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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

# Europe in Review

*Grasp the pattern, read the trend*

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the August issue of Europe in Review, in which we provide you with an overview of the war in Ukraine, including Kiev's deal with Moscow on grain exports, and an insight into President Zelensky's concerns about treason among Ukrainian officials.

We report on Europe bracing for gas rationing, and trace how the continent has created dire energy problems for itself through policies that made it dependent on Russia.

And, as usual, we bring you a thorough briefing on the latest developments in constitutional affairs, domestic politics, international relations, geopolitics, defence, collective security and human rights in Europe.

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

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# Top Stories - Editors' Pick

### War in Europe: Russia, Ukraine reset for next phase in exhausting conflict

Russian troops in early July gained control over the Luhansk Oblast, which makes up half of the eastern Donbas region, as Ukrainian commanders withdrew their forces from the city of Lysychansk – accomplishing one of Moscow's war goals.

July as a whole, however, was marked by a lack of strategic movement as both sides appeared to be preparing their next moves. [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [BBC News] [Guardian] [Euractiv] This "lull" on the strategic level does not mean fighting has stopped. Combat continues along the entire frontline, with significant fatalities for soldiers and civilians alike.

In the eastern Donetsk region, Russian forces bombarded the cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and

Bakhmut throughout July. These are the last cities Ukraine holds in the Donbas.

The decision to withdraw from Lysychansk, the last Ukrainian-controlled city in Luhansk, came weeks after the loss of the nearby city of Sievierodonetsk. Ukraine's ministry of defence said that "the continuation of the defence of [Lysychansk] would lead to fatal consequences" and that the withdrawal was ordered "in order to preserve the lives of Ukrainian defenders".

Lysychansk was left severely damaged as Russia hailed the "liberation" of the region, with Ukrainian holdings in the Donbas reduced to just part of the Donetsk Oblast. The governor of Donetsk, anticipating a Russian assault, has urged the region's population to flee.

*Ukrainian POWs killed*

In the Kiev region and elsewhere, similar deadly missile attacks were carried out. A Russian camp housing Ukrainian POWs in the Donbas was also attacked, and both sides were quick to blame the other. According to the Russian foreign ministry, 40 prisoners were killed – but there was no mention of any Russian casualties. [Reuters] [Guardian] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Euractiv]

These artillery exchanges are no longer as one-sided as before, which may be figuring into Russia's strategic planning. While Ukraine's gunners are still outnumbered, the country's Western supporters have put a new weapon in their hands: the HIMARS.

HIMARS stands for "High Mobility Artillery Rocket System" and consists of a truck-mounted launcher which can fire sophisticated GPS-guided missiles. This new weapon has had a tangible influence. Over the course of the last month, Ukraine has used the platform to strike numerous Russian command posts and ammunition depots. The Ukrainian defence ministry claims to have hit around 50 such depots, and there is credible evidence for these claims. [Hill] [Telegraph] [Independent] [Washington Post] [Reuters] [Atlantic Council] [Associated Press]

Both Russia and Ukraine are considering their next steps as the conflict moves into its sixth month. While the eastern Donbas region was the centre of gravity of the conflict after Russia's failure to capture Kiev, this may be about to change. [Reuters]

*Ukraine counter-attacks*

Ukraine has its eye on the south of the country, which has been under Russian occupation since early March.

Ukrainian artillery has struck bridges and infrastructure in the Kherson area using the HIMARS platform, which observers believe foreshadows a Ukrainian counterattack to reclaim the region. Ukrainian forces have already recaptured several villages, putting Russian supply lines west of the Dnieper River at risk.

Russia has also assumed a defensive posture there, with troops digging trenches, and men and materiel being urgently moved from the Donbas to the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in recent weeks. [Reuters] [Guardian] [Euractiv] [BBC News] [France24] [Times] [New York Times] [Institute for the Study of War]

Russia, for its part, has vowed to "expand" the scope of its invasion. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, described his country's goal as being to "get rid of the [Ukrainian] regime, which is absolutely anti-people and anti-historical". Referring to his country's support of the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), Lavrov said that the scope of the invasion was now "far from being just the DPR and LPR, it's also Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and a number of other territories."

Leaders of Russia's "military-civilian" occupation administration in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia have outlined plans to conduct votes on whether to join the Russian Federation, which experts consider to be similar to the tactics Moscow adopted in Crimea after Russia's occupation of the peninsula in 2014. [Irish Examiner] [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Associated Press] [Kyiv Post]

Experts are by and large holding to their prediction that the war in Ukraine will be long.

Andrew Milburn, writing for the Modern War Institute, argued that a long war of attrition favours Russia – and that Ukraine must achieve a technological edge and stem its casualties if it is to evict Russian forces from its occupied territory.

Another peril of this long war was discussed by the Poland-based Centre for Eastern Studies, which warned that Russia is stepping up its "creeping annexation" of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia by transplanting local officials from Russia and ruthlessly suppressing pro-Ukrainian sentiment. The Centre also warned that this process would make it harder for Ukraine to recover the territories in any potential peace talks. [Centre for Eastern Studies] [Institute for the Study of War] [Modern War Institute] [Reuters] [Washington Post]

*More aid from EU*

Despite rocketing inflation, the threat of recession and the spectre of a full gas cut-off by Russia in response to EU sanctions on Moscow, Ukraine's European supporters approved a new aid package and a seventh sanctions package in July.

The sanctions adopted by European Union member states include a ban on Russian gold imports and the seizure of assets of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank. But the measures again exclude Russian gas – the country's most profitable and essential export to the EU. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban bemoaned the sanctions, saying that Europe had "shot itself in the lungs". [*See separate story in this issue*]

Meanwhile, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the sanctions were "not enough" and continued to push for harsher measures.

Despite the passage of time and occasional frustration with Ukraine's demands, support remains high for the country among Europeans and EU officials. [RFE/RL] [Euractiv] [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Ukraine continues to receive military aid from its supporters. The United States remains the leader in this regard, having given USD 8 billion since the invasion began. The US has provided additional HIMARS rocket systems, which are now at the top of the Ukrainian military's wish-list. Britain, which has given nearly USD 3 billion in military aid, has also committed to providing 10,000 Ukrainian volunteers with military training on its own soil. The EU has committed to an extra EUR 500 million in lethal aid, bringing the bloc's total military aid to EUR 2.5 billion. [Guardian] [BBC News] [Reuters] [RFE/RL] [Associated Press]

*Russia, Ukraine both under strain*

Despite disappointment in Ukraine with the scope of the measures, Kiev will be glad of the help as it faces mounting economic difficulties.

Since the Russian invasion was launched in late February, Ukraine's economy has lost between 35 to 45 percent of its GDP, leading to an estimated 25 percent hole in the state's finances. To compare, Ukraine's pre-war budget deficit was 5 percent. Ukraine's central bank has also liquidated around USD 12.4 billion worth of its gold reserves since the beginning of the conflict. Ukrainian presidential advisor Oleg Ustenko estimated that the state may need up to USD 9 billion in financial

aid per month to sustain itself and its resistance against Moscow.

While a recent deal on protecting grain exports has raised hopes that Ukraine may be able to profit from its main crop again, a Russian missile strike on the port in Odessa immediately afterwards has dampened these somewhat. [Reuters] [Euronews] [New York Times] [Washington Examiner]

Russia remains in a stronger position – but sanctions and casualties are biting.

According to a recent study by the Yale School of Economics, sanctions are having the desired effect. The study argues that the Russian economy has been weakened in several key areas while state finances are now in "dire straits". The Russian export market has "irrevocably deteriorated", while its import market has "collapsed" – leading to shortages in every domestic sector. The report also criticised the Russian government's interventions as "patently unsustainable".

Still, these economic impacts do not appear to have spurred much discontent in Russia – a serious challenge to Vladimir Putin's regime is yet to materialise. Instead, Putin enjoys the support of Russia's wealthiest and seems to be tightening his grip over the state's security apparatus. [Euractiv] [Reuters] [Foreign Affairs] [Foreign Policy Research Institute] [Centre for Eastern Studies] [EUObserver]

Moscow is also facing a mounting problem on the frontline: manpower. Western analysts have estimated that Russia is losing up to 100 soldiers a day. Severe manpower shortages have also paralyzed separatist forces in the Donbas region, continuing a trend seen in recent months. Russia is also struggling to conscript men from these regions, with reports of prospective conscripts hiding or fleeing. Russia has authorised the Wagner Group, a mercenary outfit, to take responsibility for certain frontline sectors. While the country may want to expand its ambitions in Ukraine, it will be unable to do so without sufficient infantry. [Economist] [Al Jazeera] [Reuters] [BBC News] [RFE/RL] [Guardian] [Financial Times]

(wb/pk)

## Ukraine: Zelensky fires top officials, citing treason among their staff

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has dismissed two top officials in a purge as his country enters the sixth month of a deadly conflict with Russia, citing cases of suspected treason in their organisations. [Al Jazeera]

The officials in question, Ivan Bakanov and Iryna Venediktova, respectively the head of the Ukrainian security service – the SBU – and the prosecutor general of Ukraine, are both accused of security breaches and of overseeing staff who collaborated with Moscow.

Bakanov, a close friend of Zelensky, has headed the SBU since 2019. However, his removal did not surprise some observers, and *Politico* sources claimed that Zelensky had been looking to replace the intelligence chief. [AP]

Venediktova has been vocal about investigating Russian war crimes, with her office opening over 13,000 cases, and receiving international praise in the process. Her removal has left some experts baffled. Meanwhile, Doug Klain of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center said, speaking to Al Jazeera, that she had failed to reform her office and prevent corruption. [Washington Post] [Washington Post] [Al Jazeera] [Kyiv Post]

Alongside investigations of the two officials, over 650 cases have been opened relating to corruption and collaboration. Zelensky said: "In particular, more than 60 employees of the prosecutor's office and the SBU have remained in occupied territory and work against our state." [WSJ] [Times of Israel] [France24]

Alan Fisher, an Al Jazeera correspondent, said it was "unusual for Zelensky to make changes like this. Before the war, his cabinet was like a revolving door, but since the war started, he has kept by and large the same group around him, including these two very senior figures."

It is believed that Zelensky lost confidence in his security apparatus, worried at gaping holes in his nation's intelligence network, amid long-standing allegations that the SBU had been extensively infiltrated by Russian agents, the LA Times reported.

Two Ukrainian generals were stripped of their rank in April. Zelensky has previously said: "I do not have time to deal with all the traitors. But gradually they will all be punished." [WSJ]

(cg/pk)

## UN, Turkey broker Russian-Ukrainian deal on grain exports amid shortages

The United Nations and Turkey have brokered a deal between Moscow and Kiev to allow exports of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea to international markets struggling with record inflationary pressure and food shortages.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said at the signing ceremony in Istanbul on July 22 that the "unprecedented agreement" amid the ongoing war in Ukraine was "a beacon of hope" in a world that desperately needed it. Speaking after the agreement was inked, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the deal would "prevent billions of people from facing famine." [UN][Yahoo]

Under the plan, Ukrainian officials will guide ships through safe channels across mined waters to three ports, including the major hub of Odessa, as well as the ports of Chornomorsk and Pivdennyi, where they will be loaded with grain. The agreement does not extend to the port of Mykolaiv, which accounts for about one fifth of annual Black Sea exports but is closer to combat zones in Ukraine. [Yahoo][IFPRI]

Ships will then exit Ukrainian territorial waters in the Black Sea, transit the Bosporus Strait to a Turkish port for inspection and later head to their destinations. Russia also received assurances that its exports of food and fertiliser will not be affected by export sanctions. [IFPRI]

The UN expects the deal to be fully operational in a few weeks, with shipments back to pre-war levels of 5 million tonnes a month. [Yahoo][IFPRI]

*Millions at risk*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February disrupted the supply of wheat around the world, leaving millions of people at risk of starvation. Much of the Middle East and North Africa region depend on imports from the Black Sea. Turkey was one of the nations most threatened by a decline in grain supplies due to the war in Ukraine. [Yahoo][IFPRI] [UN]

In peace-time, Ukraine supplies more than 45 million tonnes annually to the global market, making it one of the world's leading grain exporters, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. In 2021, Ukraine exported an average 4 million tons of grains – wheat, maize and barley – a month and 430,000 tons of sunflower oil. [IFPRI] [UN]

Global wheat prices fell following the announcement of the Russian-Ukrainian deal, bringing prices of the staple grain down to levels unseen since the war started. In the two weeks after the Russian invasion began, wheat futures rose by 70 percent to a record of USD 12.94 per bushel, causing food prices to soar as much of the grain remained stuck in Ukraine. [EpochTimes] [Yahoo] [IFPRI]

Before the agreement, storage capacity was reaching its limits in Ukraine, with much of the 2022 wheat harvest and the approximately 20 million metric tons of grains and oilseeds harvested in 2021 remaining in storage. [IFPRI]

*First cargo ship*

After the deal was inked, there were indications that the agreement may not hold. Less than 24 hours after it was signed, Russian rockets struck port facilities in Odessa, damaging grain-loading facilities. The attack cast doubt on whether insurers would provide insurance to ships operating in the region. [IFPRI]

Despite these concerns, the first cargo ship carrying Ukrainian grain left Odessa on August 1. The Sierra Leone-flagged ship Razoni departed carrying 26,000 metric tons of corn bound for Lebanon. “The first grain ship since #RussianAggression has left port,” Ukrainian Infrastructure Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov wrote on Twitter, thanking Turkey and the UN for helping implement the agreement. [MSN]

The UN Secretary General “hopes that this will be the first of many commercial ships moving in accordance with the initiative signed, and that this will bring much-needed stability and relief to global food security, especially in the most fragile humanitarian contexts,” Stephane Dujarric, his spokesman, said in a statement. He added the UN World Food Programme was planning to purchase, load, and ship at least 30,000 metric tons of wheat out of Ukraine on a UN-chartered ship.

(gc/pk)

## ECB raises key interest rate for first time in 11 years

The European Central Bank (ECB) has raised its key interest rates for the first time in 11 years as the central bank of the 19 nations that share a single currency tries to dampen accelerating inflation across the euro zone.

The ECB on July 21 raised its benchmark interest rate by 50 basis points, higher than the hike of 25 basis points that traders had expected. It also brought its deposit rate to zero. [ECB] [CNBC]

“The Governing Council judged that it is appropriate to take a larger first step on its policy rate normalisation path than signalled at its previous meeting,” the ECB said in a statement. “This decision is based on the Governing Council’s updated assessment of inflation risks.” [ECB]

Euro zone inflation climbed to another all-time high, with consumer prices jumping 8.9 percent year on year in July, up from 8.6 percent in June. Soaring energy and food costs are pushing inflation higher across Europe, forcing governments to implement measures to offset the impact on their citizens. [Bloomberg]

*More hikes planned*

ECB President Christine Lagarde said that it was important to address any sign that inflation expectations were becoming entrenched, adding that the bank would raise its interest rates until inflation falls back to its 2 percent target. Lagarde made her comments in an interview with Germany's Funke Mediengruppe. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The ECB’s future policy rate path will continue to be data-dependent and will help to deliver on its 2 percent inflation target over the medium term, the bank said. “At the Governing Council’s upcoming meetings, further normalisation of interest rates will be appropriate.” [ECB]

The institution, based in Frankfurt, Germany, had kept rates at historic lows as it dealt with the region’s sovereign debt crisis and the coronavirus pandemic. The rate hike ends its policy of keeping its deposit rate for banks below zero (at -0.1 percent) to stimulate lending to businesses rather than hold on to money. In 2014, the ECB was the first major central bank to introduce negative interest rates. [ECB] [CNBC] [BBC]

The ECB had previously said it would increase rates in July and September as consumer prices keep surging. It was unclear, though, whether it would go as far as bringing rates back to zero. The bank’s deposit rate is now 0 percent, the main refinancing operations rate is 0.5 percent, and the marginal lending facility is at 0.75 percent. [ECB][CNBC]

*Economic concerns rise*

Economic concerns in the region are picking up as governments fail to curb inflation despite stepping up the pace of their monetary policies. S&P Global said that its July forecast already incorporates mild second-quarter contractions in real gross domestic product in the UK, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. [IHS Markit]

"While a rebound in tourism and consumer services might give the region a slight lift in the summer quarter, another setback is likely in the fourth quarter given unreliable energy supplies," S&P Global said. "Exceptionally high natural gas and electricity prices will damage industrial competitiveness in Germany and other manufacturing centres."

The political and economic fallout from the ongoing war in Ukraine is impacting Europe's economy, with Russia squeezing natural gas supplies to the region, and heavy industry facing tough rationing in the coming months. S&P Global added that the Russia-Ukraine war will likely drag on through 2022, deflating consumer and business confidence across Europe. [IHS Markit] [CNBC]

Officials in Europe have increasingly voiced concerns about the possibility of a shutdown in gas supplies. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said Russia was "blackmailing" the region, an accusation that Moscow has repeatedly denied. [CNBC]

*Recession Predicted*

JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs are among major banks that are predicting a recession, with Goldman saying it's already starting this quarter. Eurozone real GDP growth is projected to slow from 5.4 percent in 2021 to 2.5 percent in 2022 and 1.2 percent in 2023 before improving to 2.0 percent in 2024, according to S&P Global. [IHS Markit]

With more uncertainty, continuing supply chain disruptions and high energy prices, European banks are becoming more risk averse and tightening lending. They cite perceptions of increased risk and lower risk tolerance as factors behind the net tightening of credit standards for firms. [ECB]

Despite the general malaise across Europe, growth in the euro zone economy accelerated in the second quarter of this year. The bloc registered a gross domestic product expansion of 0.7 percent in the second quarter, according to Eurostat, Europe's statistics office, beating expectations of 0.2 percent growth. It comes after GDP rose 0.5 percent in the first quarter. [CNBC]

European Economics Commissioner Paolo Gentiloni said on Twitter that the latest growth figures were "good news."

"Uncertainty remains high for the coming quarters: [we] need to maintain unity and be ready to respond to an evolving situation as necessary," he added.

(gc/pk)

## Europe braces for energy rationing as Russia moves towards full gas cut-off

State-owned Russian company Gazprom has halted all gas shipments to Latvia, reinforcing fears that Moscow may fully cut off such supplies to EU nations in retaliation for Western sanctions over the war in Ukraine.

Gazprom stopped gas shipments to Latvia on July 30 after the country refused Moscow's demands to open dual euro and rouble accounts at Gazprom bank to pay for supplies. Gazprom had already halted all gas shipments to Poland, Bulgaria, Finland and the Netherlands for identical reasons in April and May. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3] [AP News]

Supplies through Nord Stream 1, the Gazprom pipeline supplying Germany via a 1,200 km link under the Baltic Sea from Russia, were interrupted completely for ten days from July 12 to July 21 due to scheduled maintenance. [Financial Times] [Nord Stream Pipeline]

German Vice Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck warned during this period that Russia may not restore gas flows at all. [AP News]

EU and Canadian sanctions waivers were provided to Siemens to enable it to send a critical component repaired at its facilities in Canada to Russia through Germany to enable gas service via Nord Stream 1 to be restored on time. [CBC]

However, Russia announced it would only restore 20 percent of the supply levels contracted with German utility company Uniper on July 27, after restoring flows to the previous 40 percent level on July 21. [Financial Times]

The same week Russia signed an international agreement to unlock a blockade of Ukrainian grain shipments, and then bombarded the country's main grain port, Odessa, the next day. [Financial Times]

Russia appears to be reneging on agreements in order to disrupt world commodity markets as well as regional energy supplies and thereby increase pressure on Europe to remove war sanctions.

Russian gas supply reductions may result in rationing in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. This could mean rolling blackouts, at least for commercial customers, while domestic customers would be required to conserve gas.

*Full gas cut-off by Russia 'likely': EU Commission chief*

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has warned that a full cut-off of Russian gas in response to continued EU sanctions on Moscow and Western material support for the Ukrainian government is a "likely scenario" this year. [Washington Post]

Current German winter gas stores are at 66 percent compared to the official EU goal for each member state to reach 90 percent for 2022. [New York Times]

However, current gas flows do not appear sufficient to reach this target. EU members agreed in Brussels to reduce current gas usage by 15 percent starting on July 26. [Council of the EU]

Natural gas prices have risen over 50 percent since the beginning of the Ukraine war, causing catastrophic business losses and severe consumer price increases. [Financial Times]

The German government bought a 30 percent stake in German utility Uniper to prevent bankruptcy and service operation interruptions caused by sudden war-induced gas price rises on July 22. [WSJ]

The rest of Europe is suffering from additional energy issues. The French government announced the nationalisation of the Paris Bourse-traded 16 percent share in utility Electricite de France that it does not already own. [WSJ]

This will completely nationalise the owner of the nation's 57 nuclear plants, supplying 70 percent of French energy. Freedom from stock market pressures will maintain the government's ability to absorb the large financial losses required to maintain a cap on electricity prices, which are soaring due to a large spike in summer demand.

In total, 31 reactors comprising nearly 40 percent of French generating capacity were taken offline during the greatest heatwave in European history due to

scheduled maintenance, making the country a net energy importer just when the EU could have benefited the most from previously reliable nuclear-powered French energy exports.

Italy is compensating for a decrease in Russian gas with an increase in direct imports of Algerian supplies, but this type of option is not available for most of Europe. Meanwhile, the UK government is providing the equivalent of EUR 18 billion to individual citizens to subsidise their energy bills. [Financial Times] [Financial Times]

*Energy price shocks*

Energy price shocks continue across Europe as the European benchmark gas futures price for one megawatt hour equivalent at the Title Transfer Facility (TTF) Virtual Trading Point, operated by Gasunie Transport Services (GTS), the Dutch natural gas transmission system operator, rose to nearly EUR 200 in the last week of July. [Trading Economics]

The current natural gas price is almost seven times higher than the average 2021 price of EUR 30, and reapproaching the March 8, 2022 high of nearly EUR 300 reached when Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak announced Moscow would consider completely shutting down the Nord Stream 1 pipeline in retaliation for German refusal to commission the Nord Stream 2 link. [Quantum Commodities Intelligence]

Opening Nord Stream 2 would have expanded alternative natural gas pipeline capacity to the point where gas shipments through Ukraine would no longer have been necessary to supply European contracts. That would have enabled Russia to shut down pipelines through Ukraine, providing more operational latitude for Moscow's war effort.

(rw/pk)

## ANALYSIS: Europe faces dire energy problems of its own making

*EU policy runs the risk of replacing short-term dependence on Russia with long-term dependence on China*

The prospect of rolling blackouts in Germany and throughout Europe caused by a possible Russian gas cut-off is changing the EU's plans to invest in green energy through its ambitious RePowerEU initiative.

Russian gas exports to Germany through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline have already decreased 80 percent since the war began. Now Germany, the European Union's largest economy, is preparing plans to enable rolling blackouts throughout the country should Russia choose to completely cut off gas supplies in response to progress in Ukraine's EU accession process or increased shipments of European weapons. [Bloomberg].

Germany also faces the prospect of a looming gas crisis this winter as its present decreased levels of Russian gas supply are insufficient to satisfy national household heating demand without additional and immediate conservation measures.

This means breaking contracts with energy providers to enable blackouts to occur in an orderly manner while prioritising households and critical facilities over factories and commercial enterprises. Germany has not been faced with an inability to provide reliable electric power in eight decades. Similar, perhaps even more dire prospects are faced in other parts of Europe.

