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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to Europe in Review's (EiR) July issue, informing you about the important events and developments in European constitutional politics and international relations. We hope you will enjoy the read and wish you a great day ahead.

For the entire EiR team,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Top 5 Stories - Editors' Pick

Russian forces grind forward in Donbas as Ukraine becomes EU candidate

Russia's assault against Ukraine has turned into a high-casualty war of attrition as Moscow's forces grind onward in the east, regardless of the European Union's landmark geopolitical decision to designate Kiev a candidate to join the bloc.

The conflict is now marked more by urban warfare amid ruined cities than by the mechanised offensives attempted earlier this year – and the most recent victim is the eastern city of Sievierodonetsk. [The Guardian] [France 24] [Reuters]

The battle for the city began in early May as Russian and Russian-backed separatist forces attacked from all sides, incurring heavy casualties as Ukraine counterattacked. Sievierodonetsk is separated from the rest of Ukrainian territory by the Siversky Donets river, meaning getting troops and supplies in – and civilians out – was a problem for the Ukrainians.

Despite Russian forces achieving control over most of the city by June 12, Ukrainian forces held on for an

additional two weeks. Their commanders finally ordered them out of the smouldering remains for the defence of Russia's next target in the region: nearby Lysychansk. [Euractiv][Reuters][BBC News] [CNN] [Irish Times] [Wall Street Journal]

Sievierodonetsk has been described as Russia's biggest battlefield success since its capture of Mariupol in May. Russia's advance has relied heavily on artillery barrages, which have torn much of Sievierodonetsk to shreds. It was in these ruins that much of the fighting took place and, after Russia's victory, they are all that is left of a city that once had over 100,000 residents, the vast majority of whom have fled. Speaking to Ukrainian television, Luhansk regional head Serhiy Haidai said that "over 90 percent" of houses had been shelled. [Reuters] [BBC News] [Euractiv] [Al Jazeera] [Hromadske]

The fall of Sievierodonetsk leaves Ukraine in control of just a single city in the eastern Luhansk region – Lysychansk. Haidai said that Ukrainian troops withdrew there to "continue their operations". Lysychansk has also been heavily shelled by Russian forces, though it may be harder to take than Sievierodonetsk. As the city is on higher ground and there is no river to prevent Ukraine from reinforcing it, Russia and its separatist allies are seeking to encircle the city and put it under siege. According to residents, the city has no water or electricity, while Haidai said Lysychansk was under "a huge amount" of shelling. [Euronews] [Reuters] [New York Times] [BBC News] [Al Jazeera]

Epicentre in the east

Despite occasional recent bombardments of Kiev, the largest of which came from Belarusian soil on June 26, the focus of the conflict is now firmly in the east. June was relatively quiet on the southern front. Around the southern city of Kherson, Russia has found itself on the defensive as Ukraine launched limited counter-strikes in the region. But the city of Mykolaiv remains a target for Russian artillery. [Moscow Times] [Reuters] [New York Times] [Forbes]

Despite its conquest of Sievierodonetsk, Russia is facing tough questions on the frontlines and at home. While the country's economy continues to prove resilient to Western sanctions, Russia is facing another round from the G7 nations. On the ground in Kherson, a car bomb killed Dmitry Savluchenko, an official of the pro-Russian "military-civilian" occupation administration. Meanwhile, areas occupied by Moscow and its separatist allies are in appalling condition. Mariupol, which was reduced to rubble after a three-

month siege, is suffering an outbreak of cholera among its massively depleted population. Water treatment facilities in the Donbas have been destroyed by the war.

At the same time, Russia's separatist allies are reaching a breaking point in manpower, as the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine is reported to have now lost half of its 20,000 army in casualties [BBC News] [Reuters] [Guardian] [Euractiv] [Moscow Times] [New York Times] [Forbes][Financial Times][RFE/RL] [France24] [Bellingcat]

Ukraine wins EU candidate status

On the diplomatic front, Ukraine scored a victory when, along with Moldova, it was granted candidate status by the European Union.

Before a country can join the EU, it must apply to become a candidate state – which Ukraine did shortly after the Russian invasion of late February. Ukraine's strongest ally in the process was the European Commission. Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen made a high-profile visit to Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in June, where she described Ukraine's place as being in "the European family".

Speaking anonymously to *Politico Europe,* one Commission official said the strength of pro-Kiev sentiment within the institution was because Ukraine was seen as "the only country in Europe where people died… because they were on the streets carrying EU flags." While the Commission was vocal in its support, the real power lay with the Council of the European Union – which represents the interests of the individual member states. [Euractiv] [Politico Europe] [BBC News]

Ukraine had considerable hurdles to pass at the Council. Denmark and Portugal were among the most sceptical of Ukraine's bid, arguing that the war did not change the fact that Kiev did not meet the requirements for candidate status. On the other hand, Poland was consistently the strongest voice in favour of Ukraine. The divisions were not enough to prevent Ukraine being granted candidate status on June 23 – a goal of the Euromaidan revolution that toppled Kiev's pro-Russian government in 2014.

To reach full membership, a country must undertake reforms and prepare to implement the entire body of EU law, a process which can take a long time. North Macedonia, another candidate, has been doing so since 2005, and Turkey has been a candidate since

1999. [BBC News] [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle]

The move to set Kiev on the path to membership came amid fears that straining EU consensus on Ukraine might reinforce divisions between member states. One example of a divide is an embargo on Russian oil imports which came into effect in June and was watered down considerably in negotiations amid resistance from Hungary.

While EU candidacy may boost morale, the Ukrainian government has continued to call for more instantly practical – and lethal – support from its Western allies. Recent strikes by Ukraine on Russian vessels on the Black Sea might suggest that those weapons are arriving. Still, voices from Ukraine are expressing fear that Western support may wane over time, especially as allies grapple with inflation and a spiralling energy crisis. The US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, said that Russian President Vladimir Putin would be "counting on US and EU resolve to weaken as food shortages, inflation and energy prices get worse." [BBC News] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [New York Times]

The long war

Meanwhile, the belief that the war in Ukraine will be long-term continues to grow. Philip Wasielewski, a Fellow at the *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, argued that Russia, in scaling down its war aims while expanding control over the Donbas, has turned the conflict into a "meat grinder."

While this has led to increased tactical successes for Russian forces, a "strategic victory" remains unlikely, he said. For Wasielewski, the war has stagnated into a high-casualty war of attrition which will not end "as long as Ukraine still has the will to fight and the means to do so."

This "meat grinder" poses challenges to both sides. For Ukraine to resist Russia's slow but steady advance, it would need far more weapons than its allies have been delivering. *Reuters* foreign correspondent Conor Humphries found this the prevailing view among Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian presidential advisor Oleksiy Arrestovych put the situation plainly: "[The Russians] see they are giving us 100 howitzers and… bring 600 from storage."

Russian forces have run into difficulties too, according to analysts at the *Institute for the Study of War*. Away from Sievierodonetsk, where it has concentrated the bulk of its force, Russia has failed to gain ground around Izyum and Kharkiv. Even as Russia continues to

pound Ukrainian cities and push forward in the Donbas, it is running into a manpower problem. While stopping short of full mobilisation, Russia in June increased its attempts at "covert mobilisation": attempting to increase its frontline manpower by repurposing training battalions and lowering age requirements for military service.

Veteran diplomatic editor Patrick Wintour of *The Guardian* paints a picture of a war that has left both sides exhausted – but, crucially, has left Ukraine more exhausted than Russia. Wintour said that gaps in Ukraine's military inventory, specifically tank shortages, a lack of air defence platforms, and a smaller domestic defence industry means that, as things stand, Ukraine may be "doomed to slow strangulation."

(wb/pk)

Finland, Sweden head into NATO as Turkey lifts veto

Amid alarm in Europe at a belligerent and increasingly unpredictable Russia, Finland and Sweden are on course for a fast-track entry into NATO after Turkey dropped its opposition to the two Nordic countries joining the military alliance.

Turkey's decision – which will lead Helsinki and Stockholm to abandon long-held policies of non-alignment – was announced shortly before a NATO summit in Madrid from June 28 to 30. The gathering was held as Russian forces continued their onslaught against Ukraine in the continent's worst security crisis for decades. [AP] [Reuters] [CNBC]

Helsinki and Stockholm's membership bids, which they formally launched in May, now have to be approved by the parliaments of all 30 NATO states, something that could happen within months. [AP] When they join, Finland and Sweden will contribute well-trained armies parked on Russia's doorstep. Observers say Moscow is set to achieve the opposite of what it wanted when it unleashed its war on Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin warned that Russia would respond "symmetrically" if NATO deployed soldiers and infrastructure in Finland and Sweden.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had said he opposed Helsinki and Stockholm joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization over their alleged willingness to host Kurdish militants linked to what

Ankara considers to be terrorist groups. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Following weeks of negotiations, Finnish President Sauli Niinisto announced his country, Sweden and Turkey had signed a deal to clear the Nordic nations' path to the military alliance. [AP]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Stockholm had agreed to give greater focus to Ankara's extradition requests for suspected militants. He added that Finland and Sweden would also remove their restrictions on arms sales to Ankara.

Ankara 'got what it wanted'

A spokesperson for Erdogan's office said Ankara "got what it wanted" from Sweden and Finland. [BBC] Meanwhile Niinisto, whose country shares a 1,300 km border with Russia – said the deal "underscores the commitment" of Turkey and the two Nordic countries "to extend their full support against threats to each other's security." [DW]

Public and political support for joining the Western alliance has risen sharply in both Sweden and Finland since Moscow sent its soldiers into Ukraine on February 24.

Many observers believed that Turkey was unlikely to derail the expansion of NATO, and argued that Erdogan was aiming to flex his muscles on the international arena and secure concessions, while keeping his eyes firmly fixed on domestic voters ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections next year.

Finnish tabloid Ilta-Sanomat said in an opinion piece: "...perhaps Erdogan realised he was in danger of being taken for Putin's errand boy." It added that the deal with Turkey was "in any case... a decision of historic significance."

(pk)

NATO labels Russia main threat, vows sevenfold rise in troops on high alert

NATO will put "well over 300,000" troops at high readiness, increasing its rapid reaction force sevenfold, and grow its number of soldiers and arms positioned in countries closest to Russia, allies agreed at a key summit in Madrid, after officially labelling Moscow their "most significant and direct threat" in a major policy overhaul.

Around 40,000 troops currently make up the alliance's rapid reaction team, the NATO Response Force (NRF). By 2023, the force will be replaced by a model similar to that during the Cold War, with NATO providing more troops pre-assigned to specific defence tasks across land, air, sea and cyber operations. [Reuters]

"Together, this constitutes the biggest overhaul of our collective deterrence and defence since the Cold War," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at a June 27 briefing at NATO headquarters ahead of the alliance's Madrid summit. [The Guardian]

The summit, held on June 28-30, saw the allies adopt a new Strategic Concept, a broad set of policies and strategies updated approximately every ten years.

A key change is a shift in the alliance's official stance towards Russia, which NATO now describes as the "most significant and direct threat to the allies' security." [Reuters]

Moscow was previously labelled a strategic partner in the former Strategic Concept adopted at a 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon.

The alliance also plans to increase troops, arms and supplies stationed in countries closest to Russia. Units deployed across the Baltic states and five other frontline NATO countries will be strengthened, rising from battlegroups comprising up to 1,000 members to brigades that are 3,000 to 5,000 members strong. [Sky News]

'Don't come because you will lose'

"Simply put, we're saying 'Don't come because you will lose. Don't even think of coming'," a spokesperson for Estonia's foreign ministry told CNBC.

The new approach marks a significant shift from the bloc's 2014 "tripwire" policy in the Baltic states and Poland that was adopted after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. At the time NATO allies had agreed to deploy around 1,000 troops in each country. These would not prevent a Russian invading force from conquering territory but would immediately trigger a "tripwire" leading to reinforcements being called in. [Sky News]

The Baltic states have been pushing for a revision of the policy and for more allied troops to be stationed on their soil after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24.

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas had warned reporters on June 22 that under the tripwire strategy, her country – a former Soviet Republic – would be entirely "wiped out" by a Russian invasion before any reinforcements could arrive. [FT]

'Challenge' from China

The latest Strategic Concept includes new language on China as well, describing Beijing as a challenger to the West and accusing it of forming a "strategic partnership" with Moscow.

Nevertheless, NATO said it was "open to constructive engagement" with Beijing. "China is not our adversary, but we must be clear-eyed about the serious challenges it represents," Stoltenberg said. [Washington Post]

The bloc's broad mission statement also confirmed that the cornerstone Article 5 of the NATO charter – stating that an attack against one member is an attack on all – applies to cyber-attacks and space and hybrid campaigns, such as spreading disinformation or cutting off energy supplies. [Time]

The change of NATO's official stance on Moscow, from strategic partner to main threat, removes ambiguity, places Russia as the Western bloc's primary opponent and allows allies to better plan their defence, according to William Alberque, Director of Strategy, Technology and Arms Control at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. [France 24]

Three years after French President Emmanuel Macron told The Economist that NATO was becoming "brain dead", NATO repositioning itself in the Cold War framework upon which it was founded ensures it has "strategic purpose" once more, Britain's The Spectator said.

(qv/pk)

Russia's economy shows mixed signs four months after Western economic sanctions imposed

More than four months into Russia's war in the Ukraine, and brutal Western economic sanctions, the country's economy is showing mixed signals as consumer demand and industrial output fall while economic indicators – unemployment, oil exports and inflation – have improved or have stabilised.

Retail sales, the gauge of consumer demand, which drives economic growth in Russia, fell 10.1 percent in May after a 9.8 percent drop in April. Analysts had forecast a fall of 5.5 percent compared with the year-ago period, according to a Reuters poll. Industrial output fell an annual 1.7 percent in May, with car production plummeting 97 percent in May compared to the same time last year, according to Rosstat data. [Reuters]

Data from its trading partners suggests that Russia's imports fell sharply in March and April, Gerard DiPippo, Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Economic Program, wrote on June 22. "This is affecting industrial production, including military equipment, and disruptions probably will increase as inventories of imported parts are depleted."

Smartphones aren't working properly, while food packaging has to be printed without labels, Radio Free Europe reported on June 23. Clothing factories can't find buttons to sew on shirts. [RFERL]

Chris Miller of Tufts University's Fletcher School said that Western leaders wanted to limit the ability of Russia to fund its military over the medium term and limit its ability to buy components for defence equipment. By those measures, he said, the sanctions are having an impact. [Marketplace]

Unemployment falls

Conversely, Russia's unemployment rate fell 1 percentage point to 3.9 percent in May, its lowest since the statistics service started publishing the figure in 1992, according to the Eikon database. The rouble strengthened above its pre-war level by late April after plummeting more than 40 percent against the dollar after the invasion. [Reuters] [CSIS]

China and India have also increased their purchase of Russian oil despite Western sanctions. Russia has been improving the quality of its flagship Urals crude oil export, making the heavily-discounted grade even more attractive to buyers in Asia. US officials have said Moscow was now earning more money than before the conflict in Ukraine because of higher oil and gas prices. [Reuters]

The Central Bank of Russia also cut its key interest rate by 150 basis points to 9.5 percent in June – the level it was at when Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. The central bank said in a statement that "inflation is slowing faster and the decline in economic activity is of

a smaller magnitude" than it expected in April despite external challenges remaining for the economy. [CBR]

"Recent data suggest that price growth rates in May and early June have been low. This comes as a result of rouble exchange rate movements and the tailing-off of the surge in consumer demand in the context of a marked decline in inflation expectations of households and businesses," the CBR said. [CBR]

Russian default

The latest mixed economic data came days after Moscow appeared to default on its foreign debt for the first time since 1998 after missing a key deadline. Moscow failed to pay about USD 100 million in interest on two bonds during a 30-day grace period that expired on June 26. [BBC][CNN]

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said "statements of a default were absolutely unjustified," and added that an intermediary bank had withheld the money and that the reserves were blocked "unlawfully." Russia's finance minister called the situation "a farce" and said the situation was not expected to have a short-term impact. A senior US administration official said the default was due to Western sanctions against Russia. [BBC][CNN]

"Russia's economy is doing well for now," Theodore Karasi, a Russia and Middle East Affairs fellow at the Jamestown Foundation in Washington, said in response to e-mailed questions. "The rouble is at a steady low rate. There are production issues emerging in certain Russian cities that are signalling tough times ahead."

The government is making adjustments as fast as it can, he said. "There is and always will be a sustainability issue combined with hardening resolve."

Defiant Putin

Russian President Vladimir Putin set a defiant tone during a speech about the state of his country's economy in the wake of a swathe of sanctions. Efforts to "hammer" the Russians have failed and gloomy forecasts have not been fulfilled, Putin said at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June. EU sanctions could cost the bloc more than USD 400 billion, Putin said. The West's "economic blitzkrieg against Russia had no chance of success."

The forum, known as "the Russian Davos," had a significantly lower number of participants than during previous years as international companies stayed away

because of sanctions. This year leaders from Russian-backed parts of eastern Ukraine, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and a delegation from Afghanistan's Taliban leadership attended. [Russia Briefing] [The Moscow Times]

The forum became a platform for Russia to strengthen its economic ties with so-called friendly states such as Kazakhstan, China and Egypt. Valentina Matviyenko, chairwoman of the Federation Council, said there was a "growing interest" from Asian, African and Latin American countries in developing and expanding cooperation with Russia. [The Moscow Times] [RBC] [TASS]

(gc-ab/pk)

Global food crisis triggers fears of unrest and mass deaths

From Ireland to Sri Lanka, elevated food prices are causing concerns among leaders, policy makers and international aid organisations that the war in Ukraine could destabilise governments, cause social unrest and kill millions of people as inflation hurts the world's most vulnerable.

In June, there were protests around the world against government inaction to address inflationary pressure. Across Ireland, people took to the streets calling for a hike in the minimum wage to offset higher prices in protests organised by trade unionists, student and pensioner organisations, and opposition politicians. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [RTÉ]

Other protests last month included the political opposition in Pakistan, nurses in Zimbabwe, unionised workers in Belgium, railway workers in Britain, indigenous people in Ecuador, hundreds of US pilots and some European airline workers, the Associated Press reported. Sri Lanka's prime minister declared an economic collapse after weeks of political turmoil. [AP]

International aid organisations issued dire warnings about the food crisis. Peter Sands, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, said in an interview with AFP that food shortages could further undermine global health conditions for the world's most vulnerable people. [Barrons]

"We've probably already begun our next health crisis. It's not a new pathogen but it means people who are poorly nourished will be more vulnerable to the

existing diseases," he said on the sidelines of a G20 health ministers meeting in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta. "I think the combined impact of infectious diseases and the food shortages and the energy crisis... we can be talking about millions of extra deaths because of this." [Barrons]

David Beasley, the director of the UN's World Food Program, warned that if Ukrainian and Russian food products were not able to flow the result would be "famine, destabilisation of nations and mass migration." While Beasley was speaking about the most "at-risk" nations, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that "no country will be immune to the social and economic repercussions."

Signs of Reprieve

There are signs of possible reprieve to rampant food inflation. Agricultural commodities fell as the start of the wheat harvest in the Northern Hemisphere raises forecasts for production among analysts. Slowing economic growth and the prospect of recession are also lowering commodity prices. [Yahoo][Bloomberg]

The United Nations food price index has eased from a record high in March after Russia's invasion choked exports from Ukraine, one of the world's top grain and vegetable oil shippers. The FAO Food Price Index averaged 157.4 points in May, down 0.6 percent from April, marking the second consecutive monthly decline. The drop was led by declines in the vegetable oil and dairy price indices. [FAO]

Chua Hak Bin, an economist at Maybank Investment Banking Group, said that "there are signs that the global food crisis may be nearing its peak." [Yahoo]

Deadlocked

Despite the slight improvement in the price of foods, plans to ease the crisis by getting grain out of Ukraine during the war remained deadlocked. Talks with Russia about reopening the Black Sea have made little progress so far, and Ukraine remains opposed to Turkey's proposal to open the port of Odessa to both Russian and Ukrainian food products. [The Guardian] [Los Angeles Times] [New York Times] [Deutsche Welle] [Al Jazeera] [Politico Europe] [RFE/RL]

Russia did announce on June 30 that its forces abandoned the strategic Black Sea outpost of Snake Island, in a development that could loosen the grip of Russia's blockade on Ukrainian ports. Moscow said that it decided to withdraw a "gesture of goodwill" to show it was not obstructing UN efforts to open a

humanitarian corridor allowing grain to be shipped from Ukraine. A Russian naval blockade is holding back more than 25 million tons of grain from the world food supply. [Reuters] [Politico]

On June 20, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also told UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that there were joint efforts to start exports of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea. The UN is working on a mechanism to open Ukraine's ports to allow the grain to be shipped out. US President Joe Biden has floated the idea of building grain silos in Ukraine's NATO neighbours to help increase the flow of exports.[AA] [Daily Sabah][Politico]

Traditionally non-aligned nations have been calling for peace as they feel the bite of food shortages. Indonesian President Joko Widodo, whose country will be hosting the upcoming G20 summit, has made addressing the food crisis a priority at the meeting. Macky Sall, the chairman of the African Union, visited Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

There, he called for a "mutually agreed" settlement which would release Ukrainian grain for export, which he says "particularly affects African countries." Africa imported nearly 44 percent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine during 2018 and 2020. [Africanews] [Euractiv] [Washington Post]

(wb/gc/jv/go/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Government plans to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP

Belgium plans to increase defence spending to 2 percent gross domestic product by 2035 after the government reached an agreement with the country's coalition green parties.

The Flemish and French-speaking green parties have agreed to increase defence spending to adhere to the country's NATO commitment by linking the target with six conditions. They include better integration between European states, better co-operation and joint defence acquisitions, defence investments must benefit Belgian businesses, defence expenditure must serve society as a whole and extra defence spending mustn't mean cutbacks elsewhere. [VrtNWS][BrusselsTimes]

The government had agreed to increase defence spending to 1.5 percent of GDP by 2030. Initially reaching an agreement on the 2 percent target had been difficult. The green parties argued that there are other more important challenges, such as reaching climate goals. [VrtNWS][BrusselsTimes]

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo had to convince the seven parties in his coalition, including the Flemish and French-speaking Green parties, Groen and Ecolo respectively, that increasing defence spending was in the country's national strategic interest after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [LeMonde]

"We are well aware that we are now in a new security situation," De Croo said. "The war in Ukraine means European countries have partly shed our naiveness. Luckily we now form part of an alliance of more than 30 nations committed to joint defence. If you wish to enjoy this protection, you must contribute." [VrtNWS] [BrusselsTimes]

Belgian green parties, who are traditionally pacifist, were reluctant to follow the lead of the German Greens, who recently approved a constitutional amendment in the Bundestag to create a 100 billion euro fund to modernise the army. [LeMonde]

Co-Chairman of Ecolo Jean-Marc Nollet told the daily newspaper *La Libre Belgique* in May that it was "indecent to imagine devoting so much money to defence." He added that "all this to reach an obsessional figure that makes no sense, the famous 2% of spending." [LeMonde]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Brussels is slow to process asylum seekers after hunger strike last year

The Belgian government has been slow to offer political asylum to hundreds of refugees after a hunger strike in Brussels last year attempted to raise awareness about their plight.

Only 90 undocumented migrants of 516 who participated in the hunger strike in the Beguinage church in the centre of Brussels were given the right to stay in the country legally. There were 442 applications of the total that have requested the right to stay legally in the country. [DeMorgen] [BrusselsTimes] [LeSoir]

Those who received a negative decision will be given access to guidance by a counsellor at the Immigration Department, the Belgian Secretary of State for Migration, Sammy Mahdi, said.

“The Immigration Department has thoroughly studied all the files, some of them up to 300 pages thick,” Mahdi said. “I hope this will allow us to bring the discussion to a close. We continue to work on a correct policy. For many, this means returning to their country of origin.”

Representatives of the asylum seekers allege that they are experiencing a “Kafkaesque” situation. When they reached an agreement to end the hunger strike in July, clear guidelines were given to legalise their status in the country. They allege that the government is not providing details about the duration of the procedure, the length of stay in Belgium, family ties, or education and employment.

(gt/gc)

France: Macron loses absolute majority in parliament

French President Emmanuel Macron lost his absolute majority in parliament during the second round of legislative elections on June 19, a political setback that will likely make it difficult for the beleaguered leader to implement his ambitious domestic reform agenda as confidence in the country’s economic future wanes. [France24]

Macron's Ensemble (Together) electoral coalition fell short of the 289 seats needed in the National Assembly (Lower House) to secure a majority, with 245 seats, making the first time in more than 20 years that a French president has lost an absolute majority in parliament. He now faces strong opposition from parties on the political left and right.

Jean-Luc Melenchon, leader of the new left-wing alliance, New Ecologic and Social People's Union (NUPES), came in second place, winning 131 seats, becoming the main opposition force. Marine Le Pen's right-wing party Rassemblement National (RN) scored record high wins with 89 seats, making it the single largest opposition party in France's National Assembly.

The reasons for Macron's growing unpopularity are not his domestic policies, which centred on modernising France's rigid administration and making the country more business-friendly, but rather his character, according to historian Pierre Rosanvallon. "In a certain way, he embodies something that prompts very profound rejection," Rosanvallon said. "There is this image that sticks to him…of distance, of contempt." [DW]

Consumer Confidence

With Macron's party losing its ruling majority, uncertainty about the country's economic future has increased. Consumer confidence fell more than expected in June, hitting a near nine-year low as concerns mount about the economy. The INSEE official statistics agency said its consumer confidence index fell to 82 in June from 85 in May, the lowest level since July 2013. [Reuters]

Household sentiment fell to the lowest level since May 2020 when France was in the second month of its first and most strict COVID-19 lockdown.Higher inflation is causing anxiety among the French public as they pay more for basic food commodities and energy. Reuters]

Macron doesn't seem in a position to resolve the political crisis. The opposition parties rejected his calls for "compromises" in order to find a way out of the country's crisis. Le Pen has made it clear that she would try to block Macron's agenda. [France24]

Melenchon declined Macron's invitation to the Elysee for coalition talks, sending one of his lieutenants instead. He then referred to Macron's televised address on June 22 in which the president shared his future strategy for "government unity" as "ratatouille," a famous French dish made of mixed vegetables. [France24]

Christian Jacob, the leader of the Les Republicains party (LR), which is considered the closest ideologically to Macron's party, declined to form a political alliance with Macron. With 61 seats in parliament, he would have been in a position to give Macron his majority, putting an end to the political deadlock and allowing a coalition to be formed. [Reuters]

"The logic says there is a deal to be done but Christian Jacob wants to stay independent," Paul Smith, professor of French politics at Nottingham University, said in an interview. "He has to say that because a lot of people in his party want to see Macron go to the wall."

Coalition Agreement

Macron's Europe Minister, Clement Beaune, clarified that the president would not seek an alliance with Le Pen's Rassemblement National. "Let me be absolutely clear, there cannot be any alliance, even a circumstantial one, with the RN. We have no ideas in common with the Rassemblement National." [Deutsche Welle]

"The last thing Macron wants to do is form an alliance with Le Pen," Smith said. "She would love it- she wants to play good pupil."

After rejecting French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne's offer to resign, Macron has instructed her to form a new "government of action" for early July. [France24]

"If there is no kind of majority contract, then Emmanuel Macron will have to govern on a law by law basis," Smith said. "If they [the parties] are willing to support a given measure, then one could see governance on a case by case basis."

(la/gc)

France: Macron's government undermined by rape, sexual misconduct allegations

French President Emmanuel Macron's pledge to make gender equality a pillar of his new agenda is being undermined by accusations of rape and sexual misconduct among the officials he has appointed to cabinet positions.

Three women have accused the Minister for solidarity and disabled people, Damien Abad, of raping them in 2010 and 2011, with the latest coming forth with

allegations in June, the investigative journal Mediapart reported. The accusations are based on testimonials given to the journal by the alleged victims. [Euronews] [Gettotext.com]

Abad, a former leading figure of the conservative party Les Republicains, strongly denied the allegations of rape, saying he "never raped a single woman in my life" and that his sexual relationships have "always been consensual." He also claimed that such acts are "simply impossible" because of a congenital condition he suffers from called arthrogryposis, which affects the joints and muscles.

