German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
CPG

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 1, January/2022

Brought to you by CPG

Supported by KAS

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN
WESTFÄLISCHE WILHELMS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNSTER
Auswärtiges Amt
DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange Service

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first issue of the Europe in Review in 2022 and the very best wishes for a good New Year from the entire EiR Team and KAS!

I would like to take the opportunity to also welcome Glen Carey as the EiR´s new Co-Deputy Editor – in – Chief who is running the team together with Peter Kononczuk whom, together with the team, I want to thank for the good work in 2021.

Glen has been a U.S. Defense Reporter with Bloomberg News in Washington after having served many years as Bloomberg´s Bureau Chief in Saudi Arabia. Peter has served, inter alia, as London Correspondent for Agence France Presse. Together with the CPG and EiR team and with support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation they will ensure that the Europe in Review will provide you with a reliable and coherent monthly picture of the geopolitical and domestic developments in Europe throughout the new year.

Have a good read and a nice day!

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU

Main Sections

- EU, International Relations and Geopolitics
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

EU, International Relations and Geopolitics

Tensions as Russian build-up at Ukrainian border triggers fears of invasion

Western leaders have warned of “massive consequences” if Russia invades Ukraine after massing troops at the two countries’ border, but US President Joe Biden has ruled out an American military intervention. [France24] [Deutsche Welle] [Independent]

Amid a spike in international tensions, the government in Kyiv has estimated that more than 100,000 soldiers have been posted on Russian territory bordering northern and eastern Ukraine and Crimea. [Reuters] [TASS] [Euronews]

Moscow has consistently denied any plans to invade, arguing that Russia is defending its own borders from eastward advancement by NATO. [TASS] [Macmillan Center] [Reuters]

Analysts have suggested that Russia – which seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 and backed separatists in eastern Ukraine – is putting on a show of strength designed to make NATO and the EU look weak. They have also warned that the crisis is a test of the bloc's capacity to stabilize its neighbourhood. [Politico Europe]

Biden has reiterated Washington's support for the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Ukraine. While he said that putting American troops on the ground in Ukraine in the event of a Russian invasion is "not on the table," the US will continue to send over arms and supplies. [BBC News] [Reuters]

Talks between the US, NATO, the OSCE and Russia designed to address tensions are expected to take place in early January. [Moscow Times] [Deutsche Welle] [TN]

President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, has insisted that Moscow's actions "will not depend on the course of the negotiations, but on whether Russia's security is unconditionally ensured." [Ukrinform] [Moscow Times] [TASS]

Russia on 17 December sent a list of security demands to Washington including the removal of military forces from eastern NATO states, as well as a guarantee that Ukraine will not be granted NATO membership. [Diário de Noticias] [Reuters] [Times] [TASS]

Biden was handed similar demands in his summit with Putin on 7 December – the Russian leader asked for "reliable and long-term security guarantees" from the United States and its allies "that would exclude any further NATO moves eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close vicinity to Russian territory." [TASS] [Week]

The US president insisted that Ukraine has the right to determine its own allegiances, echoing a call made by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, who said that Russia has "no right to block Kyiv's closer ties with the NATO military alliance."

Kuleba added: “Any security guarantees that Moscow might seek from the West would be illegitimate.” [CNN] [Reuters]

In a phone call with his Russian counterpart on 30 December, Biden told Putin that an attack on Ukraine would be met with “severe costs and consequences.” [Politico Europe] [TN]

A number of European leaders have also issued warnings of “massive consequences” for Russia in the event of an invasion.

Meeting in Lithuania on 20 December, leaders of the Baltic states stressed their “immediate readiness to provide non-military and military support to Ukraine,” while G-7 leaders issued a statement on 12 December calling on Russia to “de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities.” [LSM] [UK Government]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on 16 December that “if Russia moves against Ukraine, the EU will be in a position to take sanctions that could extract a massive cost.” [Euronews]

While such sanctions have yet to be revealed, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has been urged not to approve the new Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline – which bypasses Ukraine – due to the influence it could afford Russia across Europe. Moscow has insisted the pipeline, which runs from Russia to Germany, must be given the go-ahead. [Politico Europe] [Euronews] [Reuters] [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi has said that the level of international conversation thus far does not indicate an imminent invasion. Draghi said: “The fact that Putin sought out Biden by phone shows that he wants to be part of the decision-making process.”

Draghi added: “This is the behaviour of someone who wants to explore all the possibilities of diplomacy to reach a balanced solution.” [Politico Europe]

The withdrawal on 25 December of 10,000 Russian troops in military training was cautiously welcomed by some as a sign of de-escalation. [Deutsche Welle] [WELT]

Ukraine’s Security and Defence Council Secretary Alexey Danilov has estimated that a successful Russian invasion would require at least 500,000 soldiers, five

times the numbers presently amassed around Ukraine's borders. [TASS]

Military experts also say that while Ukraine is better equipped than in 2014 and could potentially inflict Russian losses significant enough to offer a deterrent to a full-scale invasion by Moscow, its defence expenditure only amounts to one-tenth of Russia's. [Reuters]

Ukraine is celebrating 30 years of independence following the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Speaking on 20 December, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told Italian daily *La Repubblica*: "We will defend our land and our people under all circumstances and from any encroachments. Ukrainians will never give up their freedom." [Kyiv Post]

Writing for *Politico*, political scientist Oksana Antonenko and columnist Paul Taylor have suggested that Putin's endgame is "to rewrite the Paris Charter of 1990, which allowed Central and Eastern European countries to regain their freedom, security and prosperity. He seeks to make the EU and NATO look impotent." [Politico Europe]

(ht/pk)

EU, US expand sanctions against Belarus over migrant crisis

The EU, US and other western nations have taken coordinated action to ramp up sanctions against Belarus in response to its continued abuses of human rights and incitement of migrants to illegally cross European Union borders.

The new measures target officials in the regime of authoritarian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka, state-owned airline Belavia, as well as tour operators and hotels "that have helped incite and organise illegal border crossings through Belarus to the EU," the Council of the European Union said in a statement. [Council of the EU] [Guardian]

In addition to targeting 11 Belarusian entities, the new sanctions from the EU announced on 2 December targeted 17 people within Lukashenka's regime - including judges, border and military officials, and government representatives. Also targeted was the Belarusian state-owned tourism organisation

Tsentrkurort, which EU officials allege helped arrange visas and transport for more than 50 Iraqi nationals.

The United Kingdom imposed sanctions against eight Belarusians "responsible for repression and human rights violations," while the US targeted 32 individuals and entities, including Dmitry Lukashenka, son of the Belarusian strongman president. [Euronews] [Guardian]

A day later Minsk threatened retaliation, with the foreign ministry releasing a statement saying that there would be "tough, asymmetric but appropriate measures" in response to the West's goal to "economically strangle Belarus." [Guardian]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on 2 December that the sanctions demonstrated "unwavering determination to act in the face of a brutal regime that increasingly represses Belarusians, undermines the peace and security of Europe, and continues to abuse people seeking only to live in freedom." On the same day, Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, said that the bloc "will not tolerate the orchestrated and politically motivated instrumentalisation of human beings by the Lukashenka regime". [Washington Post] [Council of the EU]

German news website Der Spiegel reported at the end of the month that many of the sanctions were ineffective and provided significant exemptions for targeted Belarusian companies. The report cited examples of continued Belarusian exports to European countries of products such as potassium fertilisers, oil, and timber. [Politico Europe]

The ramped up sanctions came amid a continuing crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, where migrants still face difficult conditions in their attempts to enter the EU.

Polish President Andrzej Duda on 30 November signed into law legislation that allows limited access by journalists and aid workers to border regions at the discretion of local border forces, easing a strict ban on such movement that had been in place since the Polish government declared a state of emergency in September.

The ban had been criticised by opposition parties as an attempt to conceal illegal pushback of migrants by Polish border guards. The new rules fall short of providing the unlimited movement favoured by the opposition, and has been met with criticism from human rights groups which say it gives the

government the power to limit access indefinitely. United Nations officials were denied access to the border during a visit to Poland from 29 November to 3 December. [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle]

Meanwhile, the Lithuanian parliament on 7 December voted to extend the country's own state of emergency in an attempt to prevent more migrants entering the EU via the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė said that the number of migrants attempting to cross the border had decreased, but the interior ministry warned on 20 December that the numbers could soon rise again.

Lithuania's interior minister, Agnė Bilotaitė, said that Lukashenka had ordered Belarusian authorities to clear out migrants being kept in warehouses near the border and that "there will be attempts soon to push these migrants into Lithuania, Poland and Latvia." She added that there could be between 3,000 and 4,000 migrants still in Belarus. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

(ek/pk)

US Treasury Department imposes sanctions on former Ukrainian official

The United States Treasury Department has imposed sanctions on a former Ukrainian official for buying influence in the country's courts.

Andriy Portnov has been accused of buying influence in Ukraine's judiciary by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Treasury Department. Portnov has been listed alongside 15 individuals and entities in several countries across Central America, Africa and Europe accused of corruption and human rights abuse. [Reuters]

"Widely known as a court fixer, Portnov was credibly accused of using his influence to buy access and decisions in Ukraine's courts and undermining reform efforts," said the OFAC in a statement. It continued that "as of 2019, Portnov took steps to control the Ukrainian judiciary, influence associated legislation, sought to place loyal officials in senior judiciary positions, and purchase court decisions.

In mid-2019, Portnov colluded with a high-ranking Ukrainian government official to shape the country's higher legal institutions to their advantage and influence Ukraine's Constitutional Court." [Interfax Ukraine]

The sanctions imposed by the US Treasury will block all assets that Portnov may have within the United States, prohibit Americans from conducting business transactions with them, and subject people and firms that do business with them to potential penalties. [RFE/RL]

(bm/qc)

Russia vetoes UN resolution seeking to link climate change with global security

Russia has vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution that sought to formally link climate change and global security. The resolution drafted by Ireland and Niger called for "information on the security implications of climate change" to be addressed by the Security Council. [RFE/RL]

The resolution also called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to make climate-related security risks "a central component" of conflict prevention and peacekeeping strategies. [RFE/RL]

The resolution won support from 13 of the 15 council member states. China abstained from voting, while India voted no since their reasoning is that global warming is an issue primarily related to economic development, rather than international security.

Some diplomats have said that Russia's decision to veto the resolution was hard to understand, as it was not overly "radical" in its nature. [France24]

Described by Ireland's UN envoy, Geraldine Byrne Nason, the resolution was a "modest first step." "We need to better understand this link" between security and climate change, she said. "We need to look at it globally."

Her counterpart from Niger, Abdou Abarry, called Russia's opposition to the draft "short-sighted." [France24]

The US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield said there was "no justification" for Moscow's veto.

"Only the [Security Council] can ensure the security impacts of climate change are integrated into the critical work of conflict prevention and mitigation, peacekeeping, and humanitarian response," she wrote on Twitter. "Russia let the world down by vetoing a

resolution backed by a majority of UN member states." [RFE/RL]

Russia's ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nabenzia, said a resolution would "create confusion and duplication" with other UN forums tackling climate change. "For us, the direct link between terrorism and climate change is far from obvious," he said. [France24]

The permanent Security Council members, the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China have the power to veto resolutions. Both Nason and Abarry have denounced the rule created during the UN's post-World War II founding as "an anachronism." [RFE/RL]

"This Security Council will never live up to its mandate for international peace and security if it does not adapt. It must reflect the moment we are now living in, the threats to international peace and security which we now face," they said. [RFE/RL]

(bm/qc)

European Council summit leaves energy prices a live issue as Omicron dominates talks

The December European Council summit discussed COVID-19, Belarus and even tensions in Ethiopia – but the issue of spiking energy prices was conspicuously absent from its conclusions, reiterating the stark divisions between member states on how to tackle higher prices for European consumers and businesses. [Politico Europe]

As *Europe in* Review previously reported, Spain has taken a leading role in pushing for more "forceful" reform of the EU's energy market to combat rising energy prices. Others, such as Germany and the Netherlands, see rising prices as temporary and oppose larger scale reforms. [Euractiv] [Reuters] [EiR Monthly November 2021]

At the last European Council summit, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez secured a commitment to revisit the price spikes in December. However, this summit ended without any conclusions being adopted on energy despite hours of discussion given to the problem – which *Politico Europe* reporting has described as "pretty rare." [Politico Europe] [Euractiv]

The latest COVID-19 variant of concern, Omicron, was on the top of the agenda.

However, while the conclusions reiterated the importance of "overcoming vaccine hesitancy", they stopped short of promising any immediate collective action against the variant.

Member states have already begun closing off international travel, which the conclusions say must be done "based on objective criteria… do not undermine the functioning of the Single Market or disproportionately hamper free movement." [France24] [Deutsche Welle]

The adopted conclusions also contained a threat of "massive consequences and severe cost" issued to Russia should it take military action against Ukraine. [Reuters]

Those conclusions also directly condemned Belarus for "instrumentalisation" of migrants and called for mediation in the ongoing civil war in Ethiopia.

(wb/qc/pk)

'Global Gateway': European Commission launches EUR 300bn global infrastructure plan

The European Commission has unveiled plans to invest billions in private and public funds into infrastructure projects across Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia – a move some see as a counterweight to China's transcontinental infrastructure network, the Belt and Road Initiative. [AP] [Monde]

The Global Gateway aims to plough EUR 300 billion by 2027 into strengthening supply chains and improving trade in and outside Europe through such projects as a 35,000-km high-speed fibre optic network, new airports and railroads, open internet and secure 5G systems.

European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen said: "The Global Gateway strategy is a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world."

Some observers see the Global Gateway, unveiled on 1 December, as a European response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has so far invested over USD 200 billion in a growing network of ports, pipelines, railways and

roads in more than 150 countries across the globe. [Economic Times] [RFE/RL]

The reach of the Belt and Road Initiative now extends beyond Asia to the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and Africa, with Eritrea and Guinea-Bissau the latest to join. [Asia in Review, No. 48, November/2021, 5]

Italy, Portugal and Greece are among the 14 European countries also part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

But despite its uptake, EU officials have raised concerns over a lack of negotiation transparency on China's part and the potential for debt traps. [Reuters] [BBC News] [RFE/RL]

Von der Leyen said the Global Gateway would be a "true alternative" to China's initiative. [Reuters]

The European Commission said on its website: "Global Gateway can demonstrate how democratic values provide certainty and transparency for investors, sustainability for partners and long-term benefits for people around the world."

China's ambassador to the EU, Zhang Ming, said the Global Gateway would be welcome if it was "truly open", but warned that "any attempt to turn infrastructure projects into a geopolitical tool would fail the expectation of the international community and harm one's own interests." [BBC News] [Week]

(ht/pk)

Blow to Poland, Hungary as EU court advisor says cash-for-democracy tool is legal

A tool that allows the EU to suspend funds for member states which violate the bloc's democratic principles is legal, an advisor to a top EU court has said. [Politico Europe]

The legal opinion was issued by the advocate general of the European Court of Justice in early December. It came after Poland and Hungary challenged a mechanism – available for the last year but so far not used – which allows Brussels to link payouts to the maintenance of rule-of-law standards in EU member states.

The right-wing governments in Warsaw and Budapest have repeatedly clashed with Brussels over

accusations that they have undermined democratic norms, judicial independence and media freedom.

Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro raised the stakes when he warned that his country could suspend its contributions to the EU budget and veto decisions by the bloc which require unanimity if Brussels cuts funds for Poland. [Financial Times] Ziobro claimed in an interview published on 12 December that the European Commission's real goal was not to protect the rule of law, but to bring about a change of government in Poland.

Ziobro argued that European Union bodies were overstepping their powers, and announced he would ask the Polish Constitutional Tribunal – the country's top court – to declare that the EU cash-for rule of law mechanism breaches the national constitution.

In an opinion issued on 2 December, European Court of Justice Advocate General Manuel Campos Sánchez-Bordona said the "conditionality" tool does not overstep the EU's competencies as laid out in the bloc's treaties. [Reuters] The opinion is not binding, but is likely to be reflected in a final ruling by the European court expected early in 2022. [Reuters]

The European Parliament in October filed a lawsuit against the European Commission over the EU executive's reluctance so far to use the mechanism to cut cash flows for countries seen as democratic backsliders. However, the Commission has been holding back from approving billions for Warsaw's post-pandemic recovery plan amid concern at rule-of-law standards. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

Poland, which entered the European Union in 2004, has been a leading beneficiary of funds from the bloc intended to help poorer states catch up with richer members of the club. But as it becomes more affluent, Poland is on track to eventually become a net contributor to European Union funds. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the European Commission, the EU's executive, on 22 December said it was launching infringement proceedings against Poland over July and October rulings by the Constitutional Tribunal in Warsaw which sent shockwaves through Europe by challenging the primacy of EU law over national law. [Politico Europe]

The Commission also said it had "serious doubts" about the independence and impartiality of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal, which has been described by critics as largely a puppet court in the hands of the country's ruling nationalists.

In another legal clash, the European Court of Justice in October ordered Poland to pay a fine of EUR 1 million a day for refusing to suspend a disciplinary chamber within the Supreme Court in Warsaw, even though the Luxembourg-based tribunal previously said the Polish chamber violated judicial independence, a central tenet of the EU.

(pk)

Right-wingers from across Europe vow to oppose EU 'super-state'

Right-wing and conservative leaders from across Europe met in Warsaw to discuss forming a new political alliance in the face of what they claim is the increasing "federalism" of the EU, but fell short of agreeing to found a new group in the European Parliament.

The leaders of 14 right-wing and populist parties vowed after gathering in the Polish capital on 4 December to resist attempts to turn the European Union into a "super-state". [Euronews] [VOA]

They agreed to increase cooperation and keep their votes in the European Parliament aligned on issues of sovereignty and migration. [Euronews] [VOA] [France24]

The right-wing leaders accuse the EU of undermining the sovereignty of member states, as the bloc continues to accuse Poland and Hungary of eroding democratic values and withholds post-pandemic recovery funds to the two countries. [Euronews] [Reuters]

Jarosław Kaczyński - head of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party - hosted the Warsaw meeting, which was attended by prominent European nationalists including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, French far-right politician Marine Le Pen, and Santiago Abascal of the Spanish far-right Vox party. [Euronews] [VOA]

The representatives issued a joint statement declaring that "only the sovereign institutions of the states have full democratic legitimacy" and that they oppose a "Europe governed by a self-appointed elite". [Euronews]

The meeting was the result of a declaration signed by the parties in July that laid the foundation for a "grand alliance" in the European Parliament. At their

December meeting in Warsaw, the parties agreed to hold regular meetings, with the next one scheduled in Spain in two months. [Euronews]

Observers say the leaders, whose parties belong to various political groups in the European Parliament, have difficulties in finding common ground. Notably absent from the Warsaw meeting was Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian right-wing Northern League party. Despite being one of the signatories of the July declaration, Salvini said that "the time needs to be right" for a new alliance.

Among the parties that were present there is also a history of disagreement, with Kaczyński in 2017 having accused Le Pen's party of having ties to the Kremlin. Le Pen on 3 December admitted that "bringing together political movements… takes time." [Euronews] [France24] [Euractiv]

(ek/pk)

Alleged misuse of funds at European Court of Auditors gives fuel to critics of EU institutions

European Court of Auditors President Klaus-Heiner Lehne came under scrutiny in December after revelations about alleged misuse of public funds for private purposes in the French weekly *Libération*. [Politico Europe] [Libération]

The Court of Auditors (ECA) is one of the main European Union institutions, tasked with the financial management of the EU and ensuring that funds have been spent properly. Suspicions about the ECA president's actions have cast a shadow over the institution's role as an auditor of the other institutions.

It is not the first time the ECA has been mentioned in the context of improper use of public funds. In September, the Court of Justice of the European Union found that a staff member, former Belgian defence minister Karel Pinxten, had continued to involve himself in domestic politics while working for the ECA and had used the institution's resources for leisurely activities. [Politico Europe]

Libération's report also alleges there are conflicts of interest, political pressure and misuse of public funds in other EU institutions. [RFI]

Shortly after the report, Polish Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro referred to the criticisms of the EU's financial management in a different context, related to the ongoing conflict between Poland and the European bloc over changes to the Polish judiciary and the rule of law.

According to Polish media outlets, Ziobro may use the revelations, which he has labelled a "gigantic corruption scandal" related to the ECA to question the overall impartiality and independence of the EU institutions. [WP] [EiR Monthly December 2021]

(qc)

Large-scale EU regulation of big tech nears completion as European Parliament agrees position

The European Parliament has moved the EU's digital regulation project a step closer to completion by voting to adopt its final negotiating position on the Digital Markets Act (DMA), which is intended to impose new regulations on tech multinationals.

The DMA will now move to the "trilogue" stage. This part of the EU's "co-decision" process will see discussions between the Council and the Parliament based on their agreed negotiating positions. [Euractiv]

Once any compromises have been made and both institutions can approve the act, then it will become law.