Germany has doubled its generating capacity in the past 20 years and has the leading national solar energy production capacity in Europe. However, despite the new capacity, energy prices have also doubled, reflecting strong and growing demand for power. European electricity prices were approximately twice those of the US on average in 2021, before the war in Ukraine began. [Eurostat] [US EIA]

A phase-out of coal and nuclear power in Europe in favour of cleaner-burning natural gas from Russia has enabled the EU to temporarily both save money – compared to other natural gas options – and to meet climate goals, but at the cost of energy dependence on NATO's principal adversary. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has re-established energy security as the pre-eminent priority for European governments. In retrospect, the decision to replace coal and nuclear energy with Russian natural gas over the past 20 years appears to have been a strategic mistake.

Europe is in a dire short-term energy situation of its own making. Coal represents approximately 20 percent of the European energy supply compared to 30 percent in 2012. Germany amended its Atomic Energy Act to halt new investment and begin phasing out nuclear energy in 2011, following the earthquake and tidal wave-induced Fukushima disaster in Japan. Eleven of 17 nuclear reactors operating in 2011 were shut down in Germany without replacement over the ensuing decade. Nuclear energy provision fell from 25

percent of national capacity to 12 percent. [European Commission] [CNBC] [IAEA]

Decreasing North Sea and Dutch production of natural gas has meant the majority of replacement energy for voluntary reduction in coal and nuclear power is Russian natural gas. Natural gas represents some 25 percent of European energy needs, with Russia supplying over 40 percent of this amount, and there is no infrastructure in place to support short-term replacements. [CNBC]

*Short-term solutions*

EU member states have agreed to a 15 percent voluntary reduction in natural gas consumption from July 26. [European Council]

European energy stores are at almost 66 percent capacity with the goal being 90 percent by winter, when a Russian gas supply interruption would cause the most hardship for the European population. However, that goal appears unattainable given that gas flows from Russia, accounting for 55 percent of German natural gas, were reduced to 20 percent of capacity on July 25. [NYT]

The only immediate solution is prolonging the service life of coal and nuclear plants scheduled for retirement, and bringing retired plants back online, which contradicts current German government green energy policy goals. But Berlin has ruled out bringing nuclear power plants retired in the autumn of 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 back online, despite the imminent threat of full natural gas service interruption by Russia.

*Medium-term solutions*

Medium-term solutions are being implemented in the form of five mobile terminals, known as Floating Storage Regasification Units (FSRU) at Brunsbuttel**,** Wilhelmshaven, Stade and Lubmin on the north German coast to enable imports from North America, the Middle East and Africa to replace Russian gas. The terminals have been secured through long-term lease and are currently scheduled to begin operation by the end of 2022. Permanent onshore terminals are also planned in the same locations to begin operations by 2024. [Clean Energy Wire] [Reuters]

*Long-term solutions*

The implementation of large-scale intermittent power produced by solar and wind energy combined with a phase-out of nuclear energy and coal has made

Germany dependent upon largely Russian-sourced natural gas for baseload power. Baseload power is the power upon which a consistently functional grid depends when the sun is not shining and the wind is not blowing.  Long term, a dramatic expansion of long duration battery storage, possibly at the distribution level, whether that be for neighbourhoods or individual homes and factories, may be required to enable RePowerEU renewable energy projects to provide an effective alternative.

An additional challenge for RePowerEU strategy is the deterioration of the European industrial base. Currently most European solar companies largely offshore their solar panel manufacturing to China. Given the need not only for expansion, but replenishment and maintenance of solar infrastructure, current EU policy runs the risk of replacing short-term dependence on Russia with long-term dependence on China. Economic policies, including manufacturing grants combined with equivalent or superior VAT and income tax rebates to match Chinese tax rebates and tariff barriers may be required to attract new industry and address energy supply vulnerabilities.

(rw/pk)

## Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

### Belgium: Energy minister calls for one-off tax of 25 percent of energy companies' profits

Belgium's Federal Energy Minister Tienne Van der Straeten announced in the Parliamentary Commission on Energy, Environment and Climate that all gas and electricity companies and all petroleum traders will pay a one-off crisis contribution of 25 percent on excess profits. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews] [LeSoir]

The proposal would levy a tax equivalent to 25 percent of a company's increase in gross margin as shown in their VAT returns filed for the period from 1 January to 31 December this year. The tax will be calculated by taking the difference in the gross profit margin for the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022 compared with 2021's profit margin. The tax would be imposed only if the increase in a quarter is at least EUR 100,00 or 10 percent.

The details of the proposal are now being worked out with Federal Finance Minister Vincent Van Peteghem and will be discussed during the government's budget discussion in autumn.

(gt/gc)

## Belgium: Flemish government allocates EUR 100m to help long-term unemployed people

Belgium's Flemish region plans to spend EUR 100 million during the next two years to sustain employment rates in many struggling sectors of its economy.

The regional government wants to reach an employment rate of 80 percent, while to date it is at 75 percent for the working-age population between 18 and 65. The plan was announced on 1 July by Flemish Prime Minister Jan Jambon, who said that the government wanted to add 120,000 additional jobs. [VRTNews]

The plan was prepared with suggestions from unions and employers. The accord is supported by the employers' federations and has been signed by 6 of 7 social partners and 2 out of 3 trade unions: only the socialist trade union ABVV has withdrawn its support, since it didn't agree with the first draft nor with other improvements made by the Flemish Government. [VRTNews]

The plan includes 40 measures, divided into five main categories: activation of workers currently unemployed, training, making work more accessible for those for whom this is currently difficult,

interregional mobility to attract people from Brussels and Wallonia to work in Flanders and economic migration from foreign Countries.

(gt/gc)

## France: French military intelligence beset with problems

The French military intelligence agency, the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM,) has significant technical and human resources challenges despite a change in leadership in April. [Intelligence Online]

The DRM is struggling with a "high turnover" as the need for intelligence gathering rises due France's increased military presence globally, according to an article in Le Monde. A "multiplication of conflicts" with China actively pursuing its interests in the South China Sea, increasing anti-French sentiments in West Africa and China's new security agreement with the Solomon Islands near French New Caledonia are straining French intelligence services, the newspaper reported.

The directorate also faces an uphill battle with the increasing complexity of cyberwarfare and is ill-equipped to process big data. Its failure to predict Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has revealed the organisation's flaws and led to a sacking of its chief. [rfi] [Le Monde]

In March, DRM's head Eric Vidaud was removed from his position after the country failed to predict Russia's invasion of Ukraine. General Vidaud was accused of providing "inadequate briefings" while lacking expertise on "key issues" about war, Le Monde reported at the time, citing a military source. Experts claimed that he was used as a scapegoat and that his removal had more to do with structural changes within the organisation than his failure to predict the invasion.[Europe in Review Monthly, June 2022]

Despite these shortcomings, the head of the DRM, general Jacques Langlade de Montgros, remains optimistic.

In a recent interview with Le Figaro, he said that the agency was "not facing a crisis" and that it was "moving forward." He said he wanted "to increase operational synergy" between the DRM and the intelligence units of the French Armed Forces, develop a tech-savvy workforce and make Artificial Intelligence a "priority." [Le Figaro]

Created in 1992 during the first Gulf War, the DRM is tasked with collecting and centralising information for the French Armed Forces. Its role is similar to that of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) in the US and the UK's Defence Intelligence (DI). It reports directly to the French president, Emmanuel Macron, who is also the chief of staff of the French military. [Military History] [rfi]

(la/gc)

## France: Prime Minister faces fierce opposition in first speech to parliament

France's Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne faced stiff opposition when she laid out her main priorities in parliament on July 6, after French President Emmanuel Macron's 'Ensemble!' alliance fell short of an absolute majority by 44 seats in the June legislative elections. [Euronews] [APnews]

In what was described by observers as a "rowdy" session, Borne warned disruptive members of parliament from the left and right, who booed and shouted at her during her 90-minute speech, that "disorder and instability aren't options." [France24]

Borne's main message was one of compromise, dialogue and openness as she addressed the government's most pressing challenges, which include cutting taxes, boosting jobs, gender equality, peace in Europe and a green transition to become "independent from fossil fuels."

She spoke of the government's controversial pension reform plans that would push the retirement age from 62 to 65, saying that "we will have to work a little longer" and about plans to nationalise French electricity giant Electricite de France (EDF) in the name of "energy sovereignty". [Euronews]

"The war in Ukraine, at Europe's doors, reminds us how peace is fragile," Borne said.

As the head of a minority government, Borne will have to seek alliances from opposition parties to negotiate legislation on a bill-by-bill basis. But given the fierce opposition the prime minister faced in her first speech to parliament, it appears that MPs from both the right and left are not ready to listen to her. [Euronews] [Al-Jazeera]

(la/gc)

## Germany: Government leaves option open for extending nuclear power use amid energy crises

Germany has left open the option of extending operations at its three remaining nuclear power plants beyond the year's end, when they were set to be phased out, as Europe's largest economy finds itself amid an imminent energy crisis, a government spokesperson said on July 18. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

The country's energy providers will run a stress test of the electricity grid in the next few weeks to help determine whether they can guarantee power supplies this winter, the spokesperson said. The stress test will be conducted under far more difficult conditions than previous ones, including a spike in gas prices, energy supply outages and halt in French nuclear power production. [Reuters] [Spiegel]

The test results will be "the basis of any decisions" regarding a possible extension of nuclear power production in Germany, the spokesman said. [Zeit] [Politico Europe]

Of the governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP), only the FDP has supported extending operations at the three nuclear plants. Nuclear power provided 6 percent of Germany's energy production in the first quarter of 2022. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Labour minister wants to raise unemployment benefits

German Labour Minister Hubertus Heil wants to raise unemployment benefits as people struggle to make ends meet due to crippling inflation.

Existing benefits are "too far behind current price developments," Heil said. He plans to present a draft law this summer. [Tagesschau] [ZDF] [Spiegel]

Changing benefits would go against a coalition agreement between Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and FDP, which doesn't mention any changes to how unemployment benefits are calculated, Liberal

governing party FDP spokesperson Pascal Kober said. [ZDF]

Social organisations welcomed a possible increase in unemployment benefits, with many people lacking enough money for food and energy, Verena Bentele, the president of VdK, the largest social association in Germany with 2 million members, said. Unemployment benefits have to be adjusted to the current inflation rate "without delay," she continued. [Tagesschau] [

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Government bails out biggest gas importer with EUR 15 billion investment

Germany has bailed out the country's largest natural gas importer with an investment of EUR 15 billion after approving legislation that allows the government to bail out struggling energy firms. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [AP]

Uniper, Germany's biggest importer of Russian gas, was the first company to ask for government support as the company faces insolvency after Russian firm Gazprom reduced its gas supplies to Germany and other European countries by about 60 percent on June 15. [AP] [ZDF] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

The law allows the government to support energy firms in a more flexible way, including taking a sizable stake in a company if necessary. Other options include a sharing mechanism of higher gas prices among all consumers and the possibility for the government to mandate gas saving measures. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The new energy law offers the government "far-reaching possibilities to intervene in market mechanisms," said Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck. "This is about doing everything to maintain basic supplies next winter and keeping energy markets running as long as possible," Habeck said. [Tagesschau] [AP]

*Bailout finalised*

Uniper's bailout deal was finalised on July 22. The German government bought shares of Uniper for EUR 8 billion and therefore acquired 30 percent of the company. The government also provided EUR 7.7 billion of financial support and expanded Uniper's credit line from state bank KfW from EUR 2 billion to

EUR 9 billion. [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV] [Tagesschau]

As the new law allows Uniper to share higher gas prices among all consumers, a significant rise in costs is expected, starting from September 1 or October 1, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said. This would be necessary to keep Uniper afloat, as the company "is of paramount importance for the economic development of our country," he said. [ZDF] [Politico Europe][AP]

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Berlin to adopt further measures in preparation for gas shortages

The German government on July 21 introduced plans to strengthen energy security, including stricter gas saving and increasing storage targets, in preparation for the coming winter, as the ongoing war in Ukraine and Western sanctions on Russia result in uncertainty over gas deliveries and higher prices. [EURACTIV] [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [ZDF]

Germany has taken several measures to prepare for gas shortages in the last months. The country reopened its coal fired power plants for electricity production in June and announced steps to limit gas usage and refill storage. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

The new energy security package presented by Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck calls for stricter gas saving measures. An overall reduction of 20 percent of gas consumption across Germany is necessary to avoid gas shortages in winter, Habeck said. [EURACTIV]

The storage targets previously set in June will be increased by 5 percent. Gas storage facilities will now be required to be filled to 75 percent capacity by September 1, 85 percent by October 1 and 95 percent by November 1, compared to the earlier target of 90 percent by November 1. The gas reserves are currently filled to 65 percent capacity. [Politico Europe] [Europe Monthly July 2022] [Bloomberg]

Further measures include reducing overall gas consumption by the population and public buildings, for example by no longer heating unused office spaces, storage spaces or public swimming pools. Private households are also advised to cut back on gas consumption as much as possible. [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Zeit]

Gas deliveries from Russia to Germany through the Nord Stream pipeline are currently at 40 percent capacity, after Russia's Gazprom restarted its gas flow following a pause due to maintenance on the pipeline. [Reuters] [ZDF] [Zeit]

According to Habeck, the delivery rate of 40 percent was "clearly political" as there is "nothing to prevent" Nord Stream from returning to full capacity. It is a confirmation that supplies are unreliable, he said. [Politico Europe]

Germany still relies on Russian gas imports for 35 percent of its energy consumption and will most likely need until 2024 to completely stop relying on Russian gas. [Bloomberg]

*Gas shortages to slow German economy*

Uncertain gas supply and high prices are also expected to impact the German economy, with several reports projecting a considerable slowing of economic growth in the country and some pointing to a recession. [ZDF] [EURACTIV]

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a 1.2 percent growth for the German economy in 2022 and a further decline in 2023, with a 0.8 percent economic growth. [EURACTIV]

Studies by Deutsche Bank and German economic research institute, ifo, predict a recession in 2023. "High energy prices and the threat of gas scarcity are a burden on growth," ifo Institute president Clemens Fuest said. [EURACTIV] [DW] [Süddeutsche]

The Business Climate Index, a survey by the ifo Institute that measures businesses' confidence in the economic climate based on 9,000 responses from managers across industry sectors, fell in all evaluated industries and reached its lowest value since June 2020. [DW][Bloomberg] [ifo]

According to a survey by the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry, 15.6 percent of all industrial companies will be forced to considerably reduce production or even give up on production sites due to higher energy prices.

The same survey showed that half of all industrial companies have not covered their gas supply for 2022. A third of the companies still have to buy 30 percent of their annual gas demand. [FAZ]

Considering the current economic outlook, the IMF criticised Germany's intention to comply with its

constitutional restriction on debt in 2023, after the government suspended the restrictions for the third consecutive year in 2022. The tight debt rules should be suspended for another year, the IMF report states. [EURACTIV] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Government plans to make changing gender preference easier

The German government proposed a planned law on June 30 that would make it easier for transgender persons to legally change their gender and name. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The new law would replace the current "transsexual law" from 1980, which the Minister for Family Affairs Lisa Paus called "degrading" for affected people. It requires transgender persons to provide two psychiatric expert reports in court in order to have their name and gender changed on documents. [Tagesschau] [DW]

Under the planned law, adults can declare a change of their name and gender at their local registry office without any medical or psychiatric reports. Children over 14 years would also be allowed to change their gender with approval from their parents. [DW] [Süddeutsche]

The governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) promised to abolish the current "transsexual law" after the election in 2021. According to Justice Minister Marco Buschmann the government is expected to approve the proposed law before the end of the year. [Tagesschau]

With the new law, Germany would join European countries Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland as countries that allow changing the legal gender status through self-declaration. [DW]

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Interior Minister plans to boost cyber security

Germany's Interior Minister Nancy Faeser presented on July 12 a strategy to boost the country's cyber security, as the government moves to protect strategic

infrastructure in response to threats that may emerge from the Russian war in Ukraine.

Faeser wants more competence in cyber security at a national level. Currently, the federal states are responsible for their own cyber security and responses to attacks vary as each state has different capabilities to act. To realise Faeser's new cyber security strategy, a change in the constitution would be required. [Tagesschau] [Süddeutsche] [Zeit]

According to Faeser's plan, the Federal Cyber Security Authority (BSI) would be strengthened considerably to protect the government's ministries and critical infrastructure. The plan is for the BSI to become the central office for all cyber security issues. [Tagesschau] [Spiegel]

The Russian attack on Ukraine requires a "strategic realignment" and "a considerable investment in cyber security," Faeser said. Other institutions such as the German Domestic Intelligence Service, the Federal Police and the Federal Criminal Police Office should also receive more resources to act in cases of cyber attacks. [Tagesschau] [Zeit]

A central responsible institution is sensible and necessary, said Linus Neumann of the Chaos Computer Club, Europe's largest association of hackers with 7,700 registered members. Faeser's strategy lacks important details, he said. [Tagesschau]

According to Konstantin Kuhle of the liberal governing party FDP, the specific tasks of the BSI had to be defined more clearly. Alexander Throm of the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) said the strategy "leaves critical questions unanswered," including the authority of each institution. [Süddeutsche]

(mb/gc)

## Germany: Government opens investigation into Afghanistan military mission

The German government opened a parliamentary investigation on July 8 into Germany's military mission in Afghanistan, specifically focused on the Bundeswehr's withdrawal from the country in 2021. [Tagesschau] [DW] [Spiegel]

The request for an investigation was made by the governing parties Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and

Liberals (FDP), as well as the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The aim of the investigation is to investigate Germany's military withdrawal and its evacuation mission. [Tagesschau]

The focus will be on analysing documents and interviewing witnesses in the coming months. The goal is not to look for someone to blame, but to "do everything so the obvious mistakes will not be repeated in the future," said the head of the committee of inquiry, Ralf Stegner. [Spiegel] [Tagesschau]

The German military withdrew from Afghanistan in June 2021 after 20 years of deployment. In August 2021, the German military was involved in an international evacuation mission after the Taliban seized power. [Tagesschau]

According to Stegner, the central question of the inquiry is how so many observers could "get so much so wrong" in terms of assessing the situation leading to the Taliban seizing power in Afghanistan and the "panic-driven" withdrawal from the country. [DW]

The parliamentary investigation was criticised by opposition parties Afd (far-right) and Die Linke (left). The parties say the focus on the withdrawal is a "distraction" and the entire 20-year military mission should be investigated, as they doubt the mission was useful. [DW] [Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

## Ireland: Government increases budget package to combat inflation

Ireland has increased its 2023 budget to help combat rising inflation with a series of one-off measures to tackle the cost-of-living crisis. [Reuters] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The government announced a budget of EUR 6.7 billion, up from EUR 4.5 billion previously, with EUR 1.05 billion earmarked for income tax cuts. To increase the budget, the government has to temporarily suspend a rule that limits increases in spending to 5 percent a year. [RTÉ] [Reuters] [RTÉ]

Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe said he was confident the government would reinstate the expenditure rule, but that inflation would first have to return to about 2-3 percent. Inflation touched an

almost 40-year high of 9.6 percent in June, Eurostat said last month. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Reuters]

The coalition will decide on the 2023 budget on September 27. The date has been advanced by two weeks as the government tries to manage soaring prices. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

## Ireland: Independent MPs demand cap on number of Ukrainian refugees

Two independent MPs demanded a limit to the number of Ukrainian refugees accepted into Ireland. They expressed concern over the strain more refugees could have on health services, housing, education and the tourist sector.

Kerry Kerry Teachta Dala (TD) Danny Healy-Rae and Cork South-West TD Michael Collins said the open-door policy on immigration and refusal to debate the issue was "reckless." Many refugees currently stay in commercial accommodation which is then no longer available for tourists. Tourism is a key industry in the country's southwest, the MPs said. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

## Ireland: Parliament's justice committee halts emergency legislation on data retention

The Irish parliament's justice committee halted emergency legislation on data retention intended to redress breaches of European law due to procedural and content-related concerns.

The committee said that it was not given enough time to properly revise the legislation. Additionally, a police spokesperson told the committee that the planned amendment bill could seriously compromise the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate crimes that don't involve national security. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

Under the proposed legislation, police and judges would only be able to retain mobile data if a case involved national security**.** Under the current law, mobile service providers were required to retain data on all customers for two years, which could then be

accessed by the police. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

The European Court of Justice ruled this practice to be incompatible with EU law in April this year. [RTÉ] [The Irish Independent] [Irish Examiner]

(jv/gc)

## Ireland: Government tightens migration policies after refugee accommodation runs out of capacity

The Irish government has restricted the ability of non-Ukrainian refugees to enter Ireland without a visa if they have already received protection in other European countries, a decision that was made a few days after the last government facility for refugees ran out of capacity.

A Council of Europe agreement grants visa-free access to Ireland for people that have already received protection in other countries participating in the act. It is meant to enable migrants to visit their families.

Ireland has legally opted out of the agreement. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission criticised the decision. It said that this step could "widen the gap" in a "two-tier system" for refugees. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [Irish Examiner]

New arrivals to the country are currently being housed in tents at a military camp after they had to spend two days at Dublin airport. The last government facility for housing refugees reached its full capacity on July 13. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

At the same time, the deportation of detained asylum seekers has resumed. It had been suspended during the pandemic due to travel restrictions. Hundreds of asylum seekers in Ireland face deportation now. [RTÉ] [Irish Independent] [Irish Examiner]

Although voters want Ireland to fulfil its international obligations, a majority favours a cap on the number of Ukrainians admitted, according to an Irish Times poll. They also don't want Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees to be treated differently. [The Irish Times]

The government has made it clear that there would be no limit to the number of Ukrainian refugees accepted into the country. In response to the war in Ukraine, the EU prohibits restrictions on the number of Ukrainian refugees that can enter a country. [The Irish Times]

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, around 43,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Ireland. Another 34,000 could arrive before the end of the year. The number of non-Ukrainian asylum seekers coming to Ireland has almost tripled compared to pre-pandemic figures, the UNHCR said. Seven thousand have already entered the country in 2022. [The Irish Times] [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

## Ireland: UN body criticises Irish abortion laws

Ireand's abortion laws disadvantage women living in poverty or experiencing abuse, the United Nations human rights committee said, as those women cannot adhere to waiting periods or attend required medical check-ups.

The body examined Ireland's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Further criticism included the situation of Travellers – an ethnic minority in Ireland – and resolving past situations for people that experienced abuse in mother and baby homes. [The Irish Times]

Lawmakers legalised abortion in the Health Act of 2018, allowing abortion for any reason up to the end of the first trimester. The law provides exceptions beyond 12 weeks in cases of foetal abnormalities considered fatal after birth or a potential risk to a mother's health. [New York Times]

A 1983 constitutional amendment banned nearly all abortion, reflecting the Roman Catholic Church's deep influence in the country. That influence had waned by 2018, when a referendum to end the ban was approved by 66 percent of voters.[New York Times]

(jv/gv)

## Ireland: Defence spending will increase to EUR 1.9 billion by 2028

The Irish cabinet officially approved plans on July 12 to increase military spending to EUR 1.9 billion by 2028. The initially planned EUR 1.5 billion increase was modified to factor in inflation. [BBC] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The defence spending aims to effectively increase the strength of the country's permanent defence forces by 3,000 people. Its current number is 8,500. A priority will be military radar equipment. [BBC] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The move followed a report by the Defence Commission from February that noted that Ireland was currently incapable of defending itself against a military attack and recommended three levels of measures that could be taken to upgrade its military capabilities. The current plan closely follows level two of these measures. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

(jv)

## Ireland: Government comfortably wins confidence motion

The Irish government coalition won a vote of confidence on July 13 with 85 MPs in favour of the motion against 66 opposing it after Sinn Fein's planned to table a no confidence motion.