Macron has remained supportive of Abad, despite the increasing number of allegations which have cast a shadow over his new government. The French president had pledged during his presidential campaign to make gender equality the "great cause of his new five-year term." Feminist groups have accused Macron of not delivering on his promise. [NY Times]

His cabinet was already plagued by concerns of sexism after the re-appointment of Gerald Darmanin and Eric Dupond-Moretti. They have also been accused of sexual misconduct. This has prompted concerns over the prevalence of sexism and sexual violence in French politics. [Financial Times] [Le Monde]

Two members of Les Republicains party and former colleagues of Abad said that the rape accusations came as no surprise as he was allegedly known to behave inappropriately with women around him. They had been unaware of the accusations made against Abad until the publication of the article by Mediapart. [Mediapart] [New York Times]

"If there are new elements [on Abad], if there is further legal action, we will draw all the consequences of this decision," France's newly appointed prime minister, Elisabeth Borne, said. There was "zero tolerance" for any form of sexual violence, she said. [Politico][Le Monde]

(la/gc)

France: Macron calls for increasing European defence budgets, says France in 'war economy'

French President Emmanuel Macron urged European countries to bolster their military capabilities in response to the geopolitical fallout caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a development that has

undermined a sense of regional security among EU member states. [France24]

Macron called for a “much stronger and much more ambitious” industrial and technological base for European defence. Speaking at the Eurosatory defence conference on June 13 in Paris, Macron said Europe needed "a much larger defence industry” to avoid “future dependencies” on suppliers elsewhere to meet equipment needs. [Reuters]

This marks a clear shift from Macron’s earlier stance which saw him try to ‘appease’ Putin - one which caused considerable concern in Kiev over France’s reluctance to stand up to Moscow.” During his visit to Ukraine on June 15, Macron vowed that France would ‘do everything to stop Russia’s war forces, to help the Ukrainians and their army and continue to negotiate.”

Earlier in the month, Macron had said that “we must not humiliate Russia so that the day when the fighting stops we can build an exit ramp through diplomatic means.” Speaking to French media last Friday, Macron said that Russian leader Vladimir Putin must be given an exit from what he called his “historic and fundamental mistake” of invading Ukraine. [France24]

Macron and other European leaders have changed their thinking on European defence priorities after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The invasion has compelled the EU to reassess its security and defence policy, with the European public backing “tough measures against Russia, including applying economic sanctions, ending fossil fuel imports, and deploying troops to eastern Europe,” the European Council on Foreign Relations said on June 15. [ECFR]

Reflecting this, Macron said he wants France’s military budget to increase through 2025 to “match” emerging threats. He added that France had entered a “war economy” that could last a “long time.”

Changes to the government’s legislation could be underway to allow the state to requisition civilian factories for the production of military equipment, a measure normally taken during times of war, according to Le Monde daily newspaper. [rfi] [Reuters]

Since Macron came to power in 2017, France’s military spending has gradually increased, reaching EUR 41 billion this year. It is forecast to reach EUR 50 billion in 2025. “Russia’s war has created an additional need to move faster and become stronger at lower cost,” Macron said. [France24]

(la/gc)

France: Horsemeat traders involved in illegal trafficking ring face prison time

Eighteen people, including two veterinarians, from France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands could be sentenced to 10 years in prison each for illegally trading horsemeat not cleared for human consumption in a trial that started on June 7 in the southern French city of Marseille. [France24] [rfi]

The defendants are accused of buying thousands of retired horses and ponies from owners, then shipping them to Belgium for fake identification papers before sending them to abattoirs in the south of France. The owners believed their ageing animals would be living out their final days in the countryside. [The Guardian]

Between 2010 and 2013, more than 4,700 horses were exported to the slaughterhouse by an illegal trafficking ring of horsemeat traders set up by Belgian horse trader Jean-Marc Decker. Between 2010 and 2015, the traffickers allegedly forged documents and certificates of origin in violation of the EU's strict sanitary rules which govern the trading of horsemeat. [France24][rfi]

(la/gc)

Germany: Government suspends constitutional restriction on debt for third year, raises minimum wage

Germany suspended its constitutional restrictions on debt for the third consecutive year, as the country's economy struggles with the fallout from war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, with the adoption of its 2022 budget of EUR 496 billion. [Zeit] [Tagesschau]

The German Bundestag approved on June 3 about EUR 140 billion in extra debt, the second highest on record after EUR 215.4 billion in 2021. Last year, government debt increased due to economic spending related to the Covid-19 lockdown. [Zeit] [ZDF]

The 2022 debt includes a supplementary budget of around EUR 40 billion that was submitted at the end of April for measures directly related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Federal Ministry of Finance said. The Bundesbank, the German central bank, warned in June that "uncertainty about future economic developments is exceptionally high," mainly due to the Russia-Ukraine war. [TheStar][AA]

Finance Minister Christian Lindner said the budget for 2023 would comply with regulatory restrictions on debt. Talks with ministers for next year's budget have already started and the focus will be on efforts to fight against high inflation, Lindner said. The country's so-called debt brake, which stipulates that the federal and state budgets must generally be balanced without revenues from borrowing, was temporarily suspended during the past three years. [TheStar][Zeit] [ZDF]

Chancellor Olaf Scholz told the Bundestag legislature as lawmakers convened to discuss the nation's budget that Germany must refrain from funding long-term subsidies with further credit in order to return to its constitutionally enshrined debt brake next year. "The goal must be to reduce inflationary pressures sustainably," he said.

The Bundesbank has forecast that inflation this year would rise to 7.1 percent on an annual average. The German economy will probably grow 1.9 percent this year, according to the latest projections from the Bundesbank. [AA]

"Germany's economic recovery is therefore likely to continue, but at a considerably more subdued pace than projected last December," the bank said. [AA]

The government adopted this year's budget later than usual. It is generally decided shortly before the beginning of the new budget year but the federal elections of 2021 and the change in government delayed the approval. [Tagesschau] [Spiegel]

"It's not a budget, it's a mountain of debt," Alexander Dobrindt, member of the Christian-Social Union, a Christian-democratic and conservative political party in the region of Bavaria, said. The Left criticised the postponement of social projects. [Zeit] [Spiegel]

New Minimum Wage

The Bundestag also approved raising the minimum wage by 15 percent to EUR 12, effective from October 1, a decision that meets a key campaign promise by Scholz in last year's election. The current minimum wage of EUR 9.82 is set to increase to EUR 10.45 in July then again three months later as the country grapples with inflationary pressure.

The new minimum wage will benefit around six million people, who currently earn less than EUR 12 per hour, mainly women and workers in eastern Germany, Labour Minister Hubertus Heil said. The increase will mean EUR 400 extra per month for people with a

monthly income of EUR 1,700, Heil said. [AP] [Süddeutsche][Tagesschau] [ZDF] [Bloomberg]

Germany decided on a national minimum wage in 2015. A commission composed of employers and unions usually decides on potential increases after the legislative decision by the Bundestag. [Tagesschau] [DW]

Members of the opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU), as well as some employers who are part of the minimum wage commission, criticised the bill, saying it bypasses and weakens the commission. Hermann Grohe of the CDU supports raising the minimum wage, but not the current process. [Süddeutsche] [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government approves constitutional amendment for EUR 100 billion military fund

German lawmakers approved the constitutional amendment needed for an extra EUR 100 billion military spending in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, an increase that will finally allow Berlin to meet the NATO commitment of defence spending of 2 percent of gross domestic product. [Tagesschau] [Reuters][Zeit] [Bloomberg]

The spending is supposed to upgrade Germany's under-financed and under-equipped military. The additional military fund required a change of the country's constitution since the new defence budget will be funded by credit that bypasses the country's restriction on debt. [Bloomberg] [FAZ]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed appreciation for Germany's "historic investments in defence," including the approval by the Bundestag of the special defence fund. "The support in the Bundestag to increase defence spending and to better equip the Bundeswehr is remarkable and a great signal to other allies," the Secretary General said. [NATO]

Getting the necessary support in the Bundestag was challenging. The governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) negotiated for months with the biggest opposition party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), to reach a two-thirds majority needed for approval. The vote was postponed in May due to disagreements between the parties. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

During the vote on June 3, 567 lawmakers voted in favour of the constitutional amendment. The minimum needed to pass was 491. The vote was opposed by 96 and 20 lawmakers abstained. [FAZ] [Politico Europe]

The Left, as well as the right-wing party AfD were against the military fund. Dietmar Bartsch of the left party, Die Linke, described the extra military budget as "insane."

Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht said in front of parliament that "this is a lot of money, but it is well invested in the security and peace of our country." Mathias Middelberg of the CDU said it was a "necessary and important step." [Zeit] [AP]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Berlin announces gas-saving plan, makes U-turn on coal use

Germany announced plans to boost gas storage levels and reopen coal plants to provide energy and heating for next winter, amid concerns that Russia may completely cut gas deliveries, after reducing them last month, in response to sanctions by European countries for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Bloomberg]

German Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said the plan includes reopening coal plants for electricity production, a step he called "bitter" but "simply necessary." Coal-fired power plants could add up to 10 gigawatts of capacity in case of critical supply shortages, the Economy Ministry said, adding that a corresponding law would go to the upper house of parliament on July 8.[AP] [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

Habeck also said there were plans to limit gas usage by industries through a "gas auction model." It would offer financial incentives for companies to save gas and make unused supplies available for storage. [Bloomberg] [Zeit] [Reuters]

Refilling gas stocks is the priority at this moment, Habeck said. Gas supplies are currently secure but the situation is "serious," he said, warning that the coming winter could prove challenging. [Tagesschau] [Bloomberg] [Politico Europe]

A credit line of EUR 15 billion will be made available through state bank KfW to accelerate efforts to refill gas storage. Germany's current storage is at 57 percent of capacity; the target is 80 percent by October and 90

percent by November. [Tagesschau] [Bloomberg] [Politico Europe][Zeit] [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

Russian gas company Gazprom lowered gas supplies by about 60 percent through the Nord Stream pipeline to several European countries on June 15, citing technical reasons. Chancellor Olaf Scholz sees the cut as politically motivated. Germany relies on Russian gas for 35 percent of its energy consumption. [Spiegel] [Euronews] [AP] [Politico Europe] [Bloomberg]

The German government, in response to the shortages, enacted stage two of the country's three-stage crisis plan on June 23, meaning there is a considerable risk for long-term gas supply shortages. The first stage was triggered at the end of March. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

German industry is supportive of Habeck's plans. Siegfried Russwurm, president of the business lobby group Federation of German Industries (BDI), said that consumption of gas had to be reduced as much as possible and that "every kilowatt-hour counts." [DW] [Tagesschau] [EURACTIV]

Critics of the gas-saving plan said that small to medium-sized companies would not be able to compete with larger companies on how much gas supply they could auction off. Reactivating coal plants might also jeopardise Germany's aim of using no coal by 2030. [DW]

Chairman of the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Friedrich Merz advocated for a longer running time for Germany's last active nuclear power plants, but governing parties Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens want to keep the expiration date at the end of the year. [Spiegel]

Gerard Araud, former French ambassador to the United Nations and the United States, said via Twitter that "German energy policy is reaching an apex of absurdity" in its refusal to use nuclear energy in favour of coal. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Turkish suspect admits to spying for Turkey in Germany

A Turkish citizen has confessed to spying for Turkey on supporters of the Gulen movement and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Germany during a trial on June

21 in the European country. [Globe Echo] [Teller Report] [WDR] [World Today News]

Supporters of Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim preacher living in the US, and the PKK are considered enemies of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Since the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, Erdogan has cracked down on supporters of the Gulen movement.

The alleged agent was arrested in a Dusseldorf hotel last year with the help of several special forces and an armoured car. The public prosecutor accuses him of acting as a secret service agent and violating the weapons law. The 41-year-old denied that he was spying for a second intelligence service within Turkey. [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [FAZ]

(fw/gc)

Germany: New law is being drafted to allow some rejected asylum seekers residence

Germany may introduce measures that could allow as many as 100,000 asylum seekers in the country under the "tolerated persons" status the right to stay in the country based on a new merit system, according to a law being drafted by the interior ministry. [Tagesschau]

The draft law will allow asylum seekers, who have stayed in Germany for more than five years under the "tolerated person" status but had their application denied, to receive a permanent residence permit if they meet certain conditions. These include speaking German and being self-sufficient after a trial period of one year. [FAZ] [EURACTIV]

A rejected asylum seeker is designated a "tolerated person" in Germany if a deportation is temporarily impossible, for example due to health reasons. Then, the deportation is suspended and can be extended repeatedly. [Spiegel] [EURACTIV]

Criminal offenders and people who gave wrong personal information in order to prevent their deportation will excluded from the designation. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser plans to include measures that make it easier to deport criminals. [Tagesschau] [FAZ]

The governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) is working on the draft law, according to the interior ministry. Members of the

opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) criticised the plan for allowing people who came to Germany without a legal basis to stay and for rewarding illegal migration. The federal states will have to vote on the plan. [EURACTIV] [Spiegel][Spiegel] [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Naturalisation of migrants increases by 20 percent in 2021, number of Syrians becoming citizens triples

The number of immigrants that became German citizens increased an annual 20 percent in 2021, with the rate of Syrian refugees being naturalised tripling compared to the previous year, data from the Federal Statistical Office showed.

Around 131,600 foreigners were naturalised in 2021, of the total 19,100 were Syrian who fled their country between 2014 and 2016. There were 12,200 Turkish, 6,900 Romanian, 5,500 Polish and 5,000 Italians naturalised last year. [FAZ]

A person has to live in Germany for eight years to apply for citizenship, though a person can qualify for citizenship earlier, after six years, if certain requirements are met that show a “particular willingness to integrate.” They include strong language skills, academic and professional achievements and civic commitment. [FAZ] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Transport minister, car industry oppose EU’s 2035 ban on combustion engines

Germany's Transport Minister Volker Wissing and the country’s car industry have criticised a decision by the European Parliament to ban the sale of new cars with combustion engines from 2035, due its lack of consideration for new fuel mixes and technologies and the impact on customers.

Wissing said he opposed the ban because it does not exempt cars powered with synthetic fuels, arguing that it should be implemented in a way that is technologically open. This would include registering new cars beyond 2035 if they are powered exclusively

with synthetic fuels in a climate neutral way, Wissing said. [AP]

A total ban will increase the cost for consumers, said Hildegard Muller, president of the German auto industry association VDA. "The EU Parliament has today taken a decision against citizens, against the market, against innovation and against modern technologies," Muller said in a statement after the Parliament's vote. [EURACTIV]

Banning sales of cars using diesel and petrol is part of the EU's goal to become climate neutral by 2050. The European Parliament voted in favour of banning combustion engine cars from 2035 on June 8. It still has to be approved by the member states. [EURACTIV] [AP]

Car associations are expected to continue lobbying against the ban as the 27 member states still have to agree in the European Council before negotiating with the Parliament. The VDA will continue to advocate that "the appropriate framework conditions are first created for such a far-reaching decision", including fleet regulation and the expansion of the charging infrastructure, Muller said. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government approves law to accelerate wind power expansion

Germany's cabinet approved a law to accelerate wind power expansion as the country tries to meet its renewable energy targets and reduce its dependency on Russian energy imports. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The law requires federal states to allocate 2 percent of German land to wind farms by 2032, with an interim goal of 1.4 percent of land being used for wind power by 2026. Currently, only 0.8 percent is assigned to wind farms. [Spiegel] [Reuters]

If federal states fail to meet their targets, the government can suspend states' zoning laws that regulate how far away from residential areas wind farms must be built. These rules have slowed down the expansion of wind power in some states. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

Germany has set the target to fill 80 percent of its energy demand from renewables by 2030. The capacity of onshore wind power is aimed to increase to

115 gigawatts, which is equivalent to the capacity of 38 nuclear plants. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Catholic diocese comes under pressure after report say clerics abused hundreds of minors

The German Catholic diocese has come under renewed pressure to reform after a recent report showed that at least 196 clerics allegedly abused hundreds of minors in the city of Munster between 1945 and 2020.

The study, which was commissioned by the diocese and carried out by the University of Munster over 2.5 years, showed “a massive leadership failure” of the diocese’s bishops. There were at least 610 victims of abuse, but the true figure might be over 6,000, the authors said. [Euronews]

Church officials covered up scandals or only made superficial interventions and were “extensively in the know” about the abuse, according to co-author Thomas Grossboelting. [AP] [Euronews]

Munster Bishop Felix Genn apologised to the victims, promising “further consequences” and saying that an apology is “not enough.” [AP]

The findings added to a report from 2018, which showed that at least 3,667 people were abused by members of the clergy between 1946 and 2014 in Germany. [AP] [Euronews]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Government struggles to provide basic services as asylum seekers surge

Ireland is struggling to provide basic services for the increasing number of refugees entering the country, raising concerns that a two-tiered system is developing that distinguishes between Ukrainians and others due to the strains on the immigration system, according to a government official and multiple refugee organisations.

Minister for Children, Equality and Integration, Roderic O'Gorman, said that the conditions in video footage

showing men, women and children sleeping in make-shift beds in a hotel's conference rooms and banquet hall were unacceptable. The footage from the Red Cow Hotel in Dublin showed non-Ukrainian asylum seekers lying on carpeted floors, sheets and mattresses on chairs, and a table with bottled water. [RTÉ] [Irish Independent] [RTÉ]

Multiple refugee organisations, who visited the hotel after the video was released, voiced concerns that a two-tiered asylum system could emerge between Ukrainians and others. They have demanded that the government apply the same standards to all asylum seekers in Ireland, including providing all refugees with hotel beds. [RTÉ][RTÉ] [thejournal.ie] [RTÉ]

The setup in the hotel contradicted "basic health and safety," the CEO of the Irish Refugee Council, Nick Henderson, told RTE Radio's This Week programme. "There is also a question around the use of public money to accommodate people in such a manner. I think that this situation is symptomatic of wider problems in the international protection process." [MSN]

O'Gorman acknowledged that there were two different asylum systems in place. He said that these measures were necessary due to the strain currently placed on the system and due to government efforts to follow EU directives, making it increasingly difficult to accommodate Ukrainian refugees. [RTÉ][The Irish Times]

The number of people seeking international protection in Ireland has recently risen significantly. It increased an annual 650 percent compared to March 2021 and 165 percent between January and March 2022. [IPO] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The government is being criticised for favouring Ukrainian children over other refugee children in the education system, which allegedly revealed a bias for white Christians. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Government to give universities EUR 12m increase enrolment of students with autism

Ireland will give universities EUR 12 million to become more inclusive towards students with autism and intellectual disabilities as the government seeks to raise enrolment in higher education.

The funding will be distributed over four years, with EUR 3 million each year, from 2022 to 2025. Higher education institutions are supposed to spend it for measures such as quiet zones, tailored academic programmes and assistive technology. The funding is part of a greater plan for equity of success that will be published this summer. [The Irish Times] [Irish Mirror]

In late May, the government was criticised for proposing temporary "special education centres" to cope with the lack of adequate school places for children with autism and other intellectual disabilities. Minister of State for Special Education, Josepha Madigan, said the name had caused a wrong perception. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: PM Martin wants to hold vote on Irish military neutrality

Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin said he wanted the country's Citizens Assembly to reassess Irish military neutrality in conflicts, despite most voters being in favour of the current model, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted a political debate about the issue.

Martin said on May 29 that he will discuss the possibility of a Citizens' Assembly with his coalition partners. A poll conducted in April showed that most Irish voters do not want a change in the country's principle of military neutrality. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, multiple Irish politicians have asked for a debate on the topic of neutrality. [Irish Examiner] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

The war is also spurring a debate about NATO. On June 8, Martin said the government would not need a referendum to join NATO. Martin also said that Ireland needed "to reflect" on military non-alignment and military neutrality, adding that the country is not politically neutral. [The Irish Times]

That claim was contested by constitutional scholars. David Kenny, a professor at Trinity College Dublin School of Law, said there was a "strong case" for a referendum being needed to join NATO. He cited a 1987 Supreme Court case, the Crotty judgement, which forced the government to hold a referendum on the Single European Act and on core EU treaties. [The Irish Times]

Ireland is a member of the Partnership for Peace programme that aligns its military capabilities with NATO standards, but the current government has no intention to join the alliance. [The Irish Times] [Irish Examiner]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Government will introduce new living wage as inflation threatens household income

Ireland plans to phase out the country's minimum wage by 2026 and replace it with a new living wage as rising inflation threatens to push living standards lower for the first time in many years even though government officials were divided on how to calculate it. [Government Press Release] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The new living wage will be 60 percent of the annual median wage. It will be implemented over several years to avoid strains on workers and businesses, as well as consequent job losses. [The Irish Times] [Government Press Release][The Irish Times]

Following a report by the Low Pay Commissionin March this year, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar announced plans to introduce a living wage. The current, non-binding Irish living wage is at EUR 12.90 per hour. The current minimum wage is at EUR 10.50 per hour. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

Ahead of the decision, Varadkar had said he "sees merit" in a living wage linked to a basket of goods and services that the government assesses each year to achieve an agreed upon standard of living. He also said that setting the living wage as a percentage of the median wage was a simpler approach that provides certainty. [Government Press Release] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Environment watchdog warns country may miss climate goals without urgent steps

Ireland may miss its greenhouse gas emissions reduction target unless it takes urgent steps to implement all of its climate plans and policies, the

country's environmental watchdog said in a new report.

The Environmental Protection Agency urged the government to implement "all climate plans and policies, plus further new measures" to achieve its goal of a 51 percent reduction in emissions by 2030. The EPA projected that total greenhouse emissions are estimated to have increased by 6 percent in 2021, although the country's plan requires an average reduction of 4.8 percent per year. [The Irish Times] [Belfast Telegraph]

Climate Change Minister Eamon Ryan told the cabinet that it had to aim for the upper end of sectoral emission targets published last November, including an 81 percent cut in energy emissions. Ireland has only managed to implement 73 percent of its current 2021 Climate Action Plan. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Independent][The Irish Times]

Laura Burke, director general of the EPA, said that there was "a significant gap" between the ambition in the Climate Act and the realisation of the necessary actions to deliver on that ambition. The agriculture sector is an obstacle for this. Methane emissions will need to drop by up to 30 percent to meet the lower range of the 2021 climate action plan.

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Civil rights organisations criticised debate about transgender issues on national broadcaster

Civil rights organisations criticised a debate about transgender issues on the RTE that allowed people to voice hateful comments and that ultimately led to Dublin Pride ending its media partnership with the national broadcaster. [The Irish Times] [Irish Examiner] [RTÉ]

RTE apologised to people offended by the show and said it would address all formal complaints, but it defended its general approach towards free speech. A parliamentary committee for media and culture is reviewing the incident. [The Irish Times] [Irish Examiner] [RTÉ]

In June, RTE hosted three separate discussions on transgender issues on its radio show Liveline. Listeners could call in and comment on the issue. Topics included language used in legislation.[The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Government signs deal with Microsoft to protect against cyber attacks

Ireland has signed an agreement with Microsoft to help Dublin defend its critical infrastructure against cyberattacks.

On June 15, Ireland joined the Microsoft Government Security Programme, which is a partnership between states or state agencies and Microsoft. The country will provide the company with the information it needs to help its infrastructure from cyberattacks.

The programme is free of charge but Ireland must protect Microsoft's intellectual property and sensitive information. More than 45 countries have already joined this partnership. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner]

In 2021, Ireland's health care system was the target of a cyberattack that caused major disruptions. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch intelligences services allegedly use controversial Israeli hacking software

Dutch intelligence services AIVD used the Pegasus hacking software from the Israeli company NSO Group to track a phone of a murder suspect. [Euractiv] [NLtimes]

AIVD used Pegasus to track the phone of Ridouan Taghi, the main suspect in the Marengo mass murder trial, which involved seventeen suspects from a Dutch-Moroccan criminal organisation indicted for their involvement in a number of murders and attempted murders. Taghi was arrested in Dubai in 2019. [Euractiv] [NLtimes]

AIVD declined to comment on the issue. The NSO Group has not confirmed whether the Netherlands is a customer, but their website reports that their "products help licensed government intelligence and law-enforcement agencies lawfully address the most dangerous issues in today's world." [Euractiv] [NLtimes]

The Dutch parliamentarian Pieter Omtzigt launched an investigation to determine if the Netherlands was using the Pegasus software.

“I want to know within which framework it was deployed, against which categories of people, and how supervision is organised,” he said. “I also want to know what the Prime Minister thinks about the use of Pegasus by the Netherlands.” [Euractiv] [NLtimes]

The Spanish government recently declared a reform of its intelligence service after one of its agencies confessed to using Pegasus spy software to hack into the cell phones of Catalan politicians and activists. The European Parliament has established a new committee of inquiry (PEGA) to investigate the use of spyware throughout the Union. [Euractiv]

(vp/gc)

Netherlands: Protesters gathered in Hague to highlight refugee plight in Dutch village of Ter Apel

A small group of protesters gathered overnight last month in front of the Duch Ministry of Justice and Security in The Hague to bring attention to the problems that asylum seekers are confronted with in the village of Ter Apel in the country’s northern province of Groningen.

The demonstrators said it was “inhumane” that asylum seekers must regularly spend the night in chairs due to capacity problems at the application centre in Ter Apel. The Red Cross installed tents after the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) requested better shelter for the refugees.

The director of the Red Cross in the Netherlands, Marieke van Schaik, called for a long-term solution to the problem of providing shelter for asylum seekers, saying it was unacceptable that children were sleeping in tents. The ministry is apparently working on a solution to the problem. [NLtimes]

(vp/gc)

Netherlands: Coalition party CDA calls for adjustments in government nitrogen emission reduction plans

The Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) coalition party wants the government to modify its plans to reduce nitrogen emissions because of the impact they may have on the agriculture industry. The plan calls for reductions of 70 percent in nitrogen emissions in many parts of the country.

CDA Chairman in the Dutch House of Representatives, Pieter Heerma, said the emission reduction target will hurt the farming industry, though there are "alternative ways" to reduce nitrogen. The Argactie farmers' collective plans to organise a tractor protest in The Hague. A similar protest was done back in 2019 and brought traffic around The Hague almost to a halt. [NLtimes]

(vp/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch government issues permit with Germany for North Sea gas exploration

The Dutch government has issued permits for a joint gas exploration project with Germany off the North Sea coast as part of the government's plan to diversify its energy sources after Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced European leaders to rethink their countries' dependence on energy supplies. [APnews] [Euractiv]

The exploration will take place about 19 kilometres north of the coast of the two countries and is waiting for permission from German authorities to start. If the joint project is approved, the first gas could be produced by the end of 2024. [Euractiv][APnews] [Euractiv] [Euronews]

The decision was made after Russia's energy giant Gazprom suspended gas supplies to Dutch trader GasTerra after the latter refused to bend to Moscow's demand to pay in roubles. Germany has changed its stance on North Sea drilling because of the war in Ukraine. Last year, the German state of Lower Saxony decided not to issue drilling permits. [APnews] [Euronews]

The projects have raised concerns among environmentalists, who have criticised the decision to invest in fossil fuels rather than renewable energy. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, concerned that the war in Ukraine may divert attention from the need to combat climate change, called on countries to stop drilling for new gas projects. [APnews] [Euronews]

(vp/gc)

Netherlands: Mine council recommends using earthquake-prone gas field to store gas

The Dutch Mines Council has suggested that the government use the Groningen gas field, which is being shut down due to a series of earthquakes, to store gas reserves as an emergency measure to help prevent shortages, saying that it is a real option to take into consideration. [Financialpost]

The Mines Council, an independent advisory body, said that the use of the Groningen field should be considered as an emergency measure and that the current target of filling gas storages to 80 percent is inadequate. Production from Groningen, Europe's largest gas field, was expected to be shut down by 2023. [Financialpost]

The junior Minister of Economic Affairs, Hans Viljbrief, said that the idea is unrealistic and should be used as a last resort. [Financialpost]

(vp/gc)

Switzerland: Socialist Party sets out advantages of Switzerland joining the EU

The leaders of Switzerland's Socialist Party have set in motion a plan based on a 32-page document that provides the advantages and disadvantages of joining the EU.

The party said in the report that advantages of joining the European bloc include: participation in decision-making in Brussels, the EU's more advanced climate policies, and more stable cooperation on research and education. With Europe becoming more socialist, ecological and democratic, it is of the interest of the party that the country joins the EU. [Schengenvisainfo] [Lenews]

The party stressed, however, a number of disadvantages of EU membership. These included reforms to Switzerland's system of direct democracy, the need to double VAT and pressure on the country's public service sector due to EU competition. [Schengenvisainfo] [Lenews]

Based on a poll published in 2020, only 7 percent of Swiss respondents were favourable to joining the EU.

