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EU eyes green light for Ukraine in June

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BRUSSELS Playbook *from* POLITICO

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DRIVING THE DAY: UKRAINE'S EU MEMBERSHIP



PLAYBOOK SCOOP 1 — FORMAL MEMBERSHIP TALKS FOR UKRAINE:

When EU leaders opened the door to Ukraine and Moldova in December, it was hailed as the first step in a historic expansion of the European Union. But the legal step required to kickstart membership talks for Kyiv and Chişinău was quietly delayed for months because of concerns about Hungarian opposition and jitters about making EU expansion a central theme of the European Parliament election.

Now that delay is coming to an end. According to five diplomats who spoke to Playbook and my colleague Barbara Moens on condition of anonymity, the bloc is aiming to start formal accession talks for Ukraine and Moldova as soon as June 25 (the date of a European Council summit).

Morale boost: Getting a formal go-ahead for accession to the EU would be a major boost to Ukraine, which is now in the third year of an all-out war against Russian aggression and struggling to keep its defenses intact in the face of relentless attacks. Kyiv's rapprochement with Europe was a pretext for President Vladimir Putin's move to yank Ukraine back into Russia's orbit — so a path to membership looks like poetic justice.

Hungary is an obstacle: As was the case in December, a key impediment to Ukraine's membership aspiration is Hungary. It opposes Kyiv's bid because, among other reasons, it claims to have unresolved issues relating to Hungarian minorities in Ukraine.

Due diligence: But Kyiv has been engaged in intensive bilateral discussions with Budapest to address those concerns, which have been laid out in an 11-point document, according to the diplomats. Following exchanges between the Ukrainian president's head of office and Hungary's foreign minister, Kyiv has proposed remedies for all the points raised by Budapest. It is now awaiting a response, per a summary prepared by the Ukrainian side. In other words, Kyiv wants to show it's done everything it can to satisfy Hungary.

The efforts might just pay off. With Hungary taking over the rotating presidency of the EU at the end of June, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán may not want the matter of Ukraine's accession to overshadow his entire six-month stint in the driver's seat, one EU diplomat suggested. Kicking off formal talks in June — when there will be plenty of other EU news to discuss — would allow Hungary to focus on its other priorities for its presidency.

Dutch disruption? Another possible kink in the works is the Netherlands, whose new governing coalition is very much against enlargement. But here again, timing is everything: While the Dutch parties have hammered out a governing agreement, more than six months after the election, they still don't

have a prime minister (more on that below). According to people informed on the coalition talks, the new government may not be up and running by June 25.

Hungary's comment: A spokesperson for the Hungarian Permanent Representation to the EU said Hungary's focus is on the negotiating framework. "The first step is to find consensus there," the spokesperson said, adding that it would be "premature" to talk about dates for an intergovernmental conference to begin membership negotiations.

MEANWHILE, ON THE FRONT LINES: Kyiv's forces still hold some 60 percent of a key city in the province of Kharkiv after bloody urban combat with Russian troops, Ukrainian authorities said Monday. Soldiers battled from house to house and in the streets as the Russian army sought to shore up its position in the northern region and stretch Ukrainian lines in the south and east. More [here](#) by POLITICO's Ben Munster.

Zelenskyy's plea: Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [told Reuters](#) that Western allies are taking too long to make crucial decisions about military support. He said he is pushing Ukraine's partners to help intercept Russian missiles and allow Kyiv to use Western weapons against enemy military equipment amassed near the border.

MEANWHILE, IN RUSSIA: President Vladimir Putin [on Monday appointed](#) former Deputy Economy Minister Oleg Savelyev as a deputy defense minister.

ROAD TO EU ELECTION 8

SCOOP 2 — WEIMAR COUNTRIES WANT MORE ACTION ON FOREIGN INFLUENCE: According to a statement shared with Playbook, France, Germany and Poland (aka the “Weimar Triangle”) will use a gathering of the EU’s General Affairs Council today to call on the Union to beef up its defense against foreign influence and interference ahead of the European Parliament election in June.