The Parliament's 15 December debate on the act saw several amendments considered after months of industry lobbying and expanded the scope of the act to regulate default settings – aiming to improve competition by making it easier for users to choose their own default software. [Brussels Times] [TechCrunch]

One unique amendment called for "interoperability" between messaging and social media platforms. Advocates say requiring platforms to be cross-compatible with one another would reduce user's dependency on existing social media giants. [Euractiv]

A flagship aspect of the DMA was to limit "killer acquisitions" – where larger tech multinationals buy up smaller companies and integrate their products. [Politico Europe]

The DMA has also been partnered with the Digital Services Act, which intends to mandate social media companies to take action against illegal content on their platforms. The Parliament will vote on its negotiating position for that act in January. [EU Reporter] [Politico Europe]

According to observers, the acts represent “the biggest update of digital regulations for around two decades”. [TechCrunch]

(wb/qc/pk)

Croatia closer to joining border-free Schengen zone

Croatia is on course to become the newest member of Europe’s passport-free Schengen travel zone after it persuaded the bloc it was capable of managing its external borders - a sensitive topic politically ever since the continent’s migrant crisis of 2015.

European Union governments concluded on 9 December that Zagreb had met the conditions to join. Croatia’s bid must now win the backing of the European Parliament. [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

The Schengen area comprises 26 countries including non-EU states Norway and Switzerland that have scrapped passport and other types of control at their mutual borders.

Critics say Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013, has been heavy handed in demonstrating it can protect its section of the bloc's external borders, and have accused it of violence towards migrants.

Footage aired by European media last summer triggered anger at images of a Croatian police officer hitting migrants with a stick. [Euronews]

(pk)

Switzerland: House of representatives refuses to double EU cohesion payment

The lower house of Switzerland's federal assembly decided not to double its one-billion cohesion payment to the European Union (EU) in early December, a further sign that relations between the two long-standing partners have reached an impasse. [SRF]

The doubling of the payment, which is intended to support the development of Eastern European countries, had been proposed by the foreign policy commission of the Council of the European Union to help Switzerland regain access to EU cooperation programmes. [SRF] [20 Minuten]

Switzerland is not a member of the EU but has formal relations with the bloc through a number of bilateral agreements.

Swiss access to the EU cooperation programmes, such as the research framework initiative Horizon Europe, has been suspended ever since negotiations for a new and comprehensive Swiss–EU association agreement failed in early May. [20 Minuten] [EiR Monthly November 2021]

(mm/qc)

Bulgarian government does not change stance on North Macedonia's accession to EU

The new coalition government has said it will maintain its position with regard to the accession of North Macedonia to the European Union. Bulgaria has previously vetoed the accession process because of disagreements with language policy and historical claims to North Macedonia.

During a press conference in the weeks after his election, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov stated that the now former North Macedonian prime minister and him had discussed that a first line of action would be the creation of working groups to align the goals of both states should be the first point on the agenda. [BNR] [RFE/RL]

According to a poll by Gallup International Bulgaria conducted between November and December, a majority of Bulgarian citizens support the resolution of the issues driving a wedge between Sofia and Skopje, but they oppose any decision to lift the veto over EU membership. [Euractiv]

A year after vetoing the accession of North Macedonia into the EU, recently elected PM Petkov said that Bulgaria's position remains the same and that outstanding issues related to history, culture, infrastructure and the economy would be addressed through working groups in less than six months. [BNR]

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev has proposed a change in constitution which will acknowledge the constitutional rights of Bulgarian Macedonians: "Four years after the hate speech against Bulgaria has been intensified and we don't see political will to remove insulting texts in the schoolbooks and media, we don't see political will to stop the falsification and annihilation of Bulgarian historical and cultural legacy". In an interview for *Euractiv*, he explained that the 2017 treaty between the two countries has not yet been implemented but that they are working towards fixing the issue. [Euractiv]

Radev stated that pressuring Bulgaria to lift the veto, despite its demands not being met, is not a working suggestion. He has asked European institutions to focus their efforts on encouraging North Macedonia to meet all accession criteria [Euractiv] [BNR]

Bulgarian citizens support the priority of the issue on the agenda of the new government as 71 per cent are in favour of settling Bulgarian-North Macedonian relations, shown in a poll by Gallup International, conducted between 25 November and 3 December. The information was made available several days after the poll was conducted. [Gallup]

However, 70 percent of polled citizens said that they are opposed to lifting the accession veto. Sofia's suggestion is to separate the EU accession processes of Albania and North Macedonia, so Tirana can proceed with its path towards membership. President of Albania Ilir Meta has welcomed Bulgaria's suggestion. [News.bg] [Euractiv]

(ib/qc)

G7 group's meeting in Liverpool displays criticism of China

During the G7 group's meeting in Liverpool on December 12, the foreign and development ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as representatives of the European Union, discussed developments in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. They also reiterated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, as well as in the East and South China Seas.

They shared concerns about Beijing's coercive economic policies [South China Morning Post], which are raising worries in the EU as China leverages its economic strength for political influence.

(pm)

China-EU summit postponed amid trade and human rights tensions

The annual EU-China summit was postponed as the two sides squabble over human rights, EU-Taiwan relations and the stalled EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Sources familiar with the situation cited insufficient common ground on key issues, such as the December 2020 investment deal, for the delay.

The European Parliament has not taken further action against China for its alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang [South China Morning Post] after sanctions were imposed in March on Chinese officials and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Public Security Bureau. It was the first time in more than three decades that the EU sanctioned Beijing after its 1989 arms embargo in response to the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

The sanctions appeared to signal a hardening in the EU's policy towards China [see AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4] and came as concerns about Beijing's regional influence and trade polices increase among G7 nations.

(pm)

Lithuanian dispute with China escalates as goods are barred; diplomats return from China

Relations between Lithuania and China have reached a new depth after the Baltic country was removed from China's customs system and Lithuanian diplomats were forced to leave their diplomatic mission and work on a remote basis in December. [Financial Times] [Baltic Times]

The strong support of Lithuania and the other Baltic countries for the Republic of China, commonly known as Taiwan, has created tensions with the People's Republic of China. In November, ties between the two countries were officially downgraded after Taiwan was allowed to open a diplomatic mission in the Lithuanian capital. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Lithuania has asked for help from the European Commission as the diplomatic crisis is also having ramifications for other European countries. German businesses said that the ongoing situation may force an economic decoupling and the shutdown of factories in Lithuania. [Al Jazeera] [South China Morning Post] According to the European Commission, China refuses entry of EU imports that contain Lithuanian components. [Euronews]

While Taiwan has vowed support and deepening ties with Lithuania in response to actions taken in Beijing, the diplomatic crisis is unlikely to resolve itself without the initiative of the European Union or the United States, a long-standing ally of Taipei. [Euractiv]

(qc)

China-EU tensions aggravated by Lithuania ties to Taiwan

China's customs authority rejected an EU request to discuss accusations that China was imposing trade restrictions on Lithuanian firms after Taiwan opened a representative office embassy in Vilnius, bearing the name "Taiwan" [see AiR No. 45, November/2021, 2]. [Independent].

The Chinese authority cited its preoccupation with the COVID-19 pandemic for declining to hold talks. In response, Brussels threatened a lawsuit at the World Trade Organization if the claims made by Lithuanian companies were verified. [South China Morning Post].

China cut ties with the Baltic state, expelled the Lithuanian ambassador and downgraded its diplomatic relations after Taiwan opened the representative office. In response, Lithuania pulled its last diplomat out of Beijing after closing its embassy. [Reuters] [The Economist] [See AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4].

The diplomatic squabble is impacting EU companies. China is reportedly exerting pressure on Continental, a German car parts maker, to stop using components made in Lithuania, where it manufactures them at a production facility.

(pm)

European legislators anger China with resolutions and motions in support of

Taiwan

At the End of November, beginning December, lawmakers of several European countries passed resolutions in support of Taiwan.

The French Parliament on November 29 passed a non-binding resolution calling on the French government to support Taiwan's participation in international organizations. [Radio Taiwan International]

A day later, the Dutsch House of Representatives adopted two motions supporting Taiwan, urging the government to object any unilateral change of the cross-strait status quo as well as to push the bloc to support Lithuania, who faces pressure and retaliation from China for allowing Taipei to open representative office which bears "Taiwan" in its official name [see AiR No. 47, November/2021, 4]. [Focus Taiwan 1]

Lastly, on December 2, the Irish Senate passed a motion urging the Irish government to protest "ongoing and sustained breaches of human rights in the People's Republic of China," and to support "the freedom and liberties of the people of Taiwan," while rejecting any use of force for the unification of China with Taiwan. [Focus Taiwan 2]

(dql/pm/zh)

Baltic lawmakers visit Taiwan for 2021 Open Parliament Forum

Ten lawmakers from Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia attended the 2021 Open Parliament Forum, which is co-organized by Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Legislative Yuan, and the National Democratic Institute.

Lawmakers and activists from the US, UK, Japan, France, Australia, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Siri Lanka also virtually participated in the forum. The two-day event culminated in a joint statement by representatives from participating democracies that pledged to pursue "transparency, civic space, open response to, and recovery from COVID-19 crisis". [Focus Taiwan 1][Taiwan News]

The first-ever joint visit by lawmakers from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia to Taiwan may signal an attempt by the Baltic countries to move closer toward Taipei. [Focus Taiwan 2] For reasons behind the overtures by Baltic countries toward Taiwan, see an analysis in [The

Economist] which attributes the moves to historic and economic concerns.

(zh)

Slovakia, Taiwan sign agreement to deepen ties

A delegation from the Slovak Republic visited Taiwan on December 5. The visit by the delegation, which consisted of 25 business representatives and 18 senior officials, including Deputy Economy Ministry Karol Galek, marked the highest-level visit by the Central European country since it opened a representative office in 2003.

Calling Taiwan one of its "most important investors," Lucia Kišš, director general for Economic and Development Cooperation at Slovakia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Slovakia was "determined and committed to working with Taiwan."

The two countries signed nine memorandums of understanding and an agreement titled "Protocol of the 1st Session of The Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation" to facilitate the two-way exchange in various areas including science park, space, and smart city. The two countries also agree to hold the 2nd Session of the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation in Slovakia next year. [AP][Focus Taiwan 1]

(zh)

French lawmakers visit Taiwan

A six-member delegation from the French National Assembly visited Taiwan on December 16 for a five-day visit, the second trip by French lawmakers since one in October [see AiR No. 41, October/2021, 2]. The chair of France-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group, Francois de Rugy, led the delegation.

During the visit, President Tsai Ing-wen urged France, which is taking over the chair the Council of European Union, to push ahead with an EU-Taiwan Bilateral Investment Agreement (BIA). The EU had included Taiwan on its trade partner list for a potential BIA in 2015, a year before Tsai was elected, but the issue hasn't been raised since then.

The French group also met with Premier Su Tseng-chang, Cabinet minister Huang Chi-ta, Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu, and Minister of Science and Technology Wu Tsung-tsong. [Aljazeera][Taipei Times] [CNA, in Chinese]

In opposition to the visit, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said Beijing "firmly opposed any official and political exchange between Taiwan and other countries," calling on relevant parties to "stop sending false signals to Taiwan independence separatist forces." [France 24]

(zh)

UK´s intel chief accuses Beijing of large-scale espionage

In his first speech since assuming the post of Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), Richard Moore accused China of running "large-scale espionage operations" against the UK and its allies, adding that the MI6 considers China as the biggest among four "big threats" (China, Russia, Iran and international terrorism), as "tectonic plates are shifting as China's power, and its willingness to assert it, grows." He made clear that "[a]dapting to a world affected by the rise of China is the single greatest priority for MI6." [Sky News] [CNBC]

(pm)

France backs India amid China's growing maritime aggression, offers top defence technology

Meanwhile, French Defence Minister Florence Parly said Paris stood with New Delhi and the other nations in the Indo-Pacific region to ensure that the freedom of navigation was respected as China gets "more and more aggressive." [Asian News International] [La Prensa Latina]

Parly arrived in India for a two-day visit on December 17 to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh for talks on increasing future collaboration and co-production of defence equipment between their countries. [Military.com]

The following day, Singh confirmed that France had agreed to jointly manufacture aero engines in India under the government's strategic partnership model to

boost self-reliance in the defence manufacturing sector. The project is expected to boost New Delhi's plans to have its own medium-range helicopters, which are supposed to replace Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters in the coming years. [Hindustan Times] [The Print]

France describes India as its "main partner" in the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly concerned by the growing influence of China. Paris expressed its resolve to expand strategic cooperation with New Delhi after it was angered by being left out of a nuclear submarine deal with Australia, which in September announced a new a trilateral security partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States, known by the acronym AUKUS [see AiR No. 39, September/2021, 4].

France is helping India build six Scorpene submarines, four of which have been inducted so far. The executing company on the Indian side is Mazgaon Docks Ltd, and on the French side is the Naval Group. A USD 3.75 billion contract was signed between the two nations in 2005 for building the submarines.

Moreover, France has delivered 33 out of the 36 Rafale fighter aircraft so far and the remaining ones will be delivered by April of 2022. [Livemint] [Xinhua].

(rs/lm)

France will not join diplomatic boycott of Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics: Macron

Despite concern in Europe over China's human rights record, French President Emmanuel Macron has announced that his country does not plan to take part in an "insignificant" diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. [BBC News]

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Paris was seeking a common stance by the European Union on the thorny issue.

The United States, Britain, Canada and Australia are among Western countries that have said they will not send officials to the February Winter Olympics amid allegations of abuse by China against Uyghurs and other minorities. But the decision does not prevent athletes from taking part in the games.

China has warned that the United States would "pay the price" for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games. [France24] [BBC News]

French Education and Sports Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer said his country would continue to condemn human rights violations in China, but added: "Sports is a world apart that needs to be protected from political interference. If not, things can get out of control and it could end up killing all of the competitions." [France24]

(pk)

Chinese, German leaders vow to deepen economic relations

Recently appointed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Chinese President Xi Jinping held phone talks on 21 December during which both leaders agreed to closely cooperate in tackling global and regional challenges, including climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rebuilding of Afghanistan and the Iranian nuclear issue.

The talks, the first of their kind between Germany and China after Scholz replaced Angela Merkel as chancellor, appeared to have left out issues of alleged human rights abuses by Beijing in the Xinjiang region and the undermining of democracy in Hong Kong. Readouts by both sides did not mention these topics. [Politico] [Statecraft] [DW]

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Scholz said Germany was ready to "work with China in the spirit of mutual respect and mutual trust to push for further development of the Germany-China all-round strategic partnership" and to "promote EU-China relations in a constructive manner."

Scholz added, according to a readout from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, that he hoped an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment would enter into force "at an early date." [Chinese Foreign Ministry]

The talks came as German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock has announced to shift away from Merkel's China policy – which was criticised as too lenient towards Beijing on human rights – to a values-led common European China policy. [see Asia in Review No. 50, December/2021, 2]

Relations between China and the European Union soured last year over human rights issues. Last March, the EU imposed sanctions against Chinese officials and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Public Security Bureau for rights abuses in Xinjiang. It was the first time in more than three decades that the EU had

slapped sanctions on Beijing. They signalled a substantial hardening in the bloc's policy towards China [see AiR No. 12, March/2021, 4].

Meanwhile, a German frigate is making the rounds of Asia. The ship is now halfway through its mission, and represents Berlin's first foray into the region in two decades. The German Navy's deployment of the frigate Bayern, dispatched in August 2021, "throws into relief Europe's dilemma in the Indo-Pacific," *Foreign Policy* reported. Despite its public commitments to values such as human rights, democracy, and equality, Germany, like many others in Europe, is deeply dependent on China for continued economic growth, *Foreign Policy* added. [Foreign Policy]

(pm/dql/pk)

Cyprus and China upgrade relations

During a phone call – held on 30 November as part of events marking the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Cyprus – Chinese President Xi Jinping and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades agreed to upgrade their countries' relations to a strategic partnership to deepen cooperation in the frame of the Belt and Road initiative, to expand bilateral trade, and "to maintain the right direction of the development of China-European Union relations," with Nicosia called on to push Brussels to get strained relations between China and the EU back on track. [Xinhua] [Financial Mirror]

For a discussion of the current geopolitical feud between Greece, Cyprus and Turkey and its complex entanglement with NATO, the EU, Russia and China, see Jamie Shea in [Friends of Europe].

(dql/pm/pk)

Belarus signs directive advancing bilateral relations with China

On December 3, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko signed a directive to advance the country's strategic partnership with China in a wide range of areas for the years 2021-2025, including "political cooperation, maintaining and promoting the values of friendship and mutual support, cooperation in economy, trade, finance, and investment, and implementing the Belt and Road initiative." The

directive continues a similar one for the period 2015-2021. [Xinhua]

(pm)

First-ever Russian-ASEAN joint naval exercise held in Indonesian waters

Russia and seven ASEAN member states conducted a first ever joint naval exercise in Indonesia's territorial waters on December 1-3. Russia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Brunei each sent one warship to participate in the 2021 ARNEX joint exercise. [Benar News] [Radio Free Asia]

At the Russia-ASEAN summit on October 28 this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that one of Russia's foreign policy priorities is to enhance ties with ASEAN. [Benar News 2].

At current, Russia is the biggest arms supplier to Southeast Asia. [Benar News]

Many ASEAN member countries are seeking to avoid taking sides in the China-US rivalry and welcome both EU member states and Russian as cooperation partners.

Many countries in the region such as Vietnam have long lasting defense ties with Russia which also accounts of India. [Benar News]

(ms)

Russia, Vietnam discuss cross-sector cooperation

The Vietnamese and Russian presidents have met in Moscow to discuss Vietnam-Russia's comprehensive strategic partnership in politics, trade, defense, technological cooperation, and humanitarian contact in a 2021-2030 plan.

The leaders reiterated the mutual commitment to cooperate in the oil and gas sector adhering to international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Russia will continue its operations in the South China Sea on Vietnamese territories, while Vietnam agreed to facilitate oil exports to Russia. [VNExpress]

They also agreed to strengthen bilateral trade and investments and "effectively implement the Free Trade Agreement between Vietnam and the Eurasian Economic Union." The meeting also included plans for cooperation in education, maritime security, and sustainable development. [Nhân Dân]

Moreover, the countries committed to accelerating the development of a new Nuclear Science and Technology Research Center in Vietnam, which would include the use of advanced technologies in nuclear research, laboratories for nuclear medicine, and research projects in materials science. Following the first project draft in 2011, Russia and Vietnam signed two Memorandums of Understanding on the construction of the Centre and its implementation. [Raos Rosatom]

Also, on December 1, the two leaders signed the Vietnamese-Russian inter-governmental agreement on military-technical cooperation according to which the countries commit to partner on military trade and technologies. [Janes]

(bs)

Turkey bolsters military and defence links in Europe, Africa

Turkey's defence industry continues to grow as Ankara has been developing military and defence ties with various countries in Eastern Europe, including Ukraine and Azerbaijan, as well the African continent. The country has been also increasing its defence industry exports.

Turkey's exports in the defence and aerospace industry, which was carried out with 172 states, reached USD 3 billion at the end of 2021, according to Turkish Exporters' Assembly chairperson Ismail Gülle. He added that Ankara intends to boost its exports to USD 300 billion in the next five years. [Hürriyet]

On 4 December, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that the defence industry has been serving the country's effectiveness in foreign relations, also announcing the ministry's decision of forming a defence industry department for better coordination. [Hürriyet]

Turkey has continued to fulfil as planned the delivery of drones to Ukraine which have been produced by the private Baykar company in which Selçuk Albayrak, Turkish President Erdoğan's son-in-law, is one of the key figures. [Euronews]

The sale of UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) to Ukraine was not related to the tension between Ukraine with Russia as agreements “were discussed from the beginning,” Ismail Demir, the head of Turkey’s Defence Industries Presidency said on 4 December. [Hürriyet]

Tension between two countries has been elevated after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. The longstanding tension has further been exacerbated over a mass military build-up by Russia on Ukraine’s borders. Ukraine's defence minister Oleksiy Reznikov told the parliament on 3 December that over 94,000 Russian troops were deployed in border areas and warned of the possibility of a large-scale escalation in January 2022. [Reuters]

President Erdoğan commented on the tension on 8 December and said that Turkey was ready to serve as a mediator, facilitator, or to offer support in any format anticipated with the approval of two sides. [Anadolu Agency]

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan will presumably become the second country after Nigeria to acquire Turkey’s Hurkus aircraft, said Ismail Demir, Turkey’s chief procurement official and head of the Presidency of Defence Industries, on 4 December. [Defense News]

Demir’s statement came after Azerbaijan tested Turkish aircraft on 3 December with important figures including Turkey’s ambassador to Baku Cahit Bagci and Azerbaijan’s Air Force commander, Lt. Gen. Ramiz Tahirov. [Defense News]

Turkey held the Third Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit on 17-18 December in Istanbul. Sixteen African heads of state and 102 ministers from 39 countries and representatives of the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States attended the meeting. The summit was convened following a high-level business gathering in October that aspired to advance investment and trade. [Hürriyet]

In addition to bolstering economic ties, Ankara intends to strengthen its military ties with countries in Africa. Erdoğan said at the summit that Ankara was ready to offer counterterrorism expertise and provide military technology to the regional countries. [Al Jazeera]

Turkey already has a military base in Somalia, where it has helped in infrastructure building and personnel training. [Al Jazeera] Ankara also has a military presence in Libya, where it has supported the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), and its drones were ascribed forchanging the course of the civil war in Libya and also the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. [Al Jazeera] [Euronews]

Ankara also signed a military cooperation agreement with Ethiopia in August, while Morocco and Tunisia allegedly purchased Turkey's Bayraktar drones, which have been also acquired by countries such as Azerbaijan, Poland and Ukraine. [Al Jazeera]

(go/qc)

Turkey enhances military cooperation with Pakistan

Following Turkey's ouster from the US led F-35 Joint Strike Programme over its acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile defense system and Russian reluctance to share software codes running the Identification Friend or Foe system of the missiles, Ankara put its ambitions on developing its own fifth-generation fighter jet, the TF-X National Combat Fighter in cooperation with Pakistan.