[Schengenvisainfo] [Lenews]

In 1992, the country voted against its accession to the European Economic Area, while in 2021, it broke off talks to restructure the county's agreement with Brussels. Switzerland has always supported economic cooperation with the EU, but when it comes to membership, the country does not vote yes in order to join the bloc. [Schengenvisainfo] [Lenews]

(ks/gc)

Switzerland: Government imposes new liquidity requirements on five Swiss banks

The Swiss government has imposed new regulations for the country's five major banks, requiring them to boost liquidity so that they are better prepared for external shocks such as Covid-19. [Reuters]

The banks will now have to hold enough liquidity to weather a 90-day liquidity crisis, instead of the previous 30-day threshold, the seven-member Swiss Federal Council said. The council said in a statement that the revision aims to ensure that systemically important banks hold sufficient liquidity to absorb liquidity shocks and cover their needs in the event of restructuring or liquidation. [Reuters]

Switzerland's five major banks are UBS, Credit Suisse, Raiffeisen, PostFinance and Zuercher Kantonalbank

(ks/gc)

United Kingdom: Johnson wins no-confidence vote as concerns about recession increase

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has won a vote of no-confidence among conservatives, with 59 percent backing him despite a significant revolt against his leadership among Tory members of Parliament, a rebellion that underlined the weakening of his authority as his government is plagued by successive scandals.

Johnson received 211 Tory MP votes of confidence in his favour while 148 voted against him. Now, he is immune to a conservative leadership challenge for another year. After 15 percent of the MPs submitted letters to the relevant party committee demanding that

Johnson steps down, it forced a vote of no confidence. [BBC][Guardian]

Frustration with Johnson's leaders has increased after the release of a report into lockdown parties in and near Downing Street during the Covid-19 pandemic. The report exposed the extent of the rule-breaking, including at a birthday party Mr Johnson was fined by the police for attending in June 2020. [BBC]

Following the vote, Johnson said that the outcome was an "extremely good, positive, conclusive, decisive result." In a government meeting on June 7, he demanded to "deliver what matters to the British people." Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey said Johnson's "reputation is in tatters and his authority is now totally shot." [Guardian][Gov.UK]

The political scandal comes as the United Kingdom faces serious economic challenges. Johnson has been criticised for tax increases and the government's inability to implement policies that mitigate the impact of higher prices on businesses and employees. Food price inflation could hit 15 percent this summer – the highest level in more than 20 years. [BBC][Guardian] [Guardian]

New York-based JP Morgan said that the country will likely be heading into a recession during the next year or two amid soaring inflation due to the country's vulnerability to external shocks. The US bank issued the report a day after the Bank of England raised its benchmark interest rate to 1.25 percent on Thursday – the highest since January 2009 and the fifth time it pushed rates up. [IndianExpress][MSN][Guardian]

"If the (US Federal Reserve) engineers a sharp growth slowdown or recession, this would spill over to the UK and, combined with a tightening in domestic financial conditions, likely produce a UK recession," JP Morgan said. "Given the nature of the UK economy, we see high vulnerability to external shocks beyond the near term and see increasing chances of a recession over the next one to two years." [IndianExpress]

Recession would be more likely if British rates topped its long-term forecast of 3 percent, JP Morgan said.

Accelerating inflation

The Central Bank of England predicted that inflation will soar to 11 percent this autumn when the cap on energy bills is next lifted, and that UK GDP will shrink by 0.3 percent this quarter. "The committee would be particularly alert to indications of more persistent

inflationary pressures, and would, if necessary, act forcefully in response," it said. [Guardian]

Business Minister Paul Scully has said the government must do "everything we can to weather that storm" amid fears of recession, adding that it was a "global situation" and other countries were also seeing higher prices. He did not rule out a recession and reiterated that the government has put measures in place to mitigate the economic fallout, including reducing the threshold before people start to pay National Insurance. [PoliticalHome]

(pr/gc)

United Kingdom: Transport Secretary meets aviation leaders after major disruptions at UK airports

British Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps met with leaders from the aviation sector after major disruptions at British airports, including thousands of flights amid staff shortages at airports and airlines. [Gov.UK]

The British government has asked airlines to cancel flights at the earliest date possible if they lack the resources to maintain their scheduled flights. British Airways cancelled 8,000 flights in its March-October schedule, while EasyJet has cut roughly 40 flights per day in June. [Euronews]

Shapps reiterated the government's continued support for the sector. He reiterated that the sector should have been prepared for rising passenger demand. A working group including members of the government and the aviation sector will be set up to discuss ongoing problems. [Gov.UK]

Chief Executive of Airlines UK Tim Alderslade said that they want to work collaboratively with ministers to resolve these issues as quickly as possible, in good time for the summer peak. Chief Executive of the Airport Operators Association Karen Dee said the industry is putting its full effort behind getting passengers away smoothly this weekend and preparing for the summer. [Gov.UK]

London's Mayor Sadiq Khan said the disruptions are the result of Brexit and tightened immigration rules for people working in the sector. He called on the government to relax immigration rules so that airport and airline workers from the EU could return to the UK

and avoid a summer of travel “misery.”[Euronews] [Independent]

(pr/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Armenia: Protesters clash with police over government's handling of Nagorno-Karabakh dispute

Armenian opposition protesters clashed with the police in Yerevan in late May over the government’s handling of the dispute in the Nagorno-Karabakh area with Azerbaijan. [RFERL][MSN][NEWS.AZ]

At least 50 people were hospitalised in protests on June 3. The sound of explosions could also be heard. A number of violent skirmishes broke out after a large group of demonstrators attempted to break through a police cordon near a government office in central Yerevan on May 30. Two police officers were hospitalised and 111 protesters were detained, according to the police. [RFERL][MSN][NEWS.AZ]

Opposition parties have demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian, accusing him of mishandling negotiations with archrival Azerbaijan over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Pashinian has faced heavy criticism since he and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev agreed in April to begin drafting a peace treaty to resolve the conflict and set up a joint commission on demarcating their common border. [RFERL][MSN][NEWS.AZ]

(lk/gc)

Belarus: Government against military solution of conflict over Republic of Artsakh

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said on June 10 that Belarus is strongly against a military solution of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which involves the Republic of Artsakh, an Armenian-backed de facto state formerly known as Nagorno-Karabakh. [Belta.by]

After the meeting with the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in Yerevan, Makei emphasised that all conflict must be resolved at the negotiation table via diplomatic and political means. He is convinced that the trilateral format composed of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan is a "good basis for the settlement of this problematic matter." [Belta.by]

The conflict over the Republic of Artsakh is still unresolved, with violent clashes recurrently flaring up. [Times of Israel] [Foreign Affairs]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Government to give new impetus to microelectronics industries

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko held a government session on June 14 to discuss the prospects of developing the national microelectronics industry. [Belta.by]

Lukashenko stressed that in view of the current intensification of hybrid warfare, Belarus needs to induce a new impetus for the microelectronic industry to ensure that Belarus' national capacities are sufficiently equipped. Developing the national microelectronics sector should also reduce the dependency on imports. [Belta.by]

The Belarusian President praised the domestic potential, underlining that Belarus is "one of the world leaders in electronic warfare." [Belta.by]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Reform Party, Social Democrats and Isamaa disagree on budget framework

Estonia's centre-right Reform Party, the Social Democrats and conservative Isamaa, have failed to reach an agreement on a budget framework. [ERR]

Chairman of the Social Democrats, Lauri Laanemats, criticised the budget proposals of the Reform Party, saying it was insufficient to cope with the country's current economic crisis. If the Social Democrats agreed, they could not pursue their own political agenda, he said. [ERR]

Chief negotiator of the Reform Party, Mart Vorklaev, said that additional expenditures cannot be provided due to the Reform Party's commitment to limiting the budget deficit, which is considerably high for Estonia. [ERR]

Despite the divergences, chairman of the Social Democrats Laanemats is still optimistic that an agreement can be reached before the end of the month. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Prime Minister seeks to forge new government after coalition collapses

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas (Reform Party) dismissed her coalition partner, the Centre Party, from the government on June 3 after they were unable to resolve the political deadlock.

Instead, the Reform Party is now to engage in negotiations with Isamaa and the Social Democratic Party of Estonia (SDE), two major parties of the Estonian Parliament that have been in the political opposition. [ERR] [Reuters] [France24]

Kallas' decision coincides with disputes between the Reform Party and the Centre Party over the draft of the family benefits act. The Centre Party allegedly collaborated with the opposition party EKRE to pass a bill that would provide EUR 300 million in fixed annual sums to support families and their children.

The Centre Party and EKRE also quashed the proposal of a preschool education bill submitted by the Reform Party that envisioned Estonian language education in kindergartens. [Financial Times] [Guardian]

With the Centre Party now forming a minority government, Kallas said that she would soon launch negotiations with Isamaa and the SDE. The Estonian President upon Kallas' request dismissed the ministers of the Centre Party that were replaced by representatives of the Reform Party until a new coalition was formed. [ERR] [Guardian] [Deutsche Welle]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Former Chancellor of Justice accuses PM of misusing constitution, calls for resignation

Former Estonian Chancellor of Justice, Allar Joks, called on Prime Minister Kaja Kallas to resign amid accusations that recent governmental changes did not adhere to the country's constitution. [EPL] [ERR]

Joks wrote in an opinion piece that government changes have not taken place according to the constitutionally required format, adding that it was "doubtful whether the President of the Republic, as the guardian of the constitution, can be appointed to the new government via the manner intended for the change of ministers." [EPL] [ERR]

While the constitution has specific regulations for changing the Prime Minister, the changes of ministers are announced by the president upon proposal of the prime minister. [Estonia]

After weeks of political deadlock, Kallas dismissed seven ministers of her government who were all members of the Centre Party. Kallas, however, already launched negotiations with the Social Democrats and Isamaa to form a new government. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Reform Party fails to reach consensus with potential coalition partners on energy pricing

Estonia's Reform Party, the Social Democrats and Isamaa failed to reach a broader consensus on energy pricing during a meeting on June 14. [ERR]

While Isamaa wants to enforce a reform programme for the electricity market, the Social Democrats and the

Reform Party signalled their commitment to helping those first who need support the most. Kallas is nevertheless optimistic that a common ground can be found. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Education Minister remains in office despite no-confidence vote

The Minister of Education and Research, Liina Kersna of the Reform Party, on June 14 avoided being removed from her position after members of the Riigikogu failed to muster enough backing during a no-confidence vote in the Riigikogu. [ERR] [ERR]

According to the final results, 39 voted in favour of the motion, while 33 voted against and 9 abstained. Pursuant to Estonian legislation, 51 votes were required to remove a minister from office, so that the vote of no-confidence eventually failed. [ERR] [The Baltic Times]

Marko Sorin (Centre Party) submitted the motion, stating that Kersna had broken procurement rules when she allegedly gave one company a disproportionate advantage to acquire COVID-19 test kits for schools in 2021 and 2022. He said that by doing so, she harmed the state reputation and caused economic damages. [ERR] [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Senior military commander says just deterrence as a national strategy is no longer viable

Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) Lieutenant General Martin Herem said on May 31 that deterrence as a national security strategy is no longer an option, considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Äripäev] [ERR] [Verkkouutiset]

Herem said that although he considered Russia's invasion "clearly insane," Moscow launched the military campaign regardless of the consequences. He added that Estonia must be prepared at any moment for Russian aggression. [ERR]

The EDF has pledged to allocate over EUR 800 million over the next three years to develop the relevant

infrastructures and to sufficiently cover the acquisition of ammunition. EDF will focus on training with allies and rapid response capacities that could be deployed against a common threat. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Court recognises same-sex relationships

The Latvian Administrative District Court ruled on May 31 that it recognised the relationship between people of the same sex. [BNN] [LSM]

Although the Latvian Constitution stipulates that a marriage be composed of a man and a woman, the court said that the definition of family may include same-sex couples. While formally not married, they form a relationship based on mutual understanding and respect, which is the basis of a "family" in a legal sense, the court said. [BNN] [LSM]

The Latvian Parliament was supposed to vote on the Civil Union Law on June 2, which pertains to ruling abot same-sex couples. Due to a shortage of quorum, the vote had to be delayed until at least 50 deputies can be present when deciding over the Civil Union Law. [BNN]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Government bans all Russian TV channels

Latvia's National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) announced on June 6 that all channels registered in Russia would be banned across the country, with the decision entered into force on June 9. [LSM] [Leta]

NEPLP Chairman Ivars Abolins said that given Russia's aggression against Ukraine and grave violations of the latter's territorial integrity, Russian TV channels could not operate in Latvia. The ban will be in place until Russia gives back the Ukrainian territories it has been occupying and withdraws all troops from Ukrainian soil. [Interfax] [BNN]

NEPLP issued a broadcasting licence to the Russian channel Dozhd TV, which is strongly opposed to Russian President Putin's policies. Moscow declared it a "foreign agent" and ceased all of its operations in Russia when the war started. [Interfax] [Newsweek]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Finance minister urges US to lift sanctions against Latvian ABLV Bank

Latvia has asked the US Treasury Department to lift the remaining sanctions against the country's ABLV Bank that were imposed by Washington.

Latvian Finance Minister Janis Reirs said that lifting sanctions would facilitate the recovery of ABLV Bank, enabling investments, while also easing the pressures on Latvia's financial system. The bank collapsed in 2018 after allegations that it was engaged in money-laundering. [LSM] [Al Arabiya] [Handelsblatt]

The Treasury Department decided in 2018 that it would ban ABLV Bank from its financial system, as it was involved in illegal transactions with Russian and Ukrainian entities. Washington also accused it of providing support for North Korea's missile testing. According to Reirs, cleaning up of the bank has been effective and Latvia now feels it deserves to start again with a clean slate. [LSM]

The governor of the central bank, Ilmars Rimsevics, was arrested because of charges despite denying the accusations. [Al Arabiya]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Companies bid for construction of LNG terminal

Latvia's Economics Minister Ilze Indriksone announced on June 7 that it has short-listed JSC Skulte LNG Terminal or LLC Kundzinsalas Dienvidu Projekts, two major Latvian LNG importers, for the construction of the country's LNG terminal. [BNN]

JSC Skulte LNG Terminal said it plans to develop the LNG terminal at the Skulte port without cold storage facilities to reduce costs. Instead, it plans to construct a pipeline connected with the Incukalns underground gas storage. Kundzinsalas bid for the construction of the LNG terminal, which it plans to develop in Riga. [KDP][Skulte LNG Terminal]

The Ministry of Economics has set August 31 as the deadline to evaluate the proposals and provide the government with feasibility reports from independent consultants. [BNN]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Government will increase military conscription

Lithuania decided on June 21 to increase the number of people for mandatory military service as the country tries to respond to demands for military personnel in the armed forces. The bill of the Ministry of Defence was adopted unanimously. [LRT][LRT]

The number of conscripts per year will increase by 400 to 4,400, while the number of active reserve personnel will increase by 1,000 to 5,000. There is increasing demand for civilian personnel engaged in medical care, catering, maintenance of infrastructure and other relevant services. [LRT]

The Lithuanian people have a favourable view towards conscription. According to a recent survey conducted in May 2022, 58 percent of the Lithuanian supported universal conscription, while 34 percent were against it, although the bill explicitly does not stipulate universal conscription altogether. [Delfi]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Government considers giving asylum seekers more freedoms

Lithuania's Ministry of the Interior said on June 7 that it has drafted law amendments allowing asylum seekers to find employment, even if their asylum requests were rejected. [LRT]

Deputy Interior Minister Arnoldas Abramavicius said the government would still deport asylum seekers if required despite the legislation. Parliament will decide as to whether the migrants should be allowed to work after 12 or 18 months of detention, he said.

Those who have not applied for asylum or whose application for asylum has been rejected must leave Lithuania, Abramavicius said. [LRT]

Doctors without Borders said that the Lithuanian authorities have not been complying with human rights standards for refugees from Africa and the Middle East. "The conditions of detention are inadequate for the health and protection needs of people being detained," it said. [Doctors without Borders] [Politico]

Lithuania has accused Belarus of triggering a refugee crisis. Poland and Latvia have expressed similar concerns. Prior to the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine, most refugees were from various African countries and the Middle East. [New York Times] [Reuters] [BBC]

(mo/gc)

Lithuanian: Foreign Minister calls for shipping corridor in the Black Sea to ease food shortages

Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis proposed establishing a shipping corridor for Ukrainian grain exports in the Black Sea during a press conference with Japanese journalists of NHK on June 8. [NHK]

Landsbergis suggested deploying a convoy of vessels from Ukraine's Western partners, including Lithuania, to escort transport ships from the port of Odessa to the Bosporus Strait. The mission would be non-military and humanitarian, which is not comparable with a no-fly zone, he added. [NHK] [The Guardian] [Deutsche Welle]

Russia's war in Ukraine could cause a global hunger crisis, especially in North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, Landsbergis said. [The Guardian]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Microsoft invited to expand business

Lithuania's Minister of Economy and Innovation Ausrine Armonaite invited Microsoft to expand its operations in the country to strengthen business opportunities and the public sector. [LRT] [Delfi] [FA]

Armonaite said that Microsoft has a keen interest in cooperating with Lithuania's public sector to work on digitalisation and the development of relevant skills in handling technological issues. She added that she has informed Microsoft about on-going reforms and solutions in digitising Lithuania's public sector. [LRT]

Lithuania has been devoted to improving its digital infrastructure. It has adopted a law that will allow the diversification of data storage, involving not only public, but also private data centres. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Several Orthodox priests voice opposition to calls to leave Russian Orthodox Church

Priests from the Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese published a letter on June 14 denouncing calls to leave the Moscow Patriarchate in favour of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, a development that occurred after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [LRT] [The Baltic Times]

While these priests did acknowledge "the war that has mercilessly entered into every soul," they accused their colleagues of inducing a schism within the Orthodox community. This would threaten the credibility of the Archdiocese and mislead the public over the developments in the church, they said. [Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese] [The Baltic Times]

Several Orthodox priests voiced their disagreement with the Moscow Patriarchate, to which the Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese is subordinated. They did so after Patriarch Kirill, the spiritual leader of the Moscow Patriarchate, openly endorsed Russia's war in Ukraine. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Central Election Committee accepts proposal to change Code of Elections

The Moldovan Central Election Committee approved on June 14 a proposal to modify the country's Code of Elections on June 14. [moldpres] [Noi] [Radio Free Europe]

These proposals were based on specific analysis and a decision of the Constitutional Court, which seeks to improve the legislation of the electoral procedures. According to the modifications, the elections will be held on a Saturday, and the electoral process will take place until 20:00 of the election day, with a possible prolongation of three hours.

The members of the Central Election Committee are limited to seven, and their term of office should last for five years. Also, Moldovan citizens can sign for several candidates in the signature lists when the candidates standing for elections are being registered. Moreover,

the number of signatures calling for a referendum is now reduced to 100,000. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Government to establish commission to deal with fiscal policy and inflation

Moldova set up a commission on June 2 to regulate fiscal policies and reduce inflation after the Moldovan Parliament adopted the agreement upon recommendation of the Supreme Security Council. [moldpres]

Dumitru Alaiba, Chairman of the Commission of Economics, Budgeting and Finance, said that the commission was essential in addressing inflation. [moldpres]

Along with Alaiba, Adrian Barutel, Artur Mizha and Marina Morozova – all of whom are members of the parliamentary Party of Action and Solidarity – will be the chairpersons. The Bloc of Communists and Socialists and the Party Sor will not have any representatives on the commission. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Government facilitates access to funding for young entrepreneurs

Moldova said on June 1 that it would enable young entrepreneurs seeking to start or develop their business to utilise financing or credits. [moldpres]

The Moldovan government launched the programme "Start for the Youth: Sustainable Business at Home" designed to support small and medium enterprises. The entrepreneurs seeking to launch their business could receive up to USD 10,500 in the form of grants, with state funding estimated at 70 percent. They could also apply for credits and combine them with grant funding. The entire project will cost EUR 344,000, according to governmental sources. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Russia: Finance Ministry publishes May budget items without disclosing national defence details

Russia has published its monthly budget of government expenses in May without disclosing financial allocations for national defence and other sectors related to the cost of waging war in Ukraine since February. .

The Ministry of Finance said that due to the pressure exerted on Russia and individuals by the United States, the EU, the United Kingdom and other unfriendly states, “it became necessary to partially restrict the disclosure of information.” The ministry said that this would help minimise the risk of additional sanctions.

The year-to-date budget data until April included government expenses for national defence, healthcare, housing and communal services and others. [RBC] [Bloomberg]

Separately, the Ministry of Economic Development has proposed establishing special rules to regulate financial markets and corporate relations, including not providing full disclosure of the country’s gold and foreign currency reserves. The proposed rules could “reduce the negative consequences of unfriendly actions of foreign states and international organisations.” [RBC]

(ab/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Socialist Party rejects opposition's request to investigate strategic investor status

Albania's ruling Socialist Party (SP) has rejected for the second time a request by the opposition Democratic Party (DP) to investigate a controversial strategic investor status for companies that allegedly benefits political allies of the prime minister. [Etleboro]

The request by the opposition for the investigation was rejected due to technical impediments after the required signatures were improperly collected, the SP head Taulant Balla said. DP initially asked for an investigation last May, but hours before submitting it, one of the supporters withdrew his support. [AlbanianDailyNews][BalkanInsight]

DP member Gazment Bardhi said that the SP is concerned that the investigation may implicate some parliamentarians and ministers. He said that the husband of Foreign Minister Olta Xhacka, who is a "strategic investor" in a government-awarded property to AGTTC Hotel Management, could be accused of being in conflict of interest once investigations begin. [AlbanianDailyNews][BalkanInsight]

The Albanian government granted AGTTC a 30-year lease to develop a lucrative beachfront property on the so-called Southern Riviera to a company with connections to the husband of the country's foreign minister. Albania forbids members of the government from benefiting from state funds or properties. [Europe Monthly April 2022].

Prime Minister Edi Rama approved in 2015 the special status of strategic investor to some companies that would make large investments in the country. It has

been widely criticised for providing politically connected businessmen with lucrative contracts.

(jm/gc)

Albania: Parliament elects military Chief as president

Albania's parliament voted in the Chief of Defence Bajram Begaj as the country's new president, a largely ceremonial five-year role, after three previous rounds failed to reach a consensus on the position. [USnews]

Begaj received on June 4 a simple majority with 78 votes in favour in the 140-seat parliament for nominating him as president, a role with limited powers over the judiciary and the military. Begaj will take office in July from outgoing president Ilir Meta.

Previous efforts to elect a president failed due to disagreements between the ruling Socialist Party and the opposition Democratic Party. Many opposition party members walked out of the parliamentary vote after Democratic Party Chairman Sali Berisha said Begaj's candidacy was ineligible because he was on active duty when nominated. [Europe Monthly June 2022][Euractiv][USnews]

Before the vote, Begaj resigned from his position as an active member of the armed forces to be eligible for the presidency. Born in 1967, Begaj was previously the highest-ranking military officer in the Albanian Armed Forces. During his military career of more than three decades, he held leading positions in the army. [Euractiv][USnews]

(jm/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: High Representative imposes decision to allocate funds for election

High Representative and EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, has imposed a decision to allocate EUR 6.4 million to ensure that funds are available for the country's general election in October. [BalkanInsight][REFL]

The German diplomat, who supervises the civilian implementation of the peace deal that ended the Bosnian war, made the decision on June 7 after the

government announced that elections would be held this year without providing enough resources to carry them out. [BalkanInsight][REFL]

Schmidt has the authority to assign reserves to the Central Election Commission after the country's Council of Ministers failed several times to agree on election financing. [BalkanInsight][REFL]

(jm/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Leaders commitment to democratic, EU-oriented nation

Bosnia and Herzegovina political party leaders and members of the presidency met in Brussels on June 12 where they signed an agreement to preserve a peaceful, stable and independent country that adheres to EU values.

The politicians committed to respect the rule of law and the conduct of free and democratic elections, as well as the development of democratic institutions at all levels of government. The agreement, which had 19 points, included commitments to the general elections in October, to fight corruption and to improve the overall functioning of the public administration by ensuring professional and depoliticised civil service. [Euractiv][BalkanInsight]

"The leaders of political parties represented in the Bosnia and Herzegovina Parliamentary Assembly reiterate their commitment to preserving and building a peaceful, stable, sovereign and independent functional European state of Bosnia and Herzegovina comprised of Bosniacs, Croats and Serbs," the agreement said.

The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, hosted the meeting in Brussels. [Europa]

Bosnian Serbs will respect the agreement although it is not signed or legally binding, Serbian member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, said. It will be respected on a political and moral level, he said [BalkanInsight][Euractiv]

(jm/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: US sanctions two politicians for destabilising peace

The US imposed sanctions on June 6 against Marinko Cavara, president of the Federation of Bosniaks and Croats, and Alen Seranic, minister of health of the entity of the Republika Srpska, for threatening stability by undermining the Dayton Peace Accords. [Euractiv] [USDepartmentofTreasury]

Cavara, a prominent member of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ party, said in a statement that the US accusations were "untrue and tendentious" and that he has worked for the implementation of the constitution, laws and the agreement that ended the Bosnian war. He was sanctioned for refusing, in 2019, to nominate judges to fill vacancies at the Constitutional Court of the Federation, which is not functioning as a result. [BalkanInsight]

The US sanctioned Seranic for furthering the secessionist efforts of the Republika Srpska by leading the implementation of a new law that would establish a new medicines agency solely within the republika,and would thus disrupt the authority of the state-level Agency for Medicinal Products and Medical Devices. [USDepartmentofTreasury]

Seranic pushed back, saying in a statement that his job was "to implement the policies of the Republika Srpska government" as part of the entity's governing team. "The role of Alen Seranic is to work on improving healthcare, equipping institutions, creating new hospitals, introducing new types of therapy and improving social protection," he said. [BalkanInsight]

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic criticised the US sanctions. He said they represented the "arrogant terrorisation" of the legitimate representatives of Croatian people in Bosnia to whom Croatia "must provide all necessary protection". [BalkanInsight] [Intellinews][SarajevoTimes]

(jm/gc)

Bulgaria: Petkov resigns after government loses no-confidence vote

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov resigned after being toppled during a no-confidence vote six months after coming to power, with the political opposition citing divisions over the federal budget, rampant

inflation and the veto of North Macedonia's accession to the EU as the reasons.

Opposition lawmakers in parliament voted 123-116 to bring down the government on June 20 during the vote that was held 24 hours after the end of a lengthy debate. Petkov, who formally resigned on June 28, has now been tasked with trying to form a new cabinet with President Rumen Radev. [Reuters] [SofiaGlobe] [Euronews] [RadioFreeEurope][Euractiv].

Boyko Borisov, a former prime minister and the centre-right GERB opposition party, proposed the no-confidence vote, citing the inability of Petkov's government to tame inflation of 15.6 percent as the reasons. Slavi Trifonov, the leader of the former-coalition member populist party "There is Such a People," supported the decision to hold the vote. [SofiaGlobe] [Reuters] [RadioFreeEurope].

Borisov said two days after the vote that his party would be interested in forming a coalition with other pro-European parties. He said the country should be ruled by a new Euro-Atlantic coalition shortly after apologising to Petkov for calling him a "coward." [Euractiv]

Petkov dismissed the idea. "If Boyko Borissov decides to go to a warm island, I am sure we have ideas for a European Bulgaria with some of his deputies," he said adding that "the fight against corruption cannot happen as long as you have a coalition partner who was part of corruption." [Euractiv]

Petkov's government took strong anti-corruption and anti-Russian positions. After the vote, he said that his centrist pro-European party would continue to pursue the interests of a successful European country, one "without a mafia" in its leadership. [RadioFreeEurope] [BalkanInsight] [Politico]

Petkov's party has a week to form a new government as it is the largest group in parliament. If he is unable to form a government after three attempts, Radev will appoint a caretaker government and call elections. [SofiaGlobe] [RadioFreeEurope].

After the no confidence vote, Bulgarians are worried about the repercussions of another election due to increasing support for nationalistic parties and the potential return of Borisov as a prime minister. The leader of GERB was one of the main reasons for the anti-mafia protests in the summer of 2020, which led to a year of electoral turmoil. [Politico] [Europe Monthly December 2021].

(ib/gc)

Bulgaria: Opposition parties oppose Sofia adopting Euro by 2024

Bulgaria's decision to adopt the Euro as the national currency by 2024 has been criticised by the country's opposition parties amid a poll showing that the majority of the country's public are against using the EU currency. [RadioFreeEurope] [BalkanInsight].

The pro-Russian "Revival" party and populist "There is Such a People" party criticised the decision several days after it was announced by Finance Minister Asen Vasilev, for failing to take the necessary steps to implement the adoption of the currency. A poll by Eurobarometer from June 10 showed that 54 percent of the Bulgarian public are against the implementation of the Euro, 10 percentage points higher than the previous year. [SofiaGlobe].

