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## Macron or Orbán? Choose your EU adventure

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# BRUSSELS Playbook

from POLITICO

By NICHOLAS VINO CUR

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**DUELING VISIONS OF EUROPE**    

**MACRON AND ORBÁN LAY OUT COMPETING PLANS:** Who said stump speeches were going out of style? With six weeks to go until millions of Europeans head to the polls, French President Emmanuel Macron and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán laid out their contrasting visions for the EU's future in a pair of speeches that capture the stark choice facing European voters on June 6-9.

**In one corner**, Macron presented Europe's future as an existential dilemma: Either the bloc starts behaving more like a geopolitical power to counter tougher competition from China and the United States, or it will perish. "Europe is mortal, it can die," the French president said during his nearly two-hour address. "It only depends on our choices. And these choices have to be made now." Read my Paris colleague Clea Caulcutt's [take](#) here.

**Kitchen sink:** Touching on everything from kids' screen time to the EU budget, competition rules and global trade, Macron spelled out his recipe for avoiding the above-mentioned fate. The list is too long for detailed treatment here (but thankfully my colleagues Giorgio Leali, Laura Kayali and Kathryn Carlson have parsed them and extracted the key takeaways in a handy piece you can read [here](#)).

**But the gist is this:** Europe can't go on being a goody-goody on the world stage at a time when China and the U.S. aren't playing by the rules of free trade, and Russia is threatening the Western-led security order.

**In the other corner**, Orbán told an audience of conservatives in Budapest that upcoming elections in Europe and the U.S. were a chance to defeat the "progressive world" spirit and usher in an "era of sovereignty."

**Shudder, progressives:** "The order of the world is changing, and we must usher our cause to triumph in the midst of these changes. Progressive liberals feel the danger. Replacing this era means replacing them," he said [according to the AP](#).

**Small tent:** Speaking at a CPAC conference in Budapest which organizers declared a “no-woke zone,” barring journalists from mainstream outlets, Orbán also gave a shoutout to indicted former U.S. President Donald Trump, encouraging him to “defend his own truth” in an ongoing criminal trial.

**Step back:** Orbán and Macron both face political challenges at home ahead of the European election. In the Hungarian leader’s case, the emergence of a challenger to his lengthy rule, Peter Magyar, has prompted a major outpouring of support from regular Hungarians. For Macron, the challenge comes from Marine Le Pen’s National Rally party, which is polling far ahead of his own centrist Renaissance party in the run-up to the election, according to POLITICO’s [Poll of Polls](#).

**Blue pill/red pill:** The speeches let both leaders take full advantage of their incumbency by seizing the spotlight and laying out fundamental differences with rivals whom they chose not to name. In that sense they were complementary: Macron’s nightmare of a disintegrating EU falling prey to foreign powers may well be Orbán’s dream.

**Conversely,** the “superpower Europe” promoted by Macron is the stuff of nightmares for self-described “sovereignists” like Orbán, who described Hungary as a “conservative island” on a continent ravaged by wokeness.

**Do voters care?** Unclear. Macron’s recent conversion to hawkishness on Ukraine, which set him apart from Le Pen, failed to move the polls which continue to trend in the National Rally’s favor. It seems doubtful that Thursday’s big Europe speech will prove more effective. Likewise, Orbán’s anti-EU and anti-woke agenda isn’t puncturing the buzz around Magyar, whose TISZA party will be fielding candidates in the upcoming EU election.

**Instead,** the main audience for such speeches is policymaking elites in Brussels and the European capitals who are nervously tracking trends ahead of the June vote.

**Cold winds:** One EU diplomat from a free-trading nation texted Playbook: “We want a stronger EU in the world and we see needs for a balance between U.S. and China and we believe in a strong CMU [capital markets union] and stronger defence industry. But we also need more than French solutions to this.”

**Anyone else?** For Oscar Guinea, senior economist at the ECIPE think tank, Macron’s speech underscored a “need to counterbalance [his] narrative ... There are many countries that rely on exports for their economy,” he said in a call with Playbook. “It’s not just Ireland. Spain’s strategy is based on exports. Poland is a big exporter. Germany, too. These are sizeable countries whose leaders should step up to counter this [Macron-ian] narrative.”

**In other words:** We are hearing a lot from Europe’s big, vocal leaders (Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski delivered his own notable speech Thursday, as reported by AP [here](#)). We hear less from the other nations that don’t subscribe to Macron or Hungary’s vision. Maybe it’s time their leaders broke out their own big-think takes.