Subject of this cooperation is Pakistan´s JF-17 jet, a multi-role fighter aircraft jointly developed by the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation, which is used by the militaries of Myanmar and Nigeria. [The EurAsian Times 1]

Turkey is allegedly keen to jointly develop missiles and warplanes with Pakistan to get access to Chinese military technology. [The EurAsian Times 2]

Besides, Turkey views Pakistan as an important strategic partner in in general In September, Turkey, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan strengthened their strategic cooperation by conducting the two- week long "Three Brothers 2021" joint military drills in Baku. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in September 2020 between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Pakistan and Turkey provided military support to Azerbaijan. [The News]

According to EurAsian Times, the three countries represent a significant military potential with the nuclear power Pakistan, Turkey as NATO's second largest military, and Azerbaijan as a rising regional actor. [The EurAsian Times 2]

However, both, Turkey and Pakistan, are currently experiencing critical financial conditions.

(hg)

Russia and India deepen military cooperation with signature of agreements

Russia and India have signed a series of new defence agreements that include the production of 600 thousand Kalashnikov rifles. The deal is part of a series of commitments from both countries to deepen military and technical cooperation until 2031.

Vladimir Putin met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India in early December. During Putin's visit, the pair pledged to boost annual trade to USD 30 billion by 2025 and reinforce their military and technical collaboration over the next decade. [France24]

The agreements come at a pivotal time in the relationship between Moscow and New Delhi, as India aligns itself further with the United States while Russia continues to look east to China. [BBC News]

The Kalashnikov assault rifles are to be manufactured in India's Uttar Pradesh region, the country's most populous state, as part of a joint venture pact signed during the meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military-Technical Cooperation. [RFE/RL]

India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla said that the two countries had additionally signed 28 investment pacts, including deals on steel, coal and energy. He also announced that the 2018 contract for the S-400 missile systems is being implemented. [CNN]

"Supplies have begun this month, and will continue to happen," said Shringla, in reference to the missile system. [CNN] Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov had announced ahead of the summit that an agreement to supply India with S-400 air-defence missile systems would go ahead despite what he described as efforts by the US to undermine the deal. [RFE/RL]

The deal with Russia puts India at risk of sanctions from the United States under a 2017 US law aimed at impeding countries from buying Russian military hardware. India will hope to avoid such sanctions, and that the missile deal will give the country a crucial strategic deterrence against both China and Pakistan. [BBC News]

Putin and Modi have also pledged to diversify the portfolio between the two countries, moving beyond energy and minerals and focusing more on education,

cyber security, agriculture, railways, pharmaceuticals and clean energy. [BBC News]

Both countries have also planned for long-term cooperation on shipbuilding, fertiliser, steel and skilled labour. [RFE/RL] Russia and India have also signed a memorandum of understanding for Russia to send a supply of coal to India, in order to support its steel production. [France24]

India's foreign secretary also added that Russian President Putin and Prime Minister Modi also intend to develop oil and gas investments in each other's countries. Both leaders agreed to strengthen the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and discussed extending maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean. [RFE/RL]

(bm/qc)

EU talks cooperation with US amid record number of arms sales, defence expenditure

The European Union and the United States have announced a new dialogue format for security and defence and greater cooperation with regard to technology competition, as the EU is garnering interest in greater supranational coordination of spending on defence among member states.

The EU and the US unveiled their new defence and security dialogue on 3 December, indicating that a first meeting is expected to be held in early 2022. The meeting will bring together representatives of the US State Department, the European Commission, the European External Action Service and the European Defence Agency, in an effort to improve bilateral ties and discuss cooperation in areas ranging from cyber to climate change. [Defense News] [Euractiv]

On 7 December, the EU and US also published a joint statement with regard to policy dialogue on the issue of joint technology competition. The document stated that the two partners "reaffirm their mutual interest in cooperating on competition policy and enforcement overall and especially in technology sectors."

The December announcements indicate there is recognition on both sides of the Atlantic about the similar challenges facing the EU and the US. However, the EU has primarily modelled itself as a civilian rather than military or "defence technological" actor, leaving

such matters to NATO and individual member states. [Carnegie Europe]

According to the European Defence Agency, EU member states spent around EUR 200 billion on defence in 2002. However, the amount of collaborative spending by governments has dropped in recent years. [Reuters]

Europe is not only a major player when it comes to defence spending but also the export of arms. Around one-fifth of global arms sales in 2020 were concluded by European companies, with many British, French and German arms firms in the top 100 of companies with the best sales. [Euractiv]

In Germany, the new governing coalition has indicated it favours the creation of an EU-wide arms-export policy to coordinate better between member states, although other EU countries, particularly France, want to keep the sales of arms a national competence. [Defense News]

(qc)

French sale of fighter jets, helicopters to UAE as Macron tours Gulf region

French president Emmanuel Macron went on a two-day tour of the Gulf states at the start of December, visiting Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Macron met with several leaders during his visit, including Abu Dhabi's crown prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman – who is the Saudi Arabian crown prince.

On the first leg of his tour in the Middle East, Macron made a EUR 17 billion deal with Mohammed bin Zayed in the UAE, selling the country 80 Rafale fighter jets, and 12 military helicopters – marking France's biggest ever sale of warplanes overseas. [Reuters]

The new hardware comes as a replacement for French-made Mirage 2000 airplanes that the UAE have used since the 1990s. The deal is controversial, as the UAE along with Saudi Arabia have both played major military roles in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. [France24]

The second leg of Macron's tour was in Qatar, where he met with the emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. Macron thanked the sheikh for Qatar's recent role in evacuating over 250 Afghans from Afghanistan, many of whom were threatened due to being

journalists or due to their links to France, according to the French foreign ministry. [France24]

The final leg of his tour saw Macron in Saudi Arabia, meeting with crown prince Mohammed bin Salman – making him one of the first world leaders to visit the crown prince since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi which occurred inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Macron said he believes that meeting with the prince is important to work towards stability in the region. [Al Jazeera]

The visit saw the pair trying to amend ties with Lebanon, a country that was once a French protectorate, and with whom the Saudis have traditionally been allies. It was the first time the crown prince has spoken with the new Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who took office in September this year.

Saudi Arabia has been concerned over Lebanon's relationship with Iran, but during the talks Macron said that both France and Saudi Arabia will work to offer Lebanon humanitarian assistance, the result of political dysfunction in the country and the effects of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. Mikati also said that the talk with the leaders was an important step to mending ties between his country and the Saudis. [Euronews]

Tensions have been high between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia thanks to comments made by the now ex-information minister for Lebanon Georges Kordahi regarding the Saudis involvement in the Yemen war. Punitive measures were taken against Lebanon by Saudi Arabia, who blocked imports, and other Gulf states in October.

It has not been stated whether or not these measures have been revoked. It is hoped that Kordahi's resignation will aid in attempts to repair the relationship between the two countries. [Al Jazeera]

(ig/qc)

Finland: Deal for F-35 jets strengthens defence ties with US, say observers

Finland has chosen American defence giant Lockheed Martin to supply 64 F-35 fighter jets and weapons systems in a deal worth an estimated EUR 8.38 billion that strengthens the country's defence ties with the US.

Though Finland is not a member of NATO, it has built tighter links with the military alliance in recent years. Observers say the deal for the fifth-generation F-35 Lightning II planes, the biggest arms agreement in Finland's history, highlights the increased importance of the Baltic Sea region to Washington. [Euractiv]

"By selecting the F-35, Finland gains a significant capability to ensure stability in the region," Lockheed Martin said in a statement.

The firm clinched the deal after beating rivals including America's Boeing, France's Dassault, Sweden's Saab and Britain's BAE Systems. [Euronews/Reuters]

The F-35 fighters will replace Finland's ageing fleet of combat aircraft. [Helsinki Times]

(pk)

Romanian parliament agrees to acquisition of used F-16 jets from Norway

The chamber of representatives of Romania has given its approval to the country's defence ministry to purchase 32 F-16 fighter jets from Norway to strengthen its air fleet, currently comprising 17 F-16 jets. [Euractiv]

Romania's defence ministry had requested the country's representative chamber in mid-December to greenlight the acquisition procedure. With parliamentary approval given, the acquisition will keep Romania on track to raise its defence spending to two percent of GDP, a pledge made previously to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). [Euractiv]

The total cost of the acquisition is reported to be USD 514 million with USD 400 million earmarked for the purchase of the jets and the remainder for an agreement with the United States to provide logistical support and to help modernise the equipment. According to the defence ministry, this will make the jets "viable" for at least another decade. [Defense Post]

The country is a strategic partner of the United States when it comes to NATO's Eastern Flank and for the conduct of military exercises in the Black Sea. Last month, Romania and the US announced a cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Romania has previously spoken with other NATO partners about the purchase of F-16 jets but only the

Norwegian government appeared willing to consider a sale of its F-16 fleet that will be replaced by new-generation F-35 fighter jets in the future. [Defense News]

(qc)

Serbia set to purchase new Pantsir air defence missiles from Russia

Serbia has announced the purchase of a new Pantsir S1-M air defence missile system from Russia. The announcement came from Serbia's Interior Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, after meeting in Moscow on 2 December with the Secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev.

The Pantsir missile system is a set of medium range surface to air missiles designed to counter a range of aerial threats from aircraft to precision munitions. The Pantsir S1-M is an upgraded version of the original system, the S1, and was unveiled in 2019.

The new S1-M is particularly effective at countering drone technology, an increasingly important job for modern air defence systems. [National Interest]

Serbia previously purchased six Pantsir S1 air defence systems from Russia in 2019. Serbia has a history of weapons acquisition from Russia that extends far beyond air defence. Since the Yugoslav era, the Serbian military has been dependent on Russian military technology.

In 2020, Russia donated 30 T-72MS tanks and 30 BRDM-2 armoured vehicles as part of a military-technical agreement between the two nations. Serbia is also awaiting a delivery of Kornet anti-tank guided missiles from Russia by the end of 2021. [Reuters] [European Western Balkans]

Serbia and Russia have strategic reasons for military and diplomatic cooperation. Russia wishes to maintain its influence in the Balkans, eroded since the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Serbia meanwhile wants powerful friends should any conflict in the region resume.

Drawing on their Slavic ties, Russia and Serbia, along with Belarus, have been part of joint military exercises codenamed "Slavic Brotherhood" since 2015. [National Interest] [Warsaw Institute]

Their cooperation is particularly relevant given Serbia's hostile stance towards Kosovo, Serbia's breakaway province that has been partially recognised as independent since 2008. Russia continues to support Serbia in refusing to recognise the independence of Kosovo.

However, since President Aleksandar Vučić assumed office in 2014, Serbia has tried to play a balancing act between Russian support and that of Western blocs such as the EU and the US.

In 2020 Serbia looked to US President Donald Trump when Vučić signed normalisation agreements with Kosovo in Washington.

In September 2020, Serbia also suspended all military exercises with foreign partners for six months due to "tremendous" pressure from the EU. [Reuters] [Army Technology]

(nw/qc)

Pope condemns violence against women as abuse rises amid pandemic

Pope Francis has condemned violence against women as "almost satanic," amid a rise in domestic abuse internationally during lockdowns that have left many trapped with their persecutors.

A United Nations survey of 13 countries found that half of women asked about their experiences reported they had suffered some form of violence since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

Speaking during a 19 December programme aired on Italy's TG5 network, the pope voiced concern at the "very, very high" number of women "beaten and abused in their homes." [BBC News]

According to police figures released towards the end of last year, some 90 episodes of violence against women are reported in Italy daily, and over six in ten of those are cases of domestic violence. [Guardian]

(pk)

Pope criticises indifference to migrants, condemns 'torture' in refugee camps

Pope Francis has criticised indifference to the plight of migrants, an attitude he described as evidence of a "shipwreck of civilisation."

The spiritual leader of the world's Catholics was speaking at a temporary camp housing some 2,000 asylum-seekers during a 5 December trip to Lesbos. He first visited the Greek island in 2016, when it was a key entry point for a wave of migrants attempting to reach Europe in search of a better life. The pontiff, who is known for voicing concern over the fate of refugees, lamented that little had changed since then. [BBC News] [NPR/AP]

Two days earlier during a visit to Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, the pontiff condemned "torture" in migrant camps, adding: "It reminds us of the history of the last century, of the Nazis, of Stalin." [France24/AFP]

In a gesture of solidarity, Pope Francis offered 50 migrants and refugees the chance of a new life in Italy. Migrant camps in Cyprus are overcrowded and the country has more first-time asylum seekers than any other European Union state. [Deutsche Welle]

Over a million people fleeing the Syrian civil war and other conflicts streamed to Europe in 2015 during a migrant crisis. This year, more than 1,600 people have gone missing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean, according to the International Organization for Migration. [BBC News]

(pk)

UN top court orders Armenia and Azerbaijan to prevent racial hatred, discrimination

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has requested Armenia and Azerbaijan "to refrain from any action which might aggravate or extend" the conflict over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.

Last year, the two countries fought a six-week war over a dispute that has been unresolved since the early 1990s. Fighting ended when Russia brokered a peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan although ceasefire violations and clashes briefly resumed in November of this year. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) indicated upon Armenia's request a set of general provisional

measures to Azerbaijan, including the protection of Armenian prisoners from the conflict, as well as a halt to the desecration of Armenian cultural heritage. [RFE/RL]

However, the court also declined specific requests from both sides; Armenia had asked that Azerbaijan release the prisoners as well as shut down a racist post-war “military trophy park”, while Azerbaijan had requested that Armenia hand over the maps of all the landmines laid in Azerbaijani territory. [Eurasianet]

In the case of the trophy park, the court stated that the Azerbaijani government had already taken steps to remove the most offensive exhibits.

The court’s chief judge, Joan Donaghue, said both Azerbaijan and Armenia "shall refrain from any action which might aggravate or extend the dispute before the court or make it more difficult to resolve." [RFE/RL]

Azerbaijan’s foreign ministry announced that "will comply with the measures indicated by the court related to preventing racial discrimination, which reaffirm existing treaty obligations that Azerbaijan takes seriously and is committed to upholding." [RFE/RL]

Armenia’s representative at the court, Yeghishe Kirakosyan, stated that “Armenia welcomes the orders and looks forward to their practical implementation by Azerbaijan and its high-ranking officials.” [Eurasianet]

Both countries are parties to Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), a forum that can be used to find legal support for the various post-war grievances the countries hold against one another.

(rr/qc)

Anti-torture committee urges Croatia to stop mistreating migrants

Experts from a top European human rights watchdog have called on the Croatian authorities to prevent police from mistreating migrants and to ensure that claims of ill-treatment are properly investigated.

A report by the anti-torture committee of the Council of Europe, a body which aims to protect rights and the rule of law, documents accounts of migrants being forced to march through a forest barefoot and being

thrown with their hands bound into the Korana river, which separates Croatia from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Some migrants alleged being pushed back into BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina) wearing only their underwear and, in some cases, naked," said the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. [Council of Europe]

The committee's report, published on 3 December, came after it made an ad hoc visit to Croatia in August 2020. The committee's delegation was provided with incomplete information about sites where migrants may be deprived of their liberty, and was obstructed by police officers in accessing documentation, the Council of Europe said.

The Croatian authorities have denied a string of claims that they violated migrants' rights. But activists have accused Croatian police of widespread pushbacks and abuse.

The European Court of Human Rights in November ruled that Croatia violated the rights of a six-year-old Afghan girl who was killed by a train after police forced her family out of the country without giving them a chance to apply for asylum. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

(pk)

Ukraine: Council of Europe urges Ukraine to improve prison conditions

The Committee of Ministers of the 47-member Council of Europe, the continent's main human rights organisation, has urged Ukraine to act on their commitment to resolve the continuing problems of overcrowding and inhuman conditions of detention, and the lack of effective remedies.

The request, published on 3 December, came as Ukraine had missed the deadline of 30 November for the introduction of preventative compensatory remedies regarding conditions of detention

The insufficiency of the Ukrainian penal system has had serious humanitarian implications for individuals in detention and has put significant stress on the Convention system, leading to a build-up of applications lodged with the court on the recurring problems, the committee noted.

The committee said that some changes have been made by the Ukrainian authorities to improve detention conditions, but have noted that they are insufficient and lacking in concrete progress.

Ukraine has been criticised by several international organisations about the protection of fundamental rights, not limited to conditions of imprisonment but also the freedom of expression and civic activism.

In December, the United Nations Human Rights Council discussed reports about threats and posed to human rights defenders and journalists who are critical of the government.

(bm/qc)

Turkey: European human rights court launches 'infringement proceedings' over failure to release Kavala

Several high-profile figures including human rights defenders and politicians have continued to experience pressure or have remained in detention. The Council of Europe expressed its concerns over the continuing imprisonment of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş and urged Turkish authorities for their immediate release.

Turkey was also given a formal notice over its failure to fulfil Europe's top human rights court's judgment over the Kavala case.

An Istanbul court ordered Osman Kavala, a 64-year-old civil society leader and businessperson to remain in jail on 23 December. He has been accused of organizing and providing financial support to the 2013 Gezi protests and aiding the 2016 coup attempt. He has been in jail since October 2017 and in the case of a conviction, he could serve an aggravated life sentence with no prospect of early release. [Deutsche Welle]

In February 2020, he was acquitted of the Gezi charges, but hours after his acquittal, he was incarcerated again over alleged links to the coup attempt. He denies all charges.

The decision came after the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers informed Turkey about its intention to refer the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for inquiring if the country has failed to enforce the previous judgment by

the Court on in its latest statement of 3 December. [Cumhuriyet]

In 2019, the ECHR stated that Kavala was apprehended in default of "sufficient evidence that he had committed an offence" and his pre-trial detention was political, it also ruled on his immediate release.

In its statement, the Council of Europe said, “by failing to ensure the applicant's immediate release, the Committee considers that Turkey is refusing to abide by the court's final judgment in this case,” and initiated infringement proceedings. The Council of Europe asked Turkey to present its view by 19 January over the Kavala case.

Infringement proceedings could result in the suspension of the country’s voting rights or even suspension from the body itself after a thorough multi-stage procedure. [Deutsche Welle] The procedure was only launched twice, the first one was initiated against Azerbaijan over its refusal to release an opposition figure in 2017 and closed in 2020.

Ahead of the statement, Ankara appeal to the Council of Europe to refrain from carrying out further steps, “which would/mean interference in the independent judiciary,” saying that the Committee should “respect and trust legal proceedings conducted by independent and impartial courts,” in a statement. [Hürriyet]

The committee also compelled Turkey to arrange the immediate release of Selahattin Demirtaş, the former leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) in a statement of 3 December. Demirtaş has been in jail since November 2016 over mainly terrorism-related charges of which he refuses.

Erdoğan criticized the decision on 7 December in Qatar and said to reporters “We do not recognize the decision of the European Union above the decision of our judiciary.” [Bloomberg]

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 in order to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. Turkey became a member state in 1950. All 47 member states including Turkey should adhere to the European Convention on Human Rights as the ECHR scrutinise its implementation in member states. [Deutsche Welle]

(bur/qc)

Moldova: Top human rights court finds that former PM's rights were not violated

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled on 7 December that former Prime Minister Vlad Filat's presumption of innocence was respected during a parliamentary session in 2015 that saw his immunity from prosecution lifted.

Filat was arrested and sentenced for corruption in 2015, a decision that was confirmed by Moldova's top administrative court in 2017. At the time, the former prime minister was also under investigation for number of other alleged crimes, including corruption and the illegal theft of funds. [Balkan Insight]

In September 2021, Moldova and the United Kingdom agreed on the return of GBP 458,000 of funds confiscated by British courts, which allegedly disappeared from Moldova's banking system into companies linked to Vlad Filat. [Balkan Insight]

In 2019, the ECHR accepted Filat's appeal to the court over the conditions in which he had to sit out his detention. The former prime minister had his sentence reduced and was allowed to leave prison in the same year.

The most recent ECHR ruling, the court found that Filat's complaint was ill-founded and noted there was no violation of the right to the presumption of innocence (Article 6) of the European Convention on Human Rights. [Ziarul de Gardă]

(qc)

PM of Kosovo and EU foreign policy chief disagree over association of Serb-majority municipalities

Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, and the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, expressed opposing opinions regarding an association of Serb-majority municipalities during a joint conference in early December.

Kurti maintained that the creation of the association would be thwarted by the Constitutional Court of Kosovo while he also stated that "this association is in the service of Belgrade." EU foreign policy chief Borrell, on the other hand, doubted that Kosovo's

Constitutional Court would block the association and said that he has to ask Kurti "to implement this agreement." [Politiko]

PM Kurti stressed that even though Serbia and Kosovo have signed 33 agreements, the former has yet to implement more than two-thirds of them. The chief of the EU's foreign policy clarified that unless the parties are willing to agree on substantial results, another high-level meeting would be meaningless. [Euronews Albania]

The Brussels agreement, an EU-brokered deal which was signed by Serbia and its former province Kosovo in 2013, stipulated, among others, the creation of an association of Kosovo's municipalities who have a Serb majority.