Prime Minister Micheal Martin requested the vote to counter Sinn Fein, an Irish republican and democratic socialist political party active throughout both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The current coalition government consists of the conservative parties Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and the Green Party. [BBC] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

Prior to the vote, the coalition lost its parliamentary majority after a Fine Gael MP resigned as the party whip. [BBC] [Reuters]

Although it had already been clear that the government would win the motion, Sinn Fein used it as an opportunity to criticise the coalition's policies on health, housing and the current cost-of-living crisis. [BBC] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald told the Irish Parliament that change was needed more than ever, RTE reported. She said the government was "out of touch, clearly out of ideas and now out of time" and said the government was "coming apart at the seams" and called on it to "go now." [BBC]

(jv/gc)

### United Kingdom: Prime Minister Johnson resigns amid scandals and party revolt

Boris Johnson was forced to step down as prime minister on July 7 following a series of scandals which prompted nearly 60 members of his party to resign within less than 48 hours. [CNN]

In his resignation speech outside 10 Downing Street, Johnson said that "it is clearly the will of the parliamentary Conservative party that there should be a new leader of that party and so a new Prime Minister." [CNBC]

Despite a growing number of Conservative MPs urging him to leave office with immediate effect, Johnson pledged to remain in his position until a successor is chosen, in a sign he wants to cling on to power for as long as he can. [BBC]

New ministers were swiftly appointed to fill the vacancies prompted by the torrent of resignations of MPs that same week.

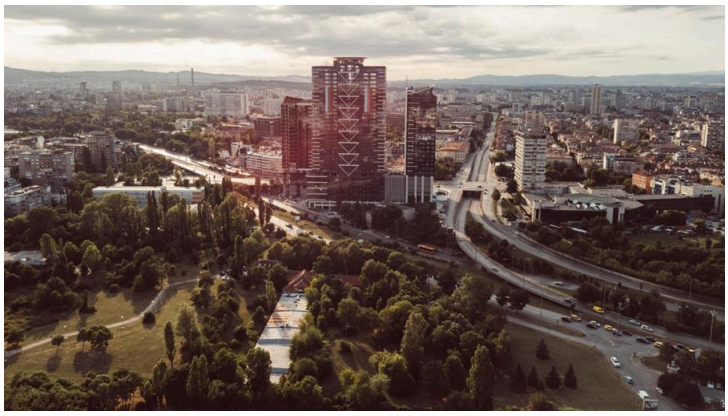
Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party, said of Johnson's resignation that "it was good news for the country," before adding that he "was unfit for office. He has been responsible for lies, scandal and fraud on an industrial scale." [CNN]

An intense leadership contest began immediately after Johnson resigned, with eleven members of parliament initially vying for the spot. After five rounds of voting by Tory members of parliament, two finalists, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and former Finance Minister Rishi Sunak, are left in the race to be UK's next prime minister. [Reuters]

Tory party members will have a month to vote once they receive the postal ballots which are due to arrive between August 1 and 5. The vote closes on September 2 and Britain's next prime minister will be announced on September 5. [The Guardian]

(la/gc)

## Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



## Armenia: Prime Minister says country must continue with parliamentary system

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on July 5 that the country needs to continue with its parliamentary system to provide an effective mechanism for crisis management and to involve the people of Armenia in the political debate.

Pashinyan said that a strong legal system, an independent judicial system and mechanisms for legality should become reliable guarantees for the protection of human dignity, without limiting and damaging democratic values. Pashinyan pointed out that a Specialised Commission for Constitutional Reforms was formed and a draft concept of constitutional reforms should be presented by the end of the year. [Panarmenian]

(fb/gc)

## Belarus: Government to deepen relations with China amid deteriorating relations with the West

Belarusian First Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik said on July 6 that Belarus has improved bilateral ties with China as a counterbalance to Western sanctions in response to its support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Belta.by]

Belarus has also tried to improve ties with countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia, Aleinik said, adding trade with China increased in the first quarter of 2022 by 50 percent compared to last year. [Belta.by]

Belarus launched the National Pavillion online store on Chinese platforms JingDong and Douyin on July 6. Aleinik said that online commerce has become one of

the key drivers of China-Belarusian relations. [Xinhua] [China Daily] [Belarus]

Belarus also officially applied for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Secretary General Zhang Ming said on July 15. [TASS] [Belta.by]

Belarus has had observer status since 2015, allowing it to participate in meetings of the Heads of Government Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ministerial meetings on foreign trade. It does not have the right to decide on the proposed resolutions. [Belta.by] [Inform.kz]

China has announced that it would hold bilateral talks with Belarus in September. [Euroradio] [Interfax]

(mo/gc)

## Belarus: Government to launch 14 import substitution projects with Russia

Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk said on July 18 that Belarus and Russia have agreed to 14 joint projects that will substitute goods and services after increased Western sanctions. [Belta.by]

Belarus will provide components that Russia can no longer import, with the latter providing the necessary funding for them, Overchuk said. Relevant areas pertain to manufacturing, logging engineering, agricultural engineering, and car production, among others. [Belta.by]

(mo/gc)

## Belarus: Lukashenko says Belarusians are prepared for hybrid warfare

President Aleksandr Lukashenko said at a ceremony on July 12 for graduates of military schools that Belarus has been confronted by hybrid warfare, hinting towards alleged NATO interference in its domestic affairs. [Belta.by]

Lukashenko said national security had been affected, as well as the economy and media. He reiterated that hybrid warfare is naturally offensive, and that Belarus is prepared to cope with the perceived threat. [Belta.by]

(mo/gc)

## Belarus: Belarusian OSCE delegation denies findings on Ryanair incident

Denis Dovgalev, counsellor of the Belarusian delegation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, said on July 28 that he strongly denied the findings of the International Civil Aviation Organization over the Ryanair flight FR4978 from Athens to Vilnius. [Austrian Wings] [Belta.by]

Dovgalev said the report was based on incomplete information, noting the interrogations of the pilots who presumably made the decision to land in Minsk. The flight was forced to land in Minsk by Belarusian authorities due to an alleged bomb threat.

He added that Belarus provided the International Civil Aviation Organization with all necessary information, yet the working group had not taken the testimony into consideration. According to Dovgalev, the EU and the US would have arranged a pre-made verdict over Belarus' potential involvement. [Belta.by]

Dovgalev said that the findings to some degree were based on the statements of an anonymous key witness that Belarusian authorities were unable to identify. Given the lack of accuracy and transparency, he accused Poland and the US of deception, forgery and the manipulation of evidence. [Belta.by]

Dovgalev claimed that the aircraft was not forced to land by Belarus, but instead the flight commander made the decision to land in Minsk. [Belta.by]

A Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius was diverted to Minsk over a bomb threat on May 23, 2021. Roman Protasevic, a prominent politician and activist of the Belarusian opposition who was on board, was arrested. The US and the EU – and most vocally, Poland and Lithuania – condemned the Belarusian measures. [Tagesspiegel]

(mo/gc)

## Belarus: Banks to be given access to Russia's public procurement system

The Russian government has approved on July 14 that Belarusian banks are allowed access to the Russian public procurement system. [Belta.by]

According to the document, which was signed by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Belarusian banks can now issue independent guarantees to participants of the Belarusian public procurement system. This initiative is designed to help Belarusian suppliers to better contribute to the economic integration of Belarus and Russia. [Belta.by]

The project will be running until 2023 and is operated in two phases. In the first phase, Belarusian banks will receive relevant documents for their operations in Russia, including the issuance of individual insurance account numbers, qualification certificates, taxpayer identification numbers, and registration in the system. The second phase encompasses the actual interactions of Belarusian banks in public procurement contracts. [Belta.by]

The Russian government underlined that this project will be materialised as a part of 28 Union State programmes designed to facilitate economic integration. [Belta.by]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: Parliament ratifies Swedish and Finnish NATO membership bids

The Estonian parliament ratified the Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden to NATO after an extraordinary meeting was held on July 6 as the Baltic country pushes for stronger security in the region. [ERR] [ERR] [USNI]

With 82 members of parliament present, 79 voted in favour of the motion, while three abstained. [ERR]

Estonia's Minister of Defence Kalle Laanet said the ratification would help Sweden and Finland become full members by 2023 and that the security cooperation would further increase. Marko Mihkelson, chairman of the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the Estonian parliament, welcomed the decision. [ERR]

NATO ambassadors met in Brussels on July 5 to sign the Accession Protocols for Finland and Sweden, opening the ratification process for each NATO member state. [Euractiv] [ERR]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: New government takes office

Estonia's new government composed of the Reform Party representing Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the Social Democrats as well as the conservative party Isamaa was sworn in on July 18. [ERR] [DW] [ALDE]

The new coalition replaced the minority government headed by Prime Minister Kallas and her Reform Party after the previous coalition government collapsed over divergent views on social policies pertaining to family benefits. The new coalition government will be in office for at least eight months until the next parliamentary elections are held in March 2023. [ERR]

President Alar Karis swore in the new government, calling on the ministers and Prime Minister Kallas to be a "crisis-solving government" in view of various crises affecting Estonia, including the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, rising energy prices, the influx of refugees, and climate change among others. [ERR] [DW]

The parties proposed on July 14 their respective candidates for a new coalition government, ending weeks of political disagreements on issues ranging from national child care to education. [ERR]

The parties nominated fifteen ministers, seven of whom are women and four of whom will continue their positions from the previous government. Each party will represent five ministries. [ERR]

*Cabinet Portfolio*

The Reform Party nominated Kaja Kallas for prime minister, Keit Pentus-Rosimannus for finance minister, Hanko Pevkur as defence minister, Signe Riisalo as social protection minister and Urmas Kruuse as rural affairs minister. [ERR]

Isamaa nominated Urmas Reinsalu as foreign affairs minister, Tonis Lukas as education and research minister, Riina Solman as public administration minister, Kristjan Järvan as entrepreneurship and IT minister and Lea Danilson-Jarg as justice minister.

The Social Democrats appointed Lauri Laanemets as interior minister, Piret Hartman as culture minister, Peep Reterson as health and labour minister, Riina Sikkut as economic affairs and infrastructure minister and Madis Kallas as environment minister.

After weeks of political deadlock over disagreements within the previous coalition government, Prime Minister Kallas was able to constitute a new coalition with Isamaa and the Social Democrats. [Euronews]

*Lock of Progress*

Karis said on July 1 that he was becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of progress in forming a national coalition government after four weeks of negotiations between the three parties. [ERR]

They were unable to resolve their differences over national childcare benefits and a transition to Estonian-language education. Isamaa and the Social Democrats did not need to speed up coalition talks because they had wanted to signal to their electorate that they were firmly behind them, according to Tonis Saarts, an Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at Tallinn University.

The Reform Party has no need to accelerate the negotiations, as it could function as a minority government during a couple of weeks, according Saarts.[ERR]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: Russia not strong enough to block Suwalki Corridor, general says

Estonian Major General Veiko-Vello Palm said on July 5 that Russia would be unable to launch a military campaign to block the Suwalki Corridor, a 100-kilometre land strip across the Polish-Lithuanian border that stretches to the border with Kaliningrad in the west and Belarus in the east.

Major General Palm said that Russia simply lacked the capabilities to cut the three Baltic states from the corridor, which is viewed by some military analysts as "NATO's Achilles Heel." He added that many assessments neglect to recognise NATO's stronghold across the Baltics, adding that the military organisation has mobilised its military capabilities in the region. [ERR][BNN]

His assessment came after Lithuania blocked the transit of Russian goods through Kaliningrad, a Russian semi-exclave sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. Some experts warned that Russian President Vladimir Putin may intervene to open up the trade route, which would then trigger a military confrontation with NATO. [BNN] [BNN] [Euractiv]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: Reporters Without Borders ranks Estonia fourth in press freedoms globally

Estonia is ranked fourth in terms of press freedoms globally, its highest ranking to date, according to the 2021 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. [ERR]

Since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonia's information and press sectors have significantly improved. Anvar Samost, head of news for Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR), said that the country's media landscape is driven by diversity and competition combined with free access. [ERR]

While Reporters Without Borders nevertheless emphasised concerns about media ownership with the market dominated by Ekspress Grupp and Postimees Grupp, Samost underlined that Estonia's demographic situation of barely 1.3 million people does illustrate a satisfactory picture with three to four publishers competing for customers. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: Minister of Education resigns over criminal proceedings

Estonia's Minister of Education Liina Kersna announced her resignation on June 30 after the Office of the Prosecutor General opened criminal proceedings against her. [The Baltic Times]

Criminal proceedings were launched to investigate Kersna's involvement in acquiring rapid coronavirus tests for schools in October 2021, giving one company a disproportionate advantage. [The Baltic Times] [ERR] [The Baltic Times]

Previously, a vote of no-confidence was directed against her on June 14, which was eventually unsuccessful. [ERR] [The Baltic Times]

On July 1, Kersna handed in her resignation to Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who nevertheless refused to forward Kersna's request to the president's office until a new coalition government was formed. Kallas said that until then, Kersna would perform her duties as the Minister of Education and Research. [Valitsus]

(mo/gc)

## Estonia: EU infringement cases mounting against Baltic state

Infringement proceedings launched by the EU against Estonia have increased even though the Baltic country is still one of the most compliant and diligent EU members, according to a report published by Estonian Public Broadcasting on July 18. [ERR]

By the end of 2021, 49 infringement cases were reported, compared with 39 in 2020, 30 in 2019 and 27 in 2018. [ERR] [European Commission]

The EU launches infringement cases against members who have delayed the implementation of EU directives. [ERR] [European Commission]

While Estonia's numbers have increased, it simultaneously is ranked third among those EU members incurring the fewest infringement proceedings after Denmark at 31 and Finland at 48 in 2021. [ERR] [European Commission]

(mo/gc)

## Georgia: Anger mounts as Georgians question government's commitment to EU aspirations

Georgians held protests in July after the Caucasian nation failed to win EU candidate status alongside Moldova and Ukraine, with thousands of protesters calling for the government in Tbilisi to resign

The ruling Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, has failed to show its commitment to these European aspirations, pushing many to wonder whether Georgian Dream is appeasing Russia to the detriment of Georgia's European future.

The protesters expressed concern that former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is widely believed to be the puppeteer behind the ruling party he founded, doesn't want intrusive EU reforms to rock the boat with the Kremlin. Ivanishvili, whose assets represent more than 20 percent of Georgia's entire economic output, made billions in Russia before becoming Georgian prime minister. [Politico]

During a meeting on July 7, Georgian Dream presented a plan to create working groups to fulfil the 12 conditions defined by the European Union. The first

working groups are going to focus on a law to reduce oligarchies and polarisation. [Europe Commission]

(fb/gc)

## Latvia: Government to reintroduce compulsory military service

Latvian Defence Minister Artis Pabriks announced on July 5 that Latvia is set to reintroduce compulsory military service for young men aged 18-27. [Politico] [Euronews] [Guardian]

Recognising the impact of the war in Ukraine, Pabriks said that if more Latvians received military training, they would be able to deter Russia from attacking smaller neighbouring countries. He added that the motion for compulsory military service will be discussed in the fall of 2022 and implemented in early 2023. [Politico] [Guardian]

As of July 2022, Latvia has 7,000 active soldiers in addition to 1,500 NATO soldiers deployed on Latvian soil. Pabriks underlined that 30,000 to 40,000 Latvian citizens should receive military training. After joining NATO in 2004, Latvia effectively abandoned compulsory military service. [Politico] [Euronews]

(mo/gc)

## Latvia: Interior Ministry urges government to extend state of emergency at the Latvian-Belarusian border

The Latvian Ministry of Interior called on the government on July 17 to extend the state of emergency along its border with Belarus until November 10. [LSM]

The ministry reported that since August 10, 2021, 6,777 persons crossed the Latvian-Belarusian border illegally. Although the numbers have decreased, cases are still reported in the border region as well as in Lithuania and Poland which are adjacent to Belarus as well, coercing the authorities to continue their monitoring. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

## Latvia: Survey shows 30 percent of Latvians believe Russia will  invade of Baltic states

More than 30 percent of Latvian citizens believe that the next target of Russia's military aggression will be the Baltic states, according to a survey conducted by SKDS research centre in late April and reported by magazine lr on July 14. [LSM] [ERR]

Over 2,000 citizens participated in the survey, which included ethnic Latvians and Latvian citizens of the Russian-speaking minority.

The survey illustrated the divide between Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority. While 45 percent of Latvians would go to war and show strong support of the Latvian army, only 12 percent of the Russian speaking minority responded similarly. [LSM]

Moreover, approximately 68 percent of Latvian respondents were in favour of closer cooperation with the West, whereas most Russian respondents (54 percent) opted for closer relations with both the West and Russia. [LSM] [ERR] [BNN]

(mo/gc)

## Latvia: Government suspends agreement with Russia on facilitated travel to Latvia for Russian citizens

Latvia decided on July 14 that it would suspend an agreement with Russia on August 1 that facilitated travel for Russian citizens residing along the border. [LSM]

The Latvian government made the decision in response to Russia's aggressive foreign policy and its war in Ukraine, which the Baltic country strongly condemned. [LSM]

Along with the suspension of the agreement, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged its citizens to avoid travelling to Russia, specifically those residing along the border. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: Bayraktar drone to be delivered to Ukraine

Lithuanian Minister of Defence Arvydas Anusauskas said on July 4 that the Bayraktar drone that was donated by the Turkish manufacturer Baykar to be deployed in Ukraine. [LRT]

The Bayraktar drone was presented at the Siauliai Air Base on July 6 before being transported to Ukraine, Anusauskas added. [LRT] [Reuters] [Hurriyet]

By the end of May 2022, Lithuanian people raised over EUR 5 million in a crowd-funding campaign to acquire the Bayraktar drone for Ukraine. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: Government reverses transit restrictions to Kaliningrad after European Commission consent

Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said on July 14 that Lithuania would suspend its transit restrictions to Kaliningrad after the European Commission issued new guidelines, allowing Russia to transport goods for civilian purposes, which are subject to the sanctions list, by rail to Kaliningrad. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [LRT]

The decision had caused discontent among Lithuanian politicians.

Petras Austrevicius, a member of the European Parliament and the Lithuanian opposition party Liberal Movement, and his fellow Liberal Movement colleague Raimundas Lopata said that such a move would soften the EU sanctions regime, instead advocating even harsher sanctions against Russia. They called on the Lithuanian government not to make concessions that would strengthen Russia's position. [LRT] [Delfi]

Lithuania launched the suspension of Russian rail transits in June if goods that are sanctioned by the EU were carried, citing EU regulations with which Vilnius sought to comply and prompting harsh responses from Moscow. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [LRT] [Euractiv]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: Kaunas city mayor's company received Russian subsidies, journalism centre says

The Viciunai Group company based in Kaliningrad and owned by Visvaldas Matijosaitis, the mayor of Kaunas, the second-largest city in Lithuania, received subsidies from the Russian government last year, investigative journalism centre Siena reported on July 5. [LRT]

According to a contract which the Viciunai Group signed with the Russian Ministry of Economy in January 2021, Russia provided EUR 20 million. Visvaldas Matijosaitis via his company also maintained active relations with VTB Bank and Alfa Bank, both of which are sanctioned by the EU, as well as Gazprombank which is affiliated with gas giant Gazprom, Siena reported. [LRT]

Although Viciunai Group announced that it would cease its business operations across Russia, most notably in Kaliningrad, there are no plans to return the subsidies to Russia in the wake of the war in Ukraine. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: First German brigade to be deployed to Lithuania by September

Lithuania's Chief of Defence Valdemaras Rupsys said on July 28 that a German brigade will be deployed by September. [LRT]

Rupsys added that Lithuania is still assessing where to station the brigade, with Rukla or locations close to Lithuania's capital Vilnius being the most likely choices. [LRT]

Pursuant to a NATO agreement reached in June, a German brigade will be deployed to Lithuania. Since 2017, a German-led multinational NATO battalion has already been stationed in Lithuania, whereupon NATO leaders agreed to upgrade it to brigade level. [LRT] [Delfi]

For the time being, most soldiers of the brigade will be temporarily deployed to Germany until Lithuania has provided necessary infrastructure. Lithuanian officials estimate that they will complete the development of relevant infrastructure by 2025. [LRT] [Delfi]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: Foreign Ministry receives Russian protest note over Kaliningrad

## transit services

Lithuania's Foreign Ministry received a protest note from Russia's acting Charge d'Affaires to Lithuania Sergei Ryabkov on July 28 condemning Lithuania's new policy of paying for Russian freight transports to Kaliningrad. [LRT]

According to Ryabkov, Russian suppliers using the Lithuanian Railways must pay for the transportation through Lithuanian bank Siauliu Bankas, which will suspend transactions with Russia from September 1, 2022 onwards. [LRT]

While Valerija Kiguoliene, spokeswoman for the Association of Lithuanian Banks, confirmed that several Lithuanian banks stopped operations with Russia and Belarus, she said that exceptions can be made in specific cases. These would involve payments for humanitarian purposes or in specific cases to ensure state functions. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

## Lithuania: Russian and Belarusian businessmen increase profits in Lithuania despite sanctions

Russian and Belarusian businessmen have accumulated remarkable profits while doing business in Lithuania, according to a report of the LRT Investigation Team which was published on July 26. [LRT]

The available data encompasses the 22 largest companies using Russian and/or Belarusian capital generated over EUR 1.2 billion in Lithuania. The businessmen involve both non-sanctioned and, more strikingly, sanctioned individuals, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and prominent businessman Andrey Melnichenko, who controls a fertiliser plant in Kedainiai. [LRT]

The report also finds that some Russian and Belarusian businesses, such as BMZ Baltija, Santa Bremor and PhosAgro Baltic, are engaged in selling products from Russia and Belarus via Lithuania to the West. [LRT]

Alexander Moshensky, an oligarch with close ties to Lukashenko and owner of Santa Bremor, is also involved in such illegal practices. Lithuania was seeking to add him to the EU sanctions list, yet Hungary was opposed to this move, as Moshensky has close

relations with Syarhey Niadbaylov who serves as a Hungarian honorary consul. [LRT]

Some companies were able to obtain European support for business development and public procurement contracts in Lithuania before Russia launched the war in Ukraine. According to the LRT report, the EU has been providing EUR 6.5 million to Russian and Belarusian companies, among which Melnichenko's company Lifosa was the largest benefactor. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Parliament accepted bill on establishing fund to reduce energy vulnerability

The Moldovan parliament accepted a bill on July 28 to establish a fund to reduce energy vulnerability for those citizens who are exposed to energy shortages and in need of electric energy and natural gas. [Moldpres]

The fund will provide a monthly compensation for those struggling to pay for energy and an information system to determine parameters of energy vulnerability of consumers and how to administer a distribution mechanism of subsidies. [Moldpres]

The state budget and European and international donors will finance the measures. The respective law on establishing the fund to reduce energy vulnerability will enter into force on September 1. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Government to implement bill on cybersecurity

The Moldovan government decided on July 22 to implement a new bill on cybersecurity designed to improve the security standards in the state sector and basic services. The bill on cybersecurity was implemented with the support of the Estonian e-Governance Academy and the European Commission in the following 18 months. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Parliament extends term of commission controlling inflation and monetary policy

The Moldovan parliament decided on July 1 to extend the term of the Control Commission of Inflation and Monetary Policy from 30 to 60 days. [moldpres]

According to Adriana Balutal, member of the Party of Action and Solidarity which constitutes the majority government of Moldova, said that the extension was necessary to process information and materials of the control commission. [moldpres]

The control commission of inflation and monetary policies was created upon recommendation of the Supreme Security Council on May 27 to cope with on-going inflation. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Parliamentary commission ratified EUR 300m credit from the EBRD

Moldova's parliamentary commission on economics, budgeting and finance ratified that Moldova would receive a credit of EUR 300 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development for implementing the bill "reliability of gas supplies." [moldpres]

While Moldova and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development already signed an agreement on June 23, parliamentary consensus was required. Moldova would be enabled to diversify its sources of natural gas and minimise the risks of energy shortages. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: President Sandu went to Lithuania for working visit

Moldovan President Maia Sandu met with her Lithuanian counterpart Gitanas Nauseda on July 6 during her working visit to Lithuania. [moldpres]

The topics of mutual interest included the security, political and economic conditions of both countries, Russia's war in Ukraine and the global energy crisis.

