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Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the September issue of Europe in Review, in which we provide you with an overview of the conflict in Ukraine, an assessment of the elections in Italy, where right-wingers are favoured to win, the state of European economies and how a summer of drought has added to the continent's woes.

The war in Ukraine grinds on. Kiev is launching its counter-offensive against Russian forces around the southern city of Kherson, bringing to an end a military stalemate, with no easy path to victory for President Volodymyr Zelensky. Fighting around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant has caused international concern as well, with the UN calling unsuccessfully for a demilitarised zone to prevent a nuclear disaster.

Seven months into Putin's war, European leaders are bracing for a winter of discontent, and poverty. French President Emmanuel Macron has warned that his countrymen will face "an end of abundance" while Belgium's prime minister said that the next decade will be very difficult. Britain is forecast to enter a recession and Germany may face a rise in political extremism as

economic hardships hit, driven by higher energy and food prices.

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,

Glen Carey

Deputy Editor in Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

War in Ukraine: After tense stalemate, Kiev eyes counter-offensive

Ukraine's long-anticipated counter-offensive against Russian invaders in the area around the southern city of Kherson may slowly be taking shape after weeks of tense stalemate in which neither side committed to any large-scale operations.

Despite a lack of major gains recently by either Moscow's or Kiev's forces, civilian and military casualties continue to mount across Ukraine, with no resolution in sight to a war that has now entered its seventh month.

Ukraine marked its Independence Day on August 23 by parading burned-out Russian tanks through Kiev's streets – a