In December 2015, Kosovo's Constitutional Court found parts of the deal unconstitutional, and the association of municipalities is still a bone of contention between the two countries. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

(ec/qc)

Germany: New government makes inaugurals visits across Europe following Angela Merkel's farewell

Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his sixteen cabinet ministers were installed as the new federal government on 8 December, officially replacing Chancellor Angela Markel after her sixteen years in power. [Tagesschau] [Deutsche Welle]

The governing coalition consists of Scholz's Social Democrat SPD, the Greens and the liberal FDP. The three parties had been negotiating for a coalition agreement since mid-October. The deal was approved by each party's members on 6 and 7 December, with large majorities. [Euractiv] [Deutsche Welle]

The coalition agreement includes commitments to a strong Europe, coordinated European external action and the prevention of climate change. There are also many "progressive" social policies, such as the legalisation of cannabis, a higher minimum wage and support for non-traditional families. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

FDP leader Christian Lindner holds the finance ministry while the co-leaders of the Greens, Annalena Baerbock

and Robert Habeck, serve as foreign affairs minister and minister for the economy and climate protection, respectively. [Politico Europe]

Scholz made a series of inaugural visits to Paris, Brussels and Warsaw, affirming the need for a Europe that "stands together" and is sovereign in "economic, security and foreign policy issues." [Deutsche Welle]

Scholz's visit to Warsaw was somewhat overshadowed by disagreements surrounding Germany's approval of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, of which Poland disapproves due to the power it gives Russia to put pressure on the EU. [Deutsche Welle] Scholz and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also disagreed on the question of war reparations to be paid by Germany and the EU's climate goals contained in the Green Deal. [Politico Europe]

Scholz was accompanied by Baerbock, who travelled to Sweden to confirm Germany's commitment to NATO and nuclear disarmament. [Euractiv] In addition, Baerbock recently announced that she would take a firmer stance on China and on Russia regarding its actions in Ukraine. [Politico Europe] [ZDF]

Lindner met with his counterpart, Bruno Le Maire, in Paris as his first inaugural visit, reaffirming that "the Franco-German tandem will remain essential for the further development of the European Union and the European Monetary Union." [Tagesschau]

Both sides showed a willingness to compromise on questions of EU household rules and investments. [Tagesschau] While Le Maire had previously called for more flexibility in light of post-pandemic recovery spending, he said new rules were "not urgent" during Lindner's visit, who has been described as a "fiscal hawk." [Politico Europe] [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, the Greens and the FDP fractions in the German parliament have chosen new leaders. For the Greens, pragmatist Britta Haßelmann and left-winger Katharina Dröge will co-lead despite tensions between the party's two wings. For the FDP, Christian Dürr and Johannes Vogel replace Lindner and former parliamentary secretary Marco Buschmann, respectively. [Euractiv]

Following its election defeat in September, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has decided on a new leader as well. Friedrich Merz, who commentators have described as the "darling of the conservatives", won the vote of 62.1 percent of the more than 400.000 party members. [Deutschlandfunk]

(mm/qc)

Berlin court ruling on Chechen murder strains German relations with Russia

A Berlin regional court convicted a Russian national on 15 December for murdering a Chechen dissident at the behest of the Russian state in Berlin in 2019. [Tagesschau] The verdict came against the backdrop of German tensions with Russia over its military build-up in Ukraine and Eastern European fears of a possible Russian invasion. [Guardian] [Deutsche Welle]

The case concerned a fatal shooting in a park in central Berlin on 23 August 2019. While on the way to prayer, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen origin, was shot in the chest and head by Russian national Vadim Krasikov and died shortly afterwards. [Zeit] [Financial Times]

The court sentenced Krasikov to a life in prison and found him to be "heavily guilty," which makes it unlikely for parole to be granted in the future. [New York Times]

The court further determined that Krasikov committed the act on behalf of a Russian "state agency," amounting to an act of "state terrorism." [Tagesschau] [Deutsche Welle] The court followed the federal prosecutor's reasoning, who had claimed that Khangoshvili was targeted because of his involvement in the Second Chechen War. Khangoshvili is alleged to have been the leader of a Chechen separatist militia fighting against Russian forces between 2000 and 2004. [Zeit]

Following the announcement of the verdict, the German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, announced the expulsion of two Russian diplomats. [Deutsche Welle] She also described the murder as a "grave breach of German law and the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Germany." [Financial Times]

In response, Russia expelled two German diplomats. [Financial Times] The Russian ambassador in Germany, Sergey Nechayev described the court's decision as "biased and politically-motivated." [Tagesschau]

Nonetheless, Kremlin representative Dmitry Peskov said the expulsion of Russia's diplomats should "in no way" have negative consequences for the dialogue between German Chancellor Scholz and Russian President Vladimir Putin. [Tagesschau]

The verdict comes against the backdrop of Russian-German relations already strained by Russia's build-up of troops near the Ukrainian border and discussions over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. [Guardian] [EiR Monthly November 2021]

Commentators have described Germany's handling of Russia as a major foreign policy test for the newly installed German government. [New York Times] While Scholz has said he is ready for "constructive dialogue," Baerbock has announced she would take a firmer stance on Russia. [New York Times] [ZDF]

(mm/qc)

Turkey signs new agreements with Qatar to advance cooperation

Turkey has signed several agreements with Qatar to enhance bilateral cooperation and currency support amid a domestic economic crisis that has increased public pressure on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While Qatar is considered a key ally, Ankara took further steps in December to improve its relations with other regional actors, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Turkey has also expressed openness to improved ties with Israel.

President Erdoğan visited Qatar to attend the bilateral high-level strategic meeting, the seventh meeting of Turkey-Qatar Supreme Strategic Committee, which was co-moderated with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, on 6-7 December. The meeting took place whilst Turkey has been facing an economic crisis, a high level of inflation and a weakening of its currency resulting due to heavily criticised efforts to cut interest rates. [Reuters]

As a result of the meeting, Turkey and Qatar signed 15 agreements covering various issues such as disaster management, culture, sports, health, and media. [Bloomberg HT] Additionally, Qatar acceded to expanding a swap agreement with Turkey with the equivalent of US 15 billion in order to boost the country's foreign reserves and also stabilise its currency. [Al Jazeera]

Erdoğan also visited Turkish soldiers at the military base which is Turkey's only military base in the region. Turkey's military cooperation with Qatar is likely to continue advancing as Qatari soldiers are presumed to be deployed impermanently to Turkey for training purposes. [Al Jazeera]

Erdoğan talked about the significance of bilateral relations and said that “we do not separate the security and stability of Qatar from that of our own country” in a speech. [Al Jazeera] [Hürriyet]

Ankara and Doha formed close relations in 2017 when Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE cut diplomatic, trade and travel ties with Qatar while imposing a blockade on the country over various disagreements related to regional disputes, support for armed groups and also Turkey’s military base in the country. [Al Jazeera]

Turkey backed Qatar as the two countries reached new deals for the provision of essential goods from Turkey and also additional deployment of Turkish troops to the base. [Al Jazeera] The blockade ended in January 2021 while paving the way for the normalisation of diplomatic relations among the Gulf countries.

Turkey also continued to pursue attempts for restoring its relations with Gulf countries. In November, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, colloquially known as MBZ, Deputy Commander of the UAE´s armed forces and Abu Dhabi ´s de-facto leader, paid an official visit to Turkey for the first time since 2012 for restoring their relations and developing economic cooperation. [Figaro]

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu delivered a visit to the UAE in order to evaluate bilateral relations and meet Turkish businesspeople in Dubai on 13-15 December. Although the normalisation attempts with the UAE was disapproved by the opposition parties as they stated that the government’s motives were solely related to the economic crisis, Erdoğan said, “As Turkey, we are in favour of continuing our cooperation, solidarity and further relations with all Gulf countries by getting stronger,” at a press conference before his departure to Doha. [Hürriyet] [Reuters]

Erdoğan also stated his openness to a rapprochement with Israel to a group of reporters in Qatar on 7 December and commented on Israel-Palestinian issue, saying that the country initially needs to present “more sensitive” policies regarding Palestinians for the initiation of the process. [Times of Israel]

Developing better relations with Gulf countries and the president’s remarks on rapprochement display Ankara’s recent attempts to break off from its isolation both at the regional and international levels. [Times of Israel]

Early this year, Erdoğan announced his first visit to Saudi Arabia for February, the first after bilateral relations soured in the wake of the Kashoggi murder in Istanbul. [Bloomberg]

(go/qc)

Turkey lashes out at Cyprus over exploration licences

Turkey has accused Cyprus of violating its continental shelf by awarding energy exploration licences to Exxon Mobil and Qatar Energy (formerly Qatar Petroleum) in disputed Mediterranean waters that Turkey partly claims. Cyprus denies the allegations, saying that the licences were within its exclusive economic zone.

The Turkish foreign ministry released a statement saying: "Turkey will never allow any foreign nation, company or ship to carry out unauthorized hydrocarbon research in its maritime jurisdiction, and it will continue to defend the rights of our country and those of the Turkish Cypriots." [Reuters]

The licences for ExxonMobil and Qatar Energy were approved by the Cypriot Cabinet and signed on 10 December, giving the companies the right to explore for gas in Block 5 off the southern coast of Cyprus. [Argus Media] Drilling off Cyprus has caused tensions with Turkey since 2011, when Texas-based Noble Energy discovered the first natural gas off the southern coast of the island. [Independent]

The president of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, said: "I am not saying that drilling will take place next year, but there will certainly be exploratory work in Block 5, which has been licensed to ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum." [Cyprus Mail]

Tensions between Turkey and Cyprus have continued for decades over energy resources, minerals, air space, and the status of the island.

After a short-lived, Greek-inspired coup, Cyprus was split by a 1974 Turkish invasion into the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus. Turkey does not recognize the Greek-Cypriot government in Nicosia. [Reuters]

(kc/pk)

Greek PM meets Russian president to discuss next steps of 'good bilateral relations'

Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the prime minister of Greece, met Russian President Vladimir Putin on 8 December at the latter's summer residence in Sochi, a Russian city on the Black Sea. The meeting took place as tensions between Greece and Turkey have risen again in recent weeks while Russia has been at odds with the United States over the security situation in Eastern Europe.

Greece and Russia consider each other as strategic and historical partners in issues related to energy, trade and security in the East Mediterranean, although ties had to be mended after a diplomatic dispute three years ago. [Kathimerini]

The meeting was the first one held between the two leaders since Mitsotakis assumed office in 2019. Both reported that the talks had been constructive and looked to strengthening the relationship between the two countries.

Mitsotakis said the meeting was "another bridge to build better relations between our two nations" and an opportunity to improve the relationship between their respective governments built on "mutual respect and mutual usefulness."

A major area of focus for the meeting was energy. Putin stated that Russia provides over 40 percent of Greece's consumption of natural gas and that Russia would be happy to "scale up" this partnership.

Energy is a major priority for Greece. In the last 12 months natural gas prices in the country have risen rapidly. Mitsotakis described Russia as a reliable supplier of energy for Greece and added that "it is important that any [price] adjustments do not deviate significantly." [Greek Reporter][EIR Monthly December 2021]

While the Greek government has pledged to phase out coal by 2028 and double its solar and wind capacity by 2030, the use of natural gas is still very much a part of the nation's future energy plans as they transition towards renewables. Russia has also been criticised in recent months over supposedly withholding natural gas exports to Europe as a way to secure political leverage. [Reuters]

Foreign policy and regional security were other major areas of discussion for the leaders. Mitsotakis thanked Russia for its consistent stance on Greece's national

priorities in reference to tensions with Turkey and the issue of Cyprus.

Greek-Turkish tensions have been longstanding. In general, the tensions revolve around the level of sovereignty and economic rights which each nation should possess in and over the Aegean Sea. Turkey believes that Greece has a disproportionate control of such waters.

With regard to Cyprus, Greece, alongside the United Nations, remains committed to the idea of a federation under the Republic of Cyprus whereas Turkey and Turkish Cypriots have called for a two-state solution as the only permanent answer to maintaining peace on the island. Russia continues to support the United Nations' position.

Although Mitsotakis and Putin were eager to stress historical ties between their nations, only in 2018 Greece and Russia had a diplomatic feud resulting in the Greek government expelling two Russian diplomats over claims they undermined national security.

Greece also protested against Russia's sale of S-400 missile systems to Turkey in 2017, while Russia has recently sought to downplay any threat to Greece after plans about the sale of another batch of S-400 missile systems were announced in December. [BBC News] [Reuters] [TASS]

Ties between Russia and Greece now appear to have improved compared to the situation three years ago.

(nw/qc/pk)

Georgia: US ambassador chastises ruling party over constitutional reform reversal

Concern over Georgia's democratic erosion has grown in recent weeks after United States Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, criticised the Georgian Dream's (GD) possible backtracking on the EU-brokered constitutional amendments to lower the electoral threshold for parties from five to two percent and to make the next parliamentary elections proportional. [Civil]

The amendments were agreed through the mediation of European Council President Charles Michel; they had already been adopted by the parliament in the first reading. However, the governing Georgian Dream party withdrew from the agreement and deputy Shalva

Papuashvili spoke about raising the threshold to three percent. [JAM News]

US representative Degnan said that the country is at risk of backtracking on positive developments that would bring more plurality and diversity in the chamber of representatives.

“This is not in line with the recommendations of international experts and is not approved by the political spectrum. It will be a pity if what the representatives of political parties, including the ruling party, have agreed on, is not implemented.” [JAM News]

International observers have previously raised questions about the state of democracy in the South Caucasus country. [FPRI] [Carnegie Europe]

In response, GD chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze said that “tyranny is not taking hold” as only two EU member states have a two percent or lower threshold. He added: “I am telling you this as an expert, and Ms Kelly [Degnan] is of course not an expert.” [Civil] [Agenda]

The ruling party said that a proportional parliamentary elections system will be come into force from 2024 and the electoral threshold can be debated with every political party represented in the chamber of representatives.

Meanwhile, the country’s main opposition party, the United National Movement, refuses to participate in the parliament’s plenary sessions despite attempts by Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili to find a 'national agreement between the government and the opposition. [Civil] [Agenda]

The United National Movement vows continued support for its former leader and ex-president, Mikheil Saakashvili, who went on a hunger strike after he was detained following a controversial conviction for abuse of office. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

(rr/qc)

Azerbaijan frees ten Armenian soldiers captured during last month’s border clashes

Azerbaijan released ten Armenian soldiers who were captured during November clashes between the two

countries over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave in the South Caucasus.

After the release was announced, Armenia handed over information about minefields located in the disputed region. The release in exchange for information was mediated by Russia, which also intervened in last year's war over the enclave. [RFE/RL]

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian met for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in late November.

During the November clashes, Azerbaijan stated that seven of its soldiers were killed. Armenia said that six of its soldiers were killed while more than 30 servicemen were captured. [RFE/RL]

Moscow hosted a six-way South Caucasus peace platform, which included Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Iran and Turkey. Ankara invited Yerevan to join the peace platform with the intention to improve relations. [Reuters]

(rr/qc)

European nations aim to deepen ties with Bangladesh, foster sustainable growth

European countries have been engaged in a flurry of activity to deepen economic relations with Bangladesh and support its sustainable growth.

Switzerland will invest some USD 129 million to implement its Cooperation Program for Bangladesh 2022-2025, which aims to support Bangladesh's sustainable graduation from a Least Developed Country, to promote a prosperous, just, and resilient society, and to contribute to peaceful coexistence.

The program is aligned with the United Nation's Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, which was launched in 2015 and aims to eradicate global poverty and ensure sustainable and inclusive growth. The program also supports Bangladesh's Eighth Five-Year Plan (2020-2025), whose goal is to begin implementing the country's longer-term Vision 2040 plan to become an upper middle-income country and eradicate poverty by 2031, and attain sustainable development goals as it graduates from a Least Developed Country (LDC) to a developing one.

Bilateral connections between Bangladesh and Switzerland have grown broader and deeper over the

last five decades, encompassing economic and international collaboration, humanitarian help, and cultural and political exchange. [Dhaka Tribune]

Meanwhile, Denmark and Bangladesh have signed a memorandum of understanding on enhancing cooperation in sectors like clean water and energy, food and agriculture, urban development and transport. Speaking in Dhaka, the Danish ambassador said the memorandum was an opportunity to meet Bangladeshi needs by using Danish maritime and logistics expertise to develop sustainable port infrastructure and help integrate Bangladesh into global supply chains. [Financial Express] [United News Bangladesh]

The Spanish government has expressed interest in investing in Bangladesh Railway, the state-owned rail transport agency of Bangladesh, and proposed that a memorandum of understanding be signed on this matter. Raquel Sanchez Jimenez, Spain's Transport Minister, made the proposal during a meeting with a Bangladeshi delegation, led by Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan, in Madrid on November 30. [Daily Star]

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has urged the new German ambassador to Bangladesh, Achim Tröster, to facilitate investment in electric vehicles and locomotives in Bangladesh. Further, acknowledging Berlin as one of Dhaka's largest trading partners, Momen invited the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry to establish an office in Bangladesh. The two countries also discussed opportunities for enhanced cooperation in IT enabled services. [Business Standard]

Momen also recently completed a three-day visit to Turkey, the latest in series of signs that the two countries are keen to deepen bilateral relations, particular in the fields of economic and defence cooperation.

Momen's trip to Turkey came after Ankara's ambassador to Dhaka recently expressed his country's interest in a long-term trade and defence partnership, saying that Turkey wants to be a "solution partner" to Bangladesh in military cooperation [see AiR No. 48, November/2021, 5]. These remarks came after an eight-day visit to Turkey by Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff (CAS), General SM Shafiuddin Ahmed, which saw top military officials from both sides discussing possible areas of defence cooperation [see AiR No. 35, August/2021, 5].

Meanwhile, Sweden has donated USD 4 million to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to improve

water safety, sanitation, and hygiene for local communities and to empower adolescents from marginalized communities in Bangladesh. Stockholm also donated USD 8.5 million to the World Health Organization's office in Bangladesh to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals through a project on strengthening the country's health system. [Business Standard] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh and Russia have discussed potential cooperation in trade and economic sectors including atomic energy, aviation, fishing and livestock, geological research, cyber security, space, and satellite technology, during the third session of their Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation. The session, which was held virtually on December 15, was followed by two days of expert meetings. The fourth session of the meeting will be held in December 2022 in Russia. [Business Standard]

(bur/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Government postpones decision about phase out nuclear power by 2025

The Belgian federal government has picked the date of 18 March to make a final decision about the prolongation of the country's two youngest nuclear power reactors before 2025, following years of discussion and indecision about the phase out of

Belgium's nuclear power supply among fears of high energy prices.

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo (Flemish Liberals) and Minister of Energy Tinne Van der Straeten (Flemish Greens) said that the nuclear phase out remains "plan A" but a prolongation of the two youngest reactors cannot be excluded as a "plan B" unless a sufficient number of gas power plants required to replace the nuclear reactors receive a building permit. [VRT]

While the decision to phase out nuclear energy by the year 2025 was taken already in 2003, back then because of concerns about security and proliferation, successive governments postponed planning and implementation of the replacement of the youngest nuclear power plants by other energy sources, such as gas or renewables.

The current coalition government agreed last year to move ahead with the nuclear phase out, while nuclear power plant operator Engie confirmed in recent months that a life extension of the country's youngest power points is no longer an option due to insufficient time before 2025. [RTBF]

Federal energy minister Van der Straeten presented a report in early December that stated how the planned closure of the last operating nuclear power plants will be compensated by a combination of two new replacement gas power plants, renewable energy sources and energy imports, leaving a sufficient amount of back-up production capacity.

Even though the minister's phase out plans were approved by the European Commission, Van der Straeten struggled to end division within the governing coalition, because of liberal and Christian-democratic doubts over the country's power capacity, carbon emissions and energy prices after 2025. [Monde] [Morgen]

The postponement of the phase out decision is the result of difficulties in obtaining approval for the replacement gas power points through licenses that are given by regional energy ministries. Flanders' Minister of Energy Zuhal Demir (New Flemish Alliance) refused to give a building permit for one gas power plant to be constructed in Vilvoorde, citing environmental concerns although her party, currently in opposition at the federal level, has been vocal against the nuclear phase out.

Engie said on 12 December an updated request would be made for a permit that addresses the nitrogen emissions from the planned Vilvoorde gas plant, while

the federal government has given the company until mid-March to obtain the permit. [VRT] Uncertainty about building permissions for gas power plants in Vilvoorde and elsewhere means that the federal government has to keep nuclear energy on the table as an option for the time being.

In December, Belgium was also “the first in Europe” to recognise the crime of “ecocide” in international criminal law, after the majority parties supported by the radical left and centrist parties approved a legislative proposal put forward by the Flemish and French-speaking Greens. [RTBF]

(qc)

France: Macron plans to use French EU presidency to secure re-election next year

While candidates on the left and right are competing to secure enough voters to proceed to the second round in next year’s presidential election, the expected candidacy of French President Emmanuel Macron is likely to be centred on the French presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2022.