Seeking Moldova's energy independence, President Sandu acknowledged Lithuania's recent experiences in cutting ties with Russia and further developing alternative energy supplies. She also appreciated Lithuania's support for Moldova's EU membership bid. [The Baltic Times] [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Government to implement recommendations of European Commission by the end of July

Moldovan President Maia Sandu announced on July 13 that the National Commission on European Integration elaborated an action plan to implement the recommendations of the European Commission by the end of July. [moldpres]

The National Commission on European Integration had held a session, in which President Sandu participated, to define relevant measures. The commission considered judicial reforms, combating corruption, the refinement of electoral legislation, the return of embezzled funds, the reform of state institutes, the conditions of legal capacities of the central state administration, and the reduction of oligarchic influences. [moldpres]

President Sandu acknowledged that progress is dependent on whether reforms can be implemented effectively.

The National Commission on European Integration was established in April and holds regular meetings to ensure Moldova's approximation to EU standards, which has been President Sandu and Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita's key priority. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Moldova: Vice Prime Minister Serebryan assesses prospect of conflict settlement with Transnistria

Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Reintegration Oleg Serebryan met with Russian and Transnistrian representatives on July 18 to discuss the contemporary stalemate in the conflict settlement between Moldova and Transnistria. [Moldpres]

Serebryan acknowledged that since the end of 2019, no formal international negotiations within the 5+2 format have taken place to resolve the dispute. He said the rhetoric of Transnistrian and Russian officials have become more assertive and, at times, more aggressive. [Moldpres]

Serebryan also underlined that the Moldovan government would support the local population to ensure human rights standards, diplomatic solutions to the bilateral disputes and stability in the Security Zone. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

## Russia: Parliament introduces wartime economic controls

Russia's parliament passed two bills introducing new economic measures as the country tries to manage the economic costs of its "special military operation" in Ukraine, though the measures fell short of a full mobilisation of the economy. [RBC]

Companies will not be able to decline contracts related to the public procurement or state defence orders, if they contribute to the execution of "operations conducted abroad," according to one law. The new measure aims to ensure that weapons and military equipment can be repaired and that certain sectors of the economy are supported. [RBC] [Financial Times] [Reuters]

Parliament also introduced changes to the Labour law that gives the government greater control of the country's workforce. The changes will impact the procedures and conditions for implementing special work conditions, such as the duration of working hours, non-working days and annual paid vacations. [Financial Times]

Valentina Matvienko, the Chairwoman of the country's The Federation Council, the upper house of the Federal Assembly of Russia, said that measures to support the military operations in Ukraine were needed, though this was not a full mobilisation of the economy to manage the cost of the war. She added that there should be a reasonable balance, saying that it was necessary at times to empower the state's role in the economy. [RBC]

(ab/gc)

### Russia: Central Bank cuts key interest rate as inflation pressure eases

The Bank of Russia cut its key interest rate by 150 basis points to 8 percent as inflation pressure and consumer demand slowed in the country.

"Current consumer price growth rates remain low, contributing to a further slowdown in annual inflation," the Russian Central Bank said on its website on July 22. "Inflation expectations of households and businesses have significantly decreased, reaching the levels of spring 2021." It added that the decline in business activity was slower than expected in June. [CBR]

The Central Bank said it would assess the feasibility of further rate cuts "in the second half of the year," most likely in September when another Board of Directors' meeting is planned. After having raised the key interest rate to 20 percent in March following the invasion in Ukraine, the Central Bank has cut the interest rate significantly over the course of the last few months. [Europe Monthly, June][Forbes]

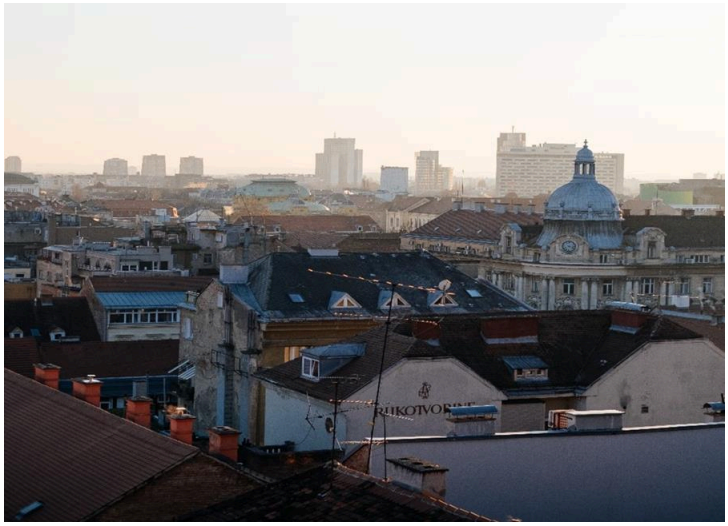
The Central Bank said that "the external environment for the Russian economy remains challenging and continues to significantly constrain economic activity." It adjusted its forecast for the economy in 2022, saying it expects a smaller  contradiction of 4-6 percent this year, compared with a previous forecast of a contraction of 8-10 percent. It noted that the decline in exports was more moderate than expected. [CBR]

Current consumer price growth rates remain low, contributing to a further slowdown in annual inflation, the Central Banks said. In June, annual inflation fell to 15.9 percent (after 17.1 percent in May) and, according to estimates as of 15 July, fell to 15.5 percent. [CBR]

"We still believe the main reason for the decline in inflation is the price correction after the spike in March," Elvira Nabiullina, the head of the Central Bank, said. "Now the situation has changed. The rouble has significantly strengthened." [Financial Times] [The Moscow Times]

(ab/gc)

## Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe



## Albania: Government says ‘synchronised military attack from abroad’ caused state servers’ to go offline

Various servers of Albania’s National Agency for Information Society - which handles the majority of government services - went offline on July 18 due to a “synchronised attack from abroad,” the country’s Council of Ministers said without providing further details. [Balkan Insight]

Various pro-government media blamed Russia for the attack, which was similar to those against Ukrainian, German and Dutch services last year. The council assured its citizens that the servers had been sufficiently backed up. [Washington Post] [Balkan Insight]

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Edi Rama shut down various physical government services in favour of the National Agency for Information Society, in an effort to digitalise the country’s government. After the alleged attack, opposition leaders criticised Rama, saying that the move was poorly planned, considering Albania’s lack of extensive cybersecurity policing. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Albania: Government seeks consultation on controversial fiscal amnesty law

Albania announced an “invitation for consultations” on July 11 to various business representatives and groups of business associations, with regard to the recently proposed draft law “On Fiscal and Criminal Amnesty

for the subjects of the Voluntary Declaration of Wealth." [Euronews]

The law would allow both Albanian citizens and foreigners to legalise money obtained through illicit means - including tax evasion, smuggling or fraud - under the condition that they pay a 5-10 percent tax. Those wishing to do so could declare as much as EUR 2 million per household and escape any criminal prosecution related to the way the money was obtained.

The European Commission voiced its concern over the law, which they believe would hinder Albania's ability to prevent money laundering and ensure compliance with tax requirements. The Commission also questioned what the law could mean for the European Union's own members, as large - potentially illegally obtained - sums of money would be moved to Albania. It remains unclear how the law could impact Albania's ongoing EU accession talks if it passes. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Albania: Judiciary system to undergo major reforms

The Albanian government has approved a new controversial judicial map that shut down fourteen prosecution offices and courts, raising questions about the accessibility and efficiency of justice in the country.

Specifically, the government plans to close nine regional courts of first instance - reducing their number from 22 to just 13 - and five courts of appeal - only leaving one still operating. Minister of Justice Ulsi Manja said that the map will be implemented in phases and that judicial services will partially continue in areas where courts will be shut down. [Euronews] [Balkan Insight]

Yet, the move drew significant protest from lawyers and Non-Governmental Organisations who claim it will significantly reduce the accessibility of justice to "ordinary people" as a result of travel costs and lower efficiency due to cases piling up. Previously this month, lawyers across the country have been boycotting court sessions, claiming that they have not been consulted, nor have their complaints been considered by the government and the Ministry of Justice. [Balkan Insight]

Albania has already been ranked lower than in previous years in various rule of law and justice

indexes on both European and global levels, and many expect the move to further continue the deterioration of the country's judicial system. [Exit Albania]

(hi/gc)

## Albania: Government condemns 2011 Council of Europe report on Kosovo war crimes

The Albanian Parliament unanimously voted on July 21 to condemn a 2011 Council of Europe report that accused various Kosovo Liberation Army officers of war crimes.

The report was issued by Swiss senator Dick Marty and included allegations of war crimes and organ trafficking, which were subsequently considered by the European Union and played a major role in the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in The Hague. [Balkan Insight]

Despite a debate in the parliament, where the government and the opposition each accused the other of not being supportive enough of Kosovo, the resolution passed unanimously. Besides claiming that after ten years of investigations, Marty's claims are yet to be proven factual and are thus "unargued, unproven, and not based on evidence and facts," the resolution also intends to ask the Council of Europe to reconsider and declare the report unverified. [Albanian Telegraphic Agency] [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Albania: Iranian Opposition Summit in Tirana cancelled amid US warning of terror threat

The US Embassy in Tirana issued a warning to American citizens, claiming that it had received information about a possible terror attack against the World Summit of Free Iran, which was planned to take place between July 23 and 24 in Durres. [Euronews]

Albania is currently hosting 3000 exiled Iranian members of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK). The summit was expected to feature pro-democracy activists, former Iranian government officials and humanitarian advocates. [Washington Post]

The Albanian government and police refrained from commenting, but pro-government news outlets have linked the threat to an alleged cyberattack that compromised Albanian online government services. The government previously said they suspected two foreign governments which could have been responsible for the attack, but now it seems like public opinion is shifting toward blaming Iran.

Although there has been no official confirmation of Iran being responsible for the cyberattack or the terror threat, various citizens have reported receiving messages urging them to question the Albanian government's support of "Durres terrorists". [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Bulgaria: Sofia expels 70 Russian diplomats

Bulgaria has declared 70 Russian representatives as "persona non grata" over activities going against their diplomatic status. Russia has said that it will respond in kind. [ABCNews] [Euractiv].

"Many of them [the diplomats] have worked directly for [intelligence] services and their diplomatic role has been more like a cover," Bulgaria's outgoing Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said. [Reuters].

The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov said on July 4 that the country will respond in kind. The Russian Ambassador in Bulgaria Eleonora Mitrofanova said that she will ask her country's government to close the embassy which will sever the diplomatic relations between the two countries. [Euractiv]

Russia had issued an ultimatum to Bulgaria to reverse its decision but it was rejected by Petkov. Bulgaria's decision was supported by the EU which found the ultimatum "unjustified." [SofiaGlobe].

The Balkan country blocked a bank transfer to the Russian embassy on July 6. The Minister of Finance Asen Vasilev cited EU sanctions as the reason for the decision and said that the country has been discussing with Brussels how to proceed. [Reuters]

(ib/gc)

## Bulgaria: Public figures are being paid to spread pro-Russian propaganda by Moscow

Prominent Bulgarian public figures have received EUR 2000 monthly payments to spread pro-Russian messages in Bulgaria according to the country's secret services. The chief of staff of the outgoing Prime Minister announced this during an interview. [Dnevnik]

Lena Borislavova, the head of outgoing Prime Minister Kiril Petkov's office, explained that among those paid by Russia to shape public opinion were politicians, journalists, and political scientists. Borislavova did not provide names but added that this has been happening since February when the war in Ukraine began. [Euractiv] [SofiaGlobe]

(ib/gc)

## Bulgaria: General prosecutor will remain in his position until end of term in 2026

Bulgaria's General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev will remain in his role until the end of his term in 2026, the country's supreme judicial council said. [Novinite]

The council announced their decision on July 8 after a vote by its members, with only two in favour of his early removal. The Minister of Justice Nadezhda Yordanova called for Geshev's early dismissal, citing nine public cases where the general prosecutor's actions undermined the judiciary. He denied all charges. [RadioFreeEurope]

After the decision, the Justice Ministry proposed restructuring the judiciary power in cases where the general prosecutor is implicated. Bulgaria's constitution allows the general prosecutor to overturn decisions made by other prosecutors. A restructuring of the judiciary is one of the requirements for Bulgaria to receive funds from the EU [Euractiv]

Bulgaria's constitutional court ruled on July 12 that the general prosecutor can be summoned in front of the Chamber of Representatives at least once in three months. The decision came after Geshev filed a claim to the court that his summoning in 2021 by the chamber was against Bulgaria's constitution. He said that such interference goes against the division of power between the legislative and judiciary branches. [RadioFreeEurope]

(ib)

## Greece: Athens to acquire F-35 jets from the US

Greece has begun the process of purchasing a full squadron of F-35 jets from the US in an effort to increase its defence capabilities amid rising tensions with Turkey. The oppositional party Syriza has criticised the decision saying the country cannot afford the purchase. [Euractiv] [APNews]

The Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced during a NATO summit in Madrid that the country has sent a formal letter of request to the US manufacturer Lockheed Martin for 20 F-35 fighter jets with the possibility to double the purchase. If the request is approved, Greece is expected to acquire them between 2027 and 2028. [APNews]

Nikos Filis, a senior member of the oppositional Syriza, told a Greek radio station that the initial decision was to purchase only French jets but that the government has decided to purchase both. He said this was expensive for the "small country with weak finances." [TheDefensePost]

In February, Mitsotakis' conservative government authorised a deal with France for additional Rafale jets which would bring the number to 24 fighter jets and three Belharra frigates in a move to modernise its military equipment. [GreekReporter] [TheDefensePost]

(ib)

## Greece: European Commission Rule of Law report claims Greece's media freedom is at a 'high-risk' level

A report issued on July 13 by the European Commission (EC) has flagged up several states with regards to insufficient freedom of expression or media freedom levels, which included Greece.

The report claims that despite there not being major issues with Greek laws and government interference in the media landscape, a series of attacks and threats against journalists have raised serious concerns.

In fact, on the same day the report was issued, an anarchist group which calls itself "Thousands of Night

Suns" carried out an arson attack against a Greek radio station in northern Athens. They claimed the attack was meant to commemorate the two-year anniversary since the death of protester Vassilis Mangos at the hands of riot police and were subsequently condemned by the government. [Balkan Insight] [Kathimerini]

This is far from the first instance of such attacks - which include the assassination of crime reporter Giorgos Karaivaz in 2021, threats against Dutch journalist Ingeborg Beugel, and attacks by various politically allied groups.

In combination with the lack of a sufficient legal framework to curb these safety threats, the alleged prevention of journalists from covering certain issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased politicisation and political fragmentation of the country's media channels, this contributes to Greece consistently ranking low in media freedom indexes. [Reporters Without Borders]

(hi/gc)

## Greece: European Court of Human Rights condemns Greece for migrant boat sinking

The European Court of Human Rights ruled that Greece violated the European Convention on Human Rights in 2014, by sinking a boat and ultimately killing eleven asylum seekers - including eight children.

The victims were Afghan nationals attempting to enter the country, which were stopped by the Greek coastguard off the small island of Farmakonisi. The survivors claimed that the coast guard sank the boat by towing it at high speed toward the Turkish coast, yet the Greek government denied such claims and convicted a 21-year-old Syrian immigrant who was driving the vessel.

Despite a Greek Court of Appeal overturning this decision, the survivors and five Greek Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights. [Balkan Insight] [Independent]

Activists and NGOs - both in Greece and internationally - have welcomed the decision, claiming that it is a landmark that will eventually help address the Greek coastguard's history of pushbacks. Many have urged both Greece and the European Union to immediately

address the allegations and create a sufficient legal framework that will prevent similar crimes from occurring in the continent's borders. As of July 2022, at least 32 more cases related to Greek pushbacks are pending in the European Court of Human Rights. [Kathimerini] [Human Rights Watch]

(hi/gc)

## Greece: Government allocates EUR 260 million to households amid energy crisis

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced on July 15 that the government is planning to allocate EUR 260 million to Greek households, in order to help combat the rising prices of energy in the country.

The Power-Pass app, as it has been dubbed, will allow citizens to apply for a grant that can be used to cover energy costs and compensate consumers for increasing prices since December. Mitsotakis claimed that this would "correct an injustice", and that over three million people had applied within the first few weeks. [AMNA] [Kathimerini]

This comes after Greece experienced a 28-year high inflation rate of 8.9 percent, and an approximately 30 percent increase in rent, electricity, gas and heating prices, making it one of the most affected states by the ongoing energy crisis. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

## North Macedonia: Government to ban the export of grain and wood pellets amid food and energy crises

The North Macedonian government has approved two proposals to ban exports of wheat, flour, pellets and firewood until 2023.

The move is meant to stimulate domestic markets and prevent profit-driven export deals that would limit the supply and further increase the prices of the aforementioned products.

North Macedonia has been experiencing fairly low levels of inflation compared to the rest of Europe, but amid the ongoing energy and food crises, as a result of the war in Ukraine, the government is taking long-term precautionary measures. [MIA] [World Bank]

Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi assured citizens that the sole reason for these measures is protecting the citizens and domestic markets within the broader international economic context. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

## Ukrainian cargo plane crashes in Greece after departing Serbia

On July 16, a Ukrainian-owned cargo plane carrying Serbian military materials to Bangladesh crashed near the Greek city of Kavala, after taking off from Serbia's Nis airport. Greek authorities were quick to protest to both Serbia and Ukraine, claiming they had not been notified of the Antonov cargo plane's contents, which allegedly included 11.5 tons of military equipment, including explosives. [Euronews]

The plane crashed near the city of Kavala in northern Greece, killing all eight of its Ukrainian crew members. Greek authorities have started investigating the conditions surrounding the crash as well as collecting the materials the plane contained.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic responded to the Greek authorities during a press release saying that although the crash was "a tragic incident" there was nothing dangerous carried on the plane. He also reiterated that the plane was not carrying military supplies to Ukraine, as previously claimed by various media sources, and only carried training equipment from Serbia to a Bangladeshi buyer. [Anadolu Agency]

Greek authorities continue their efforts to gather the equipment that has been scattered across the Kavala region and urge citizens to be careful and report any military material they might find to the appropriate authorities. [Euronews]

*Arms Exports to Continue*

Vucic said later that Serbia will continue international arms exports, despite the controversial Antonov cargo plane crash.

In a military display of Serbian weapons to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Vucic expressed his confusion as to why Serbia's military industry is being scrutinised and reaffirmed that the export of arms to countries such as Bangladesh, Cyprus, Senegal and Togo, among others, shall continue. [CNN] [Albanian Telegraphic Agency]

Serbia's mostly state-owned arms industry remains one of the largest in Europe, with a reported yearly export value of EUR 530 million. Serbia has also frequently been linked to arms deliveries to active conflict zones or countries under UN sanction embargoes. Only in the last three years, Serbian arms were sent to Yemen, Nagorno-Karabakh and Myanmar, among others. [Deutsche Welle]

(hi/gc)

## Serbia: Hearings for Serbia's only Srebrenica Massacre trial delayed once more

The Belgrade Higher Court postponed the trial of seven former Bosnian Serb policemen accused of being involved in the Srebrenica Massacre and the killing of approximately 1300 Bosniaks, for the fifth time since the beginning of 2022. Out of the 21 scheduled hearings since 2020, only 8 have moved forward, in what many have called an artificial attempt to prolong the proceedings. [Balkan Insight]

Since the trial's initiation in 2016, hearings have been constantly postponed, primarily because of the defendants not appearing in court, although in this instance it was because a defence lawyer asked to be removed from the case. Yet, this remains Serbia's only ongoing Srebrenica-related trial, in the 27 years that have passed since the massacre.

Previously this year, the trial of Bosnian Serb General Milenko Zivanovic - who was indicted in both Serbia and Bosnia - was postponed so that the Belgrade Higher Court could consider the official transfer of the trial to its jurisdiction from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Consequently, the trial was delayed until a decision was made, with indicative hearings being scheduled for September 2022. [Balkan Insight]

The postponement is only the latest in a series of events that has led various organisations, including the European Commission to voice their concern over Serbia's weak record in prosecuting war crimes, particularly for incidents such as the Srebrenica and Strpci Massacres. [Amnesty]

(hi/gc)

## Serbia: Government considers taking over Russian oil company amid energy crisis

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said on July 13 that the government is considering a takeover of Russian-owned Serbian oil company NIS, to cope with the ongoing energy crisis amid Western sanctions on Russia.