The far-right Revival, which has called for Sofia to leave the EU and NATO, said that the adoption of the single currency will "destroy Bulgaria's economy" and endanger the country's sovereignty. They have called a national referendum to decide the issue. [RadioFreeEurope]

Sceptics don't believe Bulgaria will be able to adopt the Euro by 2024, saying that the country is unable to implement the necessary steps to do so. They also cite Bulgaria's skyrocketing inflation as a reason not to adopt the currency. [BalkanInsight]

Governing coalition-members "We Continue the Change" and "Democratic Bulgaria" support the decision to adopt the Euro. [SofiaGlobe] [Euractiv]

(ib/gc)

Bulgaria: Argument erupts during Chamber of Representatives meeting

An argument between two members of opposition parties erupted during a meeting of the Chamber of Representatives, with threats of violence and insults exchanged until other politicians deescalated the situation. [BGonAir][RadioFreeEurope]

Iskren Mitev, a member of the pro-European "We Continue the Change" party accused Kostadin Kostadinov, the leader of the pro-Russian "Revival"

party of “betraying the people” by spending citizens’ money for personal gains. Kostadinov threatened Mitev with physical violence and called him an “idiot.” [RadioFreeEurope]

(ib/gc)

Bulgaria: Sofia will never buy gas from Russia’s Gazprom after Moscow halts shipments

Bulgaria’s Finance Minister Asen Valisev said that the country will “never” purchase gas from Russia’s Gazprom as it is an “unreliable partner.” [Euractiv]

During a meeting with the budgeting commission, Vasilev said that Gazprom has stopped gas deliveries and that it could no longer be relied on to provide a stable supply of gas. The contract between Bulgaria’s Bulgargaz and Gazprom will expire at the end of the year.[Euractiv] [Reuters]

In April, the Russian natural gas supplier halted its deliveries after Bulgaria refused to pay in roubles as it was not in accordance with the original contract. [RadioFreeEurope] [Euractiv]

(ib/gc)

Bulgaria: Deputy Prime Minister apologises to Ukrainian refugees for calling them ‘capricious’

Bulgaria’s Deputy Prime Minister Kalina Konstantinova apologised to Ukrainian refugees after calling them “capricious” and accusing them of not wanting to give up healthcare and social benefits, when she announced the scrapping of a government housing programme for their accommodation. [Euractiv]

After the comments, opposition party members called on Konstantinova to resign. Civil society organisations criticised her for not providing enough information about the change in refugees’ accommodation, which caused many of them to refuse to cooperate. There are nearly 100,000 Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria.

From May 31, the government ended their accommodation in hotels along the Black Sea coast because of the start of the tourism season. The government had provided them with housing further

inland but Konstantinova cancelled the program after only a few showed interest in moving from the coast. She then changed it back, saying she would continue with the programme.[Euractiv][SofiaGlobe].

(ib/gc)

Greece: Government passes bill banning conversion therapy

The Greek government passsed a bill banning the practice of suppressing one's sexual orientation through conversion therapy and its advertising as part of a broader national strategy to improve gender equality. [NBCNews] [Reuters]

The bill bans the promotion of conversion therapy to minors by psychologists and imposes fines and potential jail sentences if it is violated. Greece joins other countries, such as Canada, New Zealand and France, in criminalising conversion therapy. [NeosKosmos][Reuters]

The government has not yet banned intersex surgery of infants born with intersex or ambiguous genitalia or chromosomes. [GreekReporter]

(ib/gc)

Greece: Opposition questions Ukraine weapons' decision after announcement by US defence official

Greece's main opposition party has challenged the government's decision to provide additional military assistance to Ukraine after it was announced by a senior US official. [Euractiv] [GreekCityTimes]

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced the decision by the Greek government to provide Kiev with more weapons, including rocket launchers and 400 assault rifles. The main opposition party in Greece, Syriza, said the conservative government had not informed the parliament about such a move. [Euractiv] [AlJazeera]

SYRIZA questioned the decision of the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotaki, asking whether his office is aware of what this involvement in an ongoing war means or is it only interested in the prime minister being liked by Washington? The party said it was

“unthinkable” for Greek citizens to be informed of such decisions by foreign officials. [Euractiv] [GreekCityTimes]

In April, the Greek Minister of Defence Nikos Panagiotopoulos announced that the country will not be delivering more than the initial supply of arms to Ukraine. [GreekCityTimes] [Euractiv].

(ib/gc)

Greece: Government denies early elections to be held in September

Greece’s Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said he plans to stay in power until the 2023 elections, comments that appeared to end calls among opposition parties for early elections in September.

The leader of the oppositional party SYRIZA Alexis Tsipras had asked Mitsotakis to set a date for snap elections and to “get serious” as the country is facing a social and geopolitical crisis. Tsipras accused Mitsotakis of risking instability in Greece because of its involvement in the Ukrainian war. [TheGreekHerald] [Euractiv].

Renewed tensions between Greece and Turkey have further exacerbated tensions between Mitsotakis’s government and the opposition. [Euractiv] [TheNationalHerald].

Mitsotakis said during an interview that the country “does not need a prolonged” election campaign. The statement was interpreted by some as Mitsotakis accepting the idea of early elections. Officials from the prime ministers’ New Democracy party denied that there were talks of snap elections. [GreekReporter] [TheNationalHerald]

(ib/gc)

Greece: Government plans new measures to fight higher power costs

Greece plans to implement new measures to reduce the impact that rising energy costs are having on consumers by subsidising energy efficient home appliances, offering gas and power subsidies and by removing power companies’ surcharge on electricity. [GTP] [Reuters].

Greece announced on June 20 that it will provide consumers with subsidies to replace their old refrigerators and air conditioning units with energy-efficient ones. The subsidies are predicted to cost around EUR 150 million and will be financed through EU funds. The Greek government is spending between EUR 7-8 billion to combat rising energy and fuel prices. [GTP][Reuters] [EKathimerini].

The government issued fuel and power passes to lower the cost of utilities for consumers. The fuel pass provides EUR 80 discount on gas for cars and will be active until the end of September. [GTP]

The power pass provides rebates for 60 percent of the additional charges in electricity and is part of a broader four-step plan to relieve energy costs for individual households [GreekCityTimes] [GTP]

The Ministry of Energy is considering a proposal to remove power companies' surcharge on electricity as it often amounts to more than half the sum of electricity bills. If approved, the legislation will be active from August until July 2023. [Reuters].

(ib/gc)

North Macedonia: Foreign minister visits Washington to strengthen bilateral ties

North Macedonia held strategic talks in Washington on how the two countries can strengthen bilateral relations and cooperation between them.. [NovaMakedonia][Republika]

Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani arrived in Washington on June 2 to meet Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken. His US counterpart highlighted the crucial reform agenda North Macedonia has committed itself to, including democracy, regional economic activities, energy and its ambitions to be part of the EU. [USDepartamentofState]

Osmani met with senior US officials, several leading figures from civil society, and think tanks. Topics in the field of regional/cultural cooperation, defence and security, energy, economic cooperation, trade and investment, as well as topics in the field of education, democratic development, anti-corruption, etc., had an important place in talks. [NovaMakedonia][Republika]

Speaking to Voice of America, Foreign Policy Specialist Edward Joseph said that the timing of the strategic dialogue in Washington could not have been better for

the Balkan country as the EU is about to hold a summit and decide on a possible way to start negotiations on memberships of North Macedonia and Albania. [NovaMakedonia]

(jm/gc)

Montenegro: US company threatens to sue Customs Office after it seizes tobacco shipment

The US company Lenora International has taken steps to sue the Montenegrin government after its custom's officials seized EUR 3.5 million worth of the Delaware-based company's tobacco in the port of Bar.

Delaware-registered Lenora said that the 4,000 seized boxes of tobacco were stored legally at the port. Its international legal representative, Zoran Piperovic, said that the merchandise was ready to be shipped from the port, adding that the Customs Office thinks it's legal to take cigarettes because the shipowner is late, "so someone will have to spend a lot of money because of their mistake," Piperovic told the media. [TheNewsPage][Tornado][BalkanInsight]

The country's Minister of the Interior Filip Adzic, praised the confiscation, saying it was part of the country's fight against smuggling. The Customs Office said that since May the fight against cigarette smuggling has intensified, with the seizure in Bar being the third major one.

"During a one-month period, Montenegrin authorities seized more cigarettes than any other European country," the Customs Office said in a press release. "We will not stop intending to suppress cigarette smuggling through our state because the port of Bar should become the backbone of Montenegro's development, not a smuggling point," it added.

Since the 1990s, Bar has become a notorious cigarette smuggling hub, forcing national authorities to tighten control at the port to regulate the legal export of cigarettes. On May 14, Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic visited the port during the seizure of 145,000 packages of tobacco, explaining that the deadlines for their relocation had expired.[BalkanInsight][TheNewsPage]

(jm/gc)

Romania: Pride March in Romania attacked by conservative activists

Conservative and religious protesters attacked hundreds of participants in a Pride parade in the northeastern Romanian city of Iasi on June 5. [BalkanInsight]

While marching towards the city centre, the massive event organised by the Rise OUT Association was disturbed by the presence of a group of people wearing religious symbols, chanting offensive allusions to the LBGTQIA+ community. They also threw eggs and lit flares. [Universul]

Police intervened to separate the two groups along the march route, where officers held positions to prevent tensions from increasing. [BalkanInsight][Universul]

(jm/gc)

Serbia: President Vucic criticises decision to close airspace to Russian foreign minister as 'hysteria'

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic criticised on June 6 the decision by regional countries to close their airspace to Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov ahead of his visit to Belgrade.

Vucic described the decision by Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bulgaria to close their airspace as "hysteria" and he expressed his "dissatisfaction" with pressure on Serbia because of Lavrov's visit. He accused the EU of hypocrisy since Lavrov plans to visit NATO member Turkey. [APnews][BalkanInsight]

"I haven't seen the kind of hysteria for a long time that little Serbia has been exposed to in Europe and around the world."

Vucic said the event was certainly predictable and complained that Serbia is being condemned for not following EU sanctions on Russia, adding that his country will maintain its independence and autonomy in political decision-making. [APnews] [BalkanInsight]

(jm/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan starts election campaign with attacks against rival party,

opposition

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan started his campaign for the country's 2023 presidential election by criticising the opposition party's likely candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu as the government looks increasingly like it is putting up legal barriers for the country's opposition parties.

Despite Kilicdaroglu's political record "full of fractures and failures, he is now chasing the presidency," Erdogan said. "Instead of doing it like a man, he tries to do it in a roundabout way, from behind the stage, in accordance with his own laws. He is looking for his future with the grace of foreign ambassadors." [EURONEWS] [HABER]

While Erdogan goaded Kilicdaroglu to announce his candidacy for the People's Republic Party (CHP) or for the party to announce their candidate, the government appears like it is trying to use legal barriers to sow discord among the country's main opposition-led coalition bloc ahead of the elections scheduled for June 2023. [Al Monitor]

Turkey's top appeals courts announced on June 14 that the CHP party leader Canan Kaftancioglu's political party membership was ended. Kaftancioglu, head of the Istanbul branch CHP, is known for her ability to organise and expand the party's grassroots political messaging and mobilisation. [Al Monitor]

Under Erdogan, Turkey has become known for removing opposition politicians from their elected positions with complex legislation by criminalising offences against the president and the government. These rulings are considered an infringement of rights in accordance with the precedent of the European Court of Human Rights, according to legal scholars cited by Al Monitor.

As Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) tries to weaken its opposition, it is also trying to determine which deficiencies exist in which provinces based on the previous election results. The AKP has also started to prepare against fraud and unlawfulness that may occur at the ballot box in cooperation with the Supreme Election Court (YSK).

(go/gc)

Turkey: Amendments to Turkish parliamentary election law could harm

democracy, Venice Commission says

Changes to Turkey's parliamentary election law could harm inclusive democracy, the Venice Commission, a panel of experts of the human rights body Council of Europe, said in an opinion published on June 20.

The law is seen as an effort to divide and weaken the political opposition. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan centralised power in 2018 when the country shifted from a parliamentary to a presidential government. [Al Monitor]

While the Venice Commission welcomed some of the changes made, such as the reduction of the election threshold from 10 percent to 7 percent, it mainly criticised the new law for endangering inclusivity by making it harder for smaller parties to get into parliament. The new election threshold is still among the highest in Europe, where it is usually around 5 percent or even non-existent.

The new requirement that parties must have two congresses at the national, provincial and district level to participate in parliamentary elections makes it even harder for small parties to gain seats. The commission criticised the lack of a consultation process with the opposition and civil society.

It called on Turkey to reconsider the law and make necessary changes. [Council of Europe] [Balkan Insight]

(aml/gc)

Turkey: Annual inflation hits 24-year high in May as Ukraine war, Lira weigh on economy

Inflation in Turkey reached a 24-year high in May, increasing an annual 73.5 percent as the war in Ukraine, rising energy prices and a tumbling lira cut into consumer spending. The consensus forecast among economists was for annual inflation to rise to 76.6 percent. [ABCNEWS] [Reuters]

Transport and food costs have accelerated by an annual 108 percent and 92 percent respectively in May, causing Turks to struggle with buying basic foods as the country's economic malaise deepens amid steep depreciation of the Lira. The local currency tumbled 44 percent in 2021 and another 20 percent this year, Reuters reported. [Reuters]

Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati said on Twitter that monthly inflation was trending lower in a positive sign. Economists forecast that inflation will remain high in 2022, ending the year at 63 percent based on a median estimate. This is up from 52 percent in last month's poll. [Reuters]

The Turkish Statistical Institute's reliability has been questioned by opposition lawmakers and economists. Turks believe inflation is far higher than official data according to polls. The institute has dismissed the claims.

Steve Hanke, professor of applied economics at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, commented that the low interest rate destroyed the value of the lira, which could be Erdogan's "death knell". [Twitter]

(fw/gc)

Turkey: Government reconsiders death penalty after Erdogan's wildfire comment

Turkey will consider the reintroduction of the death penalty after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that harder punishment is needed after a suspect's deliberate fire destroyed 4,500 hectare of Aegean coastal forest. The Ministry of Justice said it has started working on revisiting a 2004 decision to abolish the death penalty. [Reuters]

A suspect detained in connection with the fire has admitted to causing it, authorities said. The fire in woodland near the resort of Marmaris was contained. [Reuters]

Erdogan said the punishment for burning forests should be "intimidating, and if that's a death sentence, it's a death sentence". Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag said that the president's statement was "instructions to us" to reconsider the law. [Middle East Eye]

Capital punishment was abolished from the constitution in 2004 during the early years of Erdogan's rule. [Reuters]

(fw/gc)

Turkey: Police arrest more than 200 people in LGBTQ+ demonstration in

Istanbul

Turkish police arrested more than 200 people, among them journalists, during an LGBTQ+ demonstration in Istanbul on June 26 after it was prohibited for security concerns. Most of the detainees were released the next day after giving a police statement and undergoing health checks. [Associated Press] [Le Monde] [Zeit]

The police detained journalists covering the march. They also beat many people attending the demonstration, according to Journalist's union DISK Basin-Is. AFP journalists said the police prevented reporters from filming the arrests. [Le Monde] [Associated Press] [Zeit]

Residents banged on pans and pots from their windows and balconies in solidarity with the protesters. Top Turkish officials have called LGBTQ+ people "pervert,'" who are against traditional family values. [FAZ] [Associated Press]

(fw/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan rebrands country's name to Turkiye

Turkey's official name at the UN is now Turkiye after the government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan wrote a letter to the organisation requesting the country's name be rebranded. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu formally asked for the change in a letter to the UN and other international agencies.

The country's rebranding campaign began in December when Erdogan issued a memorandum asking other countries to use the name Turkiye. He also instructed that products for export be labelled "Made in Turkiye" and state agencies use the name in official documents. [Al Jazeera][Tagesschau] [NPR] [Associated Press]

Turkish officials and state-run media suggest there are several reasons behind the push to have the country internationally recognized as Turkiye — including strengthening its identity and distancing itself from certain less-flattering associations. [NPR] [Associated Press]

(fw/gc)

Turkey: NATO's Stoltenberg says Ankara's security concerns are legitimate

NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on June 12 that Turkey's security concerns were legitimate and should be taken seriously given its battle with terrorists and its border with Iraq and Syria.

Stoltenberg said that "no other NATO ally has suffered more terrorist attacks than Turkey" and pointed to its strategic geographic location with neighbours such as Iraq and Syria. [Aljazeera]

Turkey had threatened to block Sweden's and Finland's bid to join NATO because of their alleged support for Kurdish militants that Turkey considers to be terrorist organisations. Before dropping his opposition to the two Nordic states joining the military alliance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that Scandinavian countries are "guesthouses for terrorist organisations." [Europe in Review, June 2022]

"These are legitimate concerns. This is about terrorism, it's about weapons exports," Stoltenberg said during a joint news conference with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto. "We have to address the security concerns of all allies, including Turkish concerns about the terrorist group PKK." He also mentioned Sweden's restriction of arms exports to Turkey and the support of Kurdish militants by the two Nordic countries. [Associated Press] [The Guardian] [Aljazeera]

Sweden's Foreign Minister Ann Linde has been criticised multiple times in Turkish media and by Turkish officials for meeting a leader of the Kurdish People's Defence Unit (YPG) in Stockholm. Sweden has been supportive of the Kurdish YPG, the PKK's Syrian branch, during the Syrian conflict. Sweden has also imposed an arms embargo against Ankara after the Turkish military invaded northern Syria. [Europe in Review, June 2022]

(fw/gc)

Turkey: Islamic State leader allegedly captured in Istanbul

Turkish police captured Abu Hasan al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, a leader of the terrorist group Islamic State in Istanbul during a raid, acccording to Turkish media. [Al-Monitor] [OdaTV] [Times of Israel] [t-online]

Turkish officials, who asked to remain anonymous, told Bloomberg that the anti-terrorism police captured a

man believed to be the leader of IS after a lengthy observation They did not provide his name. [Bloomberg]

(fw/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Turbulence as foreign minister leaves governing Five Star movement

Italy's foreign minister announced on June 21 he was quitting the co-governing Five Star movement to build a new parliamentary group supporting the government of Prime Minister Mario Draghi, but the internal fissure has raised fears that the country's multi-party ruling coalition could be destabilised. [Reuters][Corriere] [Ansa]

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio's decision to leave Five Star came after he accused the party of undermining government moves to help Ukraine, and claimed the grouping was weakening Rome's position in the European Union with its "immature attitude". [Ansa] [Reuters]

The Five Star Movement has been a key force in Italy's parliament since 2018. However, it suffered significant losses in recent local elections and opinion polls. The movement has become increasingly sceptical about delivering weapons to Ukraine, and blamed its deteriorating results on the issue.

Rumours have been circulating that Five Star leader Giuseppe Conte could take the party out of government to stop the downward trend. The party denied this in a statement issued on June 21. [Reuters] [msn]

Di Maio has already built up a new centrist grouping, provisionally named Together for the Future, that currently counts 51 deputies, including former Five Star members who have left the party following his announcement. [Il Foglio][IlManifesto][msn]

(sr/pk)

Italy: Referendum proves a flop

A referendum in Italy asking citizens about proposed changes to the country's judicial system saw only one in five voters turning out to cast a ballot, far short of the 50 percent needed for the result to be valid.

The June 12 referendum asked citizens about reforming a judiciary that is considered by many to be highly inefficient. But critics said the five questions posed in the plebiscite were too technical for some voters to grasp. [Reuters]

Former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the leader of the populist Five Star Movement, which is part of the government, said the referendum was "very disappointing in its results, with the most modest participation ever. Citizens did not believe that there was a real attempt to improve justice." [rainews]

Among those supporting the referendum was the rightist League party, which is part of the ruling coalition, and the centre-left Radical Party, which argued that greater control over the judiciary was needed**.** [ilgiorno]

(ab/pk)

Italy: Ruling parties divided on minimum wage

Italy's ruling parties are divided over proposals to introduce a statutory minimum wage in response to rising inflation.

According to Italy's minister of labour, Andrea Orlando, a minimum wage would help low-income families. But

the centre-right Forza Italia party has said that wages must correspond to productivity.

Other groupings, like the Five Star Movement, have said they are in favour of a minimum pay level. [Euractiv] [Enews.com.ng] [Flipboard] A bill that would bring in a statutory minimum wage is being examined by the Senate.

Negotiators from the European Parliament and the European Council on June 7 agreed on a directive which aims to introduce a common framework for minimum wage legislation in the European Union. *[See our story later in this issue]*.

However, the new directive does not include an obligation on Italy and five other EU countries that do not have statutory minimum pay to bring in such a measure.

(ab/pk)

Italy: Growing north-south gap holds back country's growth, says central bank

The gap in development between northern and southern regions of Italy has widened considerably, slowing the growth of the national economy as a whole, according to a report by the country's central bank. [ansa]

The report, entitled "The North-South divide: economic development and public intervention", was presented at a conference in Rome on June 20. It said that between 2007 and 2019, a period marked by financial crisis, the GDP of the south of Italy shrank 10 percent, around five times the fall in central and northern regions. [rainews]

The Bank of Italy's governor, Ignazio Visco, said the underdevelopment of the country's south resulted from profound economic and social inequalities. [rainews]

(ab/pk)

Malta: Head of Nationalist Party re-appointed after general election defeat

The head of Malta's opposition Nationalist Party, which was defeated in the country's March general election, has been chosen again for the post.

Bernard Grech was re-elected as party chief on May 28 in a ballot which, under the grouping's statute, is mandatory after every national election. He received an 81 percent share of the internal party vote. [Times of Malta [Malta Today]

Grech called for more unity in his party, and announced the reorganisation of its structure and its EUR 32 million debt. [Times of Malta [Malta Today]

The Nationalist Party is a Christian Democrat and conservative political grouping that is in opposition to the Labour government. The Labour Party won Malta's general election on March 26, in which 65 members of the House of Representatives were voted in. [The Guardian] [Europe Monthly April 2022]

(ta/pk)

Malta delaying moves to tackle corruption, says watchdog

An international anti-corruption watchdog says that Malta has not yet implemented a national strategy it recommended to tackle graft. [Malta Today] [Newsbook]

In an evaluation report, the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) concluded that Malta has fully implemented two of 23 recommendations, 12 partially and nine not at all. GRECO, which is a body of the Council of Europe, the continent's top human rights watchdog, put forward the recommendations in March 2019. [Malta Today]

According to the report, the Maltese government has yet to start investigating high-level corruption cases, which is one of the biggest challenges facing the country. [Newsbook]

David Casa, an MP for Malta's opposition Nationalist Party, said: "The Labour government congratulates itself over landmark 'reforms', judging itself on fairytale criteria and its own spin, not the independent reports of international bodies." [Newsbook]

Though the government faced accusations of corruption, the Labour Party secured a third term in power following a landslide general election victory in March.

In 2017, the murder of Maltese investigative anti-corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in a car bombing caused shockwaves in the Mediterranean

island nation and throughout Europe. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

(ta/pk)

Malta: Multi-million fund to make buildings greener

The Maltese government on June 13 unveiled a EUR 20 million grant programme to help companies make their buildings more energy-efficient. The initiative is part of the European Commission's EUR 257 million Recovery and Resilience Plan for Malta. [Times of Malta]

The initiative is aimed at old buildings needing a revamp. Each renovation project must be completed by December 2025. [Times of Malta]

(ta/pk)

Portugal: Right-wingers submit bill to dilute parliamentary immunity

Portuguese right-wing opposition party Chega on June 11 submitted a bill aiming to dilute rules on parliamentary immunity and make it easier for deputies to be brought before a court. [The Portugal News]

The country's constitution stipulates that deputies can only appear as a complainant or defendant before a court if they have been authorised to do so by parliament. Parliament is obliged to give such permission if lawmakers are accused of a crime with a maximum prison sentence of more than three years. In all other cases the decision is up to parliament. [Parlamento]

Chega's bill aims to broaden the accountability of deputies. It says that parliamentary authorisation must be given when a court case is not related to lawmakers' voting decisions or opinions expressed in the exercise of their duties as deputies. Andre Ventura, head of Chega, argues that deputies should answer before a court for misdeeds, like all other citizens. [The Portugal News]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Euthanasia bills pass first reading, after two presidential vetoes

Four bills aiming to decriminalise euthanasia submitted by Portugal's governing Socialist Party and three left-wing and centre opposition parties passed their first reading in parliament on June 9.

The vote by lawmakers marked the third attempt by the Portuguese parliament in just over a year to introduce a law decriminalising medically assisted death. [Lusa] [msn]

Deputies passed a euthanasia bill in January 2021 but Portugal's conservative President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa asked the Constitutional Court to review the legislation as he considered the wording to be unclear. The court agreed and declared the draft law unconstitutional. Rebelo de Sousa then vetoed the bill. [Reuters]

In November 2021, a revised bill was passed by parliament but vetoed again by the president. He said that the wording continued to be imprecise and sent the bill back to lawmakers for revision. However, the parliament was not able to act on the issue before its dissolution due to a snap election in January 2022. [The Portugal News] [Europe Monthly December 2021] [Europe Monthly January 2022]

The latest revised bills have addressed some of the concerns raised by Rebelo de Sousa, specifying that people would only be allowed to request assistance in ending their lives in cases of "definitive injury of extreme gravity" or "severe and incurable disease."

The bills will now be reviewed by lawmakers before a final vote. One final bill is then expected to be submitted to the president, who can either sign it into law, veto it again or send it to the Constitutional Court for assessment. [Reuters]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Ex-president calls for reform of electoral system

Former Portuguese president Anibal Cavaco Silva has called for reform of the country's electoral system, pointing to increasing abstention rates in recent elections [CM Jornal]

The conservative politician, who was in office from 2006 to 2016, told a conference on June 14 that

democracy in Portugal had started to show “some symptoms of deterioration in quality.”

He said that under current electoral rules, many votes cast do not have an impact on the outcome of elections, leading to results that do not represent the choices of citizens. This, he added, leads to frustration and causes some people to abstain from voting. [Diario de noticias]

Parliamentary elections in Portugal follow the D'Hondt method of proportional representation, dividing the country into districts that elect between two and 48 representatives, depending on the number of voters in the area.

Citizens get to choose between lists of candidates, with each party or coalition providing its own list. Parliamentary seats are then distributed among the lists in proportion to the votes received. This means that, especially in small constituencies, votes other than those for the winning lists do not affect the national result. [Parlamento][Secretaria Geral][Noticias ao minuto]

In November 2021, the Portuguese Association for Economic and Social Development proposed an electoral system in which citizens would cast two votes: one for a party, and one for a specific candidate. The association also proposed a minimum of eight representatives per constituency. [Diario de noticias]

Joao Cotrim Figueiredo, head of the centre-right opposition Liberal Initiative party, said earlier this year that there was “a serious problem with the electoral system” as election results did not reflect what voters wanted. [Diario de noticias]

The governing Socialist Party says deep changes to the electoral system are not needed. [Noticias ao minuto] [Diario de noticias]

(sr/pk)

Portugal fails to meet anti-graft standards, report warns

Portugal has not met the anti-corruption standards of the Council of Europe, the continent's top human rights watchdog, a report has said. [Council of Europe] [Lusa]

The report covering 2021 and released on June 2 by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), the

Council's bribery-monitoring body, said that Portugal had fully implemented only three of 15 GRECO recommendations. [Council of Europe][Lusa]

GRECO was formed by the Council of Europe in 1999 with the aim of helping states to fight graft by monitoring their compliance with the Council's anti-corruption standards. [Council of Europe]

Meanwhile, the Portuguese branch of anti-corruption organisation Transparency International said that the results of the report were "no longer a surprise, but still disappointing." [Lusa]

Even though Portugal has carried out a series of reforms, such as a 2019 transparency package and a national anti-corruption strategy, the changes do not go far enough and have failed to deal with underlying problems, including the regulation of lobby work, said Susana Coroado, the head of Transparency International in Portugal. [Lusa]

But Jose Tavares, the head of the Portuguese Court of Auditors – which is responsible for reviewing public expenditures – said the country had enough anti-corruption laws. He added that instead of creating new rules, the focus should be on implementing existing laws as efficiently as possible. [The Portugal News] [Lusa]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Government eyes four-day working week

Portugal's minister of labour, Ana Mendes Godinho, has announced the government is planning pilot projects to test whether the country could move to a four-day working week. The project is part of the government's "Decent Work Agenda", a legislative package focused on improving life for Portuguese employees. [Lusa] [The Portugal News]

Speaking on June 2, Godinho said the pilot projects would be conducted with companies taking part voluntarily and would allow different models and new ways of organising working time to be tested, while "always bearing in mind the concern of guaranteeing the protection of workers." [The Portugal News]

She added that the aim was to "think outside the box" and that Portugal wanted to be a pioneer in this area. Godinho said various firms have already signalled that

they are willing to be involved in the project. [Portugal Resident] [The Portugal News]

The plan, however, has sparked controversy. The right-of-centre head of the local authority on the Portuguese island of Madeira said he could not support the initiative as he was "in favour of governments not meddling in the economy". [The Portugal News]

Apart from focusing on new working time regulations, the "Decent Work Agenda" aims to protect young people, who are often employed on short-term contracts. The initiative aims to secure minimum pay levels for interns, limit repeated renewals of short-term contracts and to increase severance compensation as well as overtime pay. [Reuters]

(sr/pk)

Spain: Conservatives win regional election, in boost ahead of national vote

Spain's conservative People's Party on June 19 won an absolute majority in regional elections in Andalucia, the country's most populous region, delivering a boost for the country's main opposition grouping ahead of national elections next year. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

The result means the People's Party will not need to rely on the far-right populist Vox party, which has been on the rise in recent years, to govern in Andalucia.