The last day of November saw a surprise announcement, when Éric Zemmour officially confirmed he would run as a candidate in next year’s election, after weeks of speculation. A statement published by the far-right Zemmour, a staunchly anti-Islam and anti-immigration candidate, said that he was running “so that our daughters don’t have to wear headscarves and our sons don’t have to be submissive.” [France24]

Valerie Pécresse was also confirmed as be the candidate for the centre-right party Les Républicains. Her victory in the primaries constitutes the first time the centre-right opposition party has chosen a female candidate. A two-round primary vote saw former EU commissioner Michel Barnier lose in the first round, while Pécresse secured her party nomination by facing off Éric Ciotti in the second round. Pécresse is currently the President of the Regional Council of Île-de-France, the region comprising the capital city.

Whilst surveys currently point to a lead for Emmanuel Macron in next year’s election scheduled for April, the current president has yet to announce his candidacy. The French president has been busy on the world stage in recent weeks, especially paving the ground for the French presidency of the Council of the European Union in first half of next year.

Macron placed Europe at the heart of his future election campaign when he unveiled the "pro-European" priorities for French presidency of the Council, including plans to reform the visa-free Schengen travel area, present a new migration pact, a strengthening of European defence and greater emphasis on job creation and the fight against unemployment as part of a "new European model". [Monde] [Politico Europe] [Monde] [Euractiv]

A Council summit will be organised in March, one month before the French presidential election will take place. Migration is likely to be a key theme in the weeks before the election, as Macron, Pécresse, Zemmour and Marine Le Pen have each proposed different solutions to address the issue. [New York Times] [Politico Europe]

Meanwhile, France's centre-left parties faced trouble over the last month, with Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo calling for the left to support a single candidate in next year's election. Hidalgo's calls drew criticism from other left-wing candidates. Green Party candidate Yannick Jadot said in response that Hidalgo's candidacy is a "dead-end" while Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Fabien Roussel also dismissed her calls for a single candidate to unite the left. [France24]

(ig/qc)

France: New Caledonia rejects independence in third referendum

Citizens of New Caledonia, a pacific territory which lies about 1,500 kilometres east of Brisbane in Australia, have voted against a breakaway from France in a referendum held on 12 December. The referendum was the final in a series of three, the first being held in 2018, the second held last year in October.

Around 86 per cent of New Caledonians registered to vote turned out to the 2020 election, but the December election this year saw just over 41 per cent of those voters showing up to cast their ballot. The vote was won with 96.49 per cent of voters wishing to remain a territory of France, and just 3.51 per cent wishing to gain New Caledonian sovereignty [Guardian] [Monde]

The country was granted the right to the three referendums under a deal made in 1988, which was aimed at easing tensions between the territory and its former colonial masters of France. The official head of

state for the territory is the French President, but it also has its own president of the government of New Caledonia, Louis Mapou.

The French gained control of New Caledonia in the mid to late 1800s, and in 1953 all New Caledonians were granted French citizenship.

Pro-independence groups, namely the Kanak and Socialist Liberation Front (FLNKS), called for a boycott of the referendum, saying that a 'fair campaign' is not possible with COVID-19 still spreading. The groups wished for the vote to be postponed until next year, but the French government did not believe that COVID-19 cases were high enough in the territory to postpone the vote.

The groups have threatened to not recognise the outcome of the referendum and say they may seek the help of the United Nations to cancel the referendum and its outcome. The FLNKS say they consider the referendum a "declaration of war". Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron was happy with the outcome of the vote and said that a new "period of transition" would begin for New Caledonia. [France24]

(ig/qc)

Germany: Anti-vaxxer assassination plot against Saxony's Minister President

Following reports of an assassination plot against the federal state of Saxony's Minister President, Michael Kretschmer, state police arrested five opponents of compulsory COVID-19 vaccination who were allegedly behind the plot. [Spiegel]

The arrests took place against the backdrop of expert warnings against the radicalisation of anti-vaccination activists. [ZDF]

The persons behind the assassination plot were part of the Telegram "Dresden Offline Network" group, reuniting COVID-19 conspiracy theorists and anti-vaccination activists. Several members used the group to call for violence against Kretschmer and members of his government. [Deutsche Welle]

Kretschmer was targeted because of his COVID-19 policies and the prospect of mandatory vaccination in Germany. [Deutsche Welle]

During a raid in several locations in Saxony's capital Dresden, police found several weapons, among them

crossbows. There is an ongoing investigation against the six suspects for a serious act of state-threatening violence. [Zeit]

In response to the plot, both Kretschmer and new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said they will do more to counter extremist groups. [Deutsche Welle]

Meanwhile, several of Germany's federal states' interior ministers have warned against the radicalisation of deniers of the COVID-19 virus, anti-vaxxers and conspiracy thinkers. [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

The reports of the assassination plot followed only days after right-wing extremists carrying torches protested in front of the private residence of Saxony's health minister Petra Köpping. [Spiegel]

The protests are part of a series of threats against Saxony's high-ranking politicians in the context of anti-COVID-19 restrictions protests. [MDR]

Earlier in the year, Germany's Constitutional Court had upheld the federal government's so-called emergency brake measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. Despite their severity, the court said the measures were proportionate to the goal of "the protection of life and health as well as the maintenance of a functioning health system." [Focus]

There have been multiple large protests, in Saxony and elsewhere, against these measures. [Tagesschau]

(mm/qc)

Ireland: Opinion poll shows reluctant support for united Ireland

A new opinion poll shows a large majority of Irish people support uniting the country with Northern Ireland, but are opposed to making concessions to achieve it. The poll results suggest voters will only support unification if it does not carry an economic cost or dilute national identity. [Euractiv]

The poll was conducted by the polling agency Ipsos MRBI with the newspaper *The Irish Times* this month and asked voters their opinion on a United Ireland. This is the proposal that the 6 counties of Northern Ireland which remain under British rule should merge with the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. This has been the goal of nationalists ever since the formation of Northern Ireland 100 years ago and is supported (at least in theory) by all Irish political parties.

The headline figure shows overwhelming support for uniting the island, with 62 percent saying they would vote for a United Ireland if there was a referendum and only 16 percent saying they would vote no.

However, the poll revealed support drastically dropped when voters were asked if they would be willing to pay for it. When asked if they would accept higher taxes in a United Ireland, 79 percent said they would not. When asked if they would accept less spending on public services another 79 percent said they would not. [Irish Times]

A major barrier to a united Ireland is the opposition of the predominantly Protestant Unionist population of Northern Ireland who consider themselves British, not Irish. Several compromises have been proposed to accommodate them in a United Ireland such as creating a new flag or national anthem.

However, the opinion poll reveals overwhelming opposition to such proposals, with 72 percent being opposed to changing the anthem and 77 percent opposed to changing the flag. There is an even divide among voters to the idea of Unionists being in government, 44 percent support the idea, but 42 percent oppose it. [Independent]

Although Ireland's largest political party, Sinn Féin is strongly campaigning for a United Ireland, the poll suggests voters do not see it as a major priority. Only 15 percent of voters said they wanted a referendum on unity now whereas the most common response chosen by 42 percent of voters is in the next ten years. According to the poll, 13 percent never want a referendum and 16 percent want to vote to happen more than ten years in the future.

Only 20 percent stated the issue is very important to them, compared to 24 percent who described it as not at all important. The most popular response was "not very important but I would like to see it someday" which was the response of 52 percent of voters. [Irish Times]

(rn/qc)

Ireland: Politicians avoid politicisation of centenary commemorating Irish independence

Although Ireland does not have an official Independence Day, the closest equivalent would be 6

December. On this day in 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, bringing an end to the Irish War of Independence. The treaty, signed 100 years ago this month, gave de facto independence to Ireland but also provoked a bloody civil war. [RTE]

From 1919 to 1921, the Irish rebels fought against the British military in a war that cost over 2,000 lives. The war was ended by an agreement that granted the rebels most, but not all, of their demands, but also planted the seeds of future conflict.

Under the agreement, 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland would form a new Irish Free State, while the other six counties of Northern Ireland would remain in the United Kingdom. These six counties had a significant minority population who preferred Irish to British rule, an issue that would spark the conflict known as the Troubles that raged from 1968 to 1998.

The Treaty gave Ireland de facto independence but retained several symbols of British rule. All members of parliament were required to declare an Oath of Allegiance to the British monarch and all laws required the approval of a British Governor-General. These symbols caused a split on the Irish side between those who believed it was the best deal available and those who believed it was a sell-out.

The split turned violent in the Irish Civil War of 1922 and 1923 during which roughly 2,000 people were killed. The two opposing sides formed the two main political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which dominated Irish politics for the rest of the twentieth century.

There was no official state commemoration of Irish independence, instead representatives of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael who are in coalition together for the first time in their history, attended an exhibition at Dublin Castle. There was a conscious effort to avoid politicising the event. [Irish Examiner]

The Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Michael Martin defended the decision not to have an official event: "This (exhibition) is much more substantive and the whole series like this brings to the public, for the first time, the actual minutes and records of the time. That's a far greater substance than one fly-over on a given day and this will be a year-long." [RTE]

(rn/qc)

Ireland: Government proposes amnesty to undocumented immigrants

The Irish government has proposed a general amnesty to roughly 17,000 undocumented migrants who have been living in the country for more than four years. This is the first time Ireland has ever offered an amnesty to migrants.

Justice Minister Helen McEntee announced that people living in Ireland illegally will be granted permission to officially reside in the country. She said it is important to allow people to "come out of the shadows" and provide them with reassurance that "we want them to stay and continue to be part of our communities." [Irish Independent]

Migrants are eligible for the scheme if they have been living in Ireland for four years, or three years if they have children. The scheme will allow them to join the labour market and apply for citizenship when they are eligible.

Due to the undocumented nature of the migrants, there is no reliable data on precisely how many are in the country or are eligible for the amnesty. It is estimated that there are 17,000 undocumented migrants, of which 3,000 are children.

It is believed that the majority of undocumented migrants in Ireland are from the Philippines, Mongolia, China, Bangladesh, Brazil and Malawi. [Irish Examiner]

This year, Justice for the Undocumented Group (JFU) and Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) conducted research into the lives of over 1,000 undocumented migrants in Ireland. They found that 75 percent of the migrants had been living in Ireland for five years or more and 93 percent were in employment. The main employment fields were caring for the elderly, cleaning, childcare and construction.

In addition, researchers found 26 percent did not receive the minimum wage and 46 percent were working more than 40 hours per week. [RTE] [Irish Times]

(rn/qc)

Netherlands: Parties reach agreement while Rutte returns as prime minister

After the longest cabinet formation process in the country's history four parties reached a coalition agreement. Prime Minister Mark Rutte's liberal VVD, the centrist D66, the Christian Democratic CDA and the Christian Union join each other in the new cabinet, resulting in Mark Rutte's fourth term as head of a governing coalition in the Netherlands. [Politico Europe]

The party composition of the government remains the same in comparison to the previous coalition, however, the D66 has increased its share of seats while the CDA lost a number of seats in the chamber of representatives.

The coalition agreement puts an emphasis on sustainability and renewable energy sources as it dedicates a fund of EUR 35 billion to the country's energy transition and another fund of EUR 25 billion to pay for innovation in agriculture and for the restoration of nature. Furthermore, the new cabinet plans to build two additional nuclear power plants [Nu]

Despite the party composition remaining the same, the parties have said that it is not a continuation of the former coalition. The new coalition wants to regain trust in politics which it has lost after the former coalition collapsed because of a childcare benefits scandal,

Thousands of parents were accused by the authorities of fraudulent childcare benefits claims, were required to pay back large sums of money, leading severe financial hardship for some families. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

A parliamentary inquiry concluded that the actions of the authorities violated the fundamental principles of the rule of law. Furthermore, Mart Rutte narrowly avoided a parliamentary vote of no-confidence after it was uncovered that, during formation talks, Rutte discussed sidelining Pieter Omzigt, a CDA politician who played a major role in uncovering the scandal.

To regain trust, the cabinet said it will cooperate with all "constructive parties". Secondly, cabinet has stated it wants to increase the separation between the legislative and executive branches of power. Finally, the new cabinet plans to combat the threatening use of language. [NRC]

Besides growing lack of confidence in the political system, the new cabinet also has to deal with an increasingly polarised debate about its recent COVID-19-related restrictions.

Forum for Democracy (FvD) party leader Thierry Baudet repeatedly made comparisons between the Holocaust and COVID-19 measures.

On 15 December, the court ordered Baudet to remove several tweets that included such comparisons and prohibited the politician from using Holocaust imagery for comparisons with pandemic health measures in the future. [NOS]

(rs/qc)

Netherlands: Plans to move increasing amount of critical energy infrastructure to North Sea

Through a number of concrete and more hypothetical projects, the Netherlands is exploring how to put the North Sea to best use in the combat against climate change and preparing the country for the future.

A consortium led by the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), has developed floating solar panels that could possibly play an important role in the country's future energy supply [NOS].

Researchers have said that floating solar panels could play a major role in overall development of North Sea, where the Netherlands is planning to build a growing number of critical infrastructure projects. Among others, there are concrete plans to vastly increase the size of wind farms on the North Sea.

However, Dutch authorities are also exploring the hypothetical construction of underwater datacentres as well as the development of maritime agriculture.

This gives the North Sea increasing strategic value to the Netherlands. Yet, such plans also come with their share of challenges.

According to analysts, the infrastructure might create a bottleneck that can be exploited through (cyber) attacks. Furthermore, a number of governance issues related to the responsibilities and the mandates of the involved institutions have to be resolved. [HCSS]

(rs/qc)

United Kingdom: PM's position looking more fragile; Brexit chief quits

David Frost, the UK government's top diplomat in post-Brexit negotiations with the EU, resigned on 18 December – adding to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's list of political headaches including a recent rebellion in his ruling Conservative party, which has slipped in the polls amid scandals and questions about the stability of his leadership.

In his resignation letter, Frost disagreements over the government's "current direction of travel" and criticised "coercive measures" to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Frost had intended to resign in January, but sources speaking to *Politico Europe* say the government's recent introduction of vaccine passports inspired him to leave earlier. [Politico Europe] [BBC News]

Boris Johnson recently faced a rebellion by MPs within his own party over the same issue, when 99 of them chose to vote against his reintroduction of the measures. [Deutsche Welle] [BBC News]

As *Europe in Review* previously reported, the opposition Labour Party found itself ahead in the polls for the first time since January after a corruption scandal erupted in October involving Owen Patterson, an MP who has since resigned. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Frost has been replaced in his role as the UK's chief negotiator on Brexit by Liz Truss, the current Foreign Secretary.

Truss is a long-time supporter of Brexit and observers claim she has been appointed to the role by Johnson to "provide reassurance for Tory MPs worried about the UK taking a softer line with the EU." [BBC News] [Sky News]

Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party now looks more fragile. Sources within the party have identified Truss, along with Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, as frontrunners to potentially replace Johnson as leader. Both have been actively scouting out possible allies among the party's MPs. [Politico Europe] [Guardian]

Frost's resignation comes after a scandal-ridden few months for the ruling Conservative Party.

After Downing Street Press Secretary Allegra Stratton was recorded joking about hosting a party during the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown in a leaked video from

December 2020, she resigned from her post on 8 December. [Reuters]

Boris Johnson himself has come under fire for hosting a gathering with 19 attendants at 10 Downing Street in May 2020. Johnson and his staff have described the gathering as a "work meeting", though this explanation has gone down poorly with most observers. [Guardian] [Independent]

Recent by-elections have seen the Conservatives lose electoral support, which contrasts with their 2019 results and is consistent with their momentary decline in the polls.

In one by-election called after Owen Patterson's resignation, the Liberal Democrats managed to win control of the parliamentary seat of North Shropshire, which the Conservative party have dominated for almost 200 years. Observers have described this result, and the Conservative's poor showing in others, as fallout from the recent scandals. [Guardian] [Reuters]

(wb/qc/pk)

United Kingdom: New armed forces leader aims at reform to country's 'ponderous' defence structure

Admiral Sir Tony Radakin took up his role as Britain's Chief of the Defence Staff on 1 December – and intends to pursue a reformist agenda to confront a "dangerous" new era.

In a speech to the Royal United Services think tank, Radakin described Britain's security situation as "far more complex and dangerous than at any time over the past 30 years". He named Russia, China, Iran and North Korea as specific threats. [Sky News]

Radakin, who comes from a naval background, described Britain's existing defence structure as "too large, too hierarchical, and too ponderous" for what he describes as an ongoing return to "a more classical model of persistent inter-state competition." [Defense News]

The new chief sees tensions between Ukraine and Russia as an example of that "classical" inter-state competition.

In early December, he warned that a full-scale Russian invasion would result in violence "on a scale not seen

in Europe since World War II." [Business Insider]

Increasing the number of women in Britain's armed forces is among the changes he has called for. Radakin said the "woefulness of too few women" was "a challenge to the whole of defence." Currently, women make up 11 percent of the country's regular armed forces. The government intends to increase this to 30 percent by 2030. [BBC News] [Sky News]

Radakin will also have to face down an immediate procurement issue affecting the defence ministry.

The British Army's GBP 3.5 billion Ajax fighting vehicle project has been beset with seemingly endless delays, most recently in September. The project has been described as a "cornerstone" of the Army's ongoing restructuring effort – which Radakin has now inherited. [BBC News] [Sky News]

Radakin has spoken positively of the AUKUS security pact, signed in September 2021 between the United States, Australia, and Britain. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

Speaking to the US Naval Institute in October, he described the pact as "big and geostrategic" and described military interoperability between the three nations as the future of defence in the Indo-Pacific region. [USNI News] [BBC News]

(wb/qc)

United Kingdom: Asylum system overhaul sees rules tighten for 'illegal' asylum seekers

The British government's intention to tighten up its asylum system, announced in March, turned concrete when Home Secretary Priti Patel announced a new bill on Tuesday.

The draft asylum law, officially known as the "Nationality and Borders Bill", contains plans to introduce two different asylum procedures depending on whether the applicants entered the UK legally or illegally under British law.

It would be the first time that the UK distinguishes between legal and illegal entry into the country with different asylum procedures. The bill states that those who have entered illegally and have been granted asylum will have fewer rights than those who entered

legally. [BBC News]

According to Patel, the bill aims to "break the business model" of people-smugglers. For example, the draft law provides for a prison sentence of up to "lifetime" for smuggling activities. The bill also includes changes related to accommodation, asylum applications and appeals. The government also intends to speed up the deportation process.

Anyone entering from EU member states and third countries deemed "safe" and applying for asylum in the UK would be automatically rejected under the draft. However, the UK has no legal agreement with EU nations to send rejected claimants back. Finally, asylum seekers claiming to be minors will be subject to new age determination procedures.

Several politicians and organisations have already criticised the new bill. Former Conservative cabinet minister David Davis compared the proposed system to the creation of a ""British Guantanamo Bay" while the British Medical Association (BMA) questioned the health implications of a number of planned measures related to housing. [Guardian]

Refugee Council said the new law would "reduce the leave and family reunion rights of most new refugees, and criminalise many people making asylum claims."

Both houses of the British Parliament have yet to debate the draft bill in the coming months.

Meanwhile, an EU citizens' watchdog launched a legal complaint against the Home Office over issues related to the settlement scheme that was put in place for EU citizens residing in the UK. [Euractiv]

The UK has also come under pressure over possible changes to country's Human Rights Act, a move that was criticised by the opposition and human rights organisations as an attempt to "roll back" human rights legislation. [BBC News] [Guardian]

(yp/qc)

United Kingdom: Scotland decides on budget for next years

The new Scottish budget for 2022 and 2023 was published on 9 December, which foresees spending increases for health care and a greater emphasis on climate change and social inequality.

The budget determines how much money will be allocated to different services and people across Scotland from April onwards. According to the Scottish Government, the total amount available to invest includes money raised by taxes in Scotland and the block grant allocated to Scotland by the UK government under the Barnett Formula.

The budget increases spending on the Health and Social Care sector with a record GBP 18 billion. It also focuses on cutting carbon emissions and reducing poverty and low pay. The budget for efficiency, low carbon and renewable heat has already been cut from GBP 414 million to GBP 336 million in an addendum to the original budget plan.

Kate Forbes, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, says "the budget will accelerate Scotland's COVID-19 recovery and help transition the country towards becoming fairer, greener and more prosperous". [Guardian]

The overall government budget was reduced the result of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, with a slower projected economy than the rest of the country for the next year.

(yp/qc)

United Kingdom: Storms Arwen and Barra descend on UK, prompt military deployment

The UK was hit by two storms, Arwen and Barra, in quick succession at the end of November and in early December Both storms brought extreme weather with wind speeds up to 100 miles per hour, snow, ice, rain and floods.

Storm Arwen left over 950,000 households without electricity and around 10.000 had their water supply disrupted. Added to that there was extensive damage to the environment as well as lives lost. The military was deployed to help in remote communities struggling with power cuts. Around 180 personnel were sent out to do welfare checks. [National] [Guardian]

Storm Barra hit in the aftermath of Arwen and did similar damage, albeit to a lesser degree, sweeping over Ireland and then slowly dissipating. [BBC News]

Storm Arwen has been one of the worst in a generation and it took over a week to restore power to some households, a response time that has been called “unacceptable” by many frustrated residents. [Guardian]

The World Meteorological Association (WMO) has warned about extreme weather events becoming more normal, but it is too early to say if these two storms can be directly attributed to climate change. [WMO] [Guardian]

(yp/qc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Ex-immigration minister jailed for illegal orders on asylum seekers

A former Danish immigration minister has been sentenced to 60 days in jail after a rare trial by an impeachment court found her guilty of illegally separating asylum-seeker couples when one partner was a minor.