With Russian company Gazprom Neft owning 50 percent of NIS, Serbia is considering whether to discuss terms to take over the company with Russia. Vucic emphasised that Serbia is not interested in "stealing" anything or anyone's property and that if the move was to move forward it would be in clearly defined terms for both sides. He also stated that he hopes that the takeover would be temporary until the sanctions are lifted. [Balkan Insight]

This comes after Serbian Energy Minister Zorana Mihajlovic stated that Serbia aims to buy oil from Azerbaijan in 2023, in an effort to find alternatives to Russian energy. The Serbian interconnector to the Bulgarian-Greek gas pipeline carrying Azeri gas is set to be completed by September next year. [Reuters]

Finding alternatives to Russian gas is only part of Serbia's ongoing effort to diversify its energy supply, which includes a shift toward green energy, cooperation with neighbouring countries such as Greece and consultancy meetings with American and Israeli officials. [Serbian Monitor]

(hi/gc)

## Turkey: Detained Russian ship carrying grain released by Turkish authorities

Turkey released the Russian grain carrier Zhibek Zholy after it was detained off the Turkish coast in early July at the request of the Ukrainian government, who claimed that the 7,000 tons of grain on the vessel were stolen from its territory occupied by Russian forces. [POLITICO] [FAZ]

Turkish officials said they were investigating the case, while Russia denied that the ship, which was moored near the Turkish port of Karasu, was transporting stolen grain. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that they were disappointed by the Turkish decision and urged Ankara to investigate this situation. [Interfax UA][POLITICO] [FAZ]

The Ukrainian ambassador in Ankara, Vasyl Bodnar, had previously called on Turkey to take “necessary measures” after alleging that a stolen grain cargo came from the occupied Ukrainian port of Berdyansk on the Azov Sea. [REUTERS]

Turkey wants to restart grain exports. “We will try to transport these products and re-export them to third countries,” Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said. In June, he ensured Ankara’s efforts in establishing a safe corridor for grain exports. [REUTERS] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(go/gc)

## Turkey: Inflation seen easing to 70 percent by year's end

Turkey’s inflation rate is expected to slow to 70 percent by the end of the year, even as the central bank is seen keeping its interest rate steady for at least another year,  according to a Reuters poll among economists in mid-July. [Reuters]

Barclays Plc economist Ercan Erguzel expects inflation to peak at 88 percent in October. Bloomberg economist Selva Bahar Baziki expects Turkish “inflation to climb even further in the third quarter amid high energy costs, a weaker currency and the central bank’s reluctance to lift interest rates to stem rising prices.” [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The Reuters polls showed inflation peaking 85 percent in the third quarter. Annual inflation hit 78.6 percent in June. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The International Monetary Fund said Turkey’s inflation was the fourth highest in the world right now. [International Monetary Fund][Bloomberg]

(fw/gc)

## Turkey: Top court rules to pull out of European convention to protect women was lawful

A top administrative court in Turkey ruled in July that Ankara’s decision to withdraw from a key European treaty to protect women was lawful, rejecting petitions to cancel President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s decision to pull the country out of it. [Associated Press]

Women's rights groups, such as We Will Stop Femicide, have criticised Erdogan's decision. "It is terrifying from a legal perspective," lawyer Ipek Bozkurt, who had represented We Will Stop Femicide, told AFP. "This erroneous decision should have been stopped by the court." Reem Alsalem, a Special Rapporteur for the UN, said that women's rights "had been weakened by Turkey's withdrawal." [DW] [France24] [DW]

In Turkey, Men have murdered at least 259 women since the country withdrew in July 2021 from the international treaty, which is known as the Istanbul Convention, according to the Stockholm Center for Freedom. That year, 307 women were victims of femicide, according to Turkey's Interior Ministry. Government studies between 2008 and 2014 showed that four out of ten women have been victim to physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. [Human Rights Watch][UN NEWS] [SCF]

Often, efforts are made to protect women from violence by imposing restraining orders against their abusers, who already have harassed or threatened their victims. These preventive orders are usually ignored by the offenders, who won't be prosecuted for doing so, and ignored by the police. [Human Rights Watch]

"While penalties for men who murder women have risen over the years, there needs to be more focus on the failure of the authorities to prevent these murders," Human Rights Watch said in May. "There should be clear processes for investigating and holding to account public authorities in cases where they have not exercised due diligence in preventing and protecting victims of domestic violence."

(fw/go/gc)

## Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

## Cyprus: Reform of judicial system underway

The Cypriot parliament on July 14 approved draft legislation to reform the country's judicial system. The new rules aim to create a faster court system and enable more efficient administration of justice. [Cyprus Mail]

In addition to the existing Supreme Court, two additional courts will be set up under the reforms: a Supreme Constitutional Court which will deal with administrative and constitutional matters, and an Appellate court. [Cyprus Mail]

(ta/pk)

## Italy: Turbulence ahead as PM Draghi resigns, government collapses

Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi resigned on July 21 after three major parties in his national unity government on July 20 withdrew their support, plunging the country into turmoil and triggering fears that a potential right-wing successor administration could weaken the EU amid the war in Ukraine. [LeMonde] [TheGuardian]

Draghi will stay in office to lead a caretaker government after President Sergio Mattarella accepted his resignation and formally dissolved the Italian parliament.

Italy, the European Union's third biggest economy, will need to find a new government in national elections scheduled for September 25, while preparing for energy shortages and a rise in living costs at a time of economic and political instability.

Draghi was undermined by coalition partners in two confidence votes within a week. The biggest partner in the ruling coalition, the populist Five-Star Movement, abstained in a confidence vote combined with a ballot on a cost-of-living bill on July 14. Draghi then offered his resignation to President Mattarella for the first time. [Politico]

Mattarella, however, rebuffed the offer. Draghi, backed by the president and by many Italians who asked him to stay in office in uncertain times, asked the Senate to vote on a confidence measure calling on him to keep on governing. [Al Jazeera] [eureporter] [The Times] Draghi won the July 20 vote with 95 to 38 ballots but the majority of the 315-member Senate abstained.

*National (dis)unity government*

Three major coalition partners – the Five-Star Movement, the conservative Forza Italia party and the right-wing League party – did not support Draghi, leaving the coalition's lack of unity painfully exposed. [AP]

Draghi had been asked to form a government of national unity in early 2021, after the centrist Italia Viva party pulled out of a ruling coalition led by the Five-Star-Movement and the centre-left Democratic Party, leading to the coalition and the government crumbling. [CNBC]

Draghi, the former European Central Bank governor, was not a member of a party and thus able to form a technocratic-oriented government with broad parliamentary support amid a political crisis.

Draghi strongly backed Ukraine after Russia's invasion and was, due to his leadership skills and reputation as former ECB chief, able to present Italy as a reliable partner internationally. [Reuters] However, the government failed to complete reforms which would unlock EUR 200 billion in European Union Covid-recovery aid for Italy. [Bloomberg]

*Hard times favour hard-right*

In opinion polls, right-wing parties such as the League, Forza Italia and the post-fascist Brothers of Italy are favoured to do well in the September elections. [BBC]

With the possibility of a right-wing, Eurosceptic coalition governing Italy in the near future, the European Union could be deprived of the reliability of an important member state. Furthermore, other Eurosceptic forces across the continent could receive a boost. [TheGuardian]

The Guardian newspaper said in an opinion piece that a hard-right Italian government would weaken European consensus on Russia and sap the EU's strength at time of geopolitical confrontation, while hampering deeper political integration.

The European Union's Commissioner for the Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, tweeted that "difficult months" were upon Italy.

(jk/pk)

## Italy: Over 1,000 migrants arrive by sea amid fears of surge sparked by war

Almost 1,200 undocumented migrants landed in Italy within just 24 hours on July 24 amid fears that food shortages caused by the war in Ukraine could trigger a surge of migration from Africa and the Middle East.

Officials said that 674 people were rescued and five bodies were discovered on an overcrowded fishing boat around 125 miles off Calabria, southern Italy. [BBC]

A further 522 people rescued from 15 vessels were brought to the Italian island of Lampedusa, which is considered one of the main entry points for migrants seeking to access Europe. The boats had set sail from Tunisia and Libya.

Italian media reported that a spike in recent landings overwhelmed an immigration centre in Sicily. According to the Ansa news agency, over 1,000 were being kept at the centre, well beyond its 350-person capacity.

Since the beginning of the year, more than 34,000 migrants and asylum seekers have arrived in Italy, compared to about 25,500 during the same period last year, according to figures from the country's interior ministry. [Reuters]

Mediterranean nations along the main migration routes into Europe expect more than 150,000 arrivals this year. [Schengen Visa Info]

*Risky sea crossings*

Many individuals undertaking risky sea crossings do so on improvised boats provided by people-smugglers. When the boats break down, they are frequently left abandoned in the middle of the Mediterranean.

The recent spike in migrant arrivals came ahead of a parliamentary election in Italy, where polls indicate that the far-right Brothers of Italy could win enough seats to take the helm of a government with a rightward lean.

The party's leader, Giorgia Meloni, has vowed to restrict migration. She has already stirred up debate by calling for a blockade of the Libyan coast to prevent migrant traffickers from launching their boats towards Italy. [BBC]

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 the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(kk/pk)

## Italy breached rights of asylum-seeker to be treated as minor: court

Italy breached the rights of a young asylum-seeker by treating him as an adult and placing him in an overcrowded adult reception centre, the European Court of Human Rights has found.

The applicant, who is from Gambia, had arrived in Sicily in the summer of 2016 and was initially placed in a housing centre for unaccompanied minors. After a medical age-assessment procedure indicated that he was in fact 18, he was transferred to an overcrowded adult reception centre, the court said. Only after a court application over four months later was the applicant allowed to transfer to a facility for minors.

The European court held that Italy breached the applicant's right to not be subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment. The applicant was placed in an adult reception centre that not only housed 1,400 people despite only having a capacity for some 500, but also lacked adequate health care and the additional support that minors need, the court said. As a result, he was not provided with a guardian to file an asylum request.

The court said a doctor later testified that the method used to assess the applicant's age was on its own not sufficient to determine with certainty how old an individual was.

The court emphasised that its well-established case law does not exempt states from their obligations

under Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which prohibits degrading and inhumane treatment, even when an influx of migrants and asylum seekers causes difficulties. [ECHR, Darboe and Camara v. Italy]

(al/pk)

## Italy: MPs approve financial aid as cost of living soars

The Italian parliament has passed a law under which employees, the self-employed and pensioners will be given a one-off windfall of EUR 200 to help offset an increase in the cost of living partly caused by the war in Ukraine. [lastampa]

Annual inflation in Italy rose to 8 percent in June, the highest level since 1986, according to national statistics agency ISTAT. The average for the euro zone the same month was 8.6 percent. [ANSA]

(ab/pk)

## Italy: 10,000 migrant farm workers deprived of rights, says report

At least 10,000 migrant farm workers in Italy are deprived of their rights because they live in makeshift or unauthorised settlements lacking basic services such as drinking water, electricity and waste collection, according to a government report.

The report is part of a three-year plan to tackle the exploitation of workers and was drawn up by the labour ministry and the National Association of Italian Municipalities.

It found that Italy had about 150 unauthorised settlements, often made up of huts, tents and caravans, mainly in the south of the country. Living conditions in these settlements and shanty towns are precarious, according to the report.

Italian Labour Minister Andrea Orlando said that such conditions can no longer be tolerated because they deny “the respect due to every human being”.

Around 5.1 million migrants live in Italy, making up almost 9 percent of the population. [euronews] [Info Migrants] [Peoples Dispatch]

(al/pk)

## Malta has lowest inflation rate in eurozone

Malta recorded an annual inflation rate of 6.1 percent in June, the lowest among eurozone countries, according to an estimate by Eurostat, the EU's statistics agency. The average annual inflation rate for countries using the euro the same month was 8.6 percent. [Malta Today]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the main driver of inflation in the EU, with power and food prices soaring. The Maltese government's subsidies for energy and electricity have helped keep inflation down, however. [Malta Today] [Malta Independent]

According to Eurostat, the highest annual inflation rate in June was recorded in Baltic countries: in Estonia it hit 22 percent, and 20.5 percent in Lithuania. [Malta Today]

(ta/pk)

## Malta: Fathers allowed 10 days of paternity leave

Maltese fathers are entitled to take 10 days of paternity leave following the birth of their child after the Maltese government adopted the EU's Work Life Balance Directive.

Under the new rules, which came into effect on August 2, Maltese parents are entitled to two months of paid and two months of unpaid leave. They have eight years to take the paid leave, half of which must be taken within four years.

Although the legislation has been widely welcomed in Malta, the opposition and employers voiced some criticism. Opposition politicians have said they are unhappy that the government adopted only the minimum requirements of the EU directive. Employers, on the other hand, have demanded more clarity on the financial consequences for them.

The Maltese government will bear the costs of the new measures until 2024. After that, private companies will have to pay their share. [Malta Today] [Times of Malta]

(ta/pk)

## Portugal: Right-wing party's no-confidence motion against gov't fails

A motion of no confidence against Portugal's government brought by the right-wing opposition Chega party on July 5 was rejected by a vast majority of deputies. Chega was the only party voting in favour. The conservative opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Liberal Initiative abstained, while all other parties voted against the motion. [Diario de noticias]

Portugal is governed by the Socialist Party, which holds an absolute majority in parliament.

Chega's no-confidence motion came after Pedro Nuno Santos, the minister for infrastructure and transport, announced plans for the construction of a new airport outside Lisbon on June 29 without the approval of Prime Minister Antonio Costa, and without consulting his own governing party or the opposition. Costa then revoked the airport plan and asked Nuno Santos to quit. However, Nuno Santos remained in office. [Euractiv] [Portugal] [Portugal Resident] [Publico]

Portuguese newspaper Diario de noticias reported that Chega launched the motion of no confidence to test the position of the conservative PSD towards the government after the election of its new leader, Luis Montenegro. However, the PSD did not want to sign up to an initiative promoted by Chega, which is largely considered populist.

Chega leader Andre Ventura was previously a member of the PSD but left the party in 2019 to found the more radical Chega. He said he was disappointed at PSD's abstention and claimed that the party was colluding with the government.

Even though the PSD abstained in the vote, Paulo Rios de Oliveira, a deputy from the party, said during a debate on the no-confidence motion that the government deserved to be censured because "it doesn't govern" and was a "government without action".

During the parliamentary debate, various opposition parties strongly criticised the government and Prime Minister Costa, claiming he was inactive. [Portugal Resident][Diario de noticias][Lusa]

(sr/pk)

## Portugal: Right-wingers want to ban benefit-seeking migrants

The leader of Portugal's right-wing opposition Chega party announced on July 26 that his grouping would propose a new immigration law to parliament which would increase supervision over or prohibit entry to immigrants who "have no capacity for integration". [Diario de noticias] [The Portugal News]

Chega leader Andre Ventura said that his party wanted to forbid entry to those who come to the country "either with the aim of collecting benefits or culturally transforming Portugal". The law would oblige immigrants to present a defined objective for entering Portugal. [Diario de noticias]

Ventura's announcement came after a law establishing a new six-month work seekers' visa for foreigners was passed by parliament on July 21. Members of Chega left the assembly during the debate after a heated dispute with the Speaker of parliament, Augusto Santos Silva.

Ventura accused Santos Silva, a member of the governing Socialist Party, of being partisan and collaborating with the government. [Diario de noticias] [Portugal Resident] [Portugal Resident]

(sr/pk)

## Portugal: PM criticises EU states for not backing energy transition

Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa has strongly criticised other European Union member states for not investing in a transition to green energy quickly enough.

Speaking at the launch of a floating solar power plant on July 15, Costa said that Europe's greatest weakness was its dependence on Russian energy supplies. He added that had other member states committed to investment in renewable energy like Portugal did, the European Union would not have to continue buying Russian gas, and its response to the invasion of Ukraine by Moscow "would have been very different". [Lusa]

Portugal's biggest energy provider, Energias de Portugal, currently generates 75 percent of its power from renewable sources. Wind and solar power generation have increased by 16 percent in the last six months. As a result, the price of electricity in Portugal

has decreased by 3.7 percent. [The Portugal News] [Lusa]

Costa has repeatedly called for more electricity and gas interconnections between the Iberian Peninsula, on which Portugal is located, and the rest of Europe, highlighting Portugal's potential as an energy supplier for Europe. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(sr/pk)

## Portugal: Opposition MP slams conditions in Azores jail

A deputy from Portugal's opposition Social Democratic Party on July 27 sent a letter to the European Commissioner for Human Rights voicing concern over conditions at a jail in the Azores. [Noticias ao minuto]

Lawmaker Paulo Moniz criticised conditions at the Ponta Delgada prison as "unhealthy, inappropriate and overcrowded". In total, 166 people are detained there, while the jail has a maximum capacity of 141. [Jornalacores]

After visiting the prison on the Portuguese archipelago on July 18, Moniz claimed that the jail in its current state violates human dignity and hampers the rehabilitation of detainees. He called on the European Commission to monitor the situation and help ensure that a new prison is built. [Lusa]

(sr/pk)

## Spain: Senate approves 'only yes means yes' law on sexual consent

Spain's Senate has approved an "only yes means yes" law that requires explicit consent from both partners for sex to be considered consensual. The country's parliament now needs to confirm final amendments in the wording of the bill.

The change in the law was proposed by Spain's Socialist government after a gang rape in Pamplona in 2016 during a bull-running festival. Five men were initially found guilty of sexually abusing, but not raping, an unconscious 18-year-old woman because she could not prove that she hadn't consented.

The attack caused shock across the country, while the verdict sparked protests. Spain's Supreme Court later

overruled lower courts and handed the five men a jail term of 15 years for rape.

The new law will lower the threshold for rape cases, and silence or passivity will no longer be considered as indicating consent. The opposition conservative Popular Party and the far-right Vox party voted against the change in rules. [euronews] [abcnews]

(al/pk)

## Spain: Cabinet approves bill on transgender rights

The Spanish government has backed a bill to give more rights to transgender people following months of debate within the country's left-wing ruling coalition. The measure, which would allow children as young as 12 to officially change their gender with the consent of a court, will now be examined by the lower house of parliament. [spaintoday]

The left-wing United We Can (Unidas Podemos) party, the government's junior partner, championed the bill but it was initially rejected by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's Socialist party, which argued that women could be disadvantaged in certain sectors such as sports. [abcnews]

If the bill is approved in its original form, all Spanish citizens over the age of 16 will be able to legally change their sex and name simply by declaring their desire to do so twice within a period of four months. They previously needed a diagnosis of gender dysphoria by several doctors. [usnews]

Parental permission will be required for adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16, and authorisation by a court will be needed for those aged 12 to 14. [nationalpost]

(ab/pk)

## Spain: Court says minimum height for women police is discriminatory

Spain's Supreme Court has ruled that a minimum height requirement which bars short women from becoming police officers is discriminatory.

Around a quarter of Spain's female population is shorter than the 1.60 metre (5 feet, 3 inches) minimum

for women police officers. Meanwhile, only 3 percent of Spanish men are shorter than the 1.65 metres (5 feet, 5 inches) required of male officers.

The court said the rules stop more women from joining the police force than men. It added: "Within the police structure, there are many functions that require no special physical condition and even less a tall stature." [euronews] [thelocal.es]

(al/pk)

## UN body says Spain should compensate woman forced to have caesarean section

A United Nations committee on July 14 urged Spain to offer compensation to a woman who it said was forced to undergo a caesarean section without medical justification while her arms were tied down. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women said the woman had been subjected to "obstetric violence." [spainenglish]

The woman, who has not been named, told the committee that she went to a public hospital in Donostia, northern Spain, in the 38th week of pregnancy. The hospital did not provide her with information on alternative options, and induced her labour prematurely without her consent, said the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. [spainenglish]

Spain's health ministry said a bill approved in May would help spread good childbirth practices. [Reuters/bdnews24]

(ab/pk)

## Spain: PM unveils new taxes on energy firms, banks

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez on July 12 unveiled new taxes on power companies and banks, while at the same time announcing financial help to ease the pain of rising inflation. [spanishnewstoday]

Sanchez said a temporary tax would be levied in 2023 and 2024 on profits made by electricity, gas and oil companies as demand for energy surges amid Russia's war on Ukraine. Banks will be taxed on profits from increased interest rates. [spanishnewstoday]

Meanwhile, students over 16 who have scholarships will receive an extra EUR 100 every month. Commuters will be able to travel for free in Spain from September until the end of the year. [spanishnewstoday] [murciatoday]

Spanish annual inflation exceeded 10 percent for the first time in 37 years in June, well above the 8.6 percent average for the eurozone. [uspa24] [Reuters]

(ab/pk)

### Vatican City rejects progressive German Catholic movement to reform church

The Vatican rejected on July 21 a push by a progressive German Catholic movement to reform the Catholic church, saying in a statement that the "Synodal Path" lacks the authority to "oblige bishops and the faithful to assume new forms of governance and new approaches to doctrine and morals." [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

The movement of bishops and ordinary German Catholics wants to reform the Catholic church to allow priests to marry. It has also called for permitting women to become priests and stopping the designation of same-sex relationships as sinful.

They also want to change the power structures of the church by allowing non-clerics a role in the appointment of bishops. Power structures in the Catholic church have been criticised after numerous cases of sexual abuse and their cover up in Germany. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

Such reforms would be unlawful and "a threat to the unity of the Church," the Vatican said. [Reuters] [ZDF]

Criticism by the Vatican was "unwarranted and too harsh" and that the real threat lies in the "poor communication" of the Vatican and the "hostility to reformation," the movement said. [ZDF]

(mb/gc)

## Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

## Czech Republic: Government party shaken by corruption scandal

The Czech government has been shaken by a corruption scandal that prompted the country's education minister to quit and cast suspicion on members of the second largest party in the ruling coalition, the Mayors and Independents Movement.

Eleven individuals have been charged with bribery, involvement in organised crime and suspicion of using illegal drugs. Prague deputy mayor Petr Hlubucek of the Mayors and Independents Movement party (STAN), and Michal Redl, an entrepreneur, lobbyist and convicted fraudster, were temporarily jailed. [Politico] [Radio Prague International]

Education Minister Petr Gazdik, also of the Mayors and Independents Movement, announced his resignation on June 19. Gazdik, who had reportedly held several meetings with Redl, denied wrongdoing. But said he wanted to limit damage to the governing coalition ahead of the Czech Republic's presidency of the EU Council . [Radio Prague International]

Members of the opposition have demanded more far-reaching consequences for the Mayors and Independents Movement.

(jg/ pk)

## Czech Republic extends coal mining

The Czech Republic will extend coal mining to support its national energy security amid international concerns over supplies after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Coal-powered stations generate almost half of the Czech Republic's electricity output.

The state-owned OKD company will conduct mining at least until the end of 2023, Czech Finance Minister Zbynek Stanjura said on July 7. Originally, mining activities were scheduled to end this year. [Associated Press]

The European Union has decided to ban Russian coal by August. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic aims to end coal usage by 2033 and rely more on nuclear energy. [Associated Press]

(jg/pk)

## Hungary bans power exports, declaring 'energy emergency'

Hungary's government has declared an "energy emergency" and announced a ban on power exports amid supply disruptions across Europe, while planning a deal with Russia to buy a supplementary 700 million cubic metres of gas. [Euronews]

Budapest also aims to boost its own production of natural gas, increase coal extraction, reinstate an out-of-service coal power plant, and increase the output and lifespan of the country's only nuclear power plant. [Al Jazeera]

Budapest is heavily reliant on Russian energy, having signed a 15-year gas purchase agreement with Russian provider Gazprom in 2021. On July 29, Prime Minister Viktor Orban announced that Hungary would sign a contract with Moscow to buy a supplementary 700 million cubic metres of gas before the autumn [*see separate story in this issue*].

Moscow supplies Hungary with 65 percent of its oil and 85 percent of its gas. [Euronews] [Hungary Today]

EU Commissioner for Energy Kadri Samson said in a statement that the European Commission had not been notified of Hungary's ban on energy exports, adding that unilateral restrictions of gas flow across borders were "unwarranted and can only exacerbate problems in the current gas market situation."

Orban has been one of Moscow's closest allies in the EU, adopting a stance at odds with other European importers of Russian energy.

Orban had strongly opposed EU sanctions on Russian oil exports, arguing they would cripple his country's economy. He eventually consented to a partial oil ban

after securing guarantees for Hungary and other central European nations. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(qv/pk)

## European Commission sues Hungary over LGBT law, media freedom

Tensions between the EU and member state Hungary rose as the European Commission on July 15 referred the country to court over alleged violations of LGBT rights as well as for refusing to renew the licence of a broadcaster critical of the government in Budapest. [European Commission (1)] [European Commission (2)]

As part of an "anti-paedophilia act", Hungary in 2021 implemented a law which banned any content portraying homosexuality or transsexuality to minors, including in educational content, movies and TV shows. [DW]

The Commission, arguing the law was not in accordance with the EU charter of fundamental rights and several EU rules, launched an infringement process, and then exactly a year later referred the case to the Court of Justice of the European Union. [European Commission (1)]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has labelled the Hungarian law a "disgrace". Meanwhile, Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga said that the Commission's lawsuit was "baseless", adding that child protection was a matter of national authority. [Reuters]

The Commission has also referred a second case to the EU Court of Justice. This concerns the refusal of the Hungarian authorities in 2021 to renew the licence of domestic radio broadcaster Klubradio, whose coverage has been uncomfortable for the government. [AlJazeera]

The Commission described the Hungarian authorities' decision as "disproportionate" and "highly questionable". The refusal to renew the broadcaster's licence was seen by critics as a blow against media freedom and diversity. [EuroNews] [European Commission (2)]

The European Federation of Journalists welcomed the Commission's decision to refer Hungary to the EU court, saying: "We believe this legal challenge goes to the core of democratic standards and EU values: the freedom of the press to criticise the government and

provide independent reporting without undue interference from government or state regulatory bodies." [EFJ]

(jk/pk)

## Slovakia: Ruling coalition on verge of collapse

Slovakia's ruling coalition is on the verge of breaking up as one of the main parties in power threatens to walk away following an escalating row between political heavyweights.