The regional ballot was the first key test for the People's Party's new leader, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, who was elected to the post in March. His predecessor was ousted following a public row that threatened to tear the party apart amid bitter rivalry between conservative heavyweights. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

Left-wingers took a drubbing in the Andalucia election, piling the pressure on Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and his Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, who are in power at the national level. Sanchez's government has struggled to cope with rocketing inflation and the economic aftermath of Russia's war against Ukraine. [AP] [The Guardian]

"Sanchez might face an uphill battle to get re-elected" in a national parliamentary ballot due by the end of 2023, Antonio Barroso, an analyst at political consultancy Teneo, told the AFP news agency. [AFP/France 24]

The People's Party victory in Andalucia means it will be free to govern the region without needing the Vox party, which until recently was considered a pariah in Spanish politics because of its ultra-nationalism and xenophobia.

Vox has been gaining in strength and earlier this year for the first time entered a local government alliance in the north-central Castilla y Leon region, where it teamed up with the People's Party. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

(pk)

Spain: Catalan separatist party picks new leader to replace Puigdemont

The separatist Junts party, which led the northeastern region of Catalonia to declare independence from Spain in 2017, has chosen a new leader to replace Carles Puigdemont, who had said he would not run again for the post as he focuses on his duties as a member of the European Parliament. [rtve]

The president of the Catalan local parliament, Laura Borras, was elected to lead the party on June 4 in Argeles, a town in southern France close to the Spanish border, during a congress in which Puigdemont took part.

Puigdemont moved to self-imposed exile in Belgium after Catalonia's parliament issued a short-lived independence declaration five years ago. He is wanted in Spain for sedition and rebellion.

Borras said that independence remains a priority for the Junts party and described herself as "puigdemontist." [ElDiario]

Borras is being investigated for alleged irregular contracts being awarded while she was head of the Institute of Catalan Letters. [ElMundo]

In October 2017 Catalan separatist leaders declared independence from Spain after a contested referendum. The vote was deemed illegal by the national government, and the independence movement's leaders were convicted for sedition and rebellion, imprisoned or forced to flee abroad.

(vb/pk)

Spain: Madrid approves multi-billion aid package amid price rises

Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's government announced a EUR 9 billion package on June 25 to help Spain's most vulnerable families cope with inflation and an increase in energy prices.

The aid includes subsidies for transport, tax cuts and a 15 percent increase in pensions. The measures will be in force until the end of 2022. [Reuters][El Mundo]

The leader of the conservative opposition People's Party, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, welcomed the package but criticised the government for not "going further". [El Pais] [El Pais]

(sr/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Court launches audit of ruling OVP party's finances

The Austrian Court of Auditors has appointed an expert to examine the finances of the conservative Austrian People's Party (OVP), the senior member of the country's governing coalition, amid suspicions that the grouping underreported expenditures for its 2019 parliamentary election campaign.

The OVP was allowed to spend EUR 7 million, and reported EUR 5.6 million in campaign spending. [Spiegel]

Meanwhile, the OVP reported that it spent EUR 6.9 million on its European Parliament election campaign in 2019. The Court of Auditors said that the difference in expenditures between the national parliamentary election and European Parliament election campaigns was difficult to understand.

The current Austrian Chancellor, Karl Nehammer, was general secretary of the OVP in 2019 and was the head of its election campaign. The party was fined for overspending on Austrian parliamentary election campaigns in both 2013 and 2017. [Kurier]

(jg/pk)

Austria: Spat in ruling coalition after 'openly racist' comment about migrants

A rise in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Austria has triggered a dispute between parties in the country's ruling coalition after critics dubbed a comment by an influential politician "openly racist."

Around 16,000 asylum seekers landed in Austria in the first four months of 2022, 138 percent up on the same period in 2021. The figure does not include more than 70,000 Ukrainians fleeing the conflict in their home country. [DiePresse]

Laura Sachslehner, secretary-general of the conservative Austrian People's Party (OVP), which is the senior member of the governing coalition, said in a Twitter post that her nation "suffers" from the second highest per-capita number of asylum requests in the EU.

She added that a distinction must be made between "war-displaced persons from Ukraine and all other migrants, who mostly want to come to Austria for economic reasons." [DiePresse]

Several members of the Green party, a junior member of the ruling coalition, criticised Sachslehner's comments. Ewa Ernst-Dziedzic, the foreign policy spokesperson for the Greens, accused Sachslehner of "openly racist polemics." [DiePresse] [Kurier]

(jg/pk)

Czech Republic: EU rules speed up plan for nuclear waste repository

EU plans have forced the Czech Republic to speed up an initiative to build the country's first permanent nuclear waste repository by 2065.

The European Commission in February approved the Complementary Climate Delegated Act, which requires a nuclear waste repository to be built by 2050. The Act is part of the so-called EU taxonomy, a classification system that lists economic activities deemed to be sustainable. [European Commission]

The Czech Republic has two nuclear power plants, but not a permanent repository. Waste is stored in containers at the power plants that are designed to last 60 years.

The country's Radioactive Waste Repository Authority, which is responsible for finding a site for the repository, has picked out four locations, all of which have been approved by the government. A final decision on the choice of site will be made by 2030.

Residents at all four locations oppose the construction of such facilities. A civic organisation called Platform Against Deep Storage is demanding an alternative to the idea of a permanent repository and wants a local vote on such plans. [Radio Prague International]

(jg/pk)

Hungary improves in fighting money laundering, says watchdog

Hungary has improved in terms of combating money laundering and terrorist financing, according to a report by MONEYVAL, the anti-laundering body of the Council of Europe human rights watchdog.

Hungary has implemented several legislative, regulatory and institutional measures that impose due diligence requirements on banks which offer services to customers on behalf of foreign banks – known as correspondent banking relationships – and has established an obligation for financial groups and companies to register officially, the report said.

MONEYVAL upgraded its rating of Hungary's compliance with the international anti-laundering standards of the Financial Action Task Force, an international organisation with over 200 member states that fights money laundering and terrorist financing.

MONEYVAL said that instead of “partially compliant”, as before, Hungary was now “largely compliant”. [Council of Europe]

(aml/pk)

Hungary told to compensate asylum seeker who was put on leash

Hungary has been ordered to pay compensation to an Iraqi family of asylum seekers after the European Court of Human Rights said they were subjected to “degrading and inhuman treatment” in 2017.

The court said that the mother, who had been undergoing a high-risk pregnancy at the time, and her four children were highly vulnerable. According to the court, the conditions during their four-month stay in a transit zone – where they lived in a container which they were allowed to leave only to attend appointments – violated the prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment as defined in Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

While the father was not deemed especially vulnerable, an incident in which he was handcuffed and put on a leash when he needed to accompany his wife to a hospital appointment as an interpreter also violated this right, the court found.

The court ruled that the family’s four-month stay in the transit zone amounted to deprivation of liberty. Hungary was ordered to pay EUR 3,000 in compensation to the father and EUR 12,500 to the mother and the four children. [ECHR]

(aml/pk)

Slovenia: Broad liberal bloc attracts more parties

In line with his post-election plans, newly elected Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob has moved to consolidate a centre-left/liberal bloc. His liberal-leaning Freedom Movement party swept into power in April elections, besting the populist Slovenian Democratic Party.

Two parliamentary parties have announced they want to integrate with and become a part of the Freedom Movement. The two are the List of Marjan Sarec (LMS) party and the Party of Alenka Bratusek (SAB), which

both have centre-left, pro-European policies, similarly to Golob's party.

In May, the prime minister successfully concluded a coalition agreement with other parties on the left. [Vecer] [Dnevnik]

The aim is to create a united front to fend off attempts by the ousted right to regain power in future elections.

The Slovenian leader recently decided to join French President Emmanuel Macron's proposed new pan-European centrist alliance, which would combine the existing liberal Renew bloc and leftist parties in the European Parliament. The move could see Macron's influence over European politics increase and could see Slovenia playing a larger role on the European stage. [Delo] [Delo]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: New defence minister plans review of strategy

Slovenia's newly appointed defence minister has announced plans to review the status of the country's armed forces, including procurement deals signed recently by the previous government.

Defence Minister Marjan Sarec's plans include a revamp of doctrinal defence concepts, which he said "must be determined by the lessons of [...] war." He mentioned conflicts such as the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war – fought between Azerbaijan and Armenian forces – the Libyan civil war, and the war in Ukraine, each of which has seen the widespread use of drone technologies and modern, guided munitions.

Slovakia aims to prioritise operational manoeuvrability over heavier mechanised units. To achieve this, existing units are to be converted into light "territorial defence" forces. These units are to use light anti-armour weaponry akin to that of Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russia. This may prove to be an unpopular decision with NATO planners, who envision the Slovenian armed forces as being interoperable, allowing them to be integrated into multinational battlegroups as part of the organisation's "Enhanced Forward Presence" in Central and Eastern Europe. [Delo] [Delo] [MFA LV]

A recent defence deal saw the previous government of Slovenia sign a memorandum of understanding for a delivery of Boxer 8x8 armoured vehicles from German

defence consortium ARTEC. The hardware was to have been used for heavy mechanised formations. But the new defence minister has announced he intends to suspend the deal in order to review what he suggested were problematic issues, such as the relevance of armoured vehicles in modern warfare. [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Slovenia has a new centre-left coalition government following a parliamentary election in April. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Support for gov't under threat over plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda

The Danish Social Liberal party, which supports Denmark's minority ruling Social Democrats in parliament, has threatened to withdraw support for Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's government if a plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda is put into action.

While no official bilateral agreement has yet been concluded with Rwanda, Frederiksen's government last year approved rules that allowed reception centres to be established outside Europe to house people seeking asylum in Denmark while their application is processed.

The leader of the Social Liberal party raised human rights concerns. Speaking to Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, Sofie Carsten Nielsen said that if the current plan were implemented, "then we can no longer support [the government]. I cannot imagine that."

Rwanda, while experiencing rapidly improving living conditions, boasts a "dismal" human rights record, according to human rights group Amnesty International. [Euractiv] [Amnesty]

Nielsen said that her party was not against relocating asylum seekers to third countries in principle, but would insist on a joint EU effort to ensure that human rights are respected. [Politiken]

Social Democrat minister of foreign affairs and integration, Kaare Dybvad Bek, said: "It is not a new thing that we disagree on [the plans]. But of course, we continue to work to ensure a fair asylum treatment, where the solution we want, of course, ensures that there is respect for human rights." [Berlingske] [Politiken] Danish opposition conservative parties have voiced support for the initiative.

The United Kingdom, which has started implementing similar plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, has faced an outcry from the parliamentary opposition and from the public. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Aljazeera]

(cg/pk)

Greenland wants inquiry into contraception scandal during Danish colonial rule

Greenland's parliament has called for an independent Danish investigation into a troubling chapter of history during the former direct colonial rule of Denmark, when Greenlandic teenagers were forced to have contraception implants.

That practice, which was carried out by Danish doctors in the 1960s to manage the native population of Greenland, has recently drawn heavy criticism from the island's politicians as women have come forward with testimonies of what happened to them. [Politiken]

Greenland was a colony of Denmark until 1953 and is now an autonomous territory under Copenhagen's control.

Meanwhile, a broader independent study is to be conducted by Copenhagen to determine the effects of Danish policies introduced in Greenland after World War II.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has pledged to "create the conditions for reconciliation with the past." Her office did not divulge details of the Danish investigation.

Greenland's prime minister, Mute Egede, told news agency Sermitsiaq: "In recent years, we have witnessed one sad story after another. Stories with large personal costs for those affected. The entire Greenlandic population is behind the demand that a historical investigation be carried out." [Berlingske] [Berlingske]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Citizens' proposal seeks automatic organ donations

A citizens' initiative seeking to automatically make all Danes organ donors after death, unless they explicitly opt out of such a system, has gathered the required number of signatures to be considered by the Folketing, the Danish parliament.

In Denmark, citizens may propose legislation that can be considered by the government. A total of 56,000 signatures are required to reach this point. [dr.dk]

In a push to increase organ donor numbers, the Danish government in May signed into force a law stipulating that citizens are required to consider becoming organ donors while applying for a passport or a driver's licence.

However, Danish political parties are far from unanimous on the issue of automatic organ donations. Conservative lawmakers have said they will not vote in favour of the citizens' initiative.

The left has already ruled out its support, while Rasmus Horn Langhoff of the Social Democrats said that the proposal "goes too far." He added: "I believe that people should rather actively decide for themselves whether they want to be organ donors." [Berlingske] [Politiken]

(cg/pk)

Finland opens fast-track immigration for skilled workers

The Finnish immigration service has launched a fast-track procedure that allows skilled foreign workers such as IT experts and employees with a university degree or vocational training to receive a residence permit within 14 days.

The move aims to cut the current application time by about two weeks, and comes as Finland struggles with a shortage of highly qualified specialists in the technology sector. The new system is also designed to allow family members to move to Finland more quickly. [Euractiv] [yle] [Helsinki Times]

Finland's Employment Minister Tuula Haatainen said that by April 2023 the reform of immigration procedures is expected to be broadened to include "everyone who moves to Finland on the basis of work and education". [Euractiv]

(js/pk)

Finland: MP denies harassment of young women, alleges defamation

A deputy from Finland's opposition National Coalition Party has said he is filing a defamation complaint against the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper after it reported on claims by women who say the MP harassed them.

Several women have accused lawmaker Wille Rydman speaking to them in a way that was inappropriate and sexually explicit. Some of the women were minors at the time the alleged incidents took place. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Iltalehti]

On his Twitter account, Rydman on June 19 denied the allegations and said he was planning to take action against Helsingin Sanomat, which published an extensive article about his case. [Helsingin Sanomat]

Rydman on June 21 resigned as a member of the parliamentary group of the National Coalition Party. The party, meanwhile, said it wanted to strengthen its anti-harassment policies. [yle] [Helsingin Sanomat] [yle]

(js/pk)

Norway: Perks for lawmakers probed

The Auditor General's Office has launched a probe into the use of tax-free apartments and into severance pay and travel expenses claimed by Norwegian politicians including 500 members of parliament.

The investigation will cover the period from 2009 to 2021. Last year, news outlets criticised a lack of oversight of rules that enable Norwegian politicians to increase their income. The results of the probe by the Auditor General's Office will be published at the beginning of 2023. [aftenposten]

The investigation follows a scandal over special housing used by politicians. The Norwegian parliament – the Storting – owns apartments in Oslo meant for deputies who live more than 40 kilometres from the parliament building. Several MPs were allocated these tax-free apartments even though they were not entitled to them because they live or are registered as living close to the parliament. [dn]

The then-president of the Storting, Eva Kristin Hansen, resigned from the position on November 23 after officials revealed there had been misuse of such accommodation. [dn]

(js/pk)

Norway: Governing parties divided over proposed pay hike for MPs

A proposal to increase the annual salary of members of parliament has caused divisions between Norway's governing Labour and Centre parties.

The parliament's remuneration committee on June 2 recommended that MPs should have their pay hiked to EUR 101,700 a year. [Norwegian Government]

The governing Labour Party thinks it is the wrong time for such a move. But the Centre Party, a junior member of the governing coalition, says that it trusts the recommendation of the remuneration committee. [nrk]

The opposition Red Party is against a wage increase, arguing that while the aftermath of the pandemic is still affecting many households, parliamentarians' wages should be cut rather than increased. The opposition Conservative party has come out in favour of a boost in pay for MPs. [nrk]

The salaries of Norwegian MPs were last raised in 2019, when their pay was upped to EUR 94,500 a year. [nrk]

(js/pk)

Norway: Parliament rejects proposal to lower voting age

The Norwegian parliament on June 1 rejected a bill drafted by the opposition Liberal Party which would have given 16-year-olds the right to vote in municipal and county council elections.

The parliament's Standing Committee on Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs earlier recommended giving local electoral rights to people of that age. But a centre-right majority comprising the Conservatives, Centre Party, Progress Party and Christian Democratic Party blocked the proposal.

Opponents of such a move argue that the maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds can vary considerably, and that the age at which people can vote and the age at which they become adults – 18 in Norway – should be the same. Proponents of a lower voting age say that democracy grows stronger the more people are able to participate in it. [The Local]

Norwegian politicians previously discussed the proposal in 2013 and several municipalities started pilot projects allowing people who are 16 and above to vote. [nrk]

(js/pk)

Norway: Gov't in talks to loosen passport requirement amid shortages

As many Norwegians struggle to obtain an up-to-date passport amid a shortage of raw materials caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the government in Oslo is trying to persuade a number of countries to accept other types of ID.

Manufacturers of Norwegian passports face a lack of paper, glue and a component for a microchip used in the document.[nrk] At the beginning of June, the waiting time for a passport was around seven weeks but police expect this to reach up to ten weeks in July. [nrk]

Though many Norwegians have booked summer holidays abroad, police are discouraging them from doing so without a valid passport. [The Local] Turkey has already relaxed its passport requirements, and Norwegian travellers can enter the country using their national ID card. [aftenposten]

(js/pk)

Norway: Deadly shooting spree at gay bar, Islamic extremism suspected

A gunman believed to be a radicalised Islamist killed two people and injured 21 when he opened fired in and near a popular gay bar in Norway's capital on June 25.

The suspect is a 42-year-old Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin who has been known to the security services since 2015. The man, who is believed to have acted alone, was arrested minutes after the attack and charged with murder, attempted murder and terrorist acts.

Police confiscated a handgun and an automatic weapon, both unregistered. The suspect refused to talk to investigators and was detained in custody for four weeks. [Aljazeera] [BBC] [AP News] [NRK]

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere said it was not clear if the shooter intentionally targeted the LGBT community. [Reuters]

Oslo's annual gay pride parade, which was to have taken place the same day, was cancelled on the advice of the police. However, several thousand people gathered in the centre of the capital to hold a march, waving rainbow flags, the symbol of the LGBTQIA+ community. [BBC]

The country's terrorism threat assessment was raised to the highest level by the Norwegian security authorities following the attack.

(js/pk)

Norway needs to step up fight against human trafficking, watchdog says

Norway has made progress in the fight against human trafficking, but needs to take further steps to ensure victims have access to justice and remedies, experts

from the Council of Europe human rights watchdog have said in a report.

The Council's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings welcomed changes to the legislative framework in criminal and public law that Norway has implemented to combat rights violations. In particular, the country's Transparency Act forces larger companies to ensure decent working conditions, the experts said.

However, the report pointed to a rise in the use of trafficked workers in sectors such as construction, agriculture, cleaning, waste collection and hospitality in Norway, as well as a low rate of indictments and convictions for human trafficking. It called on the country to implement a national referral mechanism to ensure that authorities can work together effectively to avoid the deportation of potential victims without screening. [Council of Europe]

(aml/pk)

Norway wants refund for NH90 military helicopters

Norway has said it is returning 14 NH90 military helicopters it bought from NHIndustries, which is owned by a consortium led by European firm Airbus, saying the machines are unreliable or were delivered behind schedule.

Oslo wants a refund of around EUR 470 million. Norwegian Defence Minister Bjoern Arild Gram said the helicopters would never meet the requirements of his country's armed forces, no matter how much work technicians put into them.

NHIndustries responded by saying it was "extremely disappointed" at Norway's decision, which it described as "legally groundless", adding that it was not given an opportunity to discuss the latest proposal by the consortium to address specific Norwegian requirements.[Reuters] [Euronews]

(js/pk)

Norway: High prices spark concern of violence

Amid the highest inflation in Norway since 1988, many have been expressing their frustration online and

criticising politicians, leading a senior security official to voice concern over potential violence or even acts of terrorism.

The warning came from Hedvig Moe, deputy head of the Police Security Service, which is responsible for protecting politicians in Norway. [dn]

As electricity, fuel and food prices have climbed, users of online forums have been calling politicians and authorities "traitors", "liars" and "thugs". [tv2] [The Local]

Annual inflation in Norway in May stood at 5.7 percent. In comparison, inflation in the eurozone reached a new high of 8.1 percent in May, up from 7.4 percent the previous month, according to a preliminary estimate from Eurostat, the EU's statistics office. The rise was partially caused by Russia's war against Ukraine.

The Secretary General of Norway's Homeowners' National Association said that if the country was to avoid grassroots protests, "then we must ensure that the burden distribution is experienced more fairly between different interest groups in society." [tv2]

(js/pk)

Sweden: Gov't survives vote of no-confidence that complicated NATO bid

The prospect of Sweden's minority government resigning was narrowly staved off on June 7 when a former Kurdish fighter-turned-MP who has complicated Stockholm's bid to join NATO abstained in a key no-confidence vote.

A motion of no-confidence aiming to oust Sweden's justice and interior minister, Morgan Johansson, fell short of one vote after independent member of parliament Amineh Kakabaveh decided not to cast a ballot.

Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson had announced that her minority Social Democrat administration would resign if the no-confidence motion was successful, saying it was "irresponsible" to create a political crisis amid the war in Ukraine and just three months ahead of a general election in Sweden. [Euractiv] [Göteborgs-Posten]

Discontent with Johansson's handling of rising gang violence led the nationalist Sweden Democrats to initiate the no-confidence motion, which won the

support of the centre-right opposition. [Dagens Nyheter] [Dagens Nyheter]

In talks with the ruling Social Democrats prior to the vote, Kakabaveh made her backing of Andersson's minority government conditional on Sweden's continued support for Kurdish groups in Syria. She had warned the government to not make concessions regarding the Kurds to Turkey, which had opposed Sweden's efforts to join NATO. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Kakabaveh is a former Kurdish peshmerga fighter of Iranian Kurdish descent. Her influence on Swedish politics was criticised by the Turkish ambassador to Stockholm in May. The diplomat said he would like to see Kakabaveh extradited to Turkey, accusing her of connections to a group Turkey regards as a terrorist organisation. [SVT]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in May that he opposed Sweden and Finland joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization because of their alleged support for Kurdish militants. [Europe Monthly June 2022] Ankara dropped its opposition in late June after weeks of negotiations.

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Growing parliamentary support for ban on independent religious schools

The centre-right opposition Liberals in June called for a ban on independent religious schools in Sweden. With other parties also advocating a ban, there could now be a majority in parliament for such a move. [Ekot]

Independent schools in Sweden are publicly funded and must adhere to certain government guidelines in their curriculum. But their status has been controversial for some time.

The governing centre-left Social Democrats have in recent years proposed multiple bans to the Swedish parliament, claiming religious independent schools promote segregation instead of integration, undermine religious freedom of choice and exert inappropriate religious influence over their pupils. [The Local]

Now the Liberals have adopted a similar position after previously only advocating for restrictions on the establishment of new independent schools. Party

leader Johan Pehrson pointed to other alternatives for religious education like Sunday schools.

The proposed ban would not apply to certain national minorities like Finns and Jews in Sweden, who would be allowed to run schools under minority protection rules. [Göteborgs-Posten] [Dagens-Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Climate policy under fire

The Swedish government in early June pledged to do more to protect the environment, but critics say the measures are insufficient.

The move by the authorities came after they were criticised for reassigning a substantial part of this year's funds for sustainable development to finance the reception of Ukrainian refugees. [Dagens Nyheter] [Göteborgs-Posten]

Green issues moved to the forefront of Swedish politics ahead of a UN climate conference in Stockholm at the start of June. The Nordic country sees itself as something of a pioneer in climate-friendly policies, but a report by Swedish Newspaper Dagens Nyheter said that in recent decades the nation has lived up to only a quarter of its environmental promises.

Several of Sweden's former ministers for the climate and environment have said the country has not done enough to prevent climate change. [Dagens Nyheter] [Euractiv]

In an earlier push to reduce emissions, members of parliament in May decided to ban the extraction of fossil fuels in Sweden from July 1. But as there is little to no exploration activity in Sweden, that decision was criticised by right-wing parties as merely symbolic. [Göteborgs-Posten] The Moderate Party has called for an intensified use of nuclear power instead. [Dagens Nyheter]

The government's climate policy is insufficient for Aurora, a Swedish youth movement, which is opening a class action lawsuit against the Swedish state for not doing enough to prevent climate change.

Similar lawsuits have been successful in several European countries. Sweden's minister for climate and the environment, Annika Strandhall, expressed respect for the youth movement but argued that climate policy

“is best done with political tools and not in courts.” [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Lithuania closes transit to and from Kaliningrad, Russia furious

The Lithuanian authorities imposed transport restrictions on EU-sanctioned freight goods carried via rail to the Russian exclave Kaliningrad on June 18 and extended the ban to road border crossings on June 20, a move that was quickly condemned by Moscow. [LRT] [Meduza]

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said the country’s actions were concordant with EU sanctions. Although Russia reiterated that the EU and Lithuania would violate an agreement reached in 2002 that had allowed the transit of goods through Kaliningrad from other parts of Russia. Brussels and Vilnius said that the sanctions were enacted because of Russia’s “illegal war against Ukraine.” [LRT] [Meduza] [BNE]

The EU High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy Josep Borrell stressed that while goods subjected to EU sanctions were not allowed, other lawful goods were allowed to go through Lithuania. [Financial Times]

The goods sanctioned under EU law range from metals, timber and raw materials to advanced technology, household appliances, tobacco and alcohol as well as various luxury goods such as perfume, caviar and truffles. More than half of the imports are subject to EU sanctioning policies. The Russian government has already signalled that it would dispatch cargo vessels instead to transport the goods by sea. [Meduza] [Republic World]

Russia has accused the US of applying pressure on Lithuania, calling the latter's move a "blockade."

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs alleged on June 24 that the actions were enacted at the behest of the White House, and reiterated that the West was not interested in calls for dialogue and consultations. The Russian federal authorities are planning to launch retaliatory measures against both the USA and Lithuania. [Ukrainian News] [Meduza] [Republic World] [Reuters]

Lithuania dismissed Russia's allegations, as Kaliningrad is not isolated and still accessible via land and air. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Norway agrees to provide medical care for wounded Ukrainian troops

Norway has agreed to offer medical treatment for Ukrainian soldiers who were wounded as they battled Russian troops invading their country.

Ukraine reached out to Norway four times with such a request, the first time at the end of April, before Oslo agreed. Norway's Justice and Preparedness Minister Emilie Enger Mehl said the government had to make a proper assessment of the situation before acting. [nrk]

Since Moscow launched its invasion of Ukraine in late February, Russian troops have attacked 270 hospitals and health facilities, according to Norwegian broadcaster NRK. [Norwegian Government]

(js/pk)

Top US general renews security pledges to Sweden

Top US General Mark Milley renewed Washington's security assurances to Stockholm during a visit to the

city on June 4 as Sweden and Finland wait to join NATO.

The two Nordic countries in May launched bids to become members of the Western military alliance, heralding a historic evolution of Europe's security architecture [Europe Monthly June 2022], but Turkish opposition to their applications could prolong the process.

As they wait to be admitted, Sweden and Finland are not covered by the alliance's security guarantees and are worried about potential Russian aggression. In response, several countries have pledged military support for the Nordic nations if the need arises. [Göteborgs-Posten]

Milley, the principal military advisor to the US president, visited Stockholm ahead of NATO's annual naval Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) drills, which were held from June 5 to 17. During a press conference aboard a US warship, Milley affirmed American support for Sweden's NATO application and promised an expansion of an existing programme of military exercises. This would increase the presence of American ground, air and maritime forces in the Nordic region. [Washington Post]

Joining Milley were Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson and Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist. Andersson described Milley's visit as "concrete proof of [...] support and a very strong political signal at a crucial moment in history". [Dagens Nyheter] [Reuters]

(phr/pk)

Turkish drone manufacturer donates TB2 drone to Ukraine after Lithuanian crowdfunding

The Turkish drone manufacturer Baykar Tech has agreed to donate a Bayraktar TB2 drone to Ukraine after Lithuanians gathered money to buy one through crowdfunding by the end of May. [Reuters]

The Lithuanian internet broadcaster Laisves TV started the campaign, which collected EUR 5.9 million in five and a half days. From the total, EUR 1.5 million will be used to buy ammunition for the unmanned aerial combat drone. [WSJ] [Reuters] [euronews] [Daily Sabah] [Anadolu Agency] [Public Radio of Armenia]

The remaining money should be used for humanitarian or reconstruction aid in Ukraine, Bayraktar stated, waiving the purchase price. Lithuanian and Ukrainian officials will consider how to use the remaining money. The drone will be delivered to Lithuania by the beginning of July, before being transferred to Ukraine. [Bloomberg] [Twitter]

Lithuania's Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas called the donation "UNBELIEVABLE" on Twitter. Hundreds of Lithuanians crowdsourced money to buy the drone in a show of solidarity with a fellow country formerly under Moscow's rule. Its purchase is being orchestrated by Lithuania's Ministry of Defence. [Twitter] [Reuters]

(fw/mo/gc)

Lithuania: President Nauseda says Berlin will help NATO after meeting with German chancellor

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda said on June 7 that Germany signalled its willingness to increase the defence capacities of NATO's eastern flank after meeting German Chancellor Scholz in Vilnius. [Reuters] [Tagesspiegel]

Scholz emphasised that Germany would advance its military capacities in Lithuania, responding to Russia's war in Ukraine. Latvia's President Egils Levits called on Scholz to make "specific suggestions" to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. [Reuters] [Reuters] [Tagesspiegel]

(mo/gc)

ANALYSIS: War in Ukraine galvanises energy transition in Europe

The Russian attack on Ukraine has spurred an energy transition in Europe at a rate that would have been impossible without a major security challenge.