**NATO CHIEF’S WARNING**    

**EUROPE AIN’T DELIVERING ENOUGH, NATO CHIEF SAYS:** Addressing the Atlantik-Brücke group in Berlin Thursday night, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Europe has not been meeting its own target in terms of providing support to Ukraine, Stuart Lau reports. “In Europe, the delivery of ammunition is far below the levels we said we would provide,” he said.

**US delay doesn’t help:** Stepping up the criticism of NATO countries, Stoltenberg said: “In recent months, NATO allies have not provided the support we have promised,” adding that the U.S.’ \$60.8 billion aid package came late, leaving Ukraine “outgunned.”

**BERLIN, CUT YOUR CHINA OBSESSION:** Stoltenberg told his German audience to stop relying on Chinese money — just a week after Chancellor Olaf Scholz led a strong business delegation to meet leader Xi Jinping.

“In the past, we made the mistake of becoming dependent on Russian oil and gas. We must not repeat that mistake with China — depending on its money, its raw materials and its technologies,” he said.

**China helps kill Ukrainians:** Highlighting China's aid to Russia such as high-end technology like semiconductors, dual-use items as well as microelectronics "used to produce missiles, tanks, and aircraft," Stoltenberg said Beijing is "also working to provide Russia with improved satellite capabilities and imagery. All of this helps Moscow to inflict more death and destruction on Ukraine."

**SWEDEN SENDS TROOPS TO LATVIA UNDER NATO:** Sweden will send a "reduced" mechanized battalion of soldiers and officers to NATO's forces in Riga early next year, Stockholm announced Thursday. They will be part of a multinational NATO force led by Canada. The battalion will include 90 combat vehicles, 122 Leopold tanks and 360 armored all-terrain vehicles, Stuart Lau reports.

**FROZEN ASSETS**    

**EU CAPITALS TELL BELGIUM TO LET GO OF RUSSIAN ASSETS MONEY:** European countries joined calls from Western allies to Belgium to slash taxes on the proceeds of Russia's immobilized assets, as reported by [POLITICO](#) last week. "EU Member States are increasingly unhappy about the high percentage of windfall profits supposed to go [to] the Belgian tax authorities," an EU diplomat told Playbook. This echoes calls from Daleep Singh, the U.S. deputy national security adviser, who [supported cutting taxes](#) on the earnings of the assets in order to maximize aid to Ukraine, Gregorio Sorgi reports.

**Give the cash to Ukraine:** Belgium is expected to levy more than €1.7 billion in 2024 as corporate tax on the profits of Russian assets which are held by Euroclear, a securities depository based in Brussels. The EU diplomat added that "over the years that [tax revenue] will easily amount to several billion euros — which would be urgently needed by Ukrainians to finance their defence."

**Belgium's version:** Several Western diplomats privately suspect that Belgium is getting away with an accounting trick — effectively double counting its contributions to Ukraine. But the Belgian government disagrees. "Nothing [from the tax revenues on the assets] goes to the Belgian treasury. Forty-nine percent of this amount goes to military equipment," a Belgian government official told us last week. A second official pointed out that many Western companies are making huge profits in Russia that are transferred to national governments without anyone noticing.

**OPTING OUT OF RUSSIAN ASSETS-FOR-AMMO:** Meanwhile, the EU is looking into the possibility of granting neutral countries an opt-out from its plan to use the proceeds of frozen Russian assets to buy weapons for Ukraine, two EU diplomats told Gregorio.

**How to get the neutrals on board:** The idea is to create two different tracks: One that is limited to mobilizing the profits for non-military aid, and a second one that is finalized at buying weapons, from which the neutral countries — Austria, Ireland, Malta and Cyprus — can opt out. Next week the Council is expected to put forward a new proposal that will be discussed by the EU's ambassadors on May 8.

**\*\*Get ready for the upcoming Maastricht Debate, join us and our newly announced candidate Ursula Von der Leyen – European Commission President.** This edition of the Maastricht Debate is not to miss, join us online and partake in democracy alongside some of the most influential voices in the EU. [Register here.](#)\*\*

**IN OTHER NEWS**    

**SALARY BUMP FOR EU STAFF:** Feeling blue about your payslip? EU staffers can't relate. In June, they will receive an 18 percent salary bump as part of a mega inflation-adjustment, according to an EU official directly informed of the move. The increase is a one-off, representing a half-year's worth of smaller, monthly adjustments packed together. Typically, EU staff salaries are adjusted yearly, but with the inflation rate still high across the eurozone, wages are being revised at the mid-year mark. Still ... 18 percent? That sound you just heard is thousands of Brussels bubble workers frantically googling "how do I get a job in the institutions?"