On the menu: Among their proposals is a “European media platform” to counter disinformation; a boost to comms about the EU’s benefits; more funding for media literacy; and new structured exchanges between EU governments on best practices to counter influence campaigns.

ANOTHER DEBATE TONIGHT: Ursula von der Leyen will be back in the spotlight this evening when she takes the floor alongside other candidates for the European Commission presidency. The debate, hosted by Brussels think tank Bruegel and the Financial Times, will focus on economic policies. Watch here from 4 p.m.

Pitch to make the EU more competitive: Ahead of the debate, von der Leyen said she is “open to [the] discussion” of making EU subsidies conditional on national economic reforms, as a way to kick the Union’s competitiveness into high gear. Speaking to the FT, von der Leyen said she “sees the advantages” in imposing conditions on cohesion funds and the Common Agricultural Policy.

FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY: The idea of the inevitability of democracy in Europe “is as comforting as it is dead wrong,” argues Matthew C. MacWilliams from the Foundation International Communications Hub, [in this opinion piece for POLITICO](#).

****How will the election results shuffle the deck for the EU's top jobs?** Tune in on Monday, June 10 to hear what POLITICO Live's expert speakers make of the fresh election results. [Sign up to watch live!](#)**

ICC FALLOUT     4

WESTERN ALLIES DIVIDED BY WAR CRIMES ALLEGATIONS: The startling decision by the chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court to seek arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and other Hamas figures, brought a [cacophony of responses](#) from EU capitals and elsewhere — with U.S. President Joe Biden among those who loudly [condemned](#) the move.

ICYMI: Prosecutor Karim Khan filed applications on Monday for arrest warrants against leaders on both sides of the conflict for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

What happens next? A panel of three judges will decide whether to issue the warrants and allow a case to proceed, which could take several months. Israel is not a signatory to the ICC treaty, and the court has no way of enforcing an arrest of Netanyahu or Gallant even if the warrants are issued. But it could make it difficult for the leaders to travel to countries that are signatories.

In Israel, the pushback was swift: Even Netanyahu's harshest critics were quick to condemn the prosecutor's decision. Opposition leader Yair Lapid tweeted that the application for arrest warrants was a "complete moral failure," and Benny Gantz — days after giving Netanyahu an ultimatum on his handling of the war — described it as a "deep distortion of justice." Netanyahu himself said of the allegations: "I reject with disgust the comparison of the prosecutor in The Hague between democratic Israel and the mass murderers of Hamas."

There was condemnation in Washington: Biden denounced the allegations against Netanyahu and Gallant as "outrageous" and insisted the U.S. stands firmly behind Israel. "What's happening is not genocide. We reject that," Biden said during a speech at the White House to mark Jewish Heritage Month, my POLITICO colleagues report.

"I will always ensure Israel has everything it needs to defend itself against Hamas and all their enemies," said Biden, avoiding any mention of recent tensions between the two allies about the humanitarian impact of Israel's incursion into Rafah in the south of Gaza. "We stand with Israel to take out

Sinwar and the rest of the butchers of Hamas. We want Hamas defeated; we will work with Israel to make that happen.”

In Berlin ... “The ICC is a fundamental achievement which Germany has always supported,” Germany’s foreign ministry said. But, “The simultaneous application for arrest warrants against Hamas and two Israeli officials gives the false impression of an equation.”

In Prague ... Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on X that treating both sides as equally culpable was “appalling and completely unacceptable.” He said: “We must not forget that it was Hamas that attacked Israel in October and killed, injured and kidnapped thousands of innocent people. It was this completely unprovoked terrorist attack that led to the current war in Gaza and the suffering of civilians in Gaza, Israel and Lebanon.”

And in London ... “This action does nothing to help reach a pause in the fighting, get hostages out or get humanitarian aid in and make progress towards a sustainable cease-fire that we want to see,” a spokesperson for U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said.