The governing coalition comprises the centre-right Ordinary People (OL'aNO), and the centre-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), which have the majority of Cabinet posts, plus two junior partners – the right-wing We Are Family and the centrist For The People parties.

The coalition came to power following a crisis in 2021 over the use of the Russian Sputnik coronavirus vaccine. That led to Igor Matovic, who is now finance minister, resigning as premier and the current government being formed. [Euractiv]

A feud broke out between OL'aNO's Matovic and SaS party chief Richard Sulik following the failure of two OL'aNO members of parliament to vote in favour of lifting former Prime Minister Robert Fico's parliamentary immunity after his alleged involvement in a corruption scandal in May.

The row has now erupted into a full-scale political crisis. Sulik is demanding that Matovic should resign or be removed by Prime Minister Eduard Heger of OL'aNO before September. If that doesn't happen, Sulik has warned his party will leave the ruling coalition.

The SaS was unhappy at Matovic's attempt to pass a stimulus package worth EUR 1.2 billion that includes assistance to families and anti-inflation measures. Critics say that the bill will not be effective enough to help struggling families.

With the SaS against the bill, Matovic instead sought the backing of the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia, whose leader, Marian Kotleba, has been found guilty of far-right motivated crimes. [Euractiv]

Should Sulik withdraw the SaS from the governing coalition, the remaining parties will not be able to

maintain their parliamentary majority. That scenario worries many, as it could pave the way to the return of populist former Prime Minister Robert Fico who, among other members of the opposition, has called for Matovic's resignation and snap elections.

Prime Minister Heger of OL'aNO has thrown his support behind his fellow party member Matovic. At the same time, Heger, who has only been in power since April 2021, is seeking a compromise to prevent his government from fragmenting. The SaS's Sulik has announced his support for a renegotiated coalition agreement whose terms would include Matovic resigning. [Pravda] [TASR] [Dennikn]

(cg/pk)

## Slovak defence minister aims to reach 2 percent defence spending mark

Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad has announced that Bratislava will increase its 2023 defence budget to 2 percent of GDP, and also hopes to raise this year's budget to the same level amid security concerns triggered by the war in Ukraine.

Nad said Slovakia's fellow NATO members on the alliance's eastern flank have raised defence spending. Writing in a weekly defence ministry journal, he added: "Next year, the countries on NATO's eastern border will reach such budgets: Poland 3 percent of GDP, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania 2.5 percent of GDP, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia 2-2.1 percent of GDP." [Pravda]

NATO asks its members to spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on defence.

The defence funds are to be used by Slovakia for a range of military projects, including infrastructure improvement, air defence procurement, and ammunition and communications systems purchases. An emphasis is being placed on a "definitive separation" from Soviet-made equipment, much of which has been donated to Kiev to help it fight invading Russian forces. [Euractiv ]

Bratislava recently concluded a EUR 1.7 billion tender to purchase Swedish CV90 tracked armoured vehicles, as the Slovak armed forces seek to improve their capabilities. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

President Zuzana Caputova said that the military had, in the history of an independent Slovakia, never played

such an important role as now. She voiced support for the expansion in defence spending, saying: "The public must have no doubt that it was decided transparently and correctly that the armed forces receive the best in terms of quality and price. Under these circumstances, I pledge my continued support." [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

## Slovenia: Ban on same-sex marriage declared unconstitutional

Slovenia's top court has ruled that a ban on same-sex marriage and on couples of the same sex adopting children is unconstitutional. The court added that the country's current laws, which allow only people of opposite sexes to marry and adopt, violate a constitutional safeguard that forbids discrimination.

The constitutional court said in a ruling that discrimination "cannot be justified with the traditional meaning of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, nor with special protection of family," the Slovak Press Agency reported.

Slovenia must now make changes to legislation within six months. Luka Mesec, minister of labour, family, social affairs and equal opportunities in the country's new liberal-led coalition government, said that the changes would be ready in just a few weeks, adding: "The constitutional court has ordered us to do this, and we will do it with the greatest pleasure." [Euronews/AP]

Slovenia is a forerunner in terms of LGBT rights in Central and Eastern Europe and is one of the few countries in the region that affords significant rights to such groups. Other nations in the area have refused to recognise civil unions or partnerships. [Delo]

(cg/pk)

## Slovenia vows to reach NATO-mandated defence spending within six months

Slovenia has announced that it will beef up its defence spending to 2 percent of its GDP following a key NATO summit where allies officially labelled Russia their "most significant and direct threat" in a major policy overhaul.

Slovenia's recently elected Prime Minister Robert Golob, his Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Defence

Minister Marjan Sarec attended the NATO summit in Madrid from June 28 to 30, where they met their counterparts from other countries in the Western military alliance.

Golob said after the gathering that Slovenia would be fulfilling the NATO-mandated 2 percent of GDP spending on defence within the next six months. He added that, under the commitments of previous governments, such a move had been planned for 2030. [Delo]

Slovenia is one of the worst performers in NATO when it comes to defence spending, with expenditures currently standing at 1.22 percent of its national GDP.

(cg/pk)

## Slovenia joins nuclear non-proliferation effort

Slovenia's recently formed centre-left coalition government has announced that the country will join an international initiative to promote nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. At the same time, newly elected Prime Minister Robert Golob is seeking to expand his country's civil nuclear energy capabilities.

Among its goals, the Stockholm Nuclear Proliferation Treaty initiative, which was founded in 2019, aims to prevent the emergence of new nuclear powers as it reinforces existing stipulations arising from a treaty of 1968. Member states pledge to ensure their civil nuclear capabilities cannot be used to produce atomic weapons, while simultaneously developing peaceful nuclear energy infrastructure. [Delo] [Government of Sweden]

Golob's liberal Freedom Movement party has advocated the expansion of Slovenia's civil nuclear energy. The prime minister named this as one of the fundamentals of a green energy transition in his election campaign, along with maximising the use of Slovenia's sole nuclear power plant. [Balkangreenenergynews]

The goal of the Stockholm initiative is to completely eliminate the deployment of nuclear arms, but it first seeks to encourage transparency regarding weapons stockpiles, before gradually moving towards more ambitious policies. [German Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Slovenia will join 19 other countries that are already part of the initiative, among them Germany, a country

with which Ljubljana is pursuing closer ties. Slovenia has reoriented its foreign policy towards Western Europe following a change of government in June.

(cg/pk)

# Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

### Denmark: PM survives impeachment vote over mink cull

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has retained her post following a failed impeachment bid over her handling of a mass mink cull in 2020 at the height of the coronavirus pandemic. [Euronews] [Politiken]

A parliamentary inquiry committee imposed a reprimand on Frederiksen but decided against legal action over a decision by the government to order the destruction of Denmark's 15 million-strong mink population – one of the largest in Europe – in November 2020.

The health ministry said at the time that new COVID-19 mutations had been detected in the mink population, requiring a complete cull in order to prevent the spread of these to humans.

An investigation found that Frederiksen's decision had no legal basis as, under Danish law, only animals in an affected region may be culled, not across the entire country. Frederiksen claimed she was unaware of this and told the inquiry committee that decisions had been "taken on the basis of a very serious risk assessment." [Euronews]

After Frederiksen received no more than a reprimand, opposition parties called for a vote of no confidence in her leadership. Opposition parliamentarian Sophie Lohde said the prime minister "should take political responsibility and bear the consequences of the biggest political and administrative scandal in recent times by withdrawing and calling elections." [dr.dk]

Denmark's agricultural minister, Mogens Jensen, resigned in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, and Frederiksen faced a loss of support from centre and left parties in parliament over her handling of the affair. [Euronews]

(cg/pk)

## Denmark: New far-right party seeks to establish itself

A disgraced former migration minister has announced the founding of a new party called the Danish Democrats, based on a far-right political ideology and an anti-migration stance.

Inger Stojberg belonged to the conservative-liberal Venstre opposition party, which was previously in power. She was stripped of her parliamentary mandate and ministerial position following a jail sentence she received in February 2021 for illegally separating asylum-seeking couples during her tenure as integration and migration minister.

The priorities of her new party include reform of the Danish healthcare system, a green transition and a tough stance on immigration. Speaking to the *Skive Folkeblad* newspaper, Stojberg described her party as one in which "civic common sense will be the focal point". She added that the Danish Democrats "are not a protest party. On the contrary. If we are elected to parliament, we will enter into negotiations and settlements." [Euractiv]

The new party's leader collected the 20,000 signatures required to be able to run in elections in just one week. [Politiken]

Morten Messerschmidt, the leader of the rival far-right Danish People's Party, criticised Stojberg's planned policies, calling them "old wine in new bottles." [TV2] [dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

## Denmark to keep F-16 fleet active amid Russian threat

The Danish ministry of defence has announced that it plans to keep the country's ageing F-16 combat jet fleet active, as it assesses the need to maintain an increased aerial presence in light of Russian aggression in Europe.

Denmark, a member of NATO, is to earmark EUR 134 million to keep the American-made jets in the sky until 2027, marking a change from previous plans to phase out these planes from 2024. [dr.dk]

The F-16 Falcon has been in service with the Danish air force since the 1980s and is due to be replaced by the more modern F-35 Lightning II fighter. In 2016, the defence ministry had assessed that Denmark would require only four combat aircraft to patrol the country's airspace, and made purchases based on that assumption. [Reuters]

As Russia's war on Ukraine continues, Danish Defence Minister Morten Bodskov said: "The defence of NATO territory to the east is more central than at any other time in recent times. Therefore, we are extending the operational capacity for the F-16, while the new F-35 aircraft are being phased in."

Since February, Denmark has faced increasing airspace violations from Russian aircraft and has scrambled jets in response.

(cg/pk)

## Denmark: Three killed in shopping centre massacre

Three people were killed and seven were injured when Denmark experienced one of the worst mass shootings in its history on July 3. The alleged perpetrator, described by police as an "ethnic Dane", was seen in footage walking through a shopping mall in Copenhagen before opening fire on shoppers with what witnesses described as a large rifle. [Politiken] [Reuters]

The gunman reportedly selected his victims at random. The Fields mall, which is one of the largest in Scandinavia, was filled with hundreds of shoppers at the time. [Dr.dk]

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen condemned the "cruel attack" which she described as

“incomprehensible. Heartbreaking. Pointless.” [Euronews]

A 22-year-old suspect was taken into custody by armed police shortly after the shootings and has been charged with three counts of manslaughter.

Copenhagen police Chief Soren Thomassen told a press conference that the motives of the gunman were “unknown”, and that “there is nothing to suspect terrorism.”

(cg/pk)

## Finland: Survey shows rising trust in politicians

Public trust in Finland’s politicians has doubled since last autumn, according to a survey by the country’s Business and Policy Forum. Information provided by lawmakers and other people in public offices like police officers was seen as reliable by 51 percent of respondents who were asked their views.

The figure marked a rise of 26 percentage points from a similar study in the autumn, carried out before neighbouring Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Commenting on the result, the managing director of the Finnish Business and Policy Forum said that trust in decision-makers rises when there is a crisis like a war. [yle] [Helsingin Sanomat]

About 2,000 people living in Finland took part in the survey.

(js/pk)

## Finland changes rules on borders amid fears of Russian hybrid attack

The Finnish parliament on July 7 agreed on new rules that would allow the closure of crossings along the country’s border with its eastern neighbour Russia in case of a “hybrid” attack.

Many in Finland, which along with Sweden is on course for a fast-track entry into NATO, fear that Moscow could mount a hybrid operation by sending large numbers of migrants to the Russian-Finnish border.

Last year, waves of mostly Middle Eastern migrants descended on the border between Belarus and Poland.

The European Union blamed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for the surge, which it said was organised and encouraged by Minsk in retaliation for sanctions imposed on Belarus by the bloc. [Europe Monthly November 2021]

The new rules in Finland would allow the authorities to prohibit crossings at certain border points, as well as to open only one crossing where asylum applications could be processed. [yle]

Three parties that are in the Finnish government – the Left Alliance, the Greens, and the Swedish People's Party of Finland – tried to block the new rules in parliament, fearing that these would conflict with international law, but were not able to do so. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Helsinki Times]

In June, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin met with European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen to talk about how to counteract potential hybrid threats while adhering to EU law. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(js/pk)

## Norway: PM calls on Muslims to stand firm against hate

Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store has urged Muslims in the country to condemn terrorism and hate speech. [aftenposten]

His call came less than a month after a gunman believed to be a radicalized Islamist killed two people and injured 21 in and near a gay bar in Norway's capital. The suspect is a 42-year-old Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin who had been known to the security services since 2015. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

Store's comments came in a speech on July 22 in remembrance of attacks 11 years ago, when, in Norway's worst peacetime atrocity, far-right, anti-Muslim extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people. [EU Observer]

(js/pk)

## Norway: Fast-track psychological help for politicians stopped after public backlash

Fast-track publicly funded psychological help for Norwegian politicians who are being investigated over

a commuter housing scandal was withdrawn after criticism that lawmakers were able to jump the queue for counselling.

A scandal erupted after it was revealed that special commuter housing intended for deputies living more than 40 kilometres from the parliament building was used by politicians living closer than that distance. The Auditor General's Office launched an investigation into such lawmakers. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

The members of parliament probed were offered psychological services. Help was offered to the politicians more quickly than normally possible in Norway, which has an average waiting time of 45 days for mental health care. [aftenposten]

People on social media criticised the measure, pointing out that ordinary citizens face a long wait before receiving psychological help. [aftenposten]

(js/pk)

## Norway: Gov't intervenes to end strike by oil and gas workers

The Norwegian government exercised special powers on July 5 to intervene and end a strike in the petroleum sector that could have further impaired Europe's energy supplies, which have been hit as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine.

Norway is Europe's second largest energy supplier. European gas prices fell after the end of the strike, staged by Norwegian oil and gas workers demanding higher wages.

The industrial action could have cut Norway's gas exports by some 60 percent if not for the intervention of the government, which can end strikes in special cases. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The EU is trying to reduce its dependency on Russian energy in response to Moscow's war on Ukraine. [CNN] [CNBC] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(js/pk)

## Norway: Feminist who said men cannot be lesbians could face jail

A Norwegian feminist who asserted that men cannot be lesbians or mothers could face a three-year jail sentence after she was accused of hate speech.

Christina Ellingsen stated on national TV at the beginning of 2022 that a transgender woman "cannot be a mother".

She was reported for hate speech by Christina Jentoft, an advisor on gender diversity for the Norwegian Organisation for Sexual and Gender Diversity and a transgender woman. Jentoft also claimed that Ellingsen had harassed her over a long period of time. [dagbladet]

Ellingsen is the leader of Women's Declaration International Norway (WDI), an advocacy group, which released a statement announcing support for her. [WDI]

(js/pk)

## Norway: New rules force large firms to comply with basic human rights

New rules that came into force in Norway on July 1 oblige large domestic firms and all foreign enterprises to comply with basic human rights and to give consumers background information about the goods they buy.

Under the new Transparency Act, customers can ask companies about workers' salaries, working hours and about whether firms use child labour. Such questions must be answered within three weeks. [nrk]

The new rules also require all larger enterprises in Norway and foreign companies that sell goods and services in Norway to identify potential negative impacts on fundamental human rights and working conditions in their supply chain and to solve these as well as releasing an annual statement on how such issues are being tackled. [Global Compliance News]

(js/pk)

## Norway: Prostitution network uncovered

Norway has charged four people with human trafficking after the authorities uncovered a prostitution network which reportedly transported

almost 200 women, mainly citizens of Ukraine, to the country to sell sex for money.

Eight people have been accused of organised prostitution. A similar network was found to be operating in Sweden. [nrk] [bb-cntv]

(js/pk)

## Sweden's indigenous population affected by mining plans

Sweden wants to expand its mining sector amid international demand for minerals and metals needed for green technologies. But the plans conflict with the rights of the indigenous Sami people and their traditional reindeer herding industry, according to the UN.

The government plans to establish several new mines across Sweden in the years ahead to produce iron, lead, gold and copper. Earlier this year Stockholm granted a permit for an iron ore mine in Kallak, northern Sweden, in a move that drew sharp criticism from the United Nations. [Dagens Nyheter] [Europe Monthly April 2022]

After a visit to the site in Kallak at the beginning of June, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples warned that Sweden is not respecting the conventions it has signed to protect the Sami people's rights. [Dagens Nyheter]

However, Stockholm has put two measures in place to fulfill its obligations. Since March this year, the government is obliged to consult representatives of the Sami in matters that may affect them, and a special committee has been set up to review the Sami's rights. [Dagens Nyheter]

But the committee's report will not be finished until 2025 and Sami representatives fear that carrying out the current mining plans will gravely impact their reindeer herding industry. [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

## Half of Sweden's fighter pilots may take leave in row over pay: report

Half of Sweden's fighter pilots could simultaneously take leave of absence this autumn following a dispute

with their bosses over pay and pensions in the middle of international tensions caused by Russia's war on Ukraine, Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter has reported.

Pilots are dissatisfied with what they say is the Swedish air force's unwillingness to increase wages, which have seen nearly no changes in the last 20 years, and to lower the retirement age again, which in 2016 was suddenly raised by 12 years. [Dagens Nyheter]

The dispute has culminated in a decision by many pilots to apply for leave of absence after the summer unless their demands are met, while others have already quit their job. The Swedish armed forces cannot deny requests for such leave, but can only postpone them for half a year.

With the air force already short of pilots, the move by airmen could severely erode Sweden's defence capabilities amid a deteriorating security situation in Europe. [TV4]

The Swedish air force chief, Major General Karl-Johan Edstrom, said the move by pilots signified a "crisis." He appealed to pilots to give the air force another year to find a solution, and proposed changes to working conditions that will cost EUR 57 million over the next 10 years. [Swedish Armed Forces] [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

## Scandinavian Airlines' pilot strike ends

Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) reached a deal with pilots' unions on July 19 that ended a 15-day strike which had cast doubt over the carrier's future.

The financially troubled airline filed for US bankruptcy protection on the second day of the industrial action, which affected 3,700 flights and 380,000 passengers, and cost SAS around USD 10 million a day.

The strike was triggered by dissatisfaction with pay and working conditions at SAS, in which the governments of Denmark and Sweden each hold a 21.8 percent stake.

Europe's aviation sector has been experiencing widespread disruption to traffic, as rising costs of living cause unions to demand wage increases. [Dagens Nyheter] [Reuters] [AP]

(phr/pk)

## Sweden: Agency publishes plan for strengthened civil defence

Setting up more fuel and food depots and creating robust digital networks are needed to strengthen Sweden's civil defence capabilities, an agency responsible for public preparedness for major accidents, natural disasters and war has said as Russia continues its onslaught against Ukraine.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) was tasked with proposing measures that reflect the new security situation after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Among the measures the agency proposes in a recent report is reactivating civil duty, which has been dormant since 2010. Before then, citizens were trained to assume important functions, for example in the country's rescue services, in the event of a conflict.

The agency estimates that raising Sweden's level of preparedness would require around EUR 1 billion in upcoming years. But the assigned budget for this year only amounts to a tenth of this figure. [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

## Sweden: Far-right sympathiser jailed over home bomb factory

A 25-year-old Swede was sentenced to three and a half years in prison on July 22 for possession of illegal weapons after police discovered a bomb factory at his home in November last year.

During the search, several weapons and 3D-printed weapon parts were found, as well as chemicals often used for the manufacturing of bombs.

The man had also been charged with preparing an attack but was acquitted on this count as the court found that he "had the knowledge and possibility to produce explosive devices, but there were no concrete plans to bring about an explosion with danger for other people's life or health or damage of property." [The Local]

The court found that the man was a member of the Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement and sympathized with far-right extremist Anders Breivik, who killed 77

people in an attack in Norway 11 years ago. [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

# International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

### EU approves extra EUR 500m for Ukrainian military effort

The European Union will provide a further EUR 500 million for weapons and equipment for the Ukrainian armed forces, EU Council President Charles Michel said on July 18 after consultations between the foreign ministers of the bloc's member states in Brussels. [Politico]

The EU approved a first package of EUR 500 million for Ukraine at the end of February, followed by three more in March, April and May. According to the EU, the money will be used to finance weapons, but also items like personal protective equipment, medical supplies and fuel. "Ukraine needs more weapons, we will supply them," said the European Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell. [Kurier]

The funding from the bloc comes from the so-called European Peace Facility, a new EU financial instrument which can be used to strengthen armed forces in partner countries and which is limited to EUR 5 billion. If the Russian invasion continues, however, it is unclear how the European Union can continue to provide financial support to Ukraine, as half of the seven-year

facility's resources have already been allocated after only five months, according to Reuters.

(acn/pk)

## Turkey ready to block Finnish, Swedish NATO entry if vows not kept

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he is ready to block Finland's and Sweden's bids to join NATO if the two countries fail to deliver on their pledges to counteract terrorism.

After Finland and Sweden launched their membership bids in May, Turkey brandished its veto right to prevent the two countries from joining the Western military alliance. Erdogan said he opposed Helsinki and Stockholm entering NATO because of their alleged willingness to host Kurdish militants linked to what Ankara considers to be terrorist groups. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

In June, Turkey lifted its veto as Sweden and Finland promised counter-terrorism measures and to allow arms exports. Ankara said it would closely watch whether the two Nordic countries keep their promises, and that it was ready to halt their NATO bids if they do not. [Reuters]

In an interview with a Finnish media outlet on July 15, Finland's President Sauli Niinisto said that the prospect of Russia and Turkey moving closer to each other did not have any effect on Helsinki and Stockholm's NATO entry paths.

(js/pk)

## Hungary's PM says EU sanctions have failed, plans gas deal with Russia

Hungary's prime minister has announced his country will ink a contract with Russia to buy an extra 700 million cubic metres of gas before the autumn, and claimed that the EU's sanctions on Moscow over the war in Ukraine have failed. [Euronews]

Viktor Orban, who has been one of Moscow's closest allies in Europe and has opposed potential EU sanctions on Russian gas, also called for the United States to hold talks with Russia to end the war in Ukraine, saying that Kiev cannot win the conflict.

Speaking on July 23, Orban said: “A new strategy is needed which should focus on peace talks and drafting a good peace proposal…instead of winning the war”. [Reuters]

He said the talks could only occur between Russia and the United States because Moscow wants security guarantees that only Washington can give. [Radio Free Europe]

Orban, who was re-elected for a fourth term in April, reiterated that Budapest would stay out of the conflict in neighbouring Ukraine, adding that Kiev would never win the war, despite receiving American training and weapons, because Russia’s army had “asymmetric superiority”.

The Hungarian leader, whose country is heavily reliant on Russian energy, also criticised the EU’s strategy on sanctions. He said these were “not destabilising Moscow”, and that the bloc could not continue with them. Referring to Italy, Britain, Estonia and Bulgaria, Orban said European governments, hit by high inflation and rocketing energy prices, were “falling like dominoes”.