The war has galvanised European countries to make changes in three directions: first, substituting international sources for Russian natural gas; second, restarting coal production and prolonging nuclear power plant operations to fill short-term energy needs; and third, accelerating massive investment into renewables to cut reliance on Russian fossil fuels.

The European Commission announced a plan on March 8 to replace Russian energy supplies over the long term that included sourcing natural gas from the Middle East, Africa, North America and the Caucasus, production of biomethane and green hydrogen in Europe, and demand reduction through conservation.

Large grants to catalyse new renewable energy projects were announced on May 18 as part of the RePowerEU plan. Immediate energy supply challenges due to the war in Ukraine in the past month have altered plans to phase out coal and perhaps nuclear energy. [European Commission 1] [European Commission 2]

Prepare for Russian gas shutoff: energy chief

Russian state-owned gas supplier Gazprom announced a 60 percent cut in natural gas shipments through the Nordstream 1 pipeline on June 14, followed by an announced 15 percent cut to Italy on June 15. The executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA) announced on June 22 that Europe should be prepared for a total shutoff of Russian gas. [Financial Times]

Germany is reversing energy policies in response, announcing on June 19 the re-activation of coal-fired power plants to enable the diversion of reduced natural gas to bolster stored gas supplies deemed critical to support German winter power needs. The EU adopted regulations on June 27 mandating that member states fill 80 percent of available gas storage capacity before this winter and 90 percent prior to future winters.

Closing German nuclear reactors this year now no longer appears feasible, and an indefinite extension of nuclear power may be expected. [New York Times]

The Netherlands announced on June 20 that Groningen, the largest European gas field, will maintain its current 60 percent operating capacity, a reversal of a planned closure due to seismic disturbances. [Reuters]

The number of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals in Europe needed to import energy in quantities to substitute for Russian losses is currently insufficient. A response is underway but provides only an immediate solution. New LNG terminals are being built in Germany, expansion of North Sea capacity is underway, and an increase in African pipeline capacity is planned to supply southern Europe. [Globaldata]

Huge challenge for Europe

The government in Berlin leased four floating LNG terminals on May 5 and the German port of Wilhelmshaven is scheduled to begin operations in December 2022. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a speech on June 2 extolling the virtues of natural gas as the "central bridge" to a climate-neutral energy future. But new LNG terminals scheduled are not slated to begin operations until 2026, and the next three years will present an energy challenge for Europe not seen in recent memory. [Offshore-energy] [Offshore-energy] [Hanseatic-energy-hub]

Medium-term RePowerEU plans for the investment of up to EUR 72 billion in renewable energy grants over seven years, exceeding the EUR 66 billion that the US has planned over the next five years, combined with EUR 225 billion in loans and a six-fold acceleration in approval time for renewable energy projects from an estimated six years to one year, create significant new opportunities for the clean energy industry.

Blackrock, the world's largest investment firm in terms of assets under management at approximately EUR 10 trillion, announced on June 16 that it was launching an energy security and transition infrastructure programme, with half of investment projected for Europe. [EurLex]

Challenges remain in the implementation of RePowerEU, as personified in the re-start of German coal plants and the operational extension of the Dutch Groningen natural gas field, and Berlin and Europe will have to maintain coal and nuclear power in the short term to compensate for the loss in Russian energy supplies.

(rw/pk)

Belarus: Government to participate in CIS program to prepare nuclear infrastructure

Belarus will participate in a programme of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to develop nuclear infrastructure, Natalya Danilenko who oversees the Department of International Cooperation operating under the Department of Nuclear and Radiation Safety of the Belarusian Ministry of Emergency, said on June 14. [Belta.by]

The programme is designed to ensure alternative energy sources. Danilenko added that an international expert group composed of representatives of each member of the CIS, including Belarus, has been

established to elaborate the specific mechanism. [Belta.by]

The CIS is confederation of independent states, formerly constituent republics of the Soviet Union, established in 1991. The member states are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is an associate member.

(mo/gc)

Bulgaria: Azeri natural gas shipments through IGB pipeline to Bulgaria start

Bulgaria started receiving Azeri natural gas on July 1 from the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria pipeline that connects through Greece as part of the European efforts to diversify their energy sources after the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to a disruption of fuel supplies.

The cost of receiving Azeri gas through Greece will be "multiple times lower" than the current market price, Bulgaria's Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said. Azerbaijan and Bulgaria reached an agreement on the price of natural gas during a trip by Petkov to Baku in June. [Euractiv] [SeeNews].

Azeri natural gas and purchases of liquified natural gas will diversify the country's energy resources and provide an average delivery price lower than Russia's Gazprom. The Russian energy company halted its gas deliveries to Bulgaria in April after Sofia refused to pay in roubles because the change didn't comply with the requirements of the current contract. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

The Bulgaria-Greece interconnector pipeline will have an initial capacity of 3 billion cubic metres per year, with potential to expand its capacity to 5 billion cubic metres per year. It will supply Southeastern Europe and Italy with natural gas. Azeri Gas supplies will be connected to the existing Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, allowing gas to be transported from Azerbaijan via Greece to Italy and southeast Europe.

Bulgarian deputy foreign minister Vasil Georgiev said that the diversification of deliveries to Greece, Romania and neighbouring countries will be key because "we see that Russia is not reliable." There are talks with countries in the region and north Africa to diversify supplies, Georgiev said. [BNR] [CGTN]

Since the war in Ukraine began, Greece has started diversifying its energy sources to lower its reliance on Russian energy, through coal-fuelled energy and the development of domestic reserves of natural gas. The energy ministers of Bulgaria and Greece announced in May a joint purchase agreement of liquefied natural gas to combine their purchasing powers and reach a better market price. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Europe Monthly June 2022].

(ib/gc)

Ships linked to Greece, Cyprus, Malta increase transport of Russian oil: watchdog

Ships linked to Greece, Cyprus and Malta are making a "mockery" of EU efforts to impose sanctions on Moscow by transporting Russian oil worldwide, an international anti-corruption organisation has said. [Independent] [Times of Malta]

The Global Witness watchdog said in a report that cargo vessels flying Maltese, Greek and Cypriot flags have increased shipments of Russian crude each month since Moscow's war against Ukraine began. Overall, vessels linked to the three Mediterranean countries have transported 178 million barrels since February, worth about EUR 16 billion in total, according to the watchdog. [Independent] [Times of Malta]

Louis Goddard, a senior data investigations adviser at Global Witness, said: "Ships linked to Greece, Cyprus and Malta are making a mockery of the EU effort to sanction Putin's war machine, keeping cash flowing to Russia as the country's armed forces continue to pummell Ukraine." [Independent]

The Global Witness report comes after Malta, Greece and Cyprus on May 4 blocked the European Commission's proposal to ban all EU companies from helping ship Russian oil. This means that European firms will make further profits from the transport of Russian oil to non-EU countries. [Reuters] [Independent]

(ta/pk)

Finland imports more Russian light oil

Finland's imports of light heating oil from Russia rose after Moscow's attack on Ukraine, even though imports

of crude oil have fallen.

Data from Finnish customs services showed an increase in imports of light heating oil in March to three times the level seen in March 2021. Light oils produced by heating crude to high temperatures are primarily used for heat production in agriculture and industry. [yle] [Helsinki Times]

The European Union on June 3 adopted a sixth package of sanctions against Russia, prohibiting the import of all non-pipeline crude oil six months after the package is implemented, and of refined petroleum products after eight months. [European Commission] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(js/pk)

Portugal's PM urges more energy links between Iberian peninsula and rest of Europe

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa has called for more electricity and gas interconnections between the Iberian peninsula and the rest of Europe. [Lusa] [Portugal Resident]

Portugal and Spain together have the installed capacity to supply 30 percent of Europe's natural gas needs, and could make an important contribution to increasing the continent's independence from Russian gas, according to the Portuguese government. At present, however, there is no interconnection that allows natural gas to be exported to other countries in Europe. [The Portugal News][Portugal Resident]

At a summit of European Union leaders on May 31, Costa highlighted the potential of the Portuguese port of Sines in serving as an energy "gateway." He said the Portuguese government had a plan that would allow it to "immediately increase" the amount of gas it can send to Central Europe. [Lusa][Portugal Resident] [Lusa]

Due to its geographical location, the Iberian peninsula needs to collaborate with France in order to send gas to other European countries. In 2015 Portugal, Spain and France agreed to create infrastructure to better integrate the Iberian peninsula into the Energy Union. But an original goal of reaching an interconnection capacity of 15 percent by 2025 has been postponed to 2027. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

The Spanish and Portuguese authorities have repeatedly said it is difficult to step up cooperation with France, and claimed that it would not be possible to meet the 2027 goal if the project were to continue at the pace of recent years. Portugal has recently started studying the possibility of energy links that bypass France. [Lusa][Euronews][EU Observer]

(sr/pk)

Slovakia cuts Russian gas imports, seeks new suppliers

Slovak gas company SPP is reducing its Russian gas imports by up to 65 percent as the energy firm looks for alternatives, Slovak Economy Minister Richard Sulik has announced. The move is expected to see a 35 percent decrease in Slovakia's total imports from Russia, according to experts.

SPP acknowledged that it would not fully cease Russian gas imports for the time being, as the company waits for the opening of a Polish-Slovak interconnector pipeline. Meanwhile, Slovakia is eyeing gas purchases from Norway and has booked LNG terminal capacity. [Euractiv] [Dennikn]

A controversial deal at the end of May saw Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic receive exemptions from EU energy sanctions targeting the Russian oil and gas sectors in response to Moscow's war against Ukraine. The deal is intended to give Bratislava, Budapest and Prague time to source new suppliers. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who masterminded the deal, drew the ire of European Parliament Vice-President Michal Simecka, who said Orban "has once again confirmed that he is willing to blackmail the entire European Union because of his power interests and his affection for Russia."

Some Slovak and Czech MEPs have voiced dissatisfaction with the oil exemptions. Simecka, who hails from Bratislava, said the deal benefits Hungary but "people in Slovakia get practically nothing from it, and it does not translate into cheaper fuel prices." [Euractiv]

(cg/pk)

Denmark votes to join EU common defence after 30 years of opt-out

Danes voted in a referendum on June 1 to abandon an opt-out clause and join the EU's common defence policy, a move the country's premier said sent a clear signal to Russian President Vladimir Putin amid his war on Ukraine.

The decision by Danish voters means that Copenhagen will be joining the other 26 nations in the EU which subscribe to the bloc's common defence policy, a framework that allows for closer military cooperation between European armed forces. The EU policy is separate from NATO's collective defence concept. [dr.dk] [Europe Monthly April 2022] [MFA DE]

Following weeks of campaigning by political parties to mobilise Danish citizens to vote, the referendum saw a record turnout. In total, 66.9 percent said they wanted a change of course after 30 years of opting out of the European Union defence policy.

The referendum was held in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the end of February. Denmark's centre-left prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, said: "We have sent a signal to our allies in NATO, in Europe. And we have sent a clear signal to Putin." [Euractiv]

Brussels signalled its approval of the ballot result, with European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen saying that a "strong message of commitment to our common security [was] sent by the Danish people." [Politico]

Denmark's ruling Social Democrats were in favour of removing the opt-out, as were most parliamentary groupings except for three parties, one far-left and two on the far right, which refused to endorse the move, claiming it would limit Danish sovereignty.

The referendum is only the beginning of a process for the Danish government, which must now decide which EU military projects it wants to join. Such projects could include peacekeeping missions in Bosnia as part of the EUFOR multinational deployment, and anti-piracy operations in Somalia. [dr.dk] [Politico] [EUFOR]

Denmark, which joined the EU in 1973, decided to opt out of common European defence when it adopted the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

(cg/pk)

Denmark increases Arctic military footprint

The Icelandic and Danish ministries of defence have signed an agreement that will see Copenhagen stepping up its military surveillance activities in Arctic regions of the North Atlantic.

The agreement outlines the exchange of information between the militaries of both countries, as the importance of the northerly areas of the Atlantic increase. Major global powers, including the US, China and Russia, have set their sights on strategic footholds in the resource-rich region. Denmark wants to position itself favourably as global warming enables the exploitation of the Arctic to accelerate and new shipping lanes to be opened in the region. [Politiken]

Danish defence minister Morten Bodskov said in a statement that "surveillance in the Arctic is an important part of the Armed Forces' work, and this agreement will strengthen Denmark's intelligence work." [Berlingske]

Iceland is positioned on the strategically important "GI-UK gap" (Greenland/Iceland – United Kingdom) which is a NATO maritime "chokepoint", intended to prevent Russian warships and submarines from accessing the Atlantic Ocean in wartime. The Western military alliance has a network of undersea surveillance and listening posts in the region.

Denmark and Iceland have previously cooperated closely on joint coast guard tasks including oil spill clean-up, search and rescue, and fishery inspections.

A further development saw Denmark sign an agreement with the Faroe Islands on June 9 to build early-warning radars on the North Atlantic archipelago to plug a surveillance gap that has existed since the closure of a previous radar system in 2007. Bodskov said: "There has been a gap and it needs to be closed. The new security policy situation in Europe is also a significant reason why it has become more relevant to close that gap." [Berlingske] [Reuters]

The new radar system, which would take five years to build at a price of EUR 52.5 million, is to update NATO's radar coverage of the Atlantic, which does not fully cover the area between Scotland and the Faroe Islands.

Faroese parliamentarians, however, are unhappy with the agreement, saying it was reached without them being consulted, and have threatened the minister of foreign affairs with a motion of no-confidence.

[Berlingske] [dr.dk] The Faroe Islands are part of Denmark, but have a separate government which has certain privileges and autonomy.

In February 2021, the Danish parliament passed legislation for a surplus of EUR 200 million in Denmark's military budget to be spent on updating its Arctic armed forces in the north Atlantic. [dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Finnish PM, EU chief discuss potential 'hybrid' threat from Russia

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen have held talks in Brussels about counteracting the potential use of migrants by Russia to mount a form of "hybrid" attack which could put pressure on Finland's eastern border.

This kind of tactic was observed in the autumn of 2021 when Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko sent thousands of migrants from mostly Middle Eastern countries to the Polish border. [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly November 2021] [Europe Monthly December 2021]

As a member of the European Union, Finland is obliged to process an application for international protection lodged at its borders. That means it cannot seal off its 1,300 km border with Russia. [Helsingin Sanomat] [yle]

Finland and Sweden on May 18 formally applied to join NATO after decades of non-alignment in a move sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Finland now wants to change its legislation to allow the country to build barriers on its border with Russia in order to be better prepared to counteract hybrid threats. Instead of building fencing along the entire border, Finnish MPs have declared themselves in favour of building robust fences in "critical areas". The changes would also allow the building of roads to enable border patrolling. [Reuters] [yle]

(js/pk)

Amid war in Ukraine, G7 vows help to stave off food crisis

The Group of Seven (G7), which brings together the world's most advanced economies, has pledged billions to help protect vulnerable nations from food shortages amid a Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports, and urged Middle Eastern oil suppliers to increase production.

The call came at a G7 summit in the Bavarian town of Schloss Elmau, where the leaders of Germany, France, Italy, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and the European Union met from June 26-28 for an annual meeting held in the shadow of deteriorating security around the globe. [Euractiv] [TIME]

The Western leaders are seeking to choke Russia's profitable fossil fuel industry and reduce the income available to fund the war machine that the Kremlin has unleashed against Ukraine.

Russian maritime trade of oil was identified as a key problem that undermined the effectiveness of sanctions. Despite this, no concrete action was taken at the G7 summit. It is estimated that since February, Moscow has earned an estimated USD 153 billion from oil and gas exports alone. [Atlantic Council] [AP] [Reuters]

Also discussed was the possibility of sanctioning Russian gold exports, an industry that nets Moscow an annual USD 15 billion. [Euractiv] [Euronews]

Stark reminder

A missile strike on a shopping mall in the central Ukrainian city of Kremenchug left a stark reminder of the war unfolding only a few hundred kilometres away from the summit. Dozens of shoppers were killed and hundreds injured as a Russian anti-ship missile slammed into the complex, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said was packed with thousands of shoppers at the time.

The Russian ministry of defence said that the missile had been aimed at a nearby munitions storage site, adding that the strike was a "high-precision air attack at hangars where armament and munitions were stored." That claim is heavily disputed by Kiev. [Guardian] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Closely linked to the war in Ukraine was the issue of rocketing energy costs, which have increased the pressure on European economies as fuel prices and inflation have led to unrest and uncertainty for many EU citizens. Protests have erupted in many European capitals over steep petrol and diesel prices, causing

European leaders to scramble to find short-term solutions.

An increased reliance on non-Russian LNG has seen the announcement of new construction projects for liquefied natural gas terminals and pipelines across Europe. The G7 has endorsed this, saying in a statement: “We stress the important role increased deliveries of LNG can play, and acknowledge that investment in this sector is necessary in response to the current crisis.” [Reuters]

Have your cake and eat it?

The G7 called on Middle Eastern oil suppliers to reduce tension on the energy market by increasing production, in particular addressing the OPEC oil cartel, yet still pledged to achieve the so-called Paris climate goals. The group said in a statement: “We commit to achieving a fully or predominantly decarbonised power sector by 2035.”

The bloc also committed itself to spending an additional USD 4.5 billion to ensure that countries most vulnerable to food insecurities are protected from any future deterioration of the global food market. The group has spent an approximate USD 14.5 billion in total this year to bolster global food security. [Reuters]

One of the root causes for food insecurity was addressed by the bloc as Russia faced condemnation for its blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports, preventing global grain and wheat exports from leaving the war-torn country and leaving many African and Middle Eastern nations in a precarious position. [Euractiv]

In spite of geopolitical tensions, the G7 continued to address climate related issues, recognising that current efforts have proved insufficient to reach the goals outlined in the Paris accords. The group agreed that a previously outlined USD 100 billion milestone for global climate finance mobilisation would be tackled with increased intensity, with this to be achieved by 2025.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz announced the creation of a so-called “Climate Club” to further reduce global carbon emissions that would seek to complement an existing EU proposal for a carbon border tax, which involves fining countries that trade with the EU but do not adhere to its climate regulations. [Euractiv]

The G7 criticised China and Iran for the former's aggressive policy of enforcing maritime claims in the South-China Sea and human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and for the latter's continued nuclear arms development.

Finally, continued support to countries affected by the coronavirus pandemic was offered in the form of increased proliferation of vaccines and "essential medical goods".

(cg/pk)

NATO holds drills in Baltic Sea amid tensions with Russia

Sixteen countries took part in NATO's annual naval Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) exercise from June 5 to 17 amid tensions with Russia.

Dozens of ships, aircraft and 7,500 personnel participated in the drills hosted by Sweden, which along with Finland in May formally applied to join NATO – a tectonic change in European security and geopolitics triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

The BALTOPS exercises, including amphibious and submarine operations as well as mine clearance and medical response training, were designed to enhance alliance members' cooperation capabilities.

With Finland and Sweden on course to join NATO, the Baltic Sea is set to be almost completely encircled by NATO members. [Göteborgs-Posten] [Dagens-Nyheter] Top US General Mark Milley, said this was "very advantageous" for NATO in military terms and at the same time "very problematic" for the Russian security position in the region. [Reuters]

(phr/pk)

Norwegian forces test new military route via Finland

The Norwegian military on June 16 tested a new route to move equipment via north-western Finland during drills amid international tensions caused by Russia's war on Ukraine.

The annual "Thunderbolt" exercise was held in Finnmark, a region in the north-east of Norway that

borders Finland and Russia. [High North News]

In past years, Norwegian military vehicles deployed for exercises in Finnmark drove along the Norwegian coast, a route which includes narrow, easy to block roads. Meanwhile, the route from Norway, through Finland and then across the border into north-eastern Norway is considered a safer new option to transport military equipment, said a spokesperson for the Norwegian armed forces. [The Barents Observer]

The Norwegian military crossed the border into Finland on the same day that Norway's parliament voted to voice its support of Sweden and Finland's efforts to join NATO. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(js/pk)

Slovakia to supply Ukraine with howitzers

Slovakia has announced it will supply the Ukrainian armed forces with eight Zuzana 2 self-propelled howitzers using 155 mm rounds. [Dennikn] [Reuters] The move comes amid calls by Kiev for the West to increase Ukraine's chances in a grinding war by supplying it with more weapons including artillery systems.

The Zuzanas will be joining previously donated American M777, M109 and French CAESAR systems and, according to retired Slovak General Pavel Macko, will constitute a technological leap for Ukrainian forces, who often use antiquated Russian artillery pieces. [Pravda] [Pravda] [Guardian]

Further donations include five helicopters and ammunition for Grad multiple rocket launcher systems, with the Slovak helicopters being replaced by US-made Blackhawks. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Slovak defence contractor Konstrukta-Defense has signed a contract with the government in Bratislava to help increase the amount of technical and maintenance support for Ukraine. Konstrukta-Defense is to upgrade Slovak military vehicles headed for Ukraine, and to fix damaged Ukrainian equipment.

The Slovak government struck a EUR 450 million deal for new Slovak army Patria AMVXP armoured vehicles with Finnish contractor Patria in April. [Konstrukta Defense] [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

Slovakia plans steep hike in military spending

Slovakia aims to plough EUR 38 billion into boosting the capabilities of its armed forces by 2035, the country's defence minister has announced as Russia continues its war on Ukraine.

Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad said his ministry's plans had been approved by the government in Bratislava and were awaiting approval in parliament.

The plans include investing in military infrastructure to facilitate the stationing of allied armed forces on Slovak territory. This is to be completed by 2024.

The defence ministry also aims to acquire combat vehicles and American F-16 warplanes to replace retired Soviet-era aircraft. Meanwhile, Slovakia wants to have a new heavy armoured bridge up and running by 2026.

A total of 26 military exercises have been planned for 2022 so Slovak forces can train alongside their NATO allies, as well as with Ukrainian troops.

(cg/pk)

Swedish firm wins EUR 1.7 bn Slovak tender for armoured vehicles

Swedish defence manufacturer BAE Systems Hagglunds, a subsidiary of British firm BAE Systems, has announced that it has won a Slovak defence ministry tender for CV90 tracked infantry fighting vehicles worth around EUR 1.7 billion.

The Slovak ministry plans to buy 152 CV90s as the central European country's military seeks to update its armoured capabilities. Equipped with a 30mm autocannon and able to ferry seven or eight troops into battle, the CV90 is in service with various NATO allies, with over 1,300 vehicles of the type built in total. The CV90 has seen combat use in Afghanistan. [Pravda]

In the tender, BAE Systems bested German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall and the American General-Dynamics corporation. The Swedish vehicle was judged to be most suited to the Slovak armed forces in feasibility studies. [SME]

Production of the CV90 is to be partly carried out in Slovakia. The CEO of BAE Systems Hagglunds, Tommy Gustafsson-Rask, said: “More than 40 percent of the value of the contract will be returned to the Slovak industry.” In addition to extensive technology transfers to Slovak manufacturers, the outsourcing of final assembly is to be supplemented by integrating Slovak companies into the CV90 global production chain. [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

European Central Bank will raise interest rates amid inflation

The Governing Council of the European Central Bank on June 9 announced its decision to raise the key ECB interest rates for the Eurozone by 25 basis points, the first hike since 2011. The move will come into effect at the council’s next meeting on July 21. [Politico]

The ECB said that they plan to raise the key interest rates again in September. The increase will be larger than 0.25 if inflation “persists or deteriorates,” the ECB said. The ECB also decided to end its asset purchase programme as well as its pandemic emergency purchase programme, both designed to inject money into struggling states’ economies. [European Central Bank][EuroNews]

The ECB also revised its inflation projections up, now forecasting 6.8 percent in 2022, 3.5 percent in 2023 and 2.1 percent in 2024. With war, energy supply insecurities and supply chain disruptions, inflation in the eurozone hit a record-breaking 8.1 percent in May, four times the 2 percent annual target desired by the central bank. [NewYorkTimes][European Central Bank] [Euronews]

“High inflation is a major challenge for all of us,” ECB President Christine Lagarde said. “Based on our current assessment, we anticipate that a gradual but sustained path of further increases in interest rates will be appropriate.”

The US Federal Reserve announced on June 15 an increase in interest rates by 75 basis points to over 1.5 percent. The Bank of England has lifted its interest rates to 1 percent, which is the highest level in 13 years. [BBC] [Reuters]

Economic headwinds

Europe's economic confidence and growth are being dampened by Russia's unjustified aggression towards Ukraine and trade disruptions that are leading to shortages of materials and contributing to high energy and commodity prices, according to the ECB. Inflation pressures have broadened and intensified, with prices for many goods and services increasing strongly, it said.

These factors will continue to weigh on the Eurozone in "the near term," the ECB said. "However, the conditions are in place for the economy to continue to grow on account of the ongoing reopening of the economy, a strong labour market, fiscal support and savings built up during the pandemic. Once current headwinds abate, economic activity is expected to pick up again."

This outlook is broadly reflected in the Eurosystem staff projections, which foresee annual real GDP growth at 2.8 percent in 2022, 2.1 percent in 2023 and 2.1 percent in 2024. Compared with March projections, the outlook has been revised down significantly for 2022 and 2023, while for 2024 it has been revised up.

(jk/gc)

EU gives Croatia green light to adopt euro

EU heads of state and government on June 24 gave the green light for Croatia to adopt the European single currency. The decision came a week after EU finance ministers decided to back Croatia's admission to the eurozone. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

Earlier in June, the European Commission said in a report that Croatia meets the criteria for adopting the euro, clearing the way for the country to make the switch.

A report by the Commission assessed Croatia's performance against a list of so-called convergence criteria such as price stability, sustainable public finances and exchange rate stability. [Euractiv]

Croatia only just passed the price stability criterion. The average inflation rate of a country applying to join the euro must not be higher over the past year than that of the three countries using the single currency which have the lowest inflation rate, with a 1.5 percentage point margin of error.

Croatia's average inflation stood at 4.7 percent, just under the 4.9 percent maximum average inflation rate allowed. [Euractiv]

Croatia hopes to make the switch to the euro on January 1, 2023. Including Croatia, there will be 20 countries using the European single currency. [Reuters]

(jg/pk)

Czech Republic presents priorities for EU Council presidency

The Czech Republic says that during its six-month turn at the EU Council's rotating presidency its priorities will include cutting the bloc's dependency on Russian energy and seeking funds for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. [Euronews]

Prague will also support Ukraine's bid to join the EU, while Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has stressed the importance of solidarity in dealing with large numbers of Ukrainian refugees. [Euractiv]

Another priority for Prague is ensuring the resilience of the EU's energy sector. The Czech Republic supports the EU's Fit for 55 initiative and wants to push the REPowerEU forward. The latter is a EUR 300 billion plan by the European Commission to end the European Union's reliance on Russian fossil fuels. Prague also supports nuclear energy. [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Politico]

The Czech Republic's turn at the helm of the EU Council presidency started on July 1. It took over from France, whose priorities included strengthening European sovereignty. Paris also aimed to reform the Schengen treaty, which regulates border controls between its signatories, comprising both EU and non-EU countries. Another concern was allowing greater public debt for the bloc's member states. [Tagesschau] [Euronews]

An important issue for the Czech presidency, meanwhile, will be whether the government in Prague, which took office in December 2021, focuses externally or internally. European policy issues are not a major concern for Czech voters, according to Ziga Faktor of the Europeum Institute for European Policy. He added that the Czech government "first wants to stabilise its position domestically." Petr Just, an academic from Metropolitan University in Prague, said Czechs do not feel that the EU Council presidency is "crucial or some key issue." [Politico]

(jg/pk)

EU takes legal action against UK's Northern Ireland Protocol changes

The European Union is restarting legal action against the UK as Brussels prepares for a drawn-out fight after London pushed forward legislation which would scrap part of the Northern Ireland protocol. [Bloomberg]

The British government on June 13 presented a bill to change the protocol unilaterally, saying that the current agreement causes high costs and bureaucratic obstacles. European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic on June 15 declared the British decision illegal, adding that a trade war could be triggered if the bill became legislation.