But not everywhere. “Crimes committed in Gaza must be prosecuted at the highest level, regardless of the perpetrators,” Belgium’s Foreign Affairs Minister Hadja Lahbib said on social media, emphasizing Belgium’s support for the work of the ICC.

Slovenia's foreign ministry issued a statement saying alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed on Israeli and Palestinian territory “must be prosecuted independently and impartially regardless of the perpetrators.”

Amal Clooney advised the ICC: The human rights lawyer was one of the legal advisers who recommended that the chief prosecutor seek arrest warrants, and lays out her reasoning in an op-ed in the FT.

NOW READ THIS: POLITICO's opinion editor Jamie Dettmer argues that the ICC's move is likely to shore up support for Netanyahu just when he was starting to look vulnerable.

HUNGARY'S ARTICLE 7 OUTRAGE     3

SCOOP 3 — HUNGARY LASHES OUT AT POLAND: Another flashpoint at the General Affairs Council today is the rule of law, as one country accused of breaching the EU's standards faces off against another that is born again and trying to rejoin the fold.

In 1 corner: Poland. As Playbook reported on Monday, Warsaw is planning to use today's meeting to present the work it has done toward reestablishing the independence of its judiciary and cast off an Article 7 procedure launched nearly seven years ago. In a written interview, the country's Europe Minister Adam Szapka said Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government was determined to finalize the reforms, despite the threat of a veto by sitting President Andrzej Duda.

In the other corner: Hungary. As the only other EU country to face an Article 7 procedure, Hungary is getting ready to raise a stink about what it calls a "political" decision to let Poland off the hook, according to a letter obtained by POLITICO's Barbara Moens and comments from a senior Hungarian official.

Budapest's objection: "We believe the Commission's intention to withdraw the Article 7 procedure against Poland is a completely political decision," said the official, who asked not to be named. "It seems that in this case, political promises, regardless of their implementation are enough for the closure of Article 7. We find the timing very interesting as well, as EU funds were unlocked for Poland just before the local elections and now there is a proposal to withdraw Article 7 just before the EU elections."

The longer version: In a six-page letter addressed to Commission Vice President Věra Jourová, Hungarian EU Affairs Minister János Bóka cited the fact that Poland hasn't yet finalized its judicial reforms as evidence of the EU executive making a political decision. Bóka asked the Commission to present a written reply during the GAC.

Step back: It is indeed the case that Poland hasn't yet formally completed its promised reforms. But nor has the Commission formally lifted the Article 7 procedure against Poland — it has only said it intends to, and disbursed an initial tranche of frozen EU funds for Warsaw. This echoes what the Berlaymont has done for Budapest, freeing up some frozen funds to incentivize reforms. There are arguments to be made, but expect Budapest to remain isolated on this one.

IN OTHER NEWS 2

IRAN — EUROPEAN CONDOLENCE SAGA ROLLS ON: While the death of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash reverberated across the world on Monday, so did a backlash against EU leaders who publicly expressed sympathy. A [tweet by European Council President Charles Michel](#) — “The EU expresses its sincere condolences” — prompted a torrent of posts with the hashtag #Notinmyname, pointing out the role of a man [known as the “Butcher of Tehran”](#) in the execution of thousands of people.

Naive: Green MEP Hannah Neumann told Berlin Playbook that Michel and Josep Borrell, the EU's top diplomat who also expressed "condolences" on X, were "running after Iran" in hopes of saving a nuclear deal that is politically dead, ignoring Tehran's destabilizing role in the region and support for Russia's war in Ukraine. "This is naive to the point of endangering security," she said.

Biden's big fear: The White House is closely monitoring Iran's reaction to the sudden death of its president. As POLITICO reports, the Biden administration is not expecting any immediate major changes to Iran's regional policies ... but they have been anxiously watching for any sign that the U.S. or Israel will be blamed for the fatal crash.