He added that the EU should not pick a side but should stand “between” Kiev and Moscow.

Orban said that in spite of Western strategy assuming most of the world would align with Ukraine against Russia,  “not the Chinese, the Indians, the Brazilians, South Africa, the Arab world, nor Africa” had sided with Kiev. “[We] are sitting in a car with four flat tyres. It is absolutely clear that the war cannot be won like this.”

During the same address, in which he criticised Germany, Orban sparked global condemnation after alluding to Nazi World War II gas chambers, and for saying that Hungarians “do not want to become peoples of mixed race”. [Washington Post]

The statement caused the resignation of a long-time advisor and friend of Orban’s, who denounced his words as “a pure Nazi speech” that was “worthy of Goebbels.” [The Guardian]

The Hungarian prime minister later defended his statement in a press conference during a visit to Austria on July 28, calling it a “cultural, civilisational standpoint”.  [Euractiv] [Hungary Today]

(qv/pk)

## Conflict between 'despotism and freedom' has just begun, warns Austrian president

Russian leader Vladimir Putin will seek to undermine unity and solidarity in Europe, and a conflict between "despotism and freedom" has just begun, Austria's president said in a speech on July 22.

Alexander Van der Bellen said he expected the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to get worse in the future. He added that this could pose a challenge to Austria's democracy and institutions.

As Russia could stop delivering gas, Vienna should become more independent of foreign supplies and cut unnecessary energy consumption, Van der Bellen said, adding that challenging years lie ahead for Austria.

Van der Bellen hopes to be reelected on October 9. In the past, he had been criticised for not speaking out in times of political crisis. [Der Standard] [Kurier]

(phr/pk)

## Croatia set to adopt euro on January 1

The European Union has opened the way to Croatia adopting the euro on January 1, when the country is set to become the 20th member of the eurozone.

EU finance ministers formally approved the step on July 12 after a long process. Their decision means that Croatia can introduce the bloc's single currency at the start of next year at a conversion rate of one euro to 7.53 Croatian kuna. [Euractiv]

Croatia had to meet a range of criteria in order to adopt the single currency, such as price and exchange rate stability, sound public finances and economic convergence with the other countries in the eurozone. [Euractiv] [Associated Press]

The adoption of the euro by Croatia will have a limited economic impact internationally because it is a relatively poor and small country, according to the Associated Press news agency. However, the move will place Zagreb at the core of the EU and give it more political clout, AP added.

Croatia applied to become a member of the European Union in 2003 and joined ten years later. The last country to become part of the eurozone was Lithuania in 2015.

(jg/pk)

## Czech PM optimistic about Croatia joining Schengen zone next year

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, has said he is optimistic about Croatia becoming part of the border-free Schengen area in 2023.

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at a meeting with Fiala in Prague that Zagreb wants to join the area in January. Plenkovic added that Croatia has received a report by the European Commission attesting that the country fulfils the requirements for such a move in all eight domains. [Euractiv]

Fiala said that Croatia's entry next year might be possible and that he has seen strong support among EU leaders. [Euractiv]

The Schengen area comprises EU countries except for Croatia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania. Bulgaria and Romania, as well as Croatia, are in the process of joining. Meanwhile, non-EU states Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein are part of the borderless zone. [European Commission]

(jg/pk)

## Brussels calls for strengthened rule of law in EU states

The European Commission has said in a new report on the rule of law that it is worried about the state of judicial independence in several EU countries, adding that corruption is a "serious concern" for the bloc's citizens.

The annual report is the third of its kind by the EU's executive and was published on July 13 amid Russia's continuing onslaught against Ukraine.

European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders said: "The unprovoked and unjustified Russian military aggression against Ukraine shows that protecting and promoting the rule of law is more important than ever." He added that the EU would only remain credible "if we uphold the rule of law at home and if we continue to reinforce the rule of law culture."

The report noted that a survey released in July by Eurobarometer, a polling instrument used by EU institutions, found that 68 percent of citizens in EU member states believe that corruption is widespread in their country.

“In some member states, investigations and prosecutions into corruption cases are lengthy and judgments still lacking, especially in high-level cases,” the European Commission said.

In a set of recommendations for Hungary -- which has clashed with the European Union amid accusations that nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s government has misused EU funds, undermined democracy and media freedom, and influenced the country’s courts -- the Commission said Budapest should “establish a robust track record of investigations, prosecutions and final judgments for high-level corruption cases.”

The Commission also said Hungary needed to strengthen mechanisms to improve the editorial independence of public media, taking into account European standards.

On Poland, which has also been locked in a row with Brussels over accusations that the ruling nationalists have trampled on core democratic values and the political independence of the judiciary, the Commission said that Warsaw should separate the function of justice minister from that of the prosecutor-general and “ensure functional independence of the prosecution service from the government.”

The Commission added that Poland should ensure it adheres to transparent and non-discriminatory procedures when granting operating licences to media outlets.

European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova said: “Unfortunately, concerns still remain in some member states, especially when it comes to the independence of judiciary.” She added: “Russia’s war in Ukraine is another reminder of the importance of our work to uphold and promote rule of law in the EU and beyond.”

(pk)

## Police target human traffickers in raids across Europe

Police from 22 European countries investigating human trafficking detained over 130 suspects in a series of raids across the continent, law enforcement agency Europol said on July 5.

Officers added that they had identified over 100 possible victims of trafficking after carrying out checks on close to a million people at sea, land and air borders, including widely used routes into Europe.

More than 22,480 law enforcement officers took part in the operation in June, including police in Britain, Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands, as well as officials from international agency Interpol and from Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency. [Reuters] [Europol] [DW]

(jk/pk)

## North Macedonia and Albania begin EU accession talks after landmark North Macedonian decision

Accession negotiations for the two Balkan states started on July 19, in what many have claimed was a major step toward full EU membership for the two and a landmark moment for further European integration in the Western Balkans. [Euronews]

The process was able to move forward after the North Macedonian parliament voted on July 16 to amend its constitution to recognise the country's Bulgarian minority. In response, Bulgaria lifted its previous veto on North Macedonia membership, removing the final hurdle blocking the Balkan nation from starting accession talks.

The vote was met with opposition by the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party bloc, which has led daily protests since the beginning of July. It claims that such a decision threatens North Macedonian language and culture. [Aljazeera] [Reuters]

The resolution of Bulgaria's previous objection also allows Albania to proceed with its EU integration process, which was stalled as a result of it being part of the same package deal as North Macedonia. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Slovakia aims to put foreign policy divisions aside as it heads Visegrad Group

Central Europe's Visegrad Group (V4) regional cooperation platform is expected to push internal quarrels into the background as Slovakia begins its 12-month term chairing the bloc, taking over from Hungary after what proved to be a controversial term for Budapest amid Russia's war on Ukraine.

Comprising Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Visegrad group was founded in 1991 as the group of countries, newly freed from the Soviet yoke, sought to integrate themselves into Western and European institutions such as the EU and NATO. Intended to provide a unified voice to amplify the needs of the region in European politics, Visegrad members have since become a hurdle for Brussels in the implementation of European-wide policy and have recently fallen out with each other.

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic staunchly resisted a decision by EU leaders to impose mandatory quotas aimed at relocating up to 160,000 asylum seekers at the peak of Europe's migration crisis in 2015.

The Visegrad group was used as a platform from which Eurosceptic and populist stances were propelled to the forefront of European politics. Ex-Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, incumbent Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, as well as Poland's ruling conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party all faced the wrath of the EU.

Most recently, Poland and Hungary were steadfast in their support for each other, opposing EU attempts to counter sweeping legal changes in Poland that were criticised as eroding the rule of law. However, amid Orban's continued close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, ties between Warsaw and Budapest have become strained. [Spectator]

This culminated in Poland, as well as the Czech Republic, pulling out of a Visegrad defence ministers' meeting. Hungary had to cancel the gathering, which had been scheduled for March.

Poland's support for Ukraine after the latter was invaded by Russia has led to historically unparalleled relations between Warsaw and Kiev. Meanwhile, Hungary was criticised for not throwing its weight behind sanctions against Russia and refusing to allow military aid for Ukraine to pass through its territory. Instead it chose to duel with Kiev in a war of words.

Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok said in May he wanted to "significantly mute the foreign policy dimension" of the Visegrad Group, while bringing the group's shared goals to the fore. [Slovak Spectator]

During its presidency of the Visegrad Group, which began on July 1, Bratislava will focus on promoting regional infrastructure development and cooperation in green and digital transitions. [Aktuality] [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

## ECHR: Turkey failed to follow ECHR judgement to release activist Kavala

Turkey failed to implement a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgement from 2019 to release businessman and activist Osman Kavala from pre-trial detention, the ECHR found in a follow-up judgement on July 11. [ECHR, Kavala v. Turkey] [DW]

Kavala was arrested by Turkish authorities in October 2017 and put on trial for allegedly being involved in the Gezi Park protests against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regime in 2013. In 2019, the ECHR ordered Turkey in a judgement to release Kavala, who was later acquitted by a Turkish court for lack of evidence.

However, Kavala was not released and only hours later, new charges were brought against Kavala for allegedly being involved in the 2016 attempted coup d'état and for espionage. On April 25, Kavala was sentenced to life without parole for attempting to overthrow the government. The judgement was widely met with shock and criticism. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

Kavala spent four years and three months in pre-trial detention. The Council of Europe human rights organisation welcomed the new ECHR judgement and called upon Turkey to release Kavala immediately. [Council of Europe]

This was only the second time that the ECHR "has ever conducted infringement proceedings and determined that a member state has not complied with a European Court judgement," said Helen Duffy of the Turkey Litigation Support Project. "It is an acknowledgement of Turkey's ever-deepening rule of law crisis, which has involved seriously undermining the Convention system and the escalating use of criminal law for political purposes." [HRW]

(aml/gc)

## Council of Europe report criticises overcrowding and violence in UK prisons

Chronic overcrowding and violence remain a problem in UK prisons, a report by the Council of Europe human rights organisation's committee for the prevention of torture said.

The report was based on periodic visits by the committee to UK prisons and psychiatric clinics in June 2021. It noted that longstanding problems such as poor living conditions and overcrowding had only been exacerbated through inter-prisoner violence and violence by prisoner staff since 2016.

The report also said that the number of incidents of violence could have been even higher if prisoners weren't confined to their cells for 23 hours per day without any purposeful occupation.

In psychiatric clinics, the report acknowledged good to excellent material conditions as well as constructive treatment plans. However, it called upon the UK to reconsider compulsory treatment measures and requirements for consent to treatment. [Council of Europe]

In its response to the report, the UK presented its plan to expand the prison estate and to hire more staff to address the structural problems.

(aml/gc)

## Development bank gives Ukraine green light, approves loans to help refugees

The Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB) has given the green light for Ukraine to join the body and allocated EUR 465 million to support the bank's member countries in taking in Ukrainian refugees.

The CEB's 42 member states on July 8 agreed to exempt Kiev from any payment requirement for joining. While Ukraine has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1995, it is only now joining the human rights organisation's development bank. [Ukraine Business News]

The CEB also approved loans to Germany (EUR 200 million), Lithuania (EUR 120 million), Ireland (EUR 20 million), and Spain (EUR 100 million) to help them with hosting Ukrainian refugees. The money is mostly

intended to go towards social housing, health and social care, and education. [Council of Europe]

In June, the CEB approved loans with a total value of EUR 1.2 billion, including a record EUR 450 million loan to Poland that had at the time welcomed more than 4 million people fleeing the war in Ukraine [CEB 1], as well as other loans to the Czech Republic, Italy and Bosnia and Herzegovina. [CEB 2]

(aml/pk)

## Hungary defiant on global minimum tax, amid tensions with EU, US

An economic affairs panel of the Hungarian parliament on July 11 voiced support for Prime Minister Viktor Orban's opposition to a global minimum corporate tax of 15 percent, a stance which has caused tensions with the European Union and the US. [Reuters]

Over 130 countries agreed on the minimum tax in October 2021 after a deal was brokered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. [OECD]

The agreement needed to be unanimously approved by EU nations in the European Council, but Hungary in June decided to withhold its consent at the last minute, arguing that due to economic problems related to the war in Ukraine, the timing of such a deal was not right. [euobserver]

Several policymakers described Budapest's veto as "legislative hostage-taking" while an EU diplomat said that Hungary would try to blackmail the European Commission into financial concessions. [Politico]

The United States on July 9 reacted to Budapest's opposition by terminating a 1979 tax deal with Hungary. [Washington Post] The European Union is working on alternative ways to implement a global corporate tax. [European Parliament] [Politico]

(jk/pk)

## NATO chief says Ireland would be welcome in defence bloc

Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg said that Ireland would be welcome in the alliance if it chose to apply for membership. He added that NATO respected

Ireland's neutrality and that there would never be any pressure on a country to join the alliance. [The Irish Times]

Ireland is already part of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme that aligns its military capabilities with NATO standards, but the current government has no intention to join the alliance. A majority of voters oppose a change to the country's military neutrality. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Examiner] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(jv/gc)

## Russia will withdraw cosmonauts from International Space Station by 2028

Russia plans to withdraw its cosmonauts permanently from the International Space Station (ISS) by 2028 when its own satellite outpost is completed.

Yuri Borisov, the recently appointed head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, told his counterparts at the American space agency NASA on July 26 that Russia would pull out from the ISS after 2024. NASA's space operations chief Kathy Lueders told Reuters a day later that Russian officials clarified their position, saying they would keep flying their cosmonauts to ISS until Russia's own space station is operational. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

The flight director of the ISS's Russian segment Vladimir Solovyov said in an interview published on Roscomos's website that Russia must remain on the ISS until its space station, known as ROSS, is built. He expects it to be in orbit in 2028. [Roscosmos] [The Verge]

ISS is a joint cooperation of the American, Russian, Canadian, Japanese and European space agencies and is a science laboratory that has been orbiting 250 miles above Earth since 1998. NASA plans to decommission the ageing satellite in 2031. [The Guardian][BBC]

(qv/gc)

## Erdogan says words from Russia, Iran on its Kurdish security fears were not enough

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a trilateral meeting with his Russian and Iranian counterparts in Tehran that they understood Ankara's

security concerns regarding the Kurdish YPG militia but words were not enough, warning that the Kurdish group was trying to divide Syria with foreign support. [Associated Press]

Erdogan said the two countries should help Turkey in battling the Kurdish YPG and other militias in Syria. He met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

In a joint statement, the three leaders said they "rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives, and expressed their determination to stand against separatist agendas." [Associated Press]

Raisi said all parties urged expelling American forces from Syria, while Putin denounced what he described as "attempts to cement unlawful foreign military presence and foment separatist sentiments" and emphasised that all areas east of the Euphrates River should return to Syrian government control.

The US opposes Turkish military plans in Syria. Dana Stroul, the senior U.S. Defense Department official for the Middle East says, "ISIS is going to take advantage of that campaign, not to mention the humanitarian impact,". [Foreign Policy]

During the meeting, Erdogan made Putin wait for nearly a minute before entering the room for talks and then praised what he described as Russia's "very, very positive approach" during last week's grain talks in Istanbul. Erdogan said he hoped a deal will be made, and "the result that will emerge will have a positive impact on the whole world."

Turkey, a NATO member, has opposed Russia in bloody conflicts in Syria and Libya and sold lethal drones that Ukrainian forces have used to attack Russian troops. Ankara hasn't imposed sanctions on the Kremlin, making it a sorely needed partner for Moscow. [Associated Press] [Al-Monitor]

(fw/gc)

## Albania, Serbia and Greece do not meet minimum standards required to curb human trafficking, US says

Albania, Greece and Serbia, among other countries, failed to meet the minimum standards for preventing

human trafficking in 2022, the US State Department Trafficking in Persons report said. The report stressed the importance of prosecuting state officials involved in human trafficking.

The report analysed the situation in each of these states separately. In Albania, despite relative efforts and the dismissal of an accused police officer, there have been no efforts to prosecute any accused officials, nor has there been sufficient screening of potential victims entering or leaving the country. [Euractiv]

Although Greece is also making efforts to curb trafficking, there has been a noted lack of sufficient screening of migrants entering the country, whereas government policies are discouraging victims from reporting their situation to the authorities and seeking help out of fear of being deported.

Serbia is in a similar situation, with minimal measures to reduce sex trafficking. There have also been increased reports of forced labour, particularly among Vietnamese immigrants. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Russia invited to ASEAN meeting, deepens ties with Asian countries

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has been invited by Cambodia, the current host of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to attend ASEAN's upcoming regional forum on August 5 as Moscow tries to build ties with Asian countries.

Russian defence officials met with Myanmar's top general Min Aung Hlaing on July 17. They pledged to deepen military-technological ties and cooperation on nuclear energy. While Moscow has not formally recognised the military as Myanmar's government, Russia is one of the most important supporters of the Myanmar regime. [Aljazeera]

Lavrov made a two-day visit to Vietnam on July 6, marking the countries' 10th anniversary of comprehensive strategic partnership. Lavrov called Vietnam a "key partner of Russia in ASEAN" and thanked the country for supporting Russia. Vietnam has yet not condemned Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

On July 5, Lavrov met with his Mongolian counterpart Batmunkh Battsetseg in Ulan Bator, where they discussed implementing agreements such as trade,

energy, and humanitarian affairs. Mongolia seeks to maintain friendly relations with both Moscow and Beijing while also engaging with the US. [see Asia in Review No.28, July/2022, 2]

(ar/gc)

## EU concludes gas agreement with Azerbaijan

The European Union will import 20 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Azerbaijan after the signing of a new supply agreement between the bloc and the Caucasus energy producer.

From next year, Europe will receive 12 billion cubic metres of natural gas, compared with the 8 billion cubic metres supplied currently from Azerbaijan. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev signed on July 18 a Memorandum of Understanding on the future gas supplies. [European Commission]

This will help compensate for cuts in supplies of Russian gas and contribute significantly to Europe's security of supply, von der Leyen said in a statement. Before Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Russian gas supplies to Europe were unreliable, she said, adding that the EU has decided to diversify away from Russia and "to turn towards more reliable, trustworthy partners." [Euractiv] [Tagesschau]

Von der Leyen and Aliyev discussed cooperation in the field of renewable energies, which could include offshore wind power and the supply of green hydrogen. Furthermore, EU Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson said that the cooperation will accelerate the deployment of renewables and address methane emissions. [Offshore Technology]

(acn/gc)

## Austria topping up gas storage facilities amid concern in Germany

Austria will in August start to top up the Haidach gas storage facility near Salzburg, one of Europe's largest, after months during which Russian co-owner Gazprom has not filled its share of the site's capacity. [Der Standard]

The Haidach facility has mainly been used to supply gas to the German state of Bavaria, while other storage sites served Austria. But now Vienna has decided to connect the facility to the Austrian grid to ensure supplies in the winter. [Kurier]

That decision triggered concern in Germany. Bavaria's Minister-President Markus Soder fears that his region will experience gas shortages. Soder urged the German government, which agreed on the shared use of Haidach with Austria in July, to clarify how much gas from the facility will flow to Bavaria in the future. [Tagesschau]

Vienna is heavily dependent on Russian gas and fears that Moscow will cut off supplies following the invasion of Ukraine. Austria aims to have all its gas storage facilities, which are currently at half their capacity, 80 percent filled by autumn. [Reuters]

(phr/pk)

## Czech Republic secures gas via Netherlands

Prague has secured 3 billion cubic metres of gas capacity a year via a Dutch LNG terminal, as well as transit routes, according to Czech Industry Minister Jozef Sikela. [Reuters]

Czech gas storage facilities are currently 77 percent full. Including the additional Dutch supplies, the Czech Republic will be able to cover its consumption until March 2023.

Annual Czech LNG consumption is 9.4 billion cubic metres, of which 98 percent has been supplied by Russia. Sikela said that Prague is looking for other sources. [Radio Prague International]

(jg/pk)

## Croatia opens bridge criticised by Bosnia

Croatia opened a bridge on July 26 connecting two parts of its Adriatic sea coast while bypassing a strip of Bosnia, which has criticised the project.

Croatia and Bosnia were both part of Yugoslavia. After the latter broke up in the 1990s, two areas of southern Croatia were left separated by a strip of Bosnian territory. Until now, commuters and tourists have had

to undergo border controls. The south is important for Croatia because of its thriving tourist trade. [Associated Press] [Euractiv]

Croatia had plans for building the Peljesac bridge in 2007, but these were stopped due to financing issues. In 2017, the European Union provided EUR 357 million for the construction, covering the majority of the total EUR 526 million cost. [Associated Press] [Euractiv]

The 2.4 kilometre bridge was built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation, which won the tender in 2018. The project "illustrates friendly relations" between China and Croatia as well as between Beijing and the EU, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang said in a video message. [Associated Press]

However, Bosnian officials have criticised the project, saying that there are unresolved border issues with Croatia and that the bridge hinders access to Bosnia's own coastline.

The Associated Press described the bridge as a rare venture amid worries in the EU about Beijing's efforts to increase its economic leverage by ploughing money into infrastructure projects.

(jg/pk)

## Erdogan to distance himself from Cyprus peace talks: report

Turkey's president has indicated that he aims to keep his distance from any new efforts to resume the peace process in Cyprus, the In Cyprus news outlet has reported.

Cyprus's President Nicos Anastasiades exchanged views with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the Cyprus problem during a NATO summit in Madrid from June 28 to 30. [In Cyprus]

Anastasiades stressed the importance of resolving the long-standing issue of the division of Cyprus with the help of the United Nations, and expressed openness to resuming talks with his Turkish counterpart. Erdogan, in turn, said that Turkish Cypriot leaders were mainly responsible for reunification talks. [In Cyprus]

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded the island after a brief Greek-inspired coup. Turkish Cypriots later declared independence in the northern part of the country. Greek Cypriots control two-thirds of the island.

Meanwhile, Britain's new minister for Europe has expressed his support for a "bicommunal federation" as a UN settlement option for Cyprus. [Cyprus Mail]

Europe Minister Graham Stuart made the suggestion on July 13 during an event at the Houses of Parliament in London. Ioannis Kasoulides, the Cypriot foreign minister, was invited as a keynote speaker. [Cyprus Mail]

Stuart stressed the importance of sticking to existing UN parameters, saying that they would serve the interests of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots. [Cyprus Mail] Cyprus gained independence in 1960 after 144 years as part of the British Empire.

(ta/pk)

## Germany, Finland agree deal to rescue gas importer after dispute

Berlin and Helsinki on July 22 announced an agreement to rescue Uniper, a Germany-based gas importer whose largest shareholder is a Finnish energy company, after a dispute over who should bail the firm out.

When Uniper asked for additional funding from the government in Berlin because of high gas prices due to falling supply from Russia, Germany's economy minister said that part of the rescue should be taken on by the biggest stakeholder in the company. He told a German radio station that "it's right to consider models where the owners also bear an obligation." [Reuters]

Uniper is Germany's largest gas importer. Its biggest shareholder is Finnish energy company Fortum. At the beginning of July, Uniper turned to the German government to negotiate a possible bailout. [Reuters]

After a visit by Finland's Minister for European Affairs and Ownership, Tytti Tuppurainen, to Berlin, the two countries announced on July 22 that an agreement had been struck to help Uniper. The rescue package includes Germany taking a 30 percent equity stake in the gas firm as well as handing the company a EUR 7.7 billion lifeline. [Helsinki Times] [Euronews]

(js/pk)

## Greece, Bulgaria complete natural gas interconnector

The Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria that will ship gas from Azerbaijan to Europe has been completed after a number of delays. [FinancialMirror].