**LATEST ON SÁNCHEZ:** Spanish prosecutors on Thursday argued in favor of dismissing the criminal complaint filed against Begoña Gómez, the wife of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Aitor Hernández-Morales writes in to report. The country's Public Ministry considers there is no evidence that would justify the influence peddling and corruption probe. The preliminary investigation into Sánchez's wife was launched following the filing of a lawsuit against Gómez by Manos Limpias, a pseudo trade

union that regularly files lawsuits to target progressive causes. The group's founder on Thursday admitted that the complaint he filed may have been based on "fake news."

**Personal decision:** Wednesday night's bombshell letter from Sánchez threatening to resign didn't just shock average citizens: His own team was completely caught off guard by the prime minister's announcement that he was thinking of stepping down. According to officials within the government, Sánchez wrote the letter himself and did not share it, or his intention to publish it on X, with anyone — not even his inner circle. Rather than be some sort of cynical stunt, Sánchez's team told POLITICO that the way the letter was written and shared showed that Sánchez is speaking from the heart and taking a decision based on his personal feelings, not political calculations.

**BRUSSELS DREAMING OF 'MR HANDSOME':** Talk of Sánchez standing down from his post in Madrid kicked off a round of feverish speculation about his eligibility for an EU top job, namely head of the European Council, my colleagues Barbara Moens, Claudia Chiappa and Aitor report.

**Socialists eye European Council:** Europe's socialists, who are [likely to remain the second-largest group](#) in the Parliament, are eyeing the top job at the European Council, currently held by Belgian liberal Charles Michel.

**A port in the storm:** For Sánchez, moving to Brussels could prove a deft exit from Spain's fractured — and toxic — political scene. The socialist's domestic public image has never been great, and his controversial decision to grant Catalan separatists a blanket amnesty in order to secure their support for his continued tenure has only increased public resentment.

**GREENS ATTACK FAR RIGHT OVER RUSSIA TIES:** The European Greens party launched a website last night alleging connections between far-right EU politicians and the Kremlin, Eddy Wax writes in to report. "When you play with the far-right, you're playing Russian roulette," the website states.

**\*\*Power Play will be at the 27th Annual Milken Global Conference in Los Angeles, from May 5-8.** POLITICO's highly influential podcast, hosted by Anne McElvoy, will bring conversations with power players in politics, finance, tech philanthropy and beyond to your ears, as they grapple with the world's most pressing and complex challenges. Listen and follow Power Play [here](#).\*\*

**AGENDA**    

— Deputy EU ambassadors meet in Coreper I at **9:30 a.m.**

— NATO Secretary-General **Jens Stoltenberg** is in Berlin; meets parliamentarians from the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Defence Committee of the German Bundestag ... meets German Chancellor **Olaf Scholz**. Joint press statements at **3:35 p.m.** [Watch](#).

— **Scholz** also meets Azerbaijani President **Ilham Aliyev** ... takes part in the Petersberg Climate Dialogue on climate financing and the implementation of the decision of the previous COP28 climate conference.

— Signing of the 15th three-year contract 2024-2026 on the European Parliament seat in Strasbourg, with the participation of Parliament President **Roberta Metsola** and French President **Emmanuel Macron**. [Watch](#).

— European Council President **Charles Michel** is in Cotonou, Benin; meets Beninese President **Patrice Talon** ... meets ambassadors from the EU. [Watch recorded](#).

— EU Competition Day. Commission Executive Vice President **Margrethe Vestager** speaks at **9 a.m.** [Full agenda](#).

— Commission Executive Vice President **Maroš Šefčovič** is in Paris; visits the International Methane Emissions Observatory (IMEO) ... meets with Chair of the IMEO Implementation Committee **Andris Piebalgs**.

— Commission Vice President **Dubravka Šuica** delivers an opening and closing keynote speech via video message for the Ministerial Social Policy Summit in Kyiv.

— Financial Services Commissioner **Mairead McGuinness** is in Dublin; delivers a keynote speech at the joint Euro-American forum on cancer “Cancer has no borders — Together, stronger.”

— Agriculture Commissioner **Janusz Wojciechowski** is in Beijing; meets with Head of the General Administration of Customs of China **Yu Jianhua** ... meets Commissioner of the Chinese National Intellectual Property Agency **Shen Changyu**.