Inger Støjberg had a reputation as a hardliner during her time as immigration minister from 2015 to 2019 in a centre-right government supported by the right-wing Danish People's Party. [BBC News] [Deutsche Welle]

Judges ruled on 13 December that her order to separate young married couples had breached both Danish law and the European Convention on Human Rights. The decision was made by a Court of Impeachment, comprising Supreme Court judges and members appointed by parliament. It rules on cases in

which government ministers are accused of abuse of office. [Euronews/AP/AFP]

Denmark's Jyllands-Posten daily commented that Støjberg had tried to make it look like the trial was about the problem of child brides. The paper added: "Now we have it in black and white that it was not about child brides, but about how she broke the law as a minister." [Eurotopics]

(pk)

Denmark: Gov't plans to rent jail cells in Kosovo

In a move to ease overcrowding in its jails, Denmark plans to send some of its prisoners to Kosovo. Under a 10-year, EUR 210 million deal, Denmark wants to rent 300 jail cells in the Balkan country to house foreign inmates who are due to be deported after serving their terms.

Danish Justice Minister Nick Haekkerup said he was confident that the prisoners' rights would be respected, adding: "The same rules will apply as in Denmark." [Euronews/AFP] [Euractiv]

But Fatmira Haliti of the Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims, a non-profit organisation, said that transferring inmates from a jail in that country to make room for detainees from Denmark would cause overcrowding in other Kosovan prisons.

The multi-million deal with Denmark will inject funds into Kosovo's justice system and green energy initiatives. [ABC News/AP]

(pk)

Finland: Five held over suspected terror plot by far-right

Police in Finland say they have detained five men believed to have been planning a bomb attack in the country's first case of suspected terrorism by far-right extremists.

Officers seized guns, ammunition and fertiliser that can be used to make explosives. They declined to say whether the suspects were planning to target a specific community. [yle]

Police added that the five men, all aged under 30, were influenced by “accelerationism” – a white supremacist ideology designed to foment chaos and heighten tensions in order to precipitate the collapse of western societies.

Finnish intelligence services and Europol, the European Union’s law enforcement agency, were involved in the probe. [yle] [France24/AFP]

Far-right extremism in Finland has been on the rise in recent years, according to the country’s intelligence services. [Euractiv]

(pk)

Iceland: Coalition agrees to govern for another four years

Iceland's ruling coalition has agreed to govern for another four-year term after talks between three partner parties following a September 25 general election, with Katrin Jakobsdóttir staying on as prime minister. [Euronews]

The ruling coalition consists of the Left-Green movement, the centrist Progressive Party and the conservative Independence Party.

The latter received the largest share of votes in the election - 24.4 percent - and won 16 seats in the Icelandic parliament, while Jakobsdóttir's Left-Green Movement came in at 12.6 percent, with eight seats. [Deutsche Welle]

A survey conducted by pollster Prósent from December 1 to December 10 found that more than half of Icelanders approve of the new government. [Frettabladid]

The level of approval was highest among those who voted for the Independence Party in the September elections, with an overwhelming majority - 87 percent - saying they strongly approve. [Reykjavik Grapevine]

Of the people who voted for the ruling parties, the strongest opposition to the government was among the Left Greens, with 22 percent dissatisfied. [Frettabladid].

(mh/pk)

Norway: NATO chief Stoltenberg seeks top job at central bank

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has announced he has applied to be the next governor of Norway's central bank, Norges Bank. If successful, he will take up the position after his term as NATO chief ends in September 2022. [Independent]

Stoltenberg told Norwegian news agency NTB: "This is a job I am motivated for." [Norway Today]

The former Labour party leader was Norway's prime minister for 18 months between 2000 and 2001 and again between 2005 and 2013. [Reuters]

Critics argue Stoltenberg's appointment could put the monetary policy independence of Norway's central bank and Norway's oil fund at risk, as he has close ties with current Labour leader and Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre. [Financial Times]

Sveinung Rotevatn, deputy leader of the opposition Liberals party, told broadcaster NRK: "We do not have a tradition of politicians taking up this position."

He added: "It is important that everyone trusts that the central bank operates independently from day-to-day politics on everything from rate-setting to investments made by the wealth fund." [Reuters]

Stoltenberg's main rival is the current deputy governor of Norway's central bank, Ida Wolden Bache. [Politico Europe]

The successful candidate will oversee Norway's powerful sovereign wealth fund, the largest in the world, with assets of EUR 1.2 trillion. [Deutsche Welle]

(mh/pk)

Sweden: PM vows to lower deportation threshold amid gang violence

Recently appointed Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson has said her government will deport more non-Swedish criminals amid concern at widespread gang and gun violence in her country.

When asked in an interview with Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter on 9 December who specifically she was referring to, Andersson replied: "People who have

committed crimes in Sweden who do not have Swedish citizenship." [Dagens Nyheter]

Polling firm Novus lists law and order among the biggest concerns for Swedish voters amid an increase in violence.

Sweden is the only country in Europe to see fatal shootings rise over the past 20 years, with the death toll standing at over 40 in 2021, according to a study released by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. (Brå)

Under current legislation, foreigners sentenced in court to at least 12 months in jail face deportation from Sweden. Andersson has tasked Migration Minister Anders Ygeman with lowering this threshold to six months.

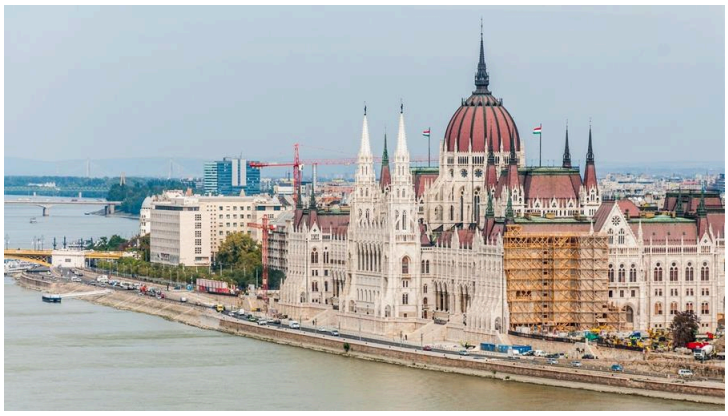
Andersson was appointed the country's first female prime minister in late November. [EiR Monthly December 2021] The stance on crime taken by Andersson and her governing Social Democratic Party acknowledges a link between violence and decades of liberal Swedish immigration policy. [New Statesman]

Andersson's announcement of a tough new line comes amid the rise of the far-right opposition Sweden Democrats party. The grouping was backed by around 20 percent of voters in December, according to pollster Val. Digital.

With citizens increasingly frustrated by the failure of politicians to bring violence under control, Andersson, who faces a general election next September, will need to convince Swedes that she has a plan that will work. [New Statesman]

(mh/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe



Austria: After political turmoil, another new chancellor appointed

Conservative Karl Nehammer, sworn in on 6 December as Austria's third Chancellor in as many months, faces the task of clearing an atmosphere of scandal and smoothing over political turmoil which shook the country's coalition government.

Observers have said that Nehammer may lead to less confrontation inside the EU, after Austria blocked important decisions under former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. [France24/AFP]

Nehammer, a former interior minister whose public image is that of a clean-cut ex-soldier, took over as the country's leader from Alexander Schallenberg, and was also appointed head of the ruling conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

Schallenberg had briefly stepped into the top job after Kurz, 35, once seen as posterboy of European conservatives [Eurotopics], quit in October amid accusations that he used taxpayers' money to pay for manipulated polls published in a newspaper in order to show him in a good light. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Police raided Kurz's offices amid a scandal that grounded his meteoric career. He denied wrongdoing but in early December announced he was quitting politics.

Nehammer said he would maintain the ÖVP party's hardline stance on migration and security. [France24/AFP]

He reshuffled the Cabinet and returned Schallenberg, a career diplomat who lacked an extensive powerbase in the ÖVP, to his previous job as foreign minister. Nehammer also appointed new heads for the interior, finance and education ministries. [Deutsche Welle/Reuters/AP] [Euractiv]

(pk)

Czech Republic: Tough tasks for new government

A new Czech government led by centre-right Prime Minister Petr Fiala and officially sworn in on 17 December by President Miloš Zeman faces challenges including rising Covid-19 infections, inflation and energy prices, and a growing budget deficit. [Euronews] [Guardian]

Zeman, whose ill-health delayed the government's inauguration, attempted to veto Fiala's choice of the new foreign minister, Jan Lipavský, due to the latter's supposed poor academic qualifications and allegedly critical stance towards Israel.

Fiala refused any changes to his cabinet and threatened Zeman with legal action, asserting that the president has no right to obstruct the formation of the new government, selected from members of a five-party ruling coalition. Analysts suggest the move by the president, who has attempted to promote support for the authoritarian administrations in Russia and China, was aimed at retaining influence over foreign policy. [Guardian] [Euractiv]

Fiala was appointed prime minister after October parliamentary elections ousted billionaire, populist and Eurosceptic premier Andrej Babiš. [Euronews] [Politico]

The new ruling coalition has differences internally on many issues, including same-sex marriage, climate change, and the adoption of the euro. However, despite clear support for the European Union and NATO, it holds positions similar to the previous government led by Babiš on the use of combustion-engine vehicles, nuclear energy and emissions reduction.

Fiala has described the European Commission's proposal to ban the production and sale of combustion-engine vehicles by 2035 as "unacceptable," and expressed strong support for the inclusion of nuclear energy in the EU's Green Taxonomy. [Euronews] [Expats.cz] [Euractiv]

"Petr Fiala is taking over in easily the most difficult circumstances facing any post-communist prime ministers," said Albin Sybera, a Czech political analyst. "He could easily and quickly find himself in a crisis situation whipped up by ANO [Action for Dissatisfied

Citizens – Babiš's party] and the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy, who remain formidable forces." [Guardian]

The new government's first priority has been to revise the plan of action against Covid-19 in response to the rise of the Omicron variant. Fiala's administration has pivoted towards increased daily PCR testing but, unlike neighbouring Austria, is hesitant to enact compulsory vaccinations without a broad EU mandate for such a move. [Czech Radio]

(sd/pk)

Hungary: Anti-LGBTQ+ rule violates rights standards, say rights experts

Rules in Hungary forbidding schools from teaching pupils about homosexuality and transgender issues breach international human rights standards, constitutional law experts from a key European human rights body have warned. [Reuters]

Experts from the Venice Commission, which advises human rights body Council of Europe, said on 13 December that the Hungarian law contributes to creating a "threatening environment" and leaves space "only for one-sided and biased teaching, opening doors to stigmatization and discrimination of LGBTQI people." [Politico Europe] [Venice Commission]

The law, passed in June, was put forward by the government of nationalist long-time Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, an admirer of "illiberal democracy" who has portrayed himself as a defender of Christian values against "LGBT ideology."

Critics accuse the Hungarian premier of inciting hate against LGBTQ+ people in order to draw attention away from political controversies and economic problems as he faces a challenge in Hungary's spring parliamentary elections from an alliance of recently united opposition parties. [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Orbán has argued that the law, which has been criticised by European leaders and EU institutions, aims to protect minors and parents' rights. The European Commission on 2 December gave Budapest two months to respond to the EU executive's concerns after triggering the second step in an infringement procedure against Hungary. [Politico Europe]

(pk)

Hungary: Deputy minister suspected of taking bribes

A deputy minister from Hungary's governing right-wing Fidesz party has quit as state secretary at the justice ministry after allegations that he took bribes. He denies the claims, which come as the opposition touts an anti-graft stance ahead of parliamentary elections.

Pál Völner, who is a deputy minister of justice, is under investigation amid suspicions he regularly received payments of between EUR 5,400 and 13,600, prosecutors said. [Euronews/AP/AFP] [Euractiv]

The probe comes as Fidesz Prime Minister Viktor Orbán faces a challenge in Hungary's parliamentary elections in the spring from opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay, who is campaigning on an anti-corruption ticket. [Reuters] Márki-Zay was picked by an alliance of six opposition parties in October to run in the elections, which are expected to be closely fought. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

The European Union has delayed the payment of over EUR 7 billion in post-pandemic recovery funds to Hungary, which is a member of the bloc, amid concerns that its spending plans lack sufficient anti-corruption safeguards. [Euronews]

Critics say that, under Orbán, Hungary has been plagued with graft, undergone democratic backsliding and suffered an erosion of judicial independence.

(pk)

Poland: President vetoes bill seen as attack on media freedom

The Polish president has vetoed a controversial bill which, according to critics, aimed to muzzle a US-owned broadcaster critical of the nationalist government in Warsaw and threatened to damage relations with Washington, the main guarantor of Poland's security.

The law, voted through by the lower house of Poland's parliament on 17 December, triggered street protests in around 100 towns and cities around the country, and heightened tensions over media freedom and

democratic norms that have seen Warsaw repeatedly clash with Brussels.

Government opponents said the legislation came just as Warsaw needed its powerful American ally by its side amid a migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border and a troop build-up by Russia next to the Ukrainian border.

The law, tightening rules on foreign ownership of media, would have forced US company Discovery to sell its controlling stake in Poland's largest private broadcaster, TVN. The station has long been a thorn in the side of the country's ruling right-wingers.

President Andrzej Duda, a conservative who has been accused of failing to stop the government from undermining democracy, said he shared the worries of some Poles about freedom of speech.

He added that if the legislation came into force, it could have breached a treaty with the US on economic and trade ties. [thenews.pl]

The Polish parliament could in theory overturn the president's veto, but the governing right wingers do not have the required majority in the legislature.

European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova had warned that the bloc's executive would "not hesitate to take action in case of non-compliance with EU law."

US State Department spokesman Ned Price, in an unusually strong statement directed at one of America's staunchest military allies, earlier in December said that Washington was "deeply troubled" by the law passed by the Polish parliament. Price added that the measure would undermine freedom of expression, weaken media freedom, and "erode foreign investors' confidence in their property rights and the sanctity of contracts in Poland." [Reuters]

Poland's ruling coalition, headed by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, has been accused by opponents of trying to suppress criticism of the government in independent media, as well as of turning the public television broadcaster into an out-and-out propaganda machine that relentlessly hammers the opposition.

Since Law and Justice came to power in 2015, Poland has plummeted from 18th to 64th place in the World Press Freedom Index issued by Reporters Without Borders, an international media watchdog. [Deutsche Welle]

Government supporters say the new legislation – which would have prevented companies from outside the European Economic Area owning majority stakes in Polish outlets – would mirror rules in some other European Union countries. They also argued the rules were needed to prevent owners from countries with a democratic deficit such as Russia and China from taking over Polish media. [Notes From Poland]

(pk)

Poland: Watchdog says gov't critics had phones hacked with spyware

Three prominent critics of Poland's ruling nationalists had their phones hacked with Israeli spyware tool Pegasus, according to an internet watchdog whose findings have increased concerns about what opponents say are undemocratic practices by the government in Warsaw.

A senior Polish state security official insisted that the government does not carry out illegal wiretapping, but the opposition said that the reported surveillance was further confirmation that the rule of law has been eroded in Poland.

The Toronto-based Citizen Lab watchdog found that Polish Senator Krzysztof Brejza's mobile phone was broken into 33 times in 2019, when he was heading the opposition's campaign in parliamentary elections, the Associated Press reported. Brejza now questions whether the election, won by the ruling party, was fair. [AP]

Citizen Lab also concluded that the phones of Roman Giertych, a high profile lawyer who has represented senior opposition politicians, and prosecutor Ewa Wrzosek, were hacked using Pegasus, which was developed by Israeli company NSO Group.

Wrzosek has been outspoken in criticising the government's erosion of democratic norms. Accusations that Poland's ruling right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party is bent on placing the country's court system under political control have caused tensions with Brussels, which has held back from approving massive post-pandemic recovery funds for Warsaw. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

The Polish opposition has called for a parliamentary inquiry into the reported hacking. Ex-Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the head of the opposition Civic Platform party and a former president of the European Council,

said: “PiS promised to listen to the people. So they’re listening.” [Politico]

(pk)

Slovakia: Ex-PM detained over anti-government rally amid epidemic

Slovak populist former Prime Minister Robert Fico was detained by police on suspicion of organising an anti-government demonstration and flouting lockdown rules amid a surge in the coronavirus epidemic that has strained the country’s health system.

Fico’s leftist opposition Smer party said his arrest in the Slovak capital Bratislava on 16 December was unconstitutional. The former premier was later released but faces charges of incitement, police said. [Reuters]

The authorities placed limits on the size of public gatherings as part of efforts to check a record spike of coronavirus cases in a country where vaccinations have been well below the EU average. The pandemic became a key challenge for the coalition government that took office after outpacing Fico in parliamentary elections in early 2020. [Euronews/AP, AFP]

Fico's Smer party had announced the demonstration to protest against President Zuzana Čaputová’s refusal to allow a referendum on early parliamentary elections.

The opposition had urged the snap vote over the government's handling of the pandemic. More than half a million Slovaks signed petitions demanding such a ballot. The country’s Constitutional Court earlier this year ruled that a national referendum on whether to call an early election cannot be held. [Deutsche Welle] [Euronews/AP, AFP]

Fico was forced to quit as prime minister in 2018 amid mass protests over the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, who had been probing high-level corruption. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

(pk)

Slovenia: MEPs criticise ‘smear campaigns’ against media, pressure on judges

The European Parliament has accused Slovenia of putting pressure on journalists and judges amid rising concern that democratic standards are being undermined in the country.

Despite opposition from nationalist Prime Minister Janez Janša's allies in the European Parliament, MEPs on 16 December voted through a resolution condemning the Slovenian government for "attacks, smear campaigns and slander" against critics. Janša, who has called journalists liars and "presstitutes", has faced opposition claims that he is bent on muzzling the media. [Guardian] [EiR Monthly December 2021]

The European Parliament also voiced concern at proposed laws which could bring in retroactive changes in the appointment criteria for Slovenian prosecutors. [Politico Europe]

The motion by MEPs was non-binding, but showed Slovenia in unflattering light in the final weeks of its half-year turn at the EU's rotating presidency. [Guardian]

Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party is a member of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group – the biggest in the European Parliament – which largely voted against the resolution.

Critics drew parallels between the EPP's defence of Janša and its past relationship with Hungary's ruling right-wing Fidesz party. Amid accusations of democratic backsliding, Fidesz resigned from the European People's Party group earlier this year. [Politico Europe]

Meanwhile, Slovenia's Corruption Prevention Commission has started probing Janša over a suspected conflict of interest after a lawyer linked to the premier was appointed to the board of a bank. [Euractiv]

(pk)

Slovenia: Constitutional Court blocks COVID-19 shots rule for public sector

Slovenia's top court has ruled that a government regulation requiring public administration staff to be vaccinated unless they have recovered from the coronavirus contravenes the country's constitution.

The new rules had been due to kick in from 1 October, but were blocked by the Constitutional Court pending

a final ruling amid a challenge by public sector workers.

The court ruled on 6 December that the rules would be comparable with obligatory vaccinations for people in certain jobs, and to be introduced would need a change in the law on infectious diseases rather than a government decree.

Slovenia has lagged behind the European Union average in vaccination rates, though the government has been encouraging citizens to sign up for anti-COVID-19 shots. [Euractiv] [Reuters]

(pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Regulator slaps giant fine on Amazon, claiming abuse of market dominance

Italy's anti-trust authority has fined online retailer Amazon EUR 1.13 billion, accusing the company of exploiting its dominant market position by promoting its own logistics service, Fulfilment by Amazon (FBA), in breach of EU competition rules.

Amazon said that it “strongly disagreed” with the regulator’s decision and would appeal the fine, which is one of the biggest levied on an American tech giant in Europe. [Reuters] [AP] [Financial Times]

The anti-trust watchdog accused Amazon of putting third-party sellers at a disadvantage. [BBC News]

The European Commission, which is also probing Amazon's business practices, said it had cooperated with Italy's competition authority on the case. [Reuters]

The EU has pioneered efforts to regulate big tech. In November, the Court of Justice of the European Union dismissed an appeal by Google against a fine of EUR 2.42 billion for breaking competition rules.

European Commission Vice President Margrethe Vestager, who imposed the penalty in 2017, said that ruling would "feed into our legislative work" in the EU's upcoming Digital Markets Act, which aims to regulate large online platforms that wield influence over the internet. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

(pk)

Malta: Lawmakers vote to allow recreational use of cannabis

Malta's parliament has voted through a law that legalises cannabis for personal recreational use, a progressive move that is a first in Europe.

While countries such as the Netherlands and Portugal have decriminalised cannabis use, the Maltese legislation goes further, permitting users to carry up to seven grams of the drug in public, even if smoking it in public areas will remain banned.

The step, which was opposed by Church-affiliated NGOs and educational groups, will also permit users to legally grow up to four plants, buy seeds for personal use, and allow people with a criminal record for cannabis possession to apply to have this struck off. [Times of Malta] [Politico Europe]

Malta allowed the use of cannabis for medical purposes in 2018. Its latest move, passed by lawmakers on 14 December, sets a precedent that could increase momentum for the legalisation of the drug in other European countries.