DUTCH PM CONTENDER WITHDRAWS: Last week, after the formation of the most right-wing government in the Netherlands in decades, it appeared the next prime minister would be Ronald Plasterk, a molecular biologist and former Labor Cabinet minister. But not so fast! On Monday, Plasterk ruled himself out after questions were raised about his historic handling of a patent process for a cancer medicine. Plasterk denied wrongdoing but said he was "unavailable" for the job of PM.

So who will be the next Dutch prime minister? It's anyone's guess. As my colleague Eva Hartog notes, this uncertainty underscores the complexity of finding a leader who can represent a government that is backed on one hand by pro-EU conservatives from Mark Rutte's party and on the other, Geert

Wilders' group of anti-EU nationalists. Sit back and prepare a batch of Gouda sandwiches — this could be a long one.

WASHINGTON'S ENTICEMENT TO GEORGIA: The U.S. is prepared to offer a sweeping package of economic and security support if Georgia's government abandons its anti-Western rhetoric and stops backsliding on human rights, POLITICO's Gabriel Gavin reports.

BULLYING CLAIMS AT TOP HEALTH NGO: The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is engulfed in crisis, after claims of harassment and a toxic work culture, and a wave of resignations. The future of the NGO is at stake, reports my colleague Mari Eccles.

NEW POLITICO PODCAST ALERT: For all our German readers, the first episode of our Berlin Playbook podcast is out today, available on all major podcast platforms. Hosted by Germany's Executive Editor Gordon Repinski, the 15-minute poddy lands in your feed at 5 a.m., bringing everything you need to know about what's driving the day in the German capital. Listen here.

AGENDA 3

— General Affairs Council. Arrivals from **8:15 a.m.** ... doorstep by Belgian Foreign Minister **Hadja Lahbib** at **9:30 a.m.** ... press conference with **Lahbib** and Commission Vice President **Věra Jourová** at **6:30 p.m.** [Full agenda.](#) [Watch.](#)

— Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council (Telecommunications). Arrivals and doorsteps from **8:15 a.m.** ... press conference with Belgian Deputy Prime Minister **Petra De Sutter**, Belgian State Secretary for Digitalization **Mathieu Michel** and Internal Market Commissioner **Thierry Breton** at **3 p.m.** [Full agenda.](#) [Watch.](#)

— The eighth EU-Republic of Moldova Association Council starts at **11 a.m.** High Representative **Josep Borrell**, Neighborhood and Enlargement Commissioner **Olivér Várhelyi** and Moldovan Prime Minister **Dorin Recean** participate.

— Energy Commissioner **Kadri Simson** is in Nairobi, Kenya; participates in the ninth annual global conference on energy efficiency by the International Energy Agency.

— Budget Commissioner **Johannes Hahn** receives Austrian EU Minister **Karoline Edtstadler** ... participates in the inauguration of the Unitatis sculpture in the Cinquantenaire Park with Brussels Secretary of State **Ans Persoons** ... delivers a keynote speech at the second edition of the Diversity and Inclusion Awards 2024 ... receives Moldovan Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration **Cristina Gherasimov**.

— Climate Action Commissioner **Wopke Hoekstra** delivers a speech on climate action, democracy and geopolitics at Maastricht University in the Netherlands.

— Global Economic Summit continues in Killarney, Ireland. Director General of the World Health Organisation **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus** gives a speech at **9:20 a.m.** [Full agenda](#).

— The South Korea AI Safety Summit takes place in Seoul, South Korea. Commission Vice President **Věra Jourová** gives a speech ... British Prime Minister **Rishi Sunak**, South Korean President **Yoon Suk Yeol** and German Chancellor **Olaf Scholz** participate, among others. [Program](#).

— CEPS think tank holds a [panel discussion](#) from **2 p.m.** about what the European Parliament could look like after June 9, featuring former EP Secretary-General **Klaus Welle**, Dutch Renew MEP **Sophie in 't Veld** and POLITICO's **Eddy Wax** as speakers.