## BRUSSELS CORNER

**CHARLEROI AIRPORT STRIKE:** The common union front of the Charleroi Airport staff filed a [strike notice](#) Thursday, valid until May 15, following reports of harassment.

**SCOOTERS ALLOWED AGAIN:** The Council of State on Thursday [suspended](#) with immediate effect a restriction that allowed only two operators — Bolt and Dott — to rent out scooters in Brussels. The Council, however, upheld the city’s decision to introduce drop-off parking zones for scooters.

**GENDER VIOLENCE WEBSITE:** Brussels [launched](#) a trilingual website to step up the fight against gender-based sexual violence on Wednesday. The site serves to centralize the currently scattered information and includes a map of services that the victims might need.

**THE MOST INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE CITIES:** Corbetta in Italy (less than 50,000 inhabitants) and Zagreb in Croatia (more than 50,000 inhabitants), are this year’s winners of the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity Award 2024. A specific award for cities addressing violence against women went to Ljubljana. See the [full list](#).

**WHAT’S ON THIS WEEKEND:** Lots of events are happening in Brussels this weekend, including ...

**Music:** The eclectic music festival [Les Nuits Botanique](#) is on until May 5 ... electronic music festival [Hangar](#) takes place this weekend at the Port of Brussels ... [Balkan Trafik Festival](#) is also happening ... as well as the [Kora Days](#), a festival dedicated to West Africa’s flagship instrument ... and [Les Equinoxes Festival](#), an inclusive festival focusing on feminist music, women and minorities.

**Movies:** [Brussels Short Film Festival](#) is on until May 5.

**Art:** Contemporary art fair Art Brussels is [running](#) until Sunday at Brussels Expo.

**Circus:** [Festival HOPLA!](#), focusing on the circus arts, starts Saturday in Brussels.

**Flea market:** There’s a [neighborhood party](#) with a flea market and music happening all day Sunday at the Place du Jardin aux Fleurs.

**Food:** As you can never get tired of pasta, POLITICO’s Elena Giordano has a [food review](#) for Eccetera in the EU Quarter.

**TRIBUTE TO JACQUES DELORS:** The City of Brussels will pay a tribute to one of the builders of the European Union, Jacques Delors, who passed away in December 2023. A tribute conference will take place on May 15 at the City Hall of Brussels, together with a guest of honor, Lille’s Mayor Martine Aubry. Register by sending an email to [international.networks@brucity.be](mailto:international.networks@brucity.be).

**NEW JOB:** Isabel Casteleyn has been [appointed](#) as the new director of the large renovation project of the Cinquantenaire Park for Belgium’s 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the non-profit organization Horizon 50/200 announced. She will take office on May 13.

**BIRTHDAYS:** MEP **Seán Kelly**; Former MEP **Claudia Schmidt**; Flanders’ state premier **Jan Jambon**; Estonia’s former Finance Minister **Toomas Tõniste**; POLITICO alums **Ginger Hervey** and **Harry Cooper**; **Joe Paolino**, former U.S. ambassador to Malta; **Annalaura Gallo** of eu travel tech; APCO’s **Nicholas Whyte**; Former U.S. First Lady **Melania Trump**; Journalist **Katja Gersemann**; Finnish Minister for European Affairs and Ownership Steering **Anders Adlercreutz**; **Laura Sullivan**, former director of WeMove Europe.

**CELEBRATING SATURDAY:** MEP **Christian Doleschal**; Former Commission Vice President and ex-MEP **Viviane Reding**; Former MEP **Jussi Halla-aho**, now a Finnish MP; Former MEP **Estefanía Torres**



**Martínez**; European Commission's **Francesco Molica** and **Sandra Cavallo**; POLITICO's **Koen Verhelst** and **Emily Schultheis**; Investigative Europe's **Pascal Hansens**; European Parliament's **Michael Alexander Speiser**; **Nikša Tkalec**, Croatian government agriculture spokesperson, Journalist **Jon Fasman**; Eurasia Group's **Emre Peker**; **King Willem-Alexander** of the Netherlands ... and King's Day in the Netherlands; **Andrew Gelston** from ACE The Alliance for Beverage Cartons and the Environment.

**CELEBRATING SUNDAY:** Former MEP **David Borrelli**; Former European Commissioner **Günter Verheugen**; European Commission's **Thomas Woolfson**; NPR's **Ruth Sherlock**.

**THANKS TO:** Playbook reporter **Ketrin Jochecová**, editor **Ali Walker** and producer **Seb Starcevic**.

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