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his Bulgairan counterpart, Kiril Petkov, opened the valve on July 8 as part of both countries' efforts to increase energy security. The 3 million cubic-metre capacity pipeline will bring gas from Azerbaijan to Bulgaria. A trial run is planned for August. [BalkanGreenEnergyNews] [FinancialMirror]

The pipeline, which was scheduled to be active from July 1, will undergo a trial run in August. The interconnector is expected to be fully operational from October 1. [FinancialMirror].

Mitsotakis called the pipeline an "energy bridge" that will help Europe strengthen its energy security. Petkov said that the pipeline will "transform the energy map of the region." [Reuters].

The pipeline will reduce Europe's reliance on Russian gas and increase energy security through the diversification of energy supplies. [BalkanGreenEnergyNews

(ib/gc)

## Norway and EU agree on closer cooperation on batteries

Norway and the European Union have pledged to work together on raw materials and battery value chains in an effort to tackle climate change.

The goal of such closer cooperation is to "further strengthen the political relations and economic ties between the EU and Norway" and to deepen their partnership in green industrial policies, according to a joint statement by the EU and Norway released during a visit by European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic to Oslo. [dn]

Several production plants are being planned in Norway to produce sustainable batteries using the country's access to minerals, metals and rare earths, which are vital to Europe's plans for producing sustainable batteries. [Reuters]

(js/pk)

## Serbia, Kosovo fail to reach deal on revealing missing person grave sites

Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti announced that a long-awaited deal with Serbia that would allow both sides to reveal grave sites has been delayed due to terminology disputes.

The deal was part of European Union-mediated talks between Pristina and Belgrade to reveal war grave locations of previously missing persons of both Albanian and Serbian ethnic origin. The families of the missing victims expressed their disappointment and urged both governments to work towards a quicker solution. [Balkan Insight] [Albanian Telegraphic Agency]

Kurti claimed that the terminological dispute arises from Serbia's insistence on using the term "people who haven't been found" whereas Kosovo maintains that they should be labelled as "forced disappearances" to reflect the wartime conditions under which they went missing.

Belgrade has yet to respond, but EU representatives have claimed that they believe the two states are "close" to reaching a deal. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

## Tensions continue to rise between Turkey and Greece

Tensions between Greece and Turkey remain high despite promises by both sides to stop the escalation in their war of words.

On July 9, far-right Turkish politician, and long-time ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Devlet Bahceli displayed a map showing various Greek islands, including Lesbos, Crete and Rhodes as part of Turkey. Greek authorities were quick to react, claiming that the move was "aggressive and provocative." [Greek Reporter]

Previously, Erdogan had warned Greece to immediately demilitarise the Aegean islands and avoid actions that could "lead to regret." Greece maintains that militarising the islands is crucial to guarantee its national security due to constant Turkish overflights over the Aegean Sea and Greece's national airspace. Despite the two countries being NATO allies, they have

come close to conflict three times during the last half-century. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

After Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis speech to the US Congress earlier this year, where he affirmed Greece's hope that the US will support Greece by not selling F-16 military aircraft to Turkey, and where he was met with applause, prompting Erdogan states that he will no longer speak to his Greek counterpart.

Ankara now claims that the closure of four Turkish minority schools in Greece's Thrace region was politically and racially motivated. Greek authorities responded that the sole reason behind the closure was the low number of students attending and urged Turkey not to "turn reality on its head in order to put forward positions which are unsubstantiated." [Aljazeera] [Euronews]

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu urged Germany on July 29 to be an "honest broker" in mitigating the tensions between the countries and not to take sides with Greece. He accused Berlin of "Greek propaganda." [Associated Press]

With Turkey's newest drillship set to sail for gas and oil drilling operations in the Mediterranean Sea at the beginning of August, Cyprus and Greece plan to consult with other European Union members on how to respond to this. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

(hi-fw/gc)

## Sweden delivers more weapons to Ukraine

Sweden is sending additional anti-tank and support weapons as well as de-mining equipment to Ukraine, the ministry of defence in Stockholm has announced. The hardware, valued at EUR 46.5 million, was specifically requested by Kiev. [Reuters]

Sweden earlier this year sent surplus equipment from its armed forces and provided funds for Ukraine's defence.

While visiting Ukraine at the beginning of July, Sweden's Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson underlined the importance of providing long-term military, financial and humanitarian support to Kiev. She pointed out that Sweden, together with the EU, condemns Moscow's invasion, and demands that Russia be held accountable for crimes it has committed.

Andersson said her presence was important "to show Sweden's and the Swedish people's support for Ukraine in their fight for freedom and democracy." [Swedish government]

During a meeting with the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, Andersson discussed Stockholm's role in the reconstruction of Ukraine. Sweden could contribute by providing expertise in waste management and recycling. [Dagens Nyheter] [SVT]

(phr/pk)

## UK sends fighter jets to Sweden and Finland

Britain deployed six of its Royal Air Force fighter jets to Sweden and Finland for joint training exercises at the beginning of July as the two Nordic neighbours wait to be admitted to NATO amid international tensions caused by Russia's war on Ukraine. [BBC]

Stockholm and Helsinki decided to apply for NATO membership in May in a historic decision. Their bids received preliminary approval at a NATO summit in Madrid at the end of June, but the two Nordic states are not covered by the alliance's security guarantees until they officially join. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

Britain is among countries that have given security assurances to Sweden and Finland for the intervening period, with London underlining its declarations by sending the jets, a move requested by Stockholm and Helsinki.

The deployment is part of a series of exercises by the Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-led rapid reaction contingent focusing on security in the Baltic Sea region. Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist called the exercises "particularly important in today's challenging security environment." [Gov.UK]

(phr/pk)

## Macron's meeting with Saudi Crown Prince in Paris stirs controversy

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to talks at the Elysee Palace on July 28, marking a clear shift from the strong position France held against Riyadh following the

murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi government in 2018. [France 24]

France's president is eager to normalise relations with Saudi Arabia amid the war in Ukraine, which has caused a global energy and food crisis, and the rising regional influence of Iran, Russia, and China. [Al Jazeera]

But the brutal murder of the Washington Post journalist has cast a shadow over the visit, angering human rights groups who accuse the French government of undermining its public commitments to defend human rights. An aide to Macron told the AFP news agency that president Macron would raise the issue of human rights in a "general way, but will also take the chance to raise individual cases". [Al Jazeera] [France24] [BBC]

The incident, which took place at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul had tarnished the Crown Prince's image as an Arab reformer. Western leaders, including US President Joe Biden, had stated they wanted to make a "pariah" of the kingdom which for decades had been a key ally in Western efforts to contain Iran. [The Guardian]

As Western nations rally around leaders of the Gulf region to persuade them to increase oil production and bring prices down, the Crown Prince has emerged from international isolation into a position of power, reaffirming the Saudi kingdom's status as a key player on the global trading scene. His Paris visit came two weeks after he held talks with US President Joe Biden in Saudi Arabia. [Washington Post]

(la/gc)

## Poland, Israel agree to reinstate ambassadors after row over Holocaust restitution

Poland and Israel have agreed to mutually reinstate ambassadors in an attempt to improve diplomatic relations, which were strained over a Holocaust restitution law passed in Warsaw last year. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

The law introduced barriers for Holocaust survivors and their descendants trying to reclaim property seized from Jews by Poland's Nazi German occupiers during World War II and later kept by the country's postwar communist rulers. The law was condemned as "antisemitic and immoral" by Yair Lapid, now Israel's

premier, when he was foreign minister. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

Poland's government had said that the legislation – which was also criticised by the United States – was put in place to end uncertainty over property ownership and to prevent fraudulent claims. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters] [Polish Radio]

Israel recalled its ambassador from Warsaw after the law was passed in August 2021, and asked the Polish envoy to Israel, who was on holiday in his home country at the time, not to return. [Polish Radio] [Notes From Poland]

Almost a year later, Polish President Andrzej Duda and his Israeli counterpart Isaac Herzog spoke on July 4 and agreed to restore both countries' ambassadors. [Notes From Poland] [Polish Radio]

Duda said that relations between the two countries were being put "back on track" through the "restoration of relations on [an] ambassadorial level." [Notes From Poland]

Herzog, meanwhile, added that both presidents expressed hope "that any future issues between Poland and Israel will be solved through sincere and open dialogue and in a spirit of mutual respect." [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

## Tehran recalls envoy after Swedish court jails Iranian for political executions

Tehran recalled its ambassador to Stockholm on July 20 after a Swedish court sentenced a former Iranian official to life imprisonment for war crimes he committed in 1988 in an Iranian jail.

The court in Stockholm said on July 14 that 61-year-old Hamid Noury participated "in the executions of many political prisoners" in 1988 and deemed his actions "serious crimes against international law." Noury, who denied the charges, faces a minimum of 20 to 25 years in prison. [Reuters] [AP]

Hundreds of exiled Iranians gathered in Stockholm to celebrate the sentence. [Dagens Nyheter] Meanwhile, Tehran urged Sweden to revoke the verdict. An Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson claimed the trial was "an excuse for a political action without any real citations and legal validity", and blamed Sweden for

tensions between the two countries. [AP] [AP] [Reuters]

Noury's trial came amid deteriorating Stockholm-Tehran relations. Iran has detained several European citizens in recent months and threatened to execute a Swedish-Iranian physician. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(phr/pk)

## Czechs want to buy F-35 fighter jets from US

Prague has started talks with the United States about buying American F-35 fighter jets in order to replace Swedish-built Gripen planes, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has announced.

The Czech Republic is interested in buying 24 F-35 Lightning II aircraft made by Lockheed Martin, said Czech Defence Minister Jana Cernochova. They are to replace 14 Gripen fighter jets which have been leased from Swedish company Saab until 2027. [Reuters]

"This is another step to modernise the army and meet our alliance commitments," said Fiala. The Czech Republic has been part of NATO since 1999 and a member of the European Union since 2004.

Meanwhile, Prague has cancelled a USD 2.6 billion tender for 210 fighting vehicles that involved Britain's BAE systems, America's General Dynamics and Germany's Rheinmetall. Instead, Prague will open talks with Sweden about acquiring CV-90 armoured fighting vehicles. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

(jg/pk)

## Brazilian president cancels meeting with Portuguese counterpart

Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro cancelled a meeting with Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, indicating he was unhappy that the latter was also meeting a political rival during a trip to Brazil on July 1. [Publico]

Bolsonaro took the decision because Rebelo de Sousa was to meet former Brazilian president Lula da Silva in Sao Paulo. Bolsonaro and da Silva will face each other in the Brazilian presidential elections scheduled for October 2. [Lusa][Jornal de noticias]

Luiz Eduardo Ramos, a senior Brazilian official, said during a visit to Portugal on July 7 that relations between the two heads of state remained normal and had not been damaged. [Lusa]

(sr/pk)

## EU, China, hold trade talks, stay silent on political tensions

The EU and China agreed to strengthen communication and coordination of macroeconomic policies in talks on July 19. But they stayed silent on a landmark investment pact that has been frozen amid a dispute on human rights, and their readouts of the meeting did not mention disagreements about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Euractiv] [Reuters]

The ninth EU-China High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue talks were described by the Chinese commerce ministry as "pragmatic", "efficient" and "candid".

European Union Commission Vice-President and Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis said that during the talks he highlighted the economic problems emerging from Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as the need for more balanced EU-Chinese trade relations. [European Commission]

The last such talks, which took place in 2020, led to a landmark investment deal, but this has not been ratified due to tensions between the regions, including over human rights issues. The West has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials it accuses of complicity in mass detentions of Muslim Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region. Beijing, which denies wrongdoing, has imposed tit-for-tat sanctions on EU politicians. [Euractiv] [Reuters]

Ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has been treading a difficult line between Russia and the West amid pressure from the United States and European Union. European politicians have warned that Chinese support for Russia "would have major implications for Europe's relations with Beijing." [Europe Monthly, April 2022]

(jk/pk)

## EU official voices support for Taiwan amid 'Chinese threat'

A senior European Parliament official has said that the EU "will not turn a blind eye to the Chinese threat towards Taiwan", adding that Europe and Taiwan both belong to the "family of democracies."

European Parliament Vice President Nicola Beer also said that there was "no room for Chinese aggression in democratic Taiwan." Beer conducted a three-day visit to Taiwan from July 19, holding talks with top government officials. [Focus Taiwan]

Earlier in July, the European Parliament adopted a resolution supporting "international initiatives calling for Taiwan's meaningful participation as an observer in meetings, mechanisms and activities of multilateral bodies" like the World Health Organization and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The resolution, passed on July 6, also urged the EU and "like-minded democratic partners in multilateral fora" to "uphold the rules-based international system in the face of an increasingly ambitious China."

EU-China relations are strained over disputes on several fronts including human rights, Hong Kong and Taiwan, which has been self-governing for nearly 80 years but is claimed by China.

(ar/pk)

## Armenia, India discuss improving bilateral ties

Armenia's Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan met in Yerevan with the Indian Secretary for Western Relations of Foreign Affairs, Sanjay Verma, to talk about how to improve bilateral cooperation. They met during the 8th Armenian-Indian Intergovernmental Commission on Cooperation in Trade, Economy, Technology, Science, Education and Culture. Bilateral trade has increased to USD 181 million in 2021 from USD 21 million in 2016. [Armenpress]

(fb/gc)

## Azerbaijan approves agreement on trade and economic cooperation with Mongolia

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev approved on July 5 a trade and economic cooperation agreement with Mongolia. The agreement, which was initiated in

October 2021, is a starting point for the expansion of the traditionally friendly relations between the two countrie**s.** [MFA-MN]

(fb/gc)

## Germany, Japan pledge to support international order

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and her Japanese counterpart Yoshimasa Hayashi pledged during a meeting in Tokyo on 11 July to support the international rules based order amid the war in Ukraine and China's attempt to expand its influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

At the meeting, Hayashi stated that "Japan needs to be united with like-minded nations to deal with Russia's invasion of Ukraine," while Baerbock thanked Japan for "supporting Europe against Moscow's violation of international rights." [Tagesschau]

Both countries said they will support efforts to restart Ukrainian grain exports. The war in Ukraine has disrupted exports of grain from Ukraine.

Baerbock called Beijing's expansion in the Indo-Pacific region and its threat to Taiwan another "global challenge." Hayashi added that Berlin and Tokyo will strengthen their collaboration to counter "unilateral attempts to change the status quo" through "economic coercion." [Kyodo News]

(ar/gc)

## Irish and Thai police work together to combat organised crime

Irish and Thai police will work together to stop the flow of illegally obtained money from Irish to Thai banks. This is part of a broader effort to forge international connections with local law enforcement agencies to fight organised crime. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

## Poland strikes major arms deal with South Korea

Poland has signed its most important and largest arms purchase in recent years, ordering almost 1,000 tanks, 650 howitzers and 50 fighter jets from South Korea as Warsaw, fearing Russian aggression, bolsters its military amid the war in neighbouring Ukraine.

The first stage of the agreement will see deliveries of 180 tanks and 48 Howitzers begin this year, with the first fighter jets expected in Poland by mid-2023. A second stage will include more than 800 tanks and 600 howitzers, which will both be produced in Poland by 2026, according to the country's defence minister, Mariusz Blaszczak. [Reuters]

This constitutes Poland's largest arms deal in years, trumping recent deals with the United States for 250 new and 116 used Abrams tanks. [Reuters]

*Hike in defence spending*

Poland has been drastically increasing its defence spending since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Warsaw recently raised its defence budget to 3 percent of its GDP, making it the third largest NATO spender on defence in relation to GDP, behind the United States and Greece.

The government aims to further increase its defence spending to 5 percent of GDP, which would give Poland "the most powerful land force in Europe," Blaszczak claimed on July 28 in a televised interview. [Notes from Poland]

When he visited Seoul in May, Blaszczak said that Poland urgently needed arms because of the war in Ukraine, partially to replace those Warsaw had sent to Kiev.

The Polish defence minister said South Korea and Poland faced similar security issues with their neighbours and thus needed similar weapons "that will deter the aggressor".[CNN]

*Poland wants arms fast*

At a signing ceremony for a framework of the agreement on July 27, Blaszczak said South Korea was the only seller that could provide the arms fast enough, adding that it was crucial for Poland to receive the first deliveries this year.

Meanwhile, Polish President Andrzej Duda estimated that his country has supplied at least the equivalent of USD 1.7 billion in military aid to its neighbour Ukraine. "We are giving Ukraine the greatest military aid we have ever provided to any country," Duda said.

After talks with the European Commission, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on June 25 that the EU would "reimburse a large part" of Poland's expenses in helping Ukraine. [Notes from Poland]

For Seoul, its deal with Poland represents the biggest weapons export agreement in South Korea's history, Chun In-Bum, a retired general, told CNN. However, South Korea does not acknowledge a link between the deal and the war in Ukraine.

South Korea's policy has been to withhold supplying lethal aid to Kiev in an effort to avoid antagonising Russia. Seoul is wary of the Kremlin's influence on North Korea and wants to protect its economy by not making an enemy out of Moscow.

Foreign Minister Park Jin stressed the deal only involved South Korea and Poland when he was asked if his country would have a greater involvement in the Ukraine conflict .[Reuters]

(qv/pk)

## India's PM tells Putin that New Delhi favours dialogue, diplomacy to end the war in Ukraine

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi told Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 1 during a phone call that New Delhi favours dialogue and diplomacy to end the war. During their conversation, they discussed furthering bilateral trade, ongoing global issues and the implementation of investment pacts and deals. [Indian Express]

The two leaders spoke only days after Modi attended the G7 summit in Germany. New Delhi, which has maintained a neutral stance during the war in Ukraine, has resisted calls by Western countries to cut ties with Moscow. It also hasn't imposed sanctions against Russia.

India has called for a cessation of hostilities and condemned the reported killings of civilians by Russian troops during the conflict. [Asia in Review, No.27, July/2022, 1]

(ar/gc)

## Academic cooperation between Slovakia and China causes concern

Slovakia is at risk of China exercising political influence on its educational institutions as academic cooperation between the two countries increases, a report has warned.

At a time when many Western countries are attempting to reconsider their relationship with Beijing, Slovakia's universities have improved their relations with China, according to the Bratislava-based Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS).

The institute has published data on increasing academic team-ups between Chinese and Slovak universities, with up to 136 research-based partnerships being recorded since 2012. [Euractiv]

CEIAS has discovered that there is little knowledge of the potential risks of such cooperation, according to Matej Simalcik, the institute's executive director. [CEIAS Unitracker]

CEIAS said there was a lack of mechanisms to prevent Beijing from exercising political influence in Slovak academic institutions. The Slovak institute is not alone in its findings, as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, an independent think-tank, classifies 58 percent of Sino-Slovak links as "high risk". [ASPI-ICPC]

Some Chinese universities have links to the People's Liberation Army – Beijing's armed forces – and produce a high number of graduates who become involved in the nation's defence sector.

Simalcik called for improved measures to be taken to minimise risks, saying: "Only limited guidelines currently exist in Europe that would allow researchers to safely engage with Chinese colleagues without running the risk of the links being abused for political goals or forced technology transfers."

(cg/pk)

## UK steelmakers indignant at plan to ease anti dumping on China

UK manufacturers expressed concern about a proposal to lift anti-dumping measures on a type of Chinese steel, fearing it could threaten hundreds of jobs and hurt British production.

The Trade Remedies Authority, a body created to advise ministers, recommended halting existing duties on Chinese reinforcement bars because the measures no longer help the country's economic interest. [Financial Times]

Beijing said on June 28 that it will extend anti-dumping tariffs on certain steel fasteners coming from the European Union and the UK for five years, while allowing for some exemptions from tariffs on imports from the United States. [Asia in Review, No.27, July/2022, 1]

(ar/gc)

## UK and Japan deepen collaboration on next-generation fighter jets

The United Kingdom on July 18 announced that it will collaborate with Japan and Italy on developing next-generation fighter jets. [Reuters]

The British ministry of defence said it will test within five years the technological features of its next-generation Tempest fighter. These include supersonic speeds and the integration of stealth technology. The UK plans to introduce the aircraft to its Future Combat Air System in 2035. [UkGovernment]

Before the announcement, Reuters reported that Japan and the UK would merge their projects. The UK said that possible partnerships for its Future Combat Air System will be examined through the countries' joint concept analysis. [TheGuardian] [Reuters]

Japan is currently working on its own F-X fighter programme and will join the UK and Italy for joint concept analysis. This would be the first time for Japan to work with a state other than the United States on a significant military project. [EurasianTimes]

(jk/gc)

## EU eyes hydrogen deal with Namibia

The EU plans to sign an agreement with Namibia in November to support that country's hydrogen sector and to increase European imports of the fuel as the bloc makes efforts to reduce its reliance on Russian energy resources, according to officials. [Euractiv]

Hydrogen is already used for energy purposes in the European Union. However, due to its high cost and a lack of infrastructure, it accounts for only 2 percent of the EU's energy needs, which rely on "grey" or "blue" hydrogen produced with gas. [Reuters]

In order to reduce costs and emissions in the future, the EU aims to sign a memorandum of understanding with Namibia on the import of so-called "green" hydrogen, produced in a climate-neutral manner, at the UN Climate Change Conference in Egypt in November.

EU officials have said that the bloc aims to import a minimum of 10 million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030 and to produce another 10 million tonnes within Europe. [Reuters]

The European Commission did not comment on the possible deal with Namibia but said that it was working on hydrogen projects in that country. However, Obeth Kandjoze, the director-general of Namibia's National Planning Commission, confirmed that a deal on green hydrogen was in the works. [rfi]

(acn/pk)

## Italy to receive more gas from Algeria

Algeria agreed on July 18 to supply Italy this year with four billion cubic metres of gas more than was agreed between the two countries in the spring, when Algiers was expected to deliver 3 billion cubic metres. [rinnovabili.it]

Algeria has now become Italy's biggest gas supplier, former Prime Minister Mario Draghi said at an intergovernmental meeting on July 18 between Italy and Algeria. [rainews]

Draghi added at the meeting in Algiers that the two countries would work together to develop renewable energy sources. In total, 15 protocols were signed with Algeria by six government ministers who accompanied Draghi. As well as gas, the protocols concerned the pharmaceutical sector, the promotion of investment and social development. [corriere.it]

(ab/pk)

## EU, New Zealand reach free trade deal

After four years of negotiations, the European Union and New Zealand have reached an agreement on a free trade deal which could see the bilateral flow of goods and services rising by almost a third. [EuroNews]

Under the agreement, all tariffs on EU exports to New Zealand will be scrapped. The New Zealand market will be opened to European Union companies in sectors such as financial services and telecommunications. EU firms will also have easier access to New Zealand government procurement contracts. [European Commission]

The deal scraps tariffs on 97 percent of goods that New Zealand exports to the EU, among them agricultural produce. New Zealand expects revenue from exports to the EU to grow by up to EUR 1.07 billion annually on full implementation in 2035. [New Zealand Government]

The free trade deal includes commitments to respect the Paris Climate Agreement, binding provisions on labour standards and clauses on gender equality. [Euractiv]

Bilateral trade was worth about EUR 7.8 billion last year, accounting for 0.2 percent of the EU's total trade. [Politico]

European Commission Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis said that the agreement could lead to a 30 percent hike in trade between the two regions. [Bloomberg] [Politico]

Before entering into force, the deal will need to be ratified by EU governments and the European Parliament. [Reuters]

(jk/pk)

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