I.

President of Italy dissolves parliament. Country goes to the polls already in early March.

European Union criticizes the removal of Vladimir Putin's opponent in Russia's presidential election. A departure that according to Brussels poses serious doubts about the political pluralism in that country.

And in this first European Magazine of the Year we also look at 2018 and the new and old challenges facing the European Union.

II.

Welcome to the Europe Magazine.

Italian President Sergio Mattarella dissolved parliament last week, paving the way for new elections on March 4, 2018. Paolo Gentiloni is expected to remain as prime minister until the new parliament takes office.

Paolo Gentiloni, Prime Minister of Italy
The Italians know that in the coming weeks attention will turn to the election campaign, as it should be. But I assure you, my fellow citizens, that the government will not stop doing its work.

In the last 70 years of democracy, Italy has had 64 governments. Since 2013, the country has had three prime ministers: Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, all of the Democratic Party.

With us on the phone is Victor Ângelo, Magazine Europe's resident commentator and international consultant based in Brussels.

Victor, I would start by asking. 70 years and 64 governments. What has gone wrong?
Italy has a very unstable political power, Italy is very divided, it is still very divided and the prospects after the March 2018 elections are that there may be a political impasse, that is, that the different parties that leave the elections can not reach to an agreement quickly. There may be the very great danger of an alliance between the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. The Five Star Movement has, according to the polls, about 28% of the votes, is a very populist movement, with many people inside the movement that is anti European Union. And, on the other hand, the Northern League is a deeply racist and xenophobic movement or political party that also does not align with European ideals.

Therefore, this will always be a coalition government.
Yes, there will be a coalition, certainly. And the big question right now is what kind of coalition. Italy has several problems. Italy has for many years been struggling with the lack of modernization of its economy. The Italian economy for decades was a creative economy, a cutting-edge economy. However, this economy has undergone international competition and, at the moment, there is a setback in economic terms.

Growth in Italy is still lower than in the rest of Europe; the Italian unemployment rate is very high, it is above the European average. The Italian financial sector is also in crisis, many of the Italian banks have bad loans that are difficult to recover, that is, this makes the banking system in Italy extremely fragile. And to add to the problems of the economy and the problems of finance and banks, we now have the great issue of emigration. Italy remains the country that receives a large proportion of immigrants arriving in Europe - received more than 600,000 in the last four years. And the issue of emigration will certainly be one of the great issues during the election campaign. And it will be a theme that will divide Italian public opinion a lot, because a part of Italian public opinion will be very favorable to populist speeches and racist speeches.

What role does Italy play today in the current framework of the European Union, dominated by Germany and France?
Italy was one of the founding countries and for many decades was a country that weighed heavily in decision-making. Lost with the political crisis and the economic crisis that the country has lived in the last two decades, would say, lost influence. However, it still has some weight within the European institutions. It should not be forgotten that the President of the European Parliament, António Tajani, is Italian and is probably one of the personalities who could be the next prime minister in Italy in a coalition government. We must also bear in mind that we have Federica Mogherini at the level of the European Union's external relations, so that Europe's foreign relations are to a certain extent influenced by Italian politicians and an Italian view of foreign policy. And we also have at the level of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi, who is evidently a remarkable personality in Europe's economy and finances.

III.

In Russia, Alexei Navalny was considered by many the only opposition candidate capable of facing Vladimir Putin. But the politician's candidacy for the March 2018 presidential election was rejected. At stake is the fact that Navalny was convicted of corruption. About the process, observers report that it was manufactured.
The removal of the 41-year-old lawyer prompted a number of criticisms, including from the European Union that says the issue raises serious questions about political pluralism in that country.
As soon as the electoral commission spoke, Navalny left the guarantee:

Alexei Navalny, politician
A large number of people will boycott these elections and will participate in an electoral strike.
Victor, Vladimir Putin will run for a fourth presidential term. It is seen as the favorite. What is the basis of these charges against the European Union?
There is a problem of democracy and a problem of political representation in present-day Russia. Vladimir Putin wants to be re-elected and any opponent who can represent a very serious competition over his election by a large majority, because he ... is not just a matter of being elected or re-elected, but Vladimir Putin wants to be re-elected with a large percentage of the votes. This is important for him because it allows him to state publicly that he has the Russian population behind him and supports him. This will mean that Vladimir Putin will try to prevent all strong candidates, including Alexei Navalny, from appearing on the Russian presidency lists.

If Navalny could get into the race, what would be the real chances of a victory?
I think he had no chance of being elected President of the Republic but would have the chance to withdraw many votes from President Vladimir Putin and that is what Vladimir Putin does not want. Vladimir Putin thinks that he represents traditional Russia, he represents imperial Russia, in what this would mean in the twenty-first century, of course, and wants to be elected with a large majority and needs - in the way he sees Russian domestic politics - of this vast majority to continue to rule the Russian space, Russian policy without any kind of opposition. In addition, Vladimir Putin will continue to bet on nationalism. It has a narrative that is fundamentally the following: Russia is a great country, but it is not recognized as such by the European countries and, therefore, we must show that we are this great country, that is, the key to Russian nationalism and of Russian traditions will be the big key during the election campaign. And, in addition, it will also show the Russians that he means the not only political rebirth of Russia, but also the rebirth in terms of defense and in terms of military might. The only problem he has is that the Russian economy is in a relative crisis and this evidently causes discontent in various sectors of the Russian electorate.

And how should the European Union face Russia in the coming years?
Europe needs Russia, it imports about one third of what it consumes in natural gas from Russia. In this year that ended now, in 2017, Europe imported 37 billion of Russian gas dollars, so Europe continues to depend a lot on Russian gas and oil. On the other hand, Russia itself obviously needs a strong Europe, a Europe that invests in Russia, a Europe that can be, let's say, a great economic partner. In other words, the deadline, either side or the other, need to move from a competitive situation to a good neighborhood situation.

Victor, we are already looking at the year that arrived. In 2018, elections will be held in Italy and Russia. On the other hand will keep on top of the table hot topics that marked 2017: the issue of refugees, the Brexit. What other challenges does Europe expect for the next 12 months?
Certainly one of them will be the deadlock in Catalonia and to what extent the European Union must or should not take a position and what kind of position it should take with regard to the question of Catalonia and in relation to Madrid. On the other hand, Merkel continues to fight for a government coalition in Germany, but as time goes by, we see a political weakening in the German domestic scene of Angela Merkel. We will watch in 2018 to an internal weakening of Merkel that will likely have a negative impact on its ability to determine and influence the European agenda. We will continue to have the problem of cooperation with Africa, which is a problem that is not resolved, but it will certainly, in 2018, gain a great deal of visibility again, and in the second half of the year we will have Austria in the Presidency of the European Union and Austria with a government in which a part of the ministers-and important ministers-is very far right, far right.

He mentioned the issue of migration and also cooperation with Africa. What other approach could we take from now on to this Europe-Africa relationship?
There has to be an approach that takes into account several factors. On the one hand, we need to open up the European economies much more to imports from Africa. There are still a lot of obstacles and these obstacles obviously do not allow African economies to develop and export in relation to Europe. On the other hand, it is also

essential that the European Union further promote regional cooperation between African countries and border control issues, customs issues continue to weigh heavily and in a negative way in the development of Africa's economies. The European Union needs to help these countries develop regional cooperation between them. On the other hand, I think it is essential and this is an issue that is very difficult to put on the table in Brussels, but it is a key issue that is the issue of trilateral cooperation in Africa. In other words, Europe must work with China in the development of African countries. When it comes to cooperation involving the European Union, China and the African countries, the leaders in Brussels are very nervous about it and think that the idea of including China is an idea that should not be maintained, should not be mentioned. I think, however, that it is exactly the opposite. China is now an unavoidable partner with regard to the development of African countries and it is vital that the European Union should reach an agreement with the Chinese authorities so that cooperation can be done together.

Victor, and what can we expect from the two presidencies of the European Council? In the first semester we will have Bulgaria and the second is Austria, as you mentioned.
Bulgaria will above all insist on the inequalities of economic development currently in Europe. Bulgaria is one of the countries that has many economic growth difficulties and will certainly insist that there be more investment and more transfers from the rich countries of Europe to the least developed countries. Austria will certainly insist on the issue of migrations, that is, to put a halt on the arrival of new immigrants and it will also certainly underline the need to develop a common border policy and develop notably FRONTEX, i.e. the European police occupies control and aid for the control of European frontiers.
On the other hand, it must also be remembered that, in spite of everything, the European economic situation is relatively positive and encouraging. This will also mark, to some extent, relations between the European countries. If Europe continues to grow in 2018 as envisaged, this growth to some extent mitigates some of the tensions that exist at national level and in particular policies against Brussels, national policies against Brussels and, on the other hand, this European growth allows to make the narrative about the advantages of the European Union continue to be a positive narrative and I think that is important, economic growth is important.
Also in 2018 we will attend the beginning of the discussion about who will succeed at the end of 2019. And this is probably going to be one of the great debates that Austria will animate during the second half of 2018 and probably that will also show what the trend they want to give to European construction, whether it is a more conservative trend, whether it is a more European tendency to the traditional or if it is a more upset tendency, let's say, for a freer, more liberal and closer Europe, for example, of social-democratic ideals.

iv.

We were then with Victor Angelo, a resident commentator for the Magazine Europa, based in Brussels.

Time still for our usual culture note. This week we suggest a book considered by critics as one of the best works edited in 2017 in Portugal

"The consciousness of words", of the Nobel Prize in German literature of Bulgarian origin Elias Canetti was edited by the Iron Horse in Portugal in September of last year.

It is a volume of 15 essays, written between 1962 and 1976, and which bring together texts about personalities such as Confucius, Georg Büchner, Tolstoy, Kafka, Karl Kraus and Hitler. It also has an evocation of the tragedy of Hiroshima through the diary of one of the survivors.

We wish you good readings. We'll stay here next week

[Technical Sheet]

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