Germany's new coalition government has agreed to back a law legalising the sale of cannabis to adults for recreational purposes. [Politico Europe]

(pk)

Portugal: Snap elections may fail to end political uncertainty

Portuguese voters are set to cast their votes in early parliamentary elections on 30 January, but analysts say the ballot may fail to settle political turbulence triggered by the failure of a key budget bill.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa on 5 December formally ordered the dissolution of parliament, a month after announcing that he would be calling the elections two years ahead of schedule. [BBC News]

His decision came after lawmakers threw out the draft budget for 2022 put forward by Prime Minister António Costa's minority Socialist government, ending six years of relative political stability. The Communists and Left Bloc parties, who had been allies of the government, said Costa favoured deficit cuts over investment in public health and increased protection for employees. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Opinion polls suggest the centre-left Socialist Party will win the election with a significant lead over the Social Democrats, the main opposition, but without gaining a parliamentary majority. That could mean further political uncertainty, which could hamper projects funded by the European Union's pandemic recovery plan and impact Portugal's economic growth. [Reuters]

(pk)

Spain: Former king seeks sovereign immunity amid lawsuit by ex-lover

Juan Carlos I, the former king of Spain, is seeking sovereign immunity as he faces allegations that he employed the services of Spanish spy agency CNI in a campaign of surveillance and harassment against his ex-lover. [Guardian] [Independent]

During a case before a London court, the former monarch's lawyers have stressed that Juan Carlos rejects the allegations against him, which include claims that CCTV cameras at his ex-lover's home in Shropshire, central England, were shot at in 2020. [Guardian]

According to Danish businesswoman Corinna Wittgenstein-Sayn, the alleged harassment was designed to persuade her either to return gifts worth more than GBP 65 million from their affair from 2004

to 2009, or to resume her relationship with Juan Carlos. [País] [Público] [Guardian]

In his defence, the former king is invoking sovereign immunity granted by the Spanish constitution, which would shield him from conviction. [País]

However, Wittgenstein-Sayn's lawyer argued on 13 December at the Royal Courts of Justice in London that this immunity only lasts as long as the reign of the monarch. Juan Carlos abdicated and relocated to Abu Dhabi in 2014, leaving the throne to his son Felipe VI. Thereafter, his lawyer argued, this immunity no longer applied. [Guardian]

But defence barrister Sir Daniel Bethlehem pointed out that because Juan Carlos holds the honorary title of king and is by law a member of the Spanish royal family, his sovereign immunity should remain in place. [Guardian] [France24]

Juan Carlos, aged 83, may have to appear in court before a judge pending a decision on his claim to immunity. The decision should be made within the next two months. [País]

(ht/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Armenia: Ruling party wins third round of local elections

The ruling Civil Contract party won the third and final round of local elections, held on 5 December, in 24 out of 36 Armenian municipalities. The vote included the largest number of municipalities since 2016.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Civil Contract said: "It is obvious that our priorities are connected with external challenges. I must note that the quality of these local elections, where the citizen is lord and arbiter, is our future dream come true." [OC Media]

Though the ruling party won over most of the municipalities, they still lost to opposition parties in many larger cities, such as Vanadzor, Abovyan and Sevan. The Republican Party tied with Civil Contract in Vanadzor and Sevan while the Prosperous Armenia party won in Abovyan. [Armenpress]

Civic Contract also lost the elections in Gyumri, the second largest city in the country. However, they signed a memorandum with the winning Balasanyan Alliance so that the Civil ruling party's candidates fill both of the deputy mayor positions.

Several violations were reported during the elections, including individuals bringing groups of voters to the polls and then instructing them on who to choose on the ballot.

The vote took place in parallel to a municipal amalgamation process that has integrated villages into the municipal structures of nearby towns. Hence, the total number of municipalities in Armenia was reduced from 500 to 79. [OC Media]

(rr/qc)

Azerbaijan: Repeated acts of violence against political opposition, protesters

Political opponents of the government and protesters were exposed to several acts of violence in the month of December while the Council of Europe's committee of ministers called upon Azerbaijan to follow the European human rights convention into practice.

In a statement published on 3 December, the Council of Europe's committee of ministers said that "Azerbaijan to take measures to ensure that national legislation and practice on freedom of assembly are compatible with the European human rights convention", noting that the country has the European Court of Human Rights has found "numerous breaches" related unauthorised dispersals of peaceful demonstrations and arrests of people who make use of their right of free assembly.

In early December, international media reported about the opposition politician Tofiq Yaqublu being beaten by the police while other activists went missing after a political rally in support of an imprisoned opposition activist. [RFE/RL] Human Rights Watch called upon Azerbaijan in a statementto investigate the circumstances in which Tofiq Yaqublu was violated and protests were dispersed.

On 15 December, Tofiq Yaqublu and around 20 other protesters were detained by the police in a similar rally that took place in Baku. [RFE/RL]

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's legislative branch has recently considered a new media law that will see the country's media landscape more restricted than before, because of a ban on media outlet owners living abroad and the creation of a registry of journalists. [Eurasianet]

(qc)

Belarus: Unwavering pressure on independent media, blogger sentenced to 18 years

Independent media has seen its ability to operate reduced in Belarus, in December, while the sentence of video blogger and government-critic Syarhei Tsikhanouski to 18 years in prison has diminished any remaining hope for dialogue between the authorities and the political opposition.

Tsikhanouski who had announced his intention to run against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the 2020 presidential election but was arrested soon after, was convicted on 14 December for organising riots and inciting social hatred.

His arrest had spurred his wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to continue his opposition work and run against Lukashenka in a presidential election which many international observers considered to be rigged in favour of the country's authoritarian leader. Likewise, Tsikhanouski's trial and sentence were met with scorn and disbelief in other European countries. [BBC News] [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle]

A draft document with constitutional amendments was published in late December by Belarusian authorities that may impose a two-term limit to the presidency but would only take effect after a new president is chosen. The amendments may see Lukashenka succeed himself as head of state until at least 2035. [Euronews]

Meanwhile, Belarusian authorities have refused to back down in other cases against journalists and opposition activists. Prosecutors have filed charges against the girlfriend of Raman Pratasevich, an opposition blogger who was arrested after a Ryanair flight was forcibly diverted to Belarus. [RFE/RL] According to Polish authorities, Belarusian security services were behind the flight diversion in May. [Moscow Times]

Belarusian blogger Eduard Palchys went to trial on 6 December because he refused the alleged victory of Lukashenka in the 2020 presidential vote. [RFE/RL] Online media editor Syarhey Satsuk was detained after a house search in what is considered to be a response to his coverage of the widespread street protests against the Belarusian authorities in 2020. [RFE/RL]

In Belarus, 31 journalists are currently detained or face charges because of their professional activities, according to the Belarusian Association of Journalists. [EBU]

(qc)

Estonia: Supreme Court defends vaccine mandate as issue of national security

The Supreme Court of Estonia has upheld the government's right to dismiss members of the military who refused to get vaccinated. The country's highest court, which has the power to rule on constitutional matters, defended the right to take the case and argued that lower courts had been too quick to dismiss the case. [Postimees]

Since the 31 August, all members of the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) are required to be vaccinated. Over 40 members have been dismissed for their failure to get vaccinated. The court found that protecting the health of the EDF members is an issue of national security which justifies mandatory vaccines. It also noted the lack of alternatives to vaccination that were equally effective and did not in some way infringe on citizens' rights, for instance through quarantine. [ERR]

Judge Ivo Pilving explained the mandate was a justifiable health measure: "No vaccine is perfect or able to prevent infection in 100 percent of cases. However, the Supreme Court has enough evidence to hold that COVID-19 vaccines help prevent infection to a certain degree." Pilving also that stated that government orders regarding COVID-19 should be

more limited in scope. “At some point, the government needs a limit on the use of this instrument.” [ERR]

In a related case, the Supreme Court rejected a case from an employee of the National Opera who contested the requirement that they be vaccinated. Unvaccinated employees have been told their contract will expire on 31 December. [ERR]

(rn/qc)

Georgia: Four lifetime appointments to top administrative court amid criticism

Representatives of the United States, the European Union and civil society actors questioned four life-long appointments of Supreme Court judges, announced in early December. According to the representatives, the Supreme Court appointments were in breach of an earlier commitment made by the ruling party.

Peter Stano, a European Union foreign affairs and security spokesperson, criticised the four lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court, the country’s top administrative court, and gave a reminder to Georgia that the EU assistance “remains conditional on progress on key reforms, including on judiciary.” [Georgian Journal]

Stano added that the appointments were not in line with the recommendations by the ODIHR and the Venice Commission and were “made before the existing shortcomings in the nomination process were addressed.” [Civil]

According to Georgian media, the appointments breached the commitments to judicial reform made by the ruling Georgian Dream coalition in an agreement reached on 19 April, which was mediated by the EU, between the government and the opposition. The EU has called on Georgia to “strengthen the independence, accountability, and quality of the judicial system, including of the High Council of Justice, through a broad, inclusive and cross-party reform process.” [Civil]

The US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, expressed disappointment over the accelerated process to appoint the judges. [JAM News]

The Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, which includes about 40 civil society organisations (CSOs), called the appointments “unjustified and damaging” as the existing rules are

"fundamentally problematic." The coalition also added that the chamber of representatives appointed the justices through a "single-party vote, in the absence of a broad political consensus." [Civil]

(rr/qc)

Latvia: Police temporarily detains one MP after unlawful gathering; another MP is accused of spying

Parliamentary member Aldis Gobzems was temporarily detained by Latvian police for four hours on 6 December due to his participation in an unauthorised political gathering. Gobzems, a lawyer and politician who is a member of the right-wing party Law and Order, said he "didn't know why he was detained." [LSM]

Chief of Latvian State Police Armands Ruks said that Gobzems was detained for an administrative violation – organising an unauthorised event during a state of emergency. Temporary detention, as opposed to an arrest made at a parliamentary member's home, is not prohibited by the country's constitution. [BNN News]

Gobzems organised another political rally in Riga on 13 December, which was not approved by the city council. Latvian police officers are pursuing several administrative complaints against Gobzems related to his political activities. [Baltic Times]

In related news, another parliamentary member came under scrutiny because of alleged spying for Russia.

Latvia's representative chamber voted in favour of an investigation that will confirm whether Janis Adamsons passed on information to Russian agents about Latvian legislation, defence capabilities and attitudes towards the Nord Stream 2 pipeline connecting Russia with Germany. Adamsons, a former interior minister, already lost his parliamentary immunity after a vote earlier this year. [RFE/RL]

(qc)

Lithuania: PM keeps foreign, transport ministers in place despite Belarus potash transport scandal

An expected government reshuffle in Lithuania did not take place after Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė refused the resignation of her foreign and transport ministers following a transit scandal with Belarus that has rattled Lithuanian politics in recent weeks. [LRT]

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis sent his resignation letter on 9 December he told Lithuanian press he "was ready to step down" over his failure to stop the transportation of US-sanctioned Belarusian fertilisers using the country's railway network. Transport Minister Marius Skuodis also said he accepted responsibility for the continued transportation of Belarusian fertilizer via Lithuania. [Delfi]

State-owned company Lithuanian Railways has aided Belarusian state-owned company Belaruskali to proceed with potash exports, after the United States announced sanctions on 8 December to put pressure on Minsk. While the US sanctions are only expected to come fully into force in 2022, the transit corridor has put Vilnius in a political bind. [Reuters]

The head of Lithuanian Railways stepped down on 14 December after PM Šimonytė reaffirmed "the trust of the coalition parties" in her government and confirmed there would be no ministerial resignations over the potash transit situation. [LRT]

The political ramifications of the scandal appear unlikely to end with the departure of the head of the railway company. Lithuania's government is considering options to end the potash transport agreement with Belarus on grounds of national security while the Belarusian potash company is likely to sue Lithuania over any plans to halt the transport. [Delfi] [Reuters]

(qc)

Russia: Continued crackdown on media; human rights organisation Memorial ordered to shut down

Russia has been condemned by several international human rights organisations for its persistent prosecution of media lawyers and calls for reporters to receive proper legal assistance. A crackdown on civil society and media has continued in December, as a court ordered the shutdown of Russia's most prominent human rights organisation, the Memorial Human Rights Centre. [Deutsche Welle]

Both Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) have issued the appeals amidst Russian authorities "stepping up their harassment" of journalists through the contentious "foreign agents" law. [RFE/RL]

The pleas came this month as one of the lawyers defending jailed investigative reporter, Ivan Safronov, was forced to flee to Georgia in late November. Lawyer Yevgeny Smirnov escaped the country after the Leningrad regional bar association began disciplinary proceedings against him at the behest of the Federal Security Service (FSB). [Meduza]

Safronov was charged with high treason in July 2020 after being accused of passing secret information to the Czech Republic, a university in Switzerland, and Germany's intelligence service.

Smirnov is the second lawyer defending Safronov to flee Russia in the past three months and is accused of failing to be present for six investigative procedures without a valid reason. Ivan Pavlov went to Georgia in September after Russian authorities opened a case against him for allegedly disclosing classified information about the Safronov investigation.

"The actions of the Russian authorities violate the rights to fair trial, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, as well as are entirely inconsistent with the obligations to protect human rights defenders," said Amnesty International on 1 December. [RFE/RL]

The group has also conveyed its concern regarding the "unprecedented pressure" placed by the authorities on Pavlov and Smirnov, and about "the continuing unlawful pressure" exerted on Safronov and his pretrial detention conditions. [RFE/RL]

Since fleeing, a wanted notice has been issued for Pavlov and he has been placed on the "foreign agents" list in early November with four of his former colleagues.

Pavlov's addition to this controversial list was followed by the addition of four current and former RFE/RL journalists by Russia's Justice Ministry. Journalists from RFE/RL Tatar-Bashkir-Service and Idel.Realities, Alina Grigoryeva, Andrei Grigoryev, Regina Khisamova, and former contributor Regina Gimalova were designated as "foreign agents" earlier this month. [RFE/RL]

The designation is used by the Russian government to label what it declares are foreign-funded organisations that are engaged in political activity, as well as people linked to them. The "foreign agent" legislation was

adopted in 2012 and has been modified repeatedly and has been increasingly used to silence civil society actors and media groups in Russia. [RFE/RL]

The legislation mandates that non-governmental organisations that receive foreign assistance and that the government considers to be engaged in political activity are required to be registered to identify themselves as "foreign agents," and must submit to audits.

On 28 December, a Moscow court ordered the closure of one of the country's best-known human rights organisations, citing a failure to label all publications with a "foreign agent" warning. Memorial was founded in the second half of the 1980s, the result of political reforms and greater openness in the Soviet Union, to investigate abuses and support victims of Stalin's regime. [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [EiR Monthly December 2021]

December has also seen Russia's Gazprom gain control of the country's largest social media network, VKontakte, bolstering the Kremlin's significant control in Russia's online media platforms. VKontakte has almost 100 million users and is considered "Russia's Facebook".

Gazprom took command of the network following a series of deals to buy out Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov from the platform's holding company. The deal will see Russian insurance company Sogaz take a 45 percent stake in MF Technologies, the holding company that controls the social media network.

Sogaz, which was founded by Gazprom and counts key allies and friends of Russian President Vladimir Putin among its other shareholders, will gain voting rights of just over 25 percent in VK. [Moscow Times]

The deal comes after many years of the Russian state gradually increasing their control over the Russian internet, which had stayed a considerably free space, despite more traditional media outlets falling under the control of the state or oligarchs considered allied to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

(bm/qc)

Ukraine: Anti-oligarch bill reveals tension between president, wealthiest Ukrainians

The Venice Commission, an advisory body on constitutional matters and democracy in Europe, has

delayed its consideration of the Ukrainian anti-oligarch bill that is set to end in January. The delay comes as Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been acting on his campaign promise of "de-oligarchisation" of the country in recent months.

Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 by a considerable margin after gaining significant support after pledging to stand up to the Ukrainian tycoons that hold influence over the country's economy, government and media. [RFE/RL]

In June of this year, the Prime Minister introduced a contentious bill that legally defined the term "oligarch" based on several criteria, including wealth, industry dominance, political activity, and influence over media assets. [RFE/RL]

Anyone that meets certain standards in three of these areas is to be identified and labelled as an "oligarch". They will be prohibited from participating in political activity, including the financing of parties and the sale of state assets.

The bill was passed by the Rada in September and signed by Zelenskyy on 5 November. It will come into law in May 2022. [RFE/RL]

The Venice Commission has postponed its ruling on the basis "on the prevention of threats to national security associated with the excessive influence of persons with significant economic and political weight in public life (oligarchs)." They have delayed their decision till the next plenary session scheduled for late January. [Interfax Ukraine]

The first realisation of the potential consequences of this bill came last month when Ukraine's richest man and owner of DTEK, Rinat Akhmetov was denied compensation. Akhmetov was meant to be owed three billion-hryvnia (USD 115 million) in compensation after the government slashed tariffs and failed to pay renewable energy procedures in a timely fashion.

Akhmetov has a net worth estimated at more than USD 7 billion, making him richer than the next three Ukrainian tycoons combined. He is also the country's largest taxpayer and employer, with about 200,000 workers nationwide. [RFE/RL]

The billionaire controls several major television stations in the country. For over a month, stations owned by Akhmetov have been broadcasting critical coverage of Zelinskiy, despite Akhmetov stating he does not influence the station's content or editorial decisions.

Tensions between the two have continued to heighten following Zelenskyy's statements in a press conference late last month that his intelligence services had uncovered alleged plans for a Russian-backed coup aimed at luring in the support from Akhmetov.

"I think (Akhmetov) may not know about it," said Zelenskyy, adding "I invite Rinat Akhmetov to (my office) to listen to the information that can be shared." [Financial Times]

Akhmetov has denied these claims against him and has called into question the fairness of the new law. In written comments to the Financial Times, Akhmetov wrote "I am not an oligarch, I am an investor. And I am ready to defend it in Ukrainian and international courts." He added that "We all need a fair competition and a level playing field." [Financial Times]

There are fears expressed by experts and diplomats that the law could be used by Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government to selectively crackdown on business figures who are not loyal to the government.

(bm/qc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Warring factions of main opposition party hold separate assemblies, oust each other

A split has deepened between the two opposing factions within the Democratic Party (DP), currently in opposition in the chamber of representatives. Sali

Berisha, former President, Prime Minister of Albania and former DP chairman, convened a DP National Assembly on 11 December in the biggest stadium of the country.

During the Assembly, 4,446 out of around 8,000 delegates of the party voted in favour of Lulzim Basha's dismissal as DP chairman, a decision which was ratified in a party referendum a week later. Berisha's National Assembly also approved changes to the party's statute. [Balkan Insight]

The following day, Basha summoned the DP's National Council which voted for the dismissal of the council's chairman as well as other high-ranking DP officials from their positions.

A resolution was adopted at the National Council, which declared the dismissed members' attendance at Berisha's National Assembly illegal and the assembly's statutory changes null and void. The National Council's resolution confirmed that the only legal National Assembly is the one called by Basha on 18 December. [Tirana Post]

The DP National Assembly which convened on 18 December, decided that members who have been declared "non grata" and those who had collaborated with Albania's communist regime are prohibited from holding executive positions in the party.

When asked about a referendum called by Berisha on the same day, Basha said that "there is no referendum". Meanwhile, the referendum took place and Berisha thanked the DP members who participated, announcing that more than 44,000 of them had voted for the dismissal of Lulzim Basha. [Euronews Albania] [Politiko]

Three days after the referendum called by Berisha and the DP National Assembly called by Basha, the former entered the DP headquarters accompanied by members of the Re-establishment Commission of the Democratic Party, a new body created by the National Assembly of 11 December, while the latter was attending a meeting with DP leadership members in a hall.

A Berisha supporter kicked down the door of a conference hall and when Berisha was asked about the incident he stated that "there is no lock that can stop their revolution". From the DP conference hall Berisha warned Basha to not even think of denying the referendum results. [Sot] [A2 News]

The rift between Basha and Berisha started in September when Basha decided to expel Berisha from the DP parliamentary group due to the latter's designation as "persona non grata" by the United States Department of State. [EiR Monthly November 2021]

(ec/qc)

Albania: Prime minister apologises for major leak of personal data

The Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, apologized during a press conference about the private data leak of hundreds of thousands of citizens and urged the law enforcement agencies to investigate the case. According to Rama, the leak was probably caused by an internal infiltration rather than a cyber-attack. [Euronews Albania]

The leaked Excel file which circulates on the internet includes information on the names, salaries, ID numbers, job positions and employer names of more than 630,000 citizens. The incident is being investigated by the Prosecutor's Office of Tirana. [Euractiv]

The President of Albania, Ilir Meta, condemned the leak calling it a breach of "freedoms, human rights and dignity, law and the constitution" and called on state authorities to investigate this incident. A high-ranking member of the biggest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Albania, referred to the leak as "an extraordinary scandal" and claimed that the government has been incapable of protecting the personal data of citizens. [Balkan Insight]

The data leak is the second one within a year. A few days before the general elections of April 2021, the private data of more than 910,000 voters including names, ID cards, addresses and other information, leaked to the media. The information was allegedly taken from state institutions by the governing Socialist Party to be used for election purposes. The Socialist Party has denied the allegations. [Balkan Insight]

(ec/qc)

Albania: Former environment minister arrested on corruption charges

The former environment minister, Lefter Koka, was arrested for alleged corruption on 14 December.

According to the Special Prosecutor's Office against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), Koka's arrest followed months of investigation. He is accused of corruption, abuse of office, money laundering and receiving a bribe of EUR 3.7 million over a concession agreement for the construction of a waste incinerator in the city of Elbasan. [AP]

Koka had been accused earlier this year for setting up a network of sham companies which received multi-million-euro contracts from the company that would construct the waste incinerator of Elbasan. These accusations were made by the Socialist Movement for Integration, a currently opposition party which Koka was part of during his term as environment minister (2013-2017) and which he left about a year ago to join the ruling Socialist Party. [Balkan Insight]

The US Ambassador to Albania, Yuri Kim, reacted on Twitter after Koka's arrest by acknowledging the work of SPAK and saying that "Justice reform is yielding concrete results". [Politiko]

SPAK, the special anti-corruption structure, was created as part of the justice reform in Albania, and it is tasked with investigating and prosecuting individuals for corruption and participation in organised crime.

Albania launched a radical reform of its justice system in 2016, with the support of the European Union and the United States of America.

(ec/qc)

Bosnia & Herzegovina: Republika Srpska begins withdrawal from federal institutions as crisis escalates

Lawmakers in Republika Srpska voted to begin withdrawing from Bosnian federal institutions on 10 December, moving the entity further towards secession and threating to unravel the country.

The vote calls on the entity's parliament to write new laws to overrule the Bosnian state's authority over the military, tax, and judicial systems. Though technically non-binding, the vote is a demonstration of how far Republika Srpska's President, Milorad Dodik, is willing to go to contest the status quo and to achieve further autonomy for the Serb-majority entity. [Reuters]

Dodik and his party have argued that the problem is centralisation. In their view, the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken powers away from the regions, with the backing of international actors like the High Representative. The Office of the High Representative has considerable political power under the 1995 Dayton Accords, which ended the Bosnian War and established the country. [Reuters]

The previous High Representative, Valentin Inzko, introduced a law to ban genocide denial in July 2021. The move provoked Dodik and his party, who have frequently called into question the scope of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. Dodik has praised Ratko Mladić, who led the Army of Republika Srpska that carried out the massacre. Mladić was convicted of war crimes, including genocide, in 2017. [Guardian] [Euronews]

Dodik has since demanded a new constitution for Bosnia and Herzegovina, one that gives power over taxation and justice to Republika Srpska, would allow the entity to have its own military, and would reduce the power of the High Representative. He has also described Bosnia as an "impossible, imposed country" and that Republika Srpska's powers had been "kidnapped…by Bosniaks". [Guardian] [RFE/RL] [Sarajevo Times]

According to one Sarajevo-based journalist quoted by *Euronews*, the situation is the result of years of simmering discontent with the country's power sharing system. The result, in his view, is that "nothing is being done to get rid of the cause because each year we are simply trying to fix the consequences" of the last crisis. [Euronews]

As *Europe in Review* previously reported, the international community has been watching events closely.

The European Union and the United States have been engaging in frantic diplomacy with Bosnia, while the UN security council approved the continuation of a European Union-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia for another year. That approval had to overcome opposition from Russia and China, who support Dodik in his efforts to weaken the powers of the High Representative. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Representatives from Republika Srpska's opposition parties left the parliament before the vote took place. Mirko Šarović, leader of the Serb Democratic Party, spoke out strongly against Dodik, warning that his plans "cannot be carried out without war". [Reuters] [Guardian]

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called for sanctions to be levied against Dodik. However, Bosnia was not mentioned in the conclusions of the December European Council summit. [Euractiv]

The EU has been criticised for a perceived failure to deliver on promises made to Bosnia after the 1995 Dayton Agreement established the country's power sharing framework. [Al Jazeera]

Writing in the *Brussels Times,* Balkans expert Thomas Bickl criticised a "divided and weak" EU for its non-committal response to the crisis thus far, arguing that the "anti-enlargement stance" of member states like France and the Netherlands bloc had contributed to the instability. [Brussels Times]

Belgian MEP Hilde Vautmans echoed this view in *EUobserver,* arguing that the EU needed to "impose leadership" to halt its declining credibility among the western Balkan states. [EUobserver]

The US has also continued its diplomatic efforts as Derek Chollet, Counsellor of the Department of State, promised to accelerate efforts to "walk [the crisis] back from the cliff". Turkey, which has strong diplomatic ties with Bosnia, has also condemned the vote as a "serious risk" to peace. [Guardian] [Reuters]

Dodik does have support from Serbia and Russia – the latter of which he visited on 2 December. There, Dodik met Russian President Vladimir Putin and ostensibly discussed a potential gas pipeline – but no official readout of the meeting was released. [RFE/RL]

The EU's enlargement commissioner, Olivér Várhelyi from Hungary, has also supported Dodik in his efforts. Reports suggest that Várhelyi negotiated a "fragile political package agreement" with Dodik in late November, when he visited the country. Várhelyi agreed with Dodik that the previous High Representative was responsible for triggering the current crisis. [Euractiv] [Guardian]

While this crisis is being viewed seriously, not all observers are despondent. Speaking to *RFE/RL*, consultant and analyst Marko Prelec pointed to a "reservoir of willingness to coexist" that can be found in younger generations, who have grown up in "this Dayton Bosnia". [RFE/RL]

(wb/qc/pk)

Bulgaria: New government prioritises fight against corruption, energy prices, administrative cuts

Bulgaria's recently elected chamber of representatives has given its approval to a coalition government led by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov of the party We Continue the Change. The new coalition will prioritise the fight against corruption, rising energy prices and the low number of vaccinations. The chamber of representatives voted on the decision on 13 December, two days after being given the mandate by the President Rumen Radev. [Euractiv] [RFE/RL]

The outcome of the elections required the parties We Continue the Change, There is Such a People, Democratic Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Socialist Party to work together, while former ruling party GERB as well as DPS and Revival remain in opposition. [RFE/RL]

Prime Minister Kiril Petkov has travelled to Brussels as one of his first official visits, where he said that Bulgaria supports NATO's position on the Russia-Ukraine issue. [Novinite] Days after the PM's appointment, Bulgaria's general prosecutor's office announced that it would drop an investigation into his citizenship.

Earlier this year, Petkov was accused of making false claims about his citizenship to the president when he was first appointed as part of a caretaker government. He allegedly held a Bulgarian and Canadian citizenships, while the Bulgarian constitution prohibits ministers from having dual citizenship. [BNR]

According to reports, in the fight against corruption the government is said to favour change in the judiciary and give more powers to the anti-corruption commission. Relations between the government and the general prosecutor's office have been tense in recent weeks, as the new coalition has put pressure on the general prosecutor to resign because of insufficient results in the fight against corruption. [Euractiv]

The interior ministry said that the general prosecutor's office has also tried to stall an investigation which can bring to light the identities of high-ranking officials involved in a corruption scandal. [RFE/RL]

To combat rising energy prices, the state's energy regulator has proposed an increase of 11.5 per cent on prices of electricity and 12.8 percent on the prices for central heating. However, the government decided to

impose a moratorium on the prices for individual consumers until the end of March 2022. [RFE/RL]

Energy specialists have criticised the moratorium because they are concerned that the decision will both make it impossible to pay energy suppliers, causing irreversible damage to the sector. The decision can cause sanctions by the European Commission as it overturns that of an independent regulatory body, which is against the constitution of the state. [Euractiv] [BTV]

The pending completion of the gas connection between Greece and Bulgaria will be beneficial for both sides and have implications on the energy and economic position of the state, as Bulgaria is losing a lot from the delay. [Euractiv]

The government also plans state administrative cuts by 15 percent before the end of next year, totalling around 30 000 people being fired. The minister of finance explained that this is a necessary decision for the development of Bulgaria. The aim of the coalition government is financial decentralisation in municipalities by 2023. They agreed on chamber control of spending with a focus on higher collectability and surplus. [Euractiv] [BTV]

Related to the deployment of NATO troops on Bulgarian soil in the Russia-Ukraine issue, the Defence Minister Stefan Yanev said that there are no “necessary circumstances that can justify a decision”. According to minister, these actions would be contrary to the interests of the state and union. [Euractiv]

The following day, the prime minister explained that the issue has not been discussed during an official chamber meeting and that the minister’s position is personal. Experts say that a divided position on the issue is dangerous for the security of the state and invite the chamber to reach a consensus. [RFE/RL] [Nova]

(ib/qc)

Bulgaria: Newspaper eviction evokes dispute concerning press freedom

The Bulgarian media *Trud* was evicted from its offices after the Ministry of Culture accused them of not paying an outstanding rent of EUR 68,000. The newspaper said the false allegations were aiming at ruining the press outlet, with the eviction leading to

tension within the newly formed government in Bulgaria. [Euractiv] [Trud]

The offices of the newspaper were sealed as *Trud* had failed to pay its rent since 2012 to the Ministry of Culture, while the rental contract was in the name of a company different from the one residing in the building.

The ministry said that it had issued an official letter to the newspaper in August reminding them to pay but no resolution had been reached. *Trud* is a pro-Russian media outlet pursuing a policy against COVID-19 vaccines and certificates.

In response to the news, Bulgaria's independent regulatory body for electronic media stated that a balance between the executive branch of the government and media should not be at expense of free speech and journalistic practice. [Darik News] [Euractiv] [Nova]

In a long article on the website of *Trud*, the editor and owner of the paper, Petyo Blaskov, denied all of the accusations. In a statement, the media group said that state institutions are spreading "lies" and repressing their freedom of speech. One day after the eviction, opposition party GERB together with media group supporters protested on the streets in the form of a flash mob. [Trud] [RFE/RL] [Nova]

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICJI) said that no media is independent from the law and should follow its contractual obligations. Pavol Shavoi of the ICIJ said that the issue appears to be a dispute between an independent media outlet that has not paid its rent and the ministry, which is the owner of the premises. [RFE/RL]

(ib/qc)

Greece: Socialists choose Nikos Androulakis as new leader

Nikos Androulakis became the leader of a centre-left and socialist coalition called Movement for Change, currently in opposition, after he successfully won against former Prime Minister George Papandreou. [ABC]

Androulakis, who is also a member of the European Parliament, will have to face off internal rivals when determining the coalition's agenda, in a political landscape that is dominated by ruling party New

Democracy, led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and left-wing opposition party Syriza. [Kathimerini]

Movement for Change was created in 2017 as an alliance between multiple socialist parties, including the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok). Before the Greek debt crisis that begin in late 2009, Pasok was one of the main political parties of the country. However, the debt crisis led to a significant decrease in popular support for the centre-left during the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Currently Greece's third-largest political force, Movement for Change may according to commentators have a decisive role in the creation of a coalition government in the next parliamentary elections, expected to take place in August 2023. [Euractiv]

(qc)

Montenegro: Opposition increases calls for early elections as no-confidence vote was pulled

Opposition parties have increased pressure on the current government with demands for early elections in 2022 after a motion of no confidence in the technocratic cabinet led by Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić was withdrawn in mid-December.

All opposition members of parliament had supported the motion tabled on 30 November but despite the strong support, the no-confidence vote was withdrawn two weeks later in favour of negotiations about the prospect of early elections. [Balkan Insight]

The government of Krivokapić was formed last year with the support of four parliamentary groups (comprising more than ten parties). Since then, President Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists has been building pressure on the government from the opposition benches. Krivokapić is criticised by the opposition and a number of coalition partners for refusing to consider a reshuffle that would reduce the number of technocrats in the cabinet. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

A memorandum of cooperation signed between two parties of the governing coalition and two minority parties in opposition may spell trouble for Krivokapić in the next weeks. Cooperation between the parties would make it possible to unseat Krivokapić and form

a minority government with the support of the Democratic Party of Socialists and other opposition parties until early elections can be held in the next year. [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, Montenegro closely cooperates with the European Union and Council of Europe to improve the functioning of its courts and strengthen the rule of law in the country.

(qc)

North Macedonia: Zaev resigns as prime minister after loss in October local elections

Zoran Zaev has officially resigned from his position as Prime Minister of North Macedonia. A new prime minister is set to replace him in January.

Zaev first announced his resignation in October, after his party's poor results in local elections, but remained in power to avoid political turbulence. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Early in December, he persuaded Alternativa, a small ethnic Albanian party, to join the governing coalition, thus securing his government's majority in parliament and preventing new elections.

In exchange of its support, Alternativa took over three ministerial posts and many other important positions in public institutions and enterprises. [Balkan Insight]

Zaev had previously resigned as chairman of his party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). His successor, Dimitar Kovacevski, is expected to become the next prime minister and form a new government by mid-January. [AP]

(ec/qc)

Romania: New governing coalition under fire for betraying anti-corruption agenda

The anti-corruption credentials of Romania's new government were widely questioned after Laura Vicol, a politician from the Social Democratic Party (PSD) was appointed as head of the representative chamber's justice committee.

Vicol's past as a lawyer representing clients with alleged connections to organised crime was seen by commentators and NGOs as a bad sign for the prospects of the recently formed governing coalition including the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the PSD as the two largest parties. [Eurotopics] [Newsweek Romania]

Vicol's appointment was reviewed but the decision was not overturned while media outlets criticised the new head of the justice committee for her luxurious spending and wealth, displayed during the appointment hearing. [Ziarul de Iaşi]

Within the liberal camp of the PNL, who have made the fight against corruption a priority, there remains distrust of the PSD, a party that has a history of convictions for corruption and graft. [Euronews] The new governing coalition was sworn in on 25 November after a protracted political crisis that saw several attempts to form a cabinet back by a majority of parliamentary representatives. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

Corruption is expected to remain a headache for the foreseeable future. One minister of the new coalition was forced to resign already after journalists said there were irregularities in his cv and his academic work. [Euractiv] A Romanian judge critical of pace of judicial reforms in recent years was suspended because of critical content posted on social media. [Eurotopics]

(qc)

Serbia: Lithium mine project suspended after massive protests

The town council of Loznica in western Serbia, voted to suspend the lithium mine project, which was planned to be launched there by mining giant Rio Tinto. [Euronews]

Serbia's government had previously suspended two new law amendments after thousands of people set up roadblocks and protested against them across the country. [AP]

Environmental and civil society organisations said that these two laws, one about expropriation and one about referendums, would enable foreign companies to evade popular opposition about projects like Rio Tinto's. [RFE/RL]

The large protests have been considered as the biggest challenge to date for Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vučić.

The president has asked the parliament of Serbia to review the two amendments that sparked the protests while he has also stated that Rio Tinto should be more transparent about its operations. [Euronews]

(ec/qc)

Turkey: Besieged government increases pressure on opposition amid economic disaster

Facing a rapidly deteriorating economy on already disastrous levels, the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has stepped up pressure on an increasingly coordinated opposition calling for early elections.

At the end of 2021, Turkey's recession further deteriorated with an outright downward spiral of the lira, adding to breathtaking inflation and high unemployment. According to the Inflation Research Group, an independent group of economists heavily criticized and pressured by the government for its assessments, Turkey's annual inflation rate last year was over 82 percent much higher than the officially released figure of 36.08 percent. [BBC] [GMFUS]

Since 2018, the country has faced growing economic problems that were amplified by the integration of millions of migrants, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic mismanagement and megalomania, the costs of military engagements and large geopolitical overstretch. When Erdoğan decided to cut interest rates amid high inflation, eventually eliminating the independence of the Central Bank of Turkey to enforce his unorthodox monetary policies, things rapidly went from very bad to worse, which is diminishing his popularity even among his traditional support base. [GMFUS]

The President´s December announcement to raise salaries of public employees by 30.5 percent and the lowest-level retirement pension by about 66 percent met heavy criticism by the Confederation of Public Employees' Trade Unions, naming it "ridiculous" given the actual 82 percent inflation rate. The Deputy Chair of Turkey's main opposition party, the centre-left Republican People's Party (CHP), commented "[w]ith

these figures, Erdoğan tells millions of retirees to starve." [bianet]

Meanwhile, the overall economic downturn has spurred the opposition to coordinate and activate widespread discontent into concerted action.

With presidential elections due in 18 months and no relief in sight, it seems unlikely for Erdoğan and his core allies to win. At the same, to accept losing the elections seems to be inconceivable for the Erdogan group after it created so many and so determined enemies as it did.

Since the 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan orchestrated a heavy crackdown on dissent in all possible directions, purging public life of real and perceived adversaries. The related campaigns led to the incarceration of thousands and the ouster of more than 150,000 academics, journalists, lawyers out of their jobs. In light of this deep repression, together with the unravelling economic disaster and detailed allegations by Sedat Pekar, a mafia boss and whistleblower, who accused various members of the ruling clique of serious crimes [The Washington Post], the presidential elections appear almost as a question of life or death for the ruling group. [Foreign Affairs]

This leads to a wide range of speculations on how the government might prevent losing power, including the possibility of early elections as most recently voiced by Selahattin Demirtaş, former leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Demirtaş was detained after the 2016 coup and, despite repeated calls by the European Court of Human Rights for his immediate release, faces up to 142 years in prison for national security-related charges. [Ahval 1]

Against this background, a previously highly divided opposition is increasingly coordinating to jointly advance against the government. Ironically, the 2017 transformation of the country´s parliamentary system to a presidential one might eventually help the opposition in this endeavor. [Foreign Affairs]

After all, as Soner Cagaptay argues, the amendments gave Erdoğan not only way more power but also "inadvertently strengthened the opposition" as the "new presidential system requires a runoff between the two leading candidates" creating the likelihood that "the leading opposition candidate now has the ability to bring together a broad anti-Erdogan coalition under one banner". [Foreign Affairs]

Decisive are the three major opposition parties, the CHP, Turkey's oldest and biggest opposition party, the

rightist Turkish Nationalist Good Party (IYI), the third biggest opposition party, and the Kurdish, leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the second biggest opposition party. CHP and IYI, together with some minor parties, form an opposition bloc, the Nation Alliance that is even joined by two newly founded parties led by former key ministers in Erdogan's earlier cabinets – Davutoğlu and Babacan – since October 2021. [Ahval News 2]

The most likely challengers for Erdoğan's presidency are the incumbent CHP mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavas respectively, and Meral Aksener, the leader of the IYI.

In December, the two largest opposition parties – CHP and HDP – decided to jointly submit a demand for early elections to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. [Ahval News 3]

More important, also in December, the oppositional Nation Alliance, comprising among others the CHP and IYI, completed a draft for an encompassing constitutional reform that would turn Turkey back to a parliamentary system. [Daily Sabah]

In this situation, President Erdoğan's government´s responds with increasing repression that targets especially Kurdish groups, especially the HDP, and the CHP.

For instance, the public prosecutor in Istanbul has just indicted an Islamic Kurdish religious association in the city at the start of the new year over alleged ties to the communist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist outlet.

The indictment equates terms used by the religious group in the Kurdish language to terms normally "not used by [ordinary] people" but "used and adopted" by the PKK including "community, protection, peace and religion". The deputy leader of the oppositional Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), founded by former Erdoğan supporters and not particularly close to the HDP, tweeted a New Year's solidarity message in Kurdish with the same terms, cited as criminal in the indictment and insisted "Kurdish is not the language of terror". [Ahval News 4]

In another move, the government arrested a group of local Kurdish HDP officials after Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu claimed that a lawmaker from the HDP was involved in the death of the brother of an official from his ruling AKP, although the PKK claimed responsibility for the murder. Critics see the arrest as another attempt to criminalize the second biggest

opposition party HDP by terrorism related charges. [Rudaw]

Most important, however, is a similar strike directed against the CHP heavyweight and mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu, one of President Erdogan's most vocal critics. After accusations by Erdoğan, Interior Minister Soylu launched criminal investigations against 557 municipal employees of Istanbul who were hired under İmamoğlu. Soylu claims that they had links to "terrorist groups," including the PKK, the Marxist–Leninist Communist Party, (MLKP) and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C). Moreover, some municipal employees were also accused of having links to US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen, a former ally and now arch enemy of Erdoğan.

According to a December survey, Erdoğan and İmamoğlu would receive 36.6 percent and 48.7 percent of the vote, respectively, if presidential elections were to be held that day. [SCF] [Reuters]

(hg)

Team:

Peter Kononczuk (pk), Glen Carey (gc), Henning Glaser (hg), Quincy Cloet (qc), Warren Ó Broin (wb), Harry Taunton (ht), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Imogen Groves (ig), Ivandzhelin Bozadzhieva (ib), Marlene Marx (mm), Palina Mizhyieuskaya (pm), Romesa Razzaq (rr), Emiljano Cera (ec), Nick Pentney (np), Beth Molloy (bm), Robert Nielsen (rn), Yara Pstrong (yp), Ruben Schutten (rs), Nicholas Warren (nw), Samuel Dempsey (sd), Karina Corral (kc), Kendall Ashlee (ka), Mustafa Hussain (mh), Venus Phuangkom, Duc Quang Ly (dql), Lucas Meier (lm), Beatrice Siviero (bs), Marco Stojanovik (ms), Sally Dobie, Prisca Mirchandani (pm), Chun-Jou Hsiao (zh)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe