against the globalist agenda," he said. *[The New York Times, March 3, 2019]*

Nicola Zingaretti elected as leader of Italy's Democratic party

Nicola Zingaretti, the president of Italy's Lazio region, has become the new leader of the centre-left Democratic party. More than 1.6 million party supporters cast their ballots across the country in a turnout that was higher than expected, giving the party hope that it can re-establish itself as a credible force against Italy's populist government. *[The Guardian, March 3, 2019]*

Tensions eased as France, Netherlands vow to work together on Air France-KLM

A meeting between Paris and The Hague has apparently gone some way to easing the breach. Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire's told reporters after a meeting with Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra in the French capital, "We have explained ourselves to each other... We want to look to the future with the goal of making Air France-KLM the most successful airline in the world." Hoekstra explained before Friday's meeting of the increased stock purchase, "The Dutch Cabinet wants to be able to directly influence the future development of Air France-KLM in order to optimally ensure the Dutch public interest." *[France24, March 5, 2019]*

Hungary's Orbán says Fidesz could quit EPP amid anti-Juncker row

The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has said his ruling nationalist Fidesz party may drop out of the centre-right European People's party (EPP) amid a row over his government's anti-Brussels media campaign. The EPP group leader, Manfred Weber, demanded Fidesz take down billboards criticising the European commission president, which were part of its campaign in the run-up to European parliamentary elections in May. Orbán spoke to a Hungarian public radio stating he would prefer to reform the EPP, moving it towards an anti-immigration platform, but also raised the prospect of Fidesz quitting the EPP. *[The Guardian, March 8, 2019]*

Police, far-right protesters clash in Kyiv, Cherkasy

Police and far-right demonstrators clashed outside the presidential administration building in the Ukrainian capital and in at least one other city. The far-right activists gathered in Kyiv to call for arrests of figures linked to an alleged military corruption scandal. The demonstrations follow after a media investigation last week detailed embezzlement schemes in Ukraine's military industry, including the involvement of a factory controlled by President Petro Poroshenko. *[UNIAN, March 10, 2019]*

JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Belgian Mayor defends carnival float featuring Jews with money and a rat

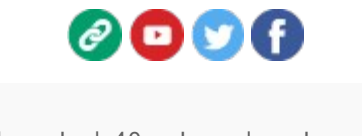
The mayor of the Belgian city whose annual parade featured puppets of Jews and a ratatop money bags defended the display, telling the local media that "In Aalst it should be allowed." The float in question is titled "Shabbat Year" and was prepared by the Vismooil'n carnival group. It featured two giant puppets with sidelocks and streimels, hats favored by some Orthodox Jews, in pink suits. One is grinning while smoking a cigar. That puppet has a white rat on his right shoulder. Both puppets are standing on gold coins and have money bags at their feet. condemnations by Jewish groups and international organizations have condemned the float, including the European Commission. *[Haaretz, March 6, 2019]*

Pope denounces 'depraved' anti-Semitism and urges dialogue

Pope Francis denounced the "depraved hatred" behind a wave of anti-Semitic attacks in parts of the world and said interfaith dialogue can help counter it. The pope warned that for Christians, any form of anti-Semitism is "a rejection of one's own origins, a complete contradiction." *[The Times of Israel, March 8, 2019]*

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