— EU election debate hosted by Bruegel and the Financial Times. Watch [here](#) from 4 p.m.

****On Wednesday, June 19, POLITICO Live will discuss the Commission's CMU agenda and the role of non-banks** with a high-level panel of experts including John Berrigan, director general of DG FISMA, and Stephen Berger, managing director and global head of government and regulatory policy at Citadel. [Register now to join us in person!](#)**

BRUSSELS CORNER     1

WEATHER: High of 19C, rainy in the afternoon.

TRAVEL UPDATE — TRAM DISRUPTION: Trams 8, 39, and 44 will be interrupted from June 1 until August 30 while the tracks are replaced. [Replacement buses](#) will be provided instead.

EU WINS, NATO LOSES: A team from DG COMM ran out winners of the 2024 Schuman Trophy, beating NATO 3-2 in a closely matched football final on Monday. Man of the match **Dominik Krakowiak** was aided by goals from **Ignazio Cocchiere** and **Thomas Regnier**. Thirty-four teams from across the EU institutions and NATO took part in the tournament, raising money for children in need. POLITICO wasn't invited but is expected to play DG COMM in a Brussels Super Cup to see who is best in the bubble. Watch this space.

IRAN EMBASSY DEMONSTRATION: Several dozen people gathered in front of the Iranian Embassy in Brussels on Monday to celebrate the death of the Iranian president. They also demanded the release of imprisoned Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi.

FATAL SHOOTING: Law enforcement authorities said they are hunting for two perpetrators on a scooter who opened fire at a café in the center of Brussels just after 11 p.m. on Sunday and then escaped. Two people suffered gunshot wounds, one of whom died on Monday.

SOLIDARITY STATUE UNVEILED: A nine-meter statue “Unitatis,” created during the pandemic by a young Salzburg-based artist to celebrate European solidarity, will be unveiled today at 2 p.m. at Parc du Cinquantaire, with Budget Commissioner **Johannes Hahn** and Brussels Secretary of State **Ans Persoons** in attendance. It will stay in the park for six months before continuing its journey around the world.

POPE FRANCIS TO VISIT BELGIUM: He will travel to Brussels, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve from September 26 to 29, the Vatican said Monday.

INTERNATIONAL COMEDY: A lineup of comedians from Spain, the U.K. and Estonia will perform in English at La Plume Persée in Ixelles on May 25, organized by the Side Splitters Comedy Club. Tickets here.

EXHIBITIONS: “**Belgica Biladi**” examines 60 years of Moroccan immigration, in four locations across the city (Boulevard Anspach, Gallerie Ravenstein, Place Fontainas and Parc Royal) until July 21 ... while the artists **Olena Mynenko** and **Stefano Moras** open a new exhibition, “From Floor to Floor,” at the Open Earth Foundation at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday.

WEEK OF BIODIVERSITY: Brussels is celebrating International Biodiversity Day, on May 22, with a series of events this week. [Program](#).

NEW JOBS: **Anna Atanaszov** is now spokesperson in charge of Coreper II issues at Hungary’s Permanent Representation to the EU, while **Dávid Oravecz** will become the spokesperson on Coreper I topics. **Zoltan Aguera** will assist Atanaszov as a deputy on Coreper II.

BIRTHDAYS: Former MEP **Molly Scott Cato**; Welt’s **Tobias Kaiser**; **Ross Rattanasena** of JPMorgan Chase & Co; BBC presenter and Spectator Chairman **Andrew Neil**; Former Irish President **Mary Robinson**; Ireland’s former Finance Minister **Michael Noonan**; **Anna Smith Lacey** of the Hungary Initiatives Foundation; **Filipe Ramalheira** from Portugal’s perm rep; POLITICO’s **Charles Stevens**.

THANKS TO: **Camille Gijs**, **Eddy Wax**, Playbook editor **Alex Spence**, reporter **Ketrin Johecová** and producer **Dato Parulava**.