"Let there be no doubt: There is no legal, nor political justification whatsoever for unilaterally changing an international agreement," Sefcovic said. "Opening the door to unilaterally changing an international agreement is a breach of international law as well. Let's call a spade a spade: This is illegal."

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said the bill will "end the untenable situation where people in Northern Ireland are treated differently to the rest of the United Kingdom, protect the supremacy of our courts and our territorial integrity." She added that the bill "will safeguard the EU Single Market and ensure there is no hard border on the island of Ireland."

The North Ireland protocol was an essential part of the UK-EU post-Brexit trade deals which aimed to prevent a hard border between British-aligned Northern Ireland and EU member Ireland. The protocol made Northern Ireland an effective part of the European single market, making it possible to check goods imported from Great Britain already at Northern Ireland's ports. [BBC] [Reuters]

The new British proposal includes two import routes to Northern Ireland, one for goods that will not be checked and one for goods to the EU which will be checked. According to the government, UK market and taxation rules will also apply to Northern Ireland. [UKGovernment] [BBC] [Reuters]

On the same day, the European Commission also published two reform proposals for the Northern Ireland protocol. The Commission said it wants to "show that solutions to the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland can be found within the Protocol". [EuropeanCommission] [Politico]

The UK is ready to make progress through negotiations if the EU is willing to change the Protocol itself, Truss said. “At the moment they aren’t. In the meantime the serious situation in Northern Ireland means we cannot afford to allow the situation to drift.”

(jk/gc)

European Court of Human Rights stops first British-Rwandan deportation flight

The European Court of Human Rights on June 14 issued an injunction to stop the first flight of asylum seekers from Britain to Rwanda in the framework of the UK’s new migration policy. [Reuters]

The court has seldom used Rule 39, which enables the court to “indicate interim measures” to any state in the European Convention on Human Rights. [European Human Rights Court] [AlJazeera]

The UK’s Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab on June 22 proposed an addition to his already planned changes to the British Human Rights Act, which would allow UK courts to ignore ECHR jurisdiction stemming from Rule 39. Raab said that the UK will remain in the European Convention on Human Rights “but make sure the procedural framework is reformed”. [BBC] [Politico]

The UK and Rwanda signed a Migration and Economic Development Partnership on April 14, allowing the UK to send asylum seekers to Rwanda while their application is processed. In exchange, Rwanda will receive GBP 120 million of British investment in economic development. International human rights groups have criticised the scheme. [Europe in Review May 2022]

(jk/gc)

EU ministers agree new migrant redistribution system amid expected influx

Justice and home affairs ministers from EU countries agreed at a June 10-11 meeting in Luxembourg to set up a redistribution mechanism to support member states facing an influx of migrants amid global food shortages caused by Russia’s war on Ukraine. [Schengen Visa Info]

Cyprus, Malta, Greece, Italy and Spain stand to benefit from the decision through a system enabling the relocation of incoming migrants to other EU states or through financial support. [Cyprus Mail]

The five Mediterranean countries expect over 150,000 migrants from Africa and the Middle East to arrive on their territory in 2022, compared to 123,318 arrivals in 2021, Cypriot Interior Minister Nicos Nouris has said. [The Telegraph]

Nouris was speaking after ministers from the "MED5" group of states came together in Venice on June 3 and 4 to discuss migration flows and the war in Ukraine. [Euractiv]

The main reason for the expected rise in migrant numbers is a global food shortage caused by plummeting exports from Ukraine and Russia. United Nations crisis coordinator Amin Awad has said that such war-induced food shortages could affect up to 1.4 billion people worldwide. [Reuters]

The numbers expected to arrive in the EU this year are, however, far lower than at the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, when over a million migrants landed in Europe, hoping to find a better life. [Schengen Visa Info]

For Cyprus, the decision to establish a redistribution mechanism is important as the small island is part of the eastern Mediterranean migration route, which is one of the busiest.

According to Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, the number of cases of migrants illegally crossing the Cypriot border so far this year has increased by 213 percent compared to last year. Most of the migrant flows come from Bangladesh, Egypt and Tunisia. Ukrainians are not included in this data. [Schengen Visa Info]

(ta-jk/pk)

EU agrees on minimum wage directive

Negotiators from the European Parliament and the European Council on June 7 agreed on a directive which aims to introduce a common framework for minimum wage legislation in the European Union. [EuroNews]

Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Italy and Sweden are the only countries of the 27 EU member states

which don't have statutory minimum pay. They regulate wages through collective bargaining, and the new directive does not include an obligation for these countries to introduce a statutory minimum salary. [European Parliament]

EU member states that do have a minimum wage will have to reassess their regulations and check whether these are "adequate to ensure a decent standard of living, taking into account their own socio-economic conditions". [European Parliament]

All member states, no matter if they have a statutory minimum wage or not, will have to strengthen collective bargaining. EU countries which have fewer than 80 percent of workers covered by collective bargaining will need to establish an action plan to increase such coverage. In addition, member states will need to set up monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance. [European Commission]

Nicolas Schmit, the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, hailed the proposal as a gamechanger in the fight against poverty.

Some member states, Denmark and Sweden among them, have opposed the new directive, as they worry the EU regulation will put existing national collective bargaining systems at risk. [EuroNews]

The provisional agreement is based on a European Commission proposal from October 2020 and needs to be formally approved by the European Parliament as well as the European Council before being implemented in member states' legislation within the next two years. [Reuters]

(jk/pk)

EU signs deal for 110,000 monkeypox vaccines

The European Union on June 14 signed a supply deal with the German-Danish biotech company Bavarian Nordic for about 110,000 doses of an anti-monkeypox vaccine. [Reuters]

European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas said that, for the first time, European Union budget funds have been used to directly purchase vaccines for member states. In addition to supplying EU countries, Brussels will also provide non-members Norway and Iceland with monkeypox vaccines, the European Commission said.

EU health commissioner Stella Kyriakides announced that doses are to be delivered in proportion to countries' population, starting with states with the most urgent needs.[European Commission] [Fox Business]

Bavarian Nordic's Imvanex vaccine has been approved against smallpox but has not yet received the green light in the EU for use against monkeypox. The bloc's drug regulator is in talks with the company so that the vaccine can be quickly approved against monkeypox too. The European Commission said that the vaccine also protects people from monkeypox "since the virus is closely related to the smallpox virus." [Reuters]

(acn/pk)

Council of Europe orders Belgium to take measures to improve prison conditions

The Council of Europe has ordered Belgium to take measures to improve prison conditions after issuing numerous warnings about overcrowding and poor detention facilities. [BrusselsTimes][MrEnquirer]

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers expressed its "deep concern at the worsening conditions in Belgian prisons" and requested that Brussels implement a plan based on a better "integrated and systematic" approach to monitor the conditions within the prison population. [BrusselsTimes]

The committee also requested creating a Penitentiary Council as required by EU law from 2019, which will help to evaluate relevant policies and develop a comprehensive plan to combat prison overcrowding. The situation in Belgian prisons will be reviewed again during a Council of Europe meeting in September 2023.

Belgium's prisons are among Europe's most densely populated. Detainees have to sleep on the floor as a result of lack of space.[MrEnquirer]

The European Court of Human Rights has reviewed many court cases related to the poor conditions within its prison system. The court requested seven years ago that Brussels adopt measures to improve living conditions in prisons.

(gt/gc)

EU leaders approve candidate status for Moldova

European leaders granted EU candidate status to Moldova, following a European Commission recommendation.

This is a "historic moment," European Council President Charles Michel said after the decision. "Today marks a crucial step on your path towards the EU." The chairman of the Moldovan parliament Igor Grosu expressed his gratitude on behalf of the members of parliament and the government, emphasising that Moldova would commit itself to launching necessary reforms. [moldpres][Euractiv] [moldpres] [Deutsche Welle]

Implementing reforms such as combating corruption and ensuring the rule of law will be the key challenge, which could take years until all conform to EU standards. [Deutsche Welle]

The EU's decision coincided with Russia's war in Ukraine and an increasingly aggressive posture vis-a-vis Moldova. The Russian spokeswoman for the Russian ministry of foreign affairs, said that the EU's decision was designed to further contain Russia and encroach the Commonwealth of Independent States. [Reuters]

(mo/gc)

Venice Commission says new Azerbaijan law attempts to over regulate media sector

The new media law in Azerbaijan over regulates an already restrictive environment, the Venice Commission, a panel of experts of the human rights body Council of Europe, said in an opinion published on June 20.

The commission said that "the law attempts to regulate almost everything related to the media sector in Azerbaijan" and has "a problematic focus on restricting activities of the media rather than creating the necessary conditions enabling the media to fulfil their 'public watchdog' role." It doesn't meet the European standards of freedom of expression and media, the commission said.

The Commission called on Azerbaijan to scrap some of the most problematic and restricting measures, such

as a media register, excessive restrictions on the establishment of media entities and an accreditation scheme for journalists, before implementing the law. [Council of Europe] [Voice of America] [Committee to Protect Journalists[

(aml/gc)

European People's Party picks Germany's Weber as new leader

The European People's Party (EPP), a key centre-right political force in Europe, has elected Germany's Manfred Weber as its new leader.

Weber, who has a reputation as a power broker in EU politics, was chosen with 447 out of 502 votes at a congress on May 31 in Rotterdam. He succeeds Donald Tusk, a former Polish prime minister, in the top EPP role. [euobserver] Weber will combine his new duties with those of the EPP's group leader in the European Parliament – a position he has occupied since 2014. [Politico]

In an interview with EuroNews published on June 1, Weber said he aimed to regain voters' trust after the EPP suffered considerable election losses in recent years, the latest being in Germany and France. He added that the war in Ukraine, economic problems and a fight against populism were priority topics for him.

(jk/pk)

Poland: EU approves Warsaw's recovery plan despite rule of law concerns

European Union ministers have approved Poland's Covid recovery plan, a step needed to unlock billions in blocked funds for Warsaw, despite ongoing concerns over rule-of-law in the country.

Economy and finance ministers in the Council of the European Union greenlighted the plan on June 17, following a similar decision by the European Commission earlier in the month. The move paves the way for Warsaw to gain access to EUR 35.4 billion in loans and grants from EU post-pandemic recovery funds. [Euronews] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [Council of the European Union]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, however, that Poland would need to fulfil

commitments to ensuring judicial independence "before any actual payment can be made." [The Guardian]

The EU has been at odds with Warsaw over sweeping changes to Poland's legal system – which the bloc says undermine the political independence of the country's judiciary and erode rule-of-law principles – and has blocked funds until key changes are reversed. [Europe Monthly March 2022]

'Milestones' first, money later

Warsaw and Brussels in May agreed on a series of "milestones" which, when met by Poland, would allow the EU funds to be released. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

One of the milestones was the suspension of a disciplinary chamber within Poland's supreme court, which the EU argues allows judges to be punished for the content of their rulings. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Poland's lower house of parliament passed a bill in June that would replace the disciplinary chamber with a "Chamber of Professional Responsibility", with Polish President Andrzej Duda – who put forward the bill – saying that the current system was working in an "absolutely irregular way." [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

However, critics say that the bill – which Duda signed into law following the parliamentary vote – simply substitutes the disciplinary chamber with a new body with similar powers. [Europe Monthly June 2022] [Rzeczpospolita]

'Cosmetic' changes?

The newly passed legislation "falls short of complying with the decisions of the European Courts," according to Iustitia, a judges' association in Poland. [Euronews]

Human rights groups also criticised the Polish bill for containing only "cosmetic" changes and for failing to ensure that judges suspended by the disciplinary chamber would be automatically reinstated. [The Guardian] [Rzeczpospolita]

"Is everything solved? No. Certainly not. But now, we have movement in the right direction and leverage so that it leads to the results needed," Von der Leyen said in response to criticism of the European Commission's decision to approve Warsaw's Covid recovery plan. [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

Council of Europe, Ireland criticises Troubles amnesty bill in UK

The Council of Europe has criticised a bill introduced by the UK government that would grant conditional immunity to people accused of violent crimes and other offences during the Troubles, a conflict that lasted for about 30 years in Northern Ireland with more than 3,500 killings, most of them unsolved.

On June 10, the Council of Europe demanded more information on the bill to determine if it is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). ECHR has repeatedly criticised the UK's failure to act in accordance with its rulings related to Troubles investigations. The UK government must reply by August 1. [The Guardian] [The Irish Times][RTÉ]

The bill, which was first introduced to parliament this May, would create the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. This commission would investigate the killings during the Troubles and grant amnesty to those who cooperate with the panel. [RTÉ] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The bill was criticised by most political parties in Northern Ireland as well as victims' groups. The Labour party announced it would oppose the bill as most of the killings during that conflict are unresolved. Critics say that the bill was effectively a tool to grant amnesty to British soldiers. Victims' groups protested the bill on multiple occasions, fearing a loss of legal possibilities. [The Guardian] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The Irish government condemned the bill as a unilateral deviation from the Stormont House Agreement, a 2014 political accommodation between the British and Irish governments, and a majority of parties that make up the Northern Ireland Executive that aims to bind parties and communities closer together on resolving identity issues. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin said that all parties, including victims and the Irish government should be involved in such decisions. The Irish government is considering taking the case to the ECHR. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [The Guardian]

(jv/gc)

European court rules Turkey's detention of Turkish Amnesty International chair was unlawful

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) unanimously ruled that Turkey unlawfully detained the Chair of Turkish Amnesty International in 2017. [Amnesty]

Turkish authorities arrested Taner Kilic in June 2017, accusing him of being linked to the Islamic preacher and Turkish dissident Fethullah Gulen, who Ankara accused of staging the 2016 coup against the government. Kilic was released after 14 months but convicted in 2020 and sentenced to six years and three months in prison for belonging to a terrorist group.

The ECHR ruled that the proof that was given for the detention in 2017, the usage of a messaging app, several news subscriptions, the school of his children and bank accounts that allegedly have connections to the Gulen movement, did not provide reasonable suspicion that Kilic committed any offences.

The court added that the convictions were directly linked to Kilic's activity as a human rights defender and interfered with his right to freedom of expression. Turkey now must pay EUR 24,500in damages. [Amnesty] [DW][ECHR, Taner Kilic n°2 v. Turkey]

(al/gc)

EU court upholds sanctions against suspected financier of Russian Wagner group

The Court of Justice of the European Union has rejected a bid by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, the alleged financier of the Russian Wagner mercenary group, to be removed from an EU list of sanctions. [Euractiv]

In 2020, ministers from EU countries said that Prigozhin was providing support for the Wagner Group's activities during the civil war in Libya which involved repeated breaches of a United Nations arms embargo established in 2011.

The EU ministers also said that Wagner group fighters were engaged in military operations against UN-backed authorities in Libya. The European Union then froze Prigozhin's assets in the bloc and decided to place him on a visa blacklist. [rfi]

Prigozhin appealed to the Court of Justice of the European Union, claiming that he had "no knowledge of an entity known as the Wagner group" and argued that the Council of the European Union did not provide a justification for imposing sanctions on him. [rfi 1]

In its ruling, the court confirmed the European ministers' assessment and said that there was "specific, precise and consistent evidence demonstrating the numerous close links between Mr Prigozhin and the Wagner group."

The court also referred to a report by experts that mentions "an estimated deployment of 800 to 1,200 Wagner operatives during 2019 and 2020" in Libya and gives details of extensive contacts between Prigozhin and Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty] [rfi 2]

(acn/pk)

European Parliament bars Russian lobbyists

Russian company representatives are forbidden entry to the European Parliament, the parliament's president announced on June 2. [Reuters]

Roberta Metsola tweeted that the restriction was effective immediately and added that the ban aims to stop the spread of Russian propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine. She added that Europe needs to protect itself from Russian influence. [EuroNews]

A spokesman of the president said that entities already targeted by EU sanctions, as well as all Russian organisations listed in the EU's transparency register, are affected by the policy. The transparency register is a public list with all organisations that try to influence European policy processes by lobbying.

An international anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International EU, welcomed the move but demanded the ban to be consequently executed. [Politico]

(jk/gc)

EU Commission decides to register 'Good Clothes, Fair Pay' drive

The European Commission has decided to register a campaign called “Good Clothes, Fair Pay”, a first step needed by an initiative pressing for higher wages in the garment, textile and footwear sectors. [European Union] [Good Clothes Fair Pay]

The campaign is being run by the European Citizens’ Initiative, a tool launched in 2012 for EU citizens to influence the bloc’s political agenda. [European Commission 1]

The campaigners want due diligence obligations to be imposed on companies, including the identification and prevention of human rights violations, and compensation for those whose rights are breached by firms in the clothing and footwear industry. [European Commission 2]

If the European Citizens’ Initiative collects one million signatures in at least seven different EU member states within a year, the European Commission must respond. The Commission can support the initiative and draw up a legislative proposal, or reject it. [European Commission 3]

(acn/pk)

Amnesty International calls on Croatia to free Pussy Riot member

Human rights group Amnesty International has urged Zagreb to release a member of anti-Kremlin punk band Pussy Riot after she was arrested on an Interpol warrant issued by Turkmenistan.

Amnesty said the band member, Aysoltan Niyazov, was at risk of “suffering serious abuse“ if she was extradited to Turkmenistan. [Reuters]

Croatian authorities arrested Niyazov based on an Interpol notice issued in 2002 by Turkmenistan, which accused her of embezzling funds from that country’s central bank. Amnesty International says that Interpol warrants have been abused by authoritarian regimes. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

Pussy Riot is a Russian band with an anti-Kremlin agenda. The group is on tour, protesting at the Russian war against Ukraine. The proceeds of its concerts will be donated to a hospital in Kiev. [Associated Press]

(jg/pk)

EU to station firefighters in Greece to battle wildfires

The European Commission has decided that more than 200 firefighters from Germany, Bulgaria, Finland, Norway and France are to be stationed in Greece this summer to tackle major forest fires.

Under the move, which is part of the EU's new policy to curb forest blazes in southern Europe, around 90 firefighting helicopters and aircraft will be deployed. [Euronews] [Tagesspiegel]

Last summer, Greece was hit by its most intense heatwave in three decades. EU Crisis Management Commissioner Janez Lenarcic said: "It is clear that we are facing a global weather change and that requires us Europeans to respond jointly. In August 2021, Greece witnessed about 65 simultaneous forest fires per day with average temperatures often exceeding 40C." [Reuters]

The firefighting help agreed between the European Commission and the Greek government will be financed and coordinated under the EU's civil protection mechanism.

(acn/pk)

Slovenia's new foreign minister looks westward

Slovenia's new centre-left foreign minister has announced that she aims to position her country closer to Europe's core and to repair its reputation, which she said has been tarnished by its populist former premier.

Under ex-Prime Minister Janez Jansa, who was ousted in April parliamentary elections, Slovenia came into conflict with Brussels amid claims that it has eroded democratic standards and the rule of law.

Slovenia's election was won by political newcomer Robert Golob, the leader of liberal Freedom Movement party, who has formed a centre-left coalition government with the Social Democrats and left-leaning Levica parties. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Social Democrat leader Tanja Fajon, who was previously an MEP, has been appointed foreign minister. She plans a shift away from Jansa's strategy of moving closer to Central and Eastern Europe's

Visegrad group, comprising Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. [Delo]

Jansa was a staunch ally of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, with the two leaders sharing similar populist platforms and political beliefs. The recently re-elected Hungarian premier was considered a personal friend of Jansa.

Referring to the ties between Jansa and Orban, who has been accused of undermining democracy, Fajon said she was concerned at her "country's unfortunately tarnished reputation," which she pledged to fix. [Euractiv]

Germany, Italy and France are to become the centre of focus for Ljubljana as it seeks to return to human rights, democracy, rule of law, media freedom and EU values, according to Fajon. She added that there had been "too many alliance structures with neighbouring countries where [democratic] values are being violated."

Another priority for Slovenia is EU enlargement in the Balkans. Ljubljana wants to see the passport-free Schengen travel area expanded to the EU's newest member states, although not in its current form. [Vecer]

Meanwhile, Croatia remains a key topic for Slovenian policymakers, as Ljubljana strives to strengthen relations with its ex-Yugoslav neighbour. A future resolution of border conflicts through arbitration will ensure that Slovenia continues to support Croatia's integration into the EU and OECD, according to Fajon.

(cg/pk)

Sweden, Kenya host major UN environmental conference

Sweden together with Kenya hosted a high-level United Nations conference on climate and the environment in Stockholm on June 2 and 3. Among the participants were multiple heads of state and government, environment and climate ministers and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

Fifty years after the UN established its environmental policy during a summit in the Swedish capital, this year's meeting, entitled Stockholm +50, aimed to accelerate global efforts to combat climate change based on the commitments countries have already made. [Göteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

The conference's final document included no new commitments or concrete decisions, but made ten recommendations for countries to achieve their climate goals. The document mentions redefining economic indicators for success and growth, phasing out of fossil fuels, aligning investments and financial flows with environmental commitments, and strengthening the rule of environmental law. [Göteborgs-Posten]

The non-binding character of the recommendations did not go far enough for Fridays for Future, a movement initiated by young Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. The movement held a march on the second day of the conference, demanding concrete action to be taken by politicians. "We are on strike because we have had enough of empty words. After 50 years of conferences, we want to see change," Thunberg told Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*.

(phr/pk)

Switzerland, Malta elected to UN Security Council

Switzerland and Malta were on June 9 elected as non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council for a two-year term beginning January 1. Japan, Mozambique and Ecuador were also elected as non-permanent members. [Times of Malta] [Reuters]

The UN Security Council has five permanent members – the US, UK, France, Russia and China – and ten non-permanent members representing different regions. For a country to be elected to the latter role, two-thirds of UN General Assembly members must vote in favour. [Reuters]

Malta's foreign minister, Ian Borg, said that his country would during its two-year term focus on issues including children and armed conflict. [Times of Malta]

(ta/pk)

EU sending delayed financial aid to Palestinians without conditions

After months of discussion, the European Union has decided to release a EUR 200 million tranche of aid for the Palestinian Territories, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced on June 14 during a visit to the West Bank. [EuroNews]

The money was delayed after concerns emerged that Palestinian textbooks contain anti-Semitic and violence-glorifying content. The European Commissioner who oversees relations with the EU's neighbouring countries, Oliver Varhelyi, proposed making the funds conditional on the Palestinian Authority changing the textbooks. [Times of Israel]

Foreign ministers from 15 EU member states had voiced criticism of Varhelyi in April. They said that the Palestinian Authority was suffering from inflation and supply shortages due to the war in Ukraine, and was already engaged in an educational reform programme. The ministers said that making the EU aid conditional would not be fair. [EuroNews]

The decision to release the money unconditionally was made in a vote by EU member states' representatives on June 13. According to news outlet euobserver, Hungary – from which Varhelyi hails – was the only country to oppose the unconditional release of the funds.

The EU, together with its member states and institutions, is the biggest donor to the Palestinian Authority, providing around EUR 600 million of aid a year. Without the EU funds, the authority has recently been unable to pay the salaries of teachers, firefighters and medical staff. [BBC]

(jk/pk)

Syrian Kurds will turn to Damascus if Turkey attacks

The Kurdish-led forces in Syria will cooperate with the Syrian government if Turkey carries out its military operation against them. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the US, said in early June that they will prevent border conflicts with Turkey but are willing to take a longer fight if necessary. [Associated Press] [Aljazeera]

Russia and the Syrian government have strengthened the number of their troops in northern Syria, according to Turkish and Syrian rebel officials. Russia and the US warned Turkey against any military operation in the region, saying it will undermine stability there. [Reuters] [Reuters]

(fw/gc)

Turkey criticises Cyprus-Israel military drills

Large joint military exercises conducted by Cyprus and Israel have been criticised by Turkey, which said the drills were a destabilising influence on the region.

The Cyprus National Guard and the Israeli Defence Forces took part in the “Agapinor-22” land, sea and air drills at several locations in Cyprus for five days from May 29. [Cyprus Mail 1] [Financial Mirror]

Turkey criticised the manoeuvres as “destabilising” amid efforts to launch new cooperation talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. [Cyprus Mail 2]

The exercises aimed to enhance the interoperability of Cypriot and Israeli armed forces, and to strengthen military links between the two Mediterranean neighbours. [Financial Mirror] [Cyprus Mail 1]

(ta/pk)

Europe-North America meeting held after hiatus

European Council President Charles Michel, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Finnish premier Sanna Marin were among leaders who travelled to Washington for an annual conference that encourages dialogue between Europe and North America.

Some 140 European and North American politicians, journalists, researchers and business people attended the so-called Bilderberg meeting from June 1 to 4. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, this year’s gathering was the first held since 2019. Key topics included geopolitical realignments and the challenges facing NATO, China, Russia and Ukraine. [Bilderberg Meetings]

The first such meeting took place in 1954. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Finnish Government] [yle]

(js/pk)

US envoy: Russia, China ‘not interested’ in helping America on North Korea

An American envoy said at a June 3 meeting in Seoul with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts that

Russia and China are not interested in collaborating with the US to manage Pyongyang's nuclear and missile arsenal.

Sung Kim, the United States Special Representative for North Korea Policy, was speaking after Moscow and Beijing on May 27 at the United Nations Security Council vetoed a proposal by America to impose new sanctions on Pyongyang. [Reuters]

(ar/pk)

Taiwan to remain 'trusted partner' for global semiconductor industry: minister

Taiwan's economy minister, Wang Mei-hua, told the European Commission's director-general for trade, Sabine Weyand, at rare high-level talks on June 2 that Taipei would continue to be a "trusted partner" of the global semiconductor industry.

Wang said that Taiwan had "tried its best" to help the EU and other partners amid a global shortage of microchips. The EU has asked Taipei, a major semiconductor producer, to build plants in Europe.

During the talks, both sides discussed boosting research cooperation, monitoring semiconductor supply chains and improving market access for the EU's agricultural products.

(ar/pk)

Algeria blocks trade with Spain amid Western Sahara dispute

Algeria suspended a 20-year-old treaty of friendship with Spain on June 8 and blocked bilateral trade after Madrid backed a Moroccan plan to offer autonomy to the territory of Western Sahara, which is claimed by both Morocco and an independence movement supported by Algiers. [Aljazeera]

Algeria's move was announced by its president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who called Spain's stance "unjustifiable" and accused Madrid of "contributing directly to the degradation of the situation" in the region. [Euronews]

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez had previously described Rabat's plan – under which Western Sahara would operate autonomously under Moroccan rule –

as the “most serious, credible and realistic basis” to resolve the dispute over the territory. [moroccoworldnews] [Europe Monthly April 2022] The European Union has urged Algeria to reverse its decision to suspend the friendship treaty, and has called for dialogue. [ABC/AP]

Algeria last year provided some 40 percent of Spain’s natural gas needs. The Algerian president said his country was determined “to comply with its contractual obligations”. [Bloomberg] [ElIndependiente] However, the Algerian authorities have announced a block on bank payments to and from Spain. [ElPais]

Western Sahara was a Spanish colony until the 1970s, when Morocco annexed it. The Western Sahara Polisario independence movement is financed and supported by the Algerian government.

(vb/pk)

Bulgaria: Parliament approves French plan to lift Sofia’s veto of North Macedonia EU accession

Bulgaria’s parliament voted to allow the government to proceed with a French proposal to lift Sofia’s veto of North Macedonia’s accession to the EU only days after Prime Minister Kiril Petkov’s government was toppled from power. [Euractiv] [SofiaGlobe].

Members of parliament on June 24 voted 170 in favour of the mandate, with 37 voting against it. MPs from Petkov’s party, “We continue the change,” former prime minister Boyko Borissov’s centre-right GERB opposition party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and Democratic Bulgaria, a small centre-left party, voted in favour. The pro-Russian Vazrazhdane party and Slavi Trifonov’s populist party “There is such a people,” voted against the mandate. [Euractiv]

The French proposal incorporates Bulgaria’s conditions for solving the bilateral issues as part of Skopje’s negotiating framework, the European Commission being the guarantor of their implementation. This compromise became known as the “French proposal” because it came during the French presidency of the Council of the EU. [Euractiv] [Reuters].

Prime Minister of North Macedonia Dimitar Kovacevski said that the French proposal was “unacceptable” as such requirements were not part of the accession process of any other of the 27 members. [Euractiv] [Reuters]. [BalkanInsight] [Euractiv].

Petkov advised Kovacevski to accept the proposal as it would push forward Skopje's EU membership. Bulgaria's outgoing prime minister recognised that it might lead to a no-confidence vote against Kovacevski but that it would be "a good…achievement for a prime minister" to open the door for EU membership. [Politico].

The parliament was adamant that North Macedonia acknowledge in the constitution the rights of Bulgarians living in the country and that nothing in the negotiation process can be interpreted as Bulgaria's recognition of the existence of the Macedonian language.[SofiaGlobe].

(ib/gc)

Bulgaria, Slovakia seek closer links

The defence ministers of Slovakia and Bulgaria agreed during a meeting in Bratislava on June 3 that both countries should seek to boost their cooperation within NATO and the EU and promote their common interests in the two blocs.

Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad and his Bulgarian counterpart Dragomir Zakov, whose countries are situated on NATO's eastern flank, also discussed the modernisation of their armed forces. They agreed that countering so-called hybrid threats was a key security issue.

The pair agreed that continued support for Ukraine was in their interest, with Nad saying: "Both of our countries are seeking solutions to help Ukraine." [TASR]

(cg/pk)

Czech Republic extradites Vietnamese citizen to Germany for alleged kidnapping role

The Czech Republic extradited a Vietnamese national to Germany to be prosecuted for allegedly participating in the kidnapping of an oil executive in 2017. According to the public prosecutor general at the German federal court of justice, the crime was committed by members of the Vietnamese secret service, officials at the Vietnamese embassy in Germany, and a number of Vietnamese citizens.

The group kidnapped the oil executive and his partner in Berlin's Tiergarten park and smuggled them to Vietnam, where the man, a senior Communist Party functionary who back then lived in Germany seeking political asylum, was sentenced to two life terms in jail for corruption.

A German court convicted another suspect in the case in 2018. The Czech-Vietnamese national confessed his participation in the kidnapping activity and received 3 years and 10 months in prison. Germany, moreover, expelled two Vietnamese diplomats and summoned the ambassador several times. [The Guardian]

(ntan/gc)

Ties fray between NATO members Greece, Turkey

Ties between NATO members Greece and Turkey have deteriorated again as the two countries' leaders exchange slights, verbally spar over the sovereignty of islands in the Aegean and point fingers at perceived hostile military manoeuvring.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweeted that "Greeks must feel completely safe" and that Athens has a "strong deterrent capability" which it has strengthened during the last three years with "powerful allies." Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned while speaking to his party's lawmakers on June 15 that Greece "would get hurt" if it continued to be "a bit player" acting against Turkey. [Al-Monitor] [LeMonde]

Tensions escalated amid Mitsotakis's visit to Washington. Ahead of his trip, the Greek parliament approved the renewal and amendment of a defence cooperation agreement with the US. The amendments allow the presence of US forces in four more military areas, including two army camps in central and northern Greece and a naval base on the island of Crete. Turkey has been critical of both accords. [Al-Monitor]

Erdogan accused Mitsotakis of calling on US officials not to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey and of harbouring followers of his declared nemesis, the US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen. Erdogan said at the time that Mitsotakis "no longer exists" for him. On June 28, before heading to Madrid for a NATO summit, Erdogan reiterated his intention not to meet with Mitsotakis. [Europe in Review, June 2022] [Reuters] [LeMonde]

Mitsotakis told a joint session of Congress on May 17 that NATO doesn't need "another source of instability" on its southeastern flank. The US should "take this into account" when making defence procurement decisions concerning the eastern Mediterranean. [Europe in Review, June 2022] [The NationalHerald] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu discussed the issue of Greek sovereignty over its Aegean islands in June. "The sovereignty of the islands will be questioned if (Greece) does not end its violation," Cavusoglu said. [Al-Monitor]

Mitsotakis said that Ankara's questions about Greece's sovereignty over the islands were "absurd." He said at the end of a European Council meeting in June that he would continue pursuing a diplomatic solution to the dispute but that "Turkey must stop the extreme aggressive rhetoric of questioning Greek sovereignty."

He added that any talks between the two countries would be difficult. Both countries have sent letters to the United Nations outlining their rival positions on airspace and the islands. [Reuters] [The NationalHerald]

"We have several disputes with Greece in the Aegean Sea, such as the width of territorial waters, delimitation of the continental shelf, demilitarisation of islands or length of airspace," the former Turkish ambassador in Athens, Hasan Gogus, said. "While all issues are interrelated, Greece only acknowledges the existence of the continental shelf dispute." [MSN].

Gogus said separately that upcoming elections in both countries have escalated tensions. Erdogan and Mitsotakis face elections within a year. [DW]

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on June 14 called on both sides to show restraint a day before the alliance's defence ministers meeting in Brussels. "We urge Greece and Turkey to solve their differences in the Aegean in a spirit of trust and allied solidarity. That means restraint and moderation and refraining from any actions or rhetoric that could escalate the situation." [Al-Monitor]

A spokesman for the US State Department was quoted as saying by Hellas Journal site that Greece's sovereignty over these islands is not in question. Brussels also made a similar statement. [Al-Monitor]

(go/ib/gc)

Hungary and Ukraine in war of words

Budapest and Kiev have traded barbs in unusually strong language after the Speaker of the Hungarian parliament said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's behaviour on the international stage was the result of a "psychological problem." (Telex)

In a TV interview, Speaker Laszlo Kover said on June 4 he could not understand how the president of a country in trouble dared take a tough stance against the German chancellor or the Hungarian prime minister, from whom he was looking for help amid Russia's war on Ukraine.

"One usually makes threats against one's enemies, but rarely against those one is trying to win as friends. There is a personal, psychological problem here," said Kover. (Telex)

Kover referred to comments by Ukraine's ambassador to Berlin, who called German Chancellor Olaf Scholz an "offended liver sausage", and to previous sharp exchanges with Hungary. (Reuters) (Europe in Review, June 2022)

Reacting to Kover's comments, a Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesperson said in a Facebook post: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine expects the Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament, Laszlo Kover, to publish a certificate of his own mental health. Further evaluation of Mr Kover's words will directly depend on the conclusion recorded in the certificate." (Pravda)

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto pitched into the row, saying that while in Hungary tens of thousands of people have been working in recent months to help war-torn Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, "Ukrainian politicians continue to speak about Hungary in in an unacceptable tone, provoke us, tell lies and try to smear us. They have not once spoken with a voice of thanks. All this makes Laszlo Kover absolutely right, even if the Ukrainians are outraged." (Telex)

On June 21, Zelensky made a phone call to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban which was seen as an effort to smooth things over. Zelensky thanked Hungary for its help in supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and EU accession hopes, and for its assistance to refugees. (Mandiner) (Magyar Nemzet)

Relations between Budapest and Kiev were tense even before the war, largely because of the 130,000 Hungarians living in Ukraine near the Hungarian border. Kiev fears that they could threaten Ukraine's

territorial integrity. In 2019, a law was passed to ban the use of minority languages, including Hungarian, except in private conversations and church services in Ukraine by 2030. [Guardian] [Magyar Nemzet] [Mandiner] [HVG] [Telex]

(dk/pk)

Moldovan, Romanian parliamentary delegations meet in Chisinau

Moldovan and Romanian parliamentarians met at a joint meeting in Chisinau on June 6, as reported by the Chairman of the Moldovan Parliament Igor Grosu and the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Romanian bicameral parliament Marcel Ciolacu. [moldpres] [moldpres] [Libertatea]

The two delegations discussed various topics of mutual interest, such as infrastructure, energy policies, investments, healthcare, education and culture. Igor Grosu appreciated Romania's commitment to Moldova's European integration, which of late has intensified, with Moldova seeking EU candidate status. Marcel Ciolacu reiterated that "there is no other way for Moldova, but to join the European Union." [moldpres]

Moldovan President Maia Sandu also met with the Romanian delegation, whom she thanked for their political and financial support during the refugee crisis. She accentuated Moldova's interest in deepening bilateral ties. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova welcomes French president for working visit

Moldovan President Maia Sandu welcomed French President Emmanuel Macron on June 15 for a brief working visit. [moldpres] [Euractiv]

They discussed the impact of the war in Ukraine as well as Moldova's EU candidate status. President Macron said at a press conference that it would be "perfectly legitimate for Moldova to join the EU." [Reuters]

He also reiterated that although it is important to send a "clear and positive" response to Moldova and Ukraine, the EU should make it clear that specific

conditions must be met before granting candidate status to either of them. [Radio Free Europe] [Politico]

(mo/gc)

Spain to support Moldova amid refugee crisis

Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said during a meeting with Moldova's President Maia Sandu on June 3 that Madrid would provide financial assistance to Moldova and would also accept 2,000 refugees from Ukraine in case of an emergency. [moldpres] [La Prensa Latina]

Sanchez said that Spain wanted to strengthen bilateral ties and would open a diplomatic office in Moldova. [Anadolu] [Euroweeklynews]

(mo/gc)

Norway tightens visa rules for Russians

Russian citizens are more likely to see their application to visit friends, partners and siblings in Norway rejected after Oslo tightened visa rules.

According to Norway's Directorate of Immigration, a decision on whether a visa application is accepted or not is based on an assessment of how likely a person from Russia is to return to their home country after their visa expires. The rules for people wanting to visit their parents, children and husband or wife are not being tightened.

The number of Russians applying for asylum in Norway has risen from 13 in 2021 to 126 so far this year. [The Local] [nrk]

(js/pk)

Slovenia-Croatia border fence to be removed this year

A border fence that has existed between Slovenia and Croatia since the onset of the European migrant crisis in 2015 is due to be removed before the end of the year. [Vecer]

The fence, which runs 200 kilometres, was erected by previous governments and was most recently endorsed by Slovenia's ex-Prime Minister Janez Jansa, a populist with an anti-migrant agenda.

Slovenia's newly elected, liberal-leaning prime minister, Robert Golob, said: "The fence has not fulfilled its declared purpose, which was to discourage those who would like to cross the border." [Euronews]

Despite the border fence, the number of migrants entering Slovenia has increased since the start of the year. Human rights groups have long campaigned against the border fortifications, saying that migrants were forced into taking more dangerous routes to get around the fence.

(cg/pk)

Armenia: Prime Minister Pashinian holds talks with Qatari officials in Doha

Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian held official talks in June with Qatar's Interior Minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani, about improving ties in the economic, commerce, health, education and food security sectors. [GulfTimes] [PanARMENIAN]

The two attended the signing of a memorandum of understanding to establish political talks on issues of joint interest, another MoU on news exchange between the Armenian News Agency and Qatar News Agency and an agreement between Doha and Yerevan as sister cities.[GulfTimes]

The countries also signed a joint cooperation agreement in the health field, another cooperation agreement in education and higher education, an MoU in tourism and a cooperation agreement between Qatar University and Yerevan State University.

(lk/gc)

Turkey, Saudi Arabia start 'new era of cooperation' as ties thaw

Turkey and Saudi Arabia have said they have started a "new era of cooperation" during a visit to Ankara by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, his first trip to the country since the killing of journalist Jamal

Khashoggi by Saudi agents in Istanbul. [Associated Press] [New York Times] [Alarabiya News]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a two hour meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed. The countries said in a joint statement released following their meeting that they "strongly emphasised a joint determination to start a new era of cooperation in bilateral relations ... including political, economic, military, security and cultural relations." [Associated Press] [New York Times] [Alarabiya News]

They discussed developing and diversifying trade and boosting investments in various fields. The talks were held in an atmosphere of "sincerity and brotherhood embodying the depth of excellent relations between the two countries," according to the statement. [Associated Press]

The recalibration of the Saudi-Turkish relationship isn't surprising, Emile Hokayem, a Middle East analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said. "These are two heavyweight boxers who can punch each other quite hard — but no one is going to win by knockouts." [New York Times]

The talks in Ankara come as Turkey faces crippling inflation and a weak Lira and as Erdogan prepares for presidential elections in 2023. Ankara wants to attract foreign direct investment from the rich Gulf oil-producing nations. Erdogan's meeting with the UAE's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan late last year led to investment deals worth USD 10 billion after years of regional rivalry. [Associated Press]

With ties strained with the Biden administration, Saudi Arabia appears to be diversifying its alliances. The crown prince wants to shake off the diplomatic isolation he suffered after Khashoggi's killing that damaged his reputation. US President Joe Biden is due to visit Saudi Arabia at the tail end of a July 13-16 regional trip. [Associated Press]

The prince's regional trip this week is "designed to cement Riyadh's regional role and expand reconciliation efforts" ahead of Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia," Ayham Kamel, head of the Eurasia Group's Middle East research team, said "Bilateral trade is likely to increase, and there is a good chance that Saudi tourism flows to Turkey will resume. Talks could also involve military/defence cooperation or arms procurement, as the Saudis are interested in exploring diversifying their suppliers."

Khashoggi's fiancee, Hatice Cengiz, said she welcomed the improvement in Saudi and Turkish relations but

opposed Prince Mohammed getting welcomed to Ankara before Khashoggi's killers were brought to justice. "As someone who has been wronged, I find it very heartbreaking," Cengiz told *The Associated Press* in a written response to questions. "I object to this. Jamal's body is still missing. I am devastated that this has gone unanswered and that those who killed him remain unpunished." [Associated Press]

(fw/gc)

Brazil federal police says human remains found in Amazon belonged to British journalist

Human remains found in the Amazon rainforest belonged to British journalist Dom Phillips, Brazil's federal police said after a forensic exam was carried out. The remains of a second person, believed to be that of indigenous expert Bruno Pereira, were still under analysis, a report by CNN Brasil said. [Reuters]

The remains were found 10 days after the pair went missing while returning from a reporting trip in the remote Javari region of the Amazon of Brazil. A suspect confessed to the crime and led police to the spot where they were buried. [Reuters]

Police said the killer acted alone, but the local indigenous group Univaja disagrees, saying Pereira and Phillips crossed paths with a powerful criminal organisation that tried at all costs to cover its tracks during the investigation. Univaja said it had notified the federal police several times since late 2021 about an organised crime group operating in the Javari Valley. [Reuters]

The disappearance brought international attention to the land conflicts happening in the Amazon. The area in which the two men were travelling is known for illegal fishing, mining and drug-trafficking activities, and the violent conflicts between these criminal groups, government agents and indigenous people. [BBC]

Pereira was an expert on isolated tribes in the Amazon and had received death threats prior to taking the trip. Phillips, a contributor to the Guardian and other newspapers, lived in Brazil for more than 10 years and was in the Javari region to do research for his book on the Amazon's future, called *How to Save the Amazon.* [The Guardian]

On June 15, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the UK government was “deeply concerned” about the disappearance, after British politician Theresa May called on him to make the case “a diplomatic priority”. [The Guardian]

(af/gc)

Cyprus-US strengthen technological cooperation

A Cypriot deputy minister on June 6 held meetings in New York and Washington DC aiming to strengthen cooperation with the US on innovation, research and technological development. The talks with US officials focused on sharing expertise and know-how in order to implement digital reforms in Cyprus. [Cyprus Mail] [Ekathimerini]

Kyriacos Kokkinos, Deputy Minister for Research, Innovation and Digital Policy, also discussed ways to promote the active participation of women in information and communication technology. [Cyprus Mail]

The meetings were held as part of a Cooperation Agreement on Science and Technology between Cyprus and the United States signed on February 11. [In Cyprus]

(ta/pk)

Denmark, Canada split tiny island, settling ownership spat

Denmark and Canada have announced they have settled an almost 50-year border dispute over the tiny uninhabited Hans Island, situated between Canada and Greenland in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.

Greenland is an autonomous territory under Denmark’s control. For years, Denmark and Canada have each repeatedly attempted to wrestle control of Hans Island from the other, in what has been described as more a squabble than a border conflict. [Euronews]

The two countries, both NATO members, have decided to put their differences aside and split the 1.3 square kilometre island in half. [Reuters] Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod said the deal was “an important

signal now that there is much war and unrest in the world." [Euronews]

(cg/pk)

Malta opens its first embassy in Brazil

Maltese Foreign Minister Ian Borg on June 5 officially opened his country's first ever embassy in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. After the opening ceremony, he met Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for informal talks.

Borg said that the launch of an embassy in Latin America was an important development for Malta as it strives to strengthen bilateral relations and find new ways of boosting political and economic cooperation. [Times of Malta] [Malta Independent]

(ta/pk)

Nicaragua allows Russian troops to deploy for training, law enforcement

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega approved on June 9 the deployment of Russian troops, planes, and ships to Nicaragua for training, law enforcement, humanitarian aid, rescue missions, and emergency searches for natural disasters. [Ticotimes] [WashingtonPost]

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the decision by Ortega was routine. This is "a procedure for the adoption of Nicaraguan law on the temporary admission of foreign military personnel to its territory," she said, adding that this law also allows troops from the US, Mexico and other Central American nations to enter the country. [EFE][Ticotimes][WashingtonPost]

Ortega has been a staunch ally of Russia since his days in the leadership of the 1979 revolution that ousted dictator Anastasio Somoza, the Washington Post reported. Ortega served as president from 1985 to 1990, before being re-elected to power in 2007. Nicaragua is one of the seven countries that recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, two regions of Georgia that declared themselves sovereign with the support of the Kremlin. [DW] [WashingtonPost]

(jm/gc)

Venezuelan president visits Turkey to strengthen trade ties

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro visited Turkey on June 8, where he met with his counterpart President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara to discuss bilateral relations and sign agreements on agriculture, tourism and financial relations. [Daily Sabah]

Turkey is one of the few countries with whom Maduro maintains ties because of sanctions by the United States. Since 2018 trade between both countries has increased.

In April, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visited Venezuela, where seven agreements were signed by them. Cavusoglu said then that their goal was to expand trade between the two countries to USD 1.5 billion annually, up from some USD 850 million currently. [Mercopress]

As part of continuing efforts to improve their partnership, President Erdogan announced he would visit Venezuela in July 2022. [Daily Sabah]

(af/gc)

Belgium's Princess Astrid leads first overseas trade mission to US since start of Covid-19 pandemic

Belgium's Princess Astrid led a high-level delegation to the United States where the delegates met with US officials and businesses to discuss expanding trade ties between the two countries. They also met representatives from Belgium subsidiaries, such as Solvay in Atlanta and AB InBev in New York.

It was the first trade mission outside of Europe since the Covid-19 outbreak and the largest since a trade mission to China in November 2019. The Belgian Foreign Ministry and regional and federal foreign trade agencies organised the visit that included 541 delegates of which 459 were businessmen and women, in addition to academics, trade federation representatives and politicians. [VRTNews]

The delegation include the Federal Minister with responsibility for foreign trade David Clarinval (Francophone liberal), the Flemish Prime Minister Jan Jambon (nationalist), the Walloon Economy and

Foreign Trade Minister Willy Borsus (Francophone liberal) and the Brussels regional secretary of state with responsibility for foreign trade Pascal Smet (Flemish socialist). [VRTNews]

Around 500 Belgian companies operate in the United States and employ 70,000 people. Exports of Brussels goods to the US have even increased by more than 80 percent since 2020. [Hub.Brussels]

(gt/gc)

MEPs say China's treatment of Uyghurs carries 'serious risk of genocide'

The European Parliament on June 9 adopted a resolution labelling China's treatment of Uyghurs and other ethnic Turkic people in the western region of Xinjiang as "crimes against humanity" which "represent a serious risk of genocide".

In total, 513 parliamentarians voted in favour, with 14 abstentions and one vote against the resolution. [European Parliament]

The resolution was also critical of a visit by United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet to Xinjiang in late May, saying that she "failed to clearly hold the Chinese government accountable for human rights abuses against the Uyghurs."

The European Parliament resolution stopped short of accusing China of genocide, as the US has done.

Officials from the Chinese mission to the EU said they "strongly deplore and firmly oppose" the resolution, adding that it was "in total disregard of facts with fabrication and confounding black and white."

The move by the European Parliament came after a recent leak of documents which showed the scale of human rights abuses in Xinjiang led to a shift in attitude in some European countries. The European Parliament resolution does not automatically lead to an official change in the EU's position. [see Asia in Review No.24, June/2022, 2]

(ar/pk)

UN Higher Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet will not seek a second

term

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, will not seek re-election for a second term but denied that the reason was due to her controversial visit to China. [Swissinfo]

Bachelet made her announcement at the end of a speech to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council. Bachelet said she has informed UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres two months prior and said she wants to spend more time with family in Chile. [Swissinfo]

Bachelet has been criticised for not challenging Beijing for alleged abuses against Uyghurs and other minority groups in China. Before Bachelet steps down from her position she will provide an assessment of the human rights situation in China come August. [Swissinfo]

(ks/gc)

India's foreign minister tells Europe to 'grow out of' its mindset

India's foreign minister has said that Europe "has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems."

Speaking at the 2022 GLOBSEC annual international security conference on June 3 in Slovakia, Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was responding to a question about New Delhi's stance on the war in Ukraine. [Indian Express]

In March, Jaishankar defended India after it was criticised for buying discounted oil from Moscow, saying that Europe consumed vastly more Russian oil before the war than India was consuming now. In April, he underlined that India would set its own foreign policy course. [see Asia in Review No.23, June/2022, 1]

(ar/pk)

China is Germany's largest trade partner, again

Beijing is still Berlin's most important trade partner, and commerce between the two countries has not been significantly hit by hard Covid-19 lockdowns in

China, according to the German Federal Statistics Office.

China has been Germany's largest trade partner for six years in a row. Trade between the nations was worth EUR 245.9 billion in 2021. Most of Germany's imported goods came from China, with these valued at EUR 142.2 billion. [Reuters] [Destatis, in German]

(ar/pk)

Italy vetoes technology transfer to Chinese firm

The Italian government on June 7 vetoed the transfer of technology and software from domestic company Robox to Chinese firm EFORT Intelligent Equipment.

The Chinese company earlier this year increased its stake from 40 percent to 49 percent in Robox, which designs and manufactures electronic components for robotics and motion control systems. [Reuters]

To impose the veto, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi used powers that aim to protect industry sectors of strategic national importance such as banking, energy, telecoms and health.

It was the fifth time Draghi employed such a right since he became premier in February 2021. In March this year, he stopped the sale of Italian drone manufacturer Alpi Aviation to Mars Information Technology, a Chinese company based in Hong Kong but with strong ties to the Beijing government. [Europe Monthly April 2022] [CorrieredellaSera]

(vb/pk)

Lithuania: Three members of parliament call for legislative branch to denounce China's actions in Hong Kong

Three members of Lithuania's parliament called for the legislative branch of government to denounce China's recent actions in Hong Kong. [The Baltic Times] [LRT]

They demanded in a resolution that China release all political prisoners that have been incarcerated in the latest crackdown and that the new Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee should not be recognized. [The Baltic Times]

The Office of China's Charge d'Affaires condemned the resolution, stating that it would undermine the election results that were held in a democratic way and that Lithuania's behaviour "reveals its hypocrisy and double standards." [The Baltic Times]

Among the EU members, Lithuania has adopted a hawkish view on China. Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis told Nikkei Asia that he called on his European colleagues to abandon China's 17+1 economic forum. [Global Times] [Nikkei Asia] [CNA]

(mo/gc)

Russia, China open cross-border bridge, continue engaging

Russia and China on June 10 opened a new cross-border bridge in the Far East, as Moscow suffers the impact of Western sanctions and China continues to engage economically with Russia.

Russian authorities said the bridge would bring the two nations closer by boosting trade, adding that it "carries a special symbolic meaning in today's divided world."

The bridge, which connects the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk with the Chinese city of Heihe across the Amur River, is over one kilometre long and cost around USD 342 million. [Reuters]

China has heavily increased its oil and gas imports from Russia, benefiting from discounts. Although Beijing views Western sanctions imposed on Moscow over the war in Ukraine as illegal, it has refrained from openly undermining them.

(ar/pk)

Russia suspends fishing deal with Japan near disputed islands

Moscow said on June 7 it was suspending a deal on fishing rights for Japanese crews near the disputed Southern Kuril Islands, claiming that Tokyo had not made payments that were part of the agreement. [Al Jazeera]

A spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry said: "In the current situation, we are forced to suspend the implementation of the 1998 agreement until the Japanese side fulfils all its financial obligations."

The Southern Kuril islands have been the subject of dispute between Moscow and Tokyo ever since the Soviet Union seized them from the Japanese Empire after its downfall in 1945.

(ar/pk)

Belgium pledges to invest EUR 16m in Democratic Republic of Congo during royal visit

Belgium's Federal Minister for Development Cooperation Meryam Kitir signed an agreement to invest EUR 16 million to improve social protection and working conditions in the Democratic Republic of Congo. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews]

The cooperation agreement was signed on June 10 with the African country's Minister for Foreign affairs, Christophe Lutundula, and coincided with the visit of the King and Queen of Belgium. The Belgian development agency, Enabel, will implement the project on the ground until it ends in 2026, marking the first time it is working regionally for social protection in a partnership that includes Rwanda and Uganda. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews]

The Democratic Republic of Congo is trying to create jobs for young Congolese and women. Key sectors in the country are in the service and agricultural sectors, where there is exploitation and poor working conditions. The introduction of training initiatives and effective job placement could add 12,000 "quality jobs," Kitir said.

The agreement underscores the improving ties between the two countries since the election in 2019 of the African country's current President Felix Tshisekedi. Diplomatic relations between Belgium and Congo warmed significantly with several Belgian federal ministers travelling to the country.

Royal Visit

King Philip and Queen Mathilder were in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the signing of the agreement with other senior Belgian officials. They included Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and State Secretary for Science Policy Thomas Dermine.

King Philippe expressed his "deepest regrets for the wounds of the past," referring to Belgium's colonial regime in the country, saying that it was "based on

exploitation and domination," although he did not give a formal apology for the colonial period.

This was the first visit by a Belgian Kind to Congo since 2010, when late-King Albert II attended the celebrations of 50 years of Congolese independence. King Philippe is only the seventh royal to visit Belgium's former colony in history. It had originally been planned to to mark the 60th anniversary of the African Country's independence in 2020 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews]

The highlights of the itinerary include the return of a mask that was taken to Belgium during the colonial period, a visit to the Belgian school and university, the visit of the Panzi Hospital of Congolese gynaecologist and human rights activist Denis Mukwege, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for his global efforts in the fight against the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war.

(gt/gc)

Nigerian bishop criticises comments on church shooting by Irish President

A Nigerian Catholic bishop criticised Irish President Micheal D. Higgins for comments he made linking a church shooting that killed as many as 50 people in the West African country in June to the consequences of climate change and food insecurity.

Jude Ayodeji Arogundade, the bishop of the diocese of Ondo, said that Higgins' statement was "incorrect and far-fetched." He said on Facebook that the comments were inappropriate and an attempt to push a political agenda by linking it to the massacre. [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

Armed attackers killed about 50 people on June 5 who were celebrating the Christian holiday of Pentecost at St. Francis Catholic Church in the town of Owo. The assailants, who local authorities believe were supporters of the Islamic State West Africa Province, used AK-47 rifles and explosives to attack the congregation at the church in southwestern Ondo State. [CNN] [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times]

Given that the attack happened in a place of worship, it deserved condemnation, Higgins said, adding that any attempts to scapegoat pastoral peoples, who are among the foremost victims of the consequences of climate change, also deserved condemnation.

“The neglect of food security issues in Africa, for so long, has brought us to a point of crisis that is now having internal and regional effects based on struggles, ways of life themselves,” he said. [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

A spokesman of the president said that there was no direct link made between climate change and the massacre in the statement. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Spain: Anger over deaths of 23 migrants in Melilla enclave

Human rights groups have demanded a probe into the deaths of at least 23 migrants from sub-Saharan countries during an attempted mass crossing into the North African Spanish enclave of Melilla. [BBC 1] [Al Jazeera]

About 2,000 migrants attempted to enter Spanish territory from neighbouring Morocco on June 25, the authorities in Madrid said. According to reports, some of them fell from a border fence, while others were targeted by Moroccan border guards wielding batons and tear gas. [BBC 2] A total of 133 migrants made it across the border. [BBC 1]

Spanish and Moroccan human rights groups have called for an investigation to determine whether border guards used physical force. Meanwhile, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez condemned the attempted mass crossing, and blamed mafias involved in human trafficking. [Al Jazeera]

This is not the first time border police in Melilla have been accused of brutality against migrants. Human rights groups reported excessive use of force in March 2022, when migrants stormed a fence and more than 800 people entered Spanish territory. [Europe Monthly March 2022]

The latest mass crossing is the first of its kind since the renewal of diplomatic relations between Spain and Morocco in March after years of dispute over Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony annexed by Morocco in the 1970s. [BBC 2] [Al Jazeera]

After decades of neutrality, Spain has backed Morocco’s claim to the territory. In doing so, the Spanish government hopes to receive support from Morocco in managing migration flows in Melilla and Ceuta, another Spanish exclave in North Africa. [BBC 2]

(ta/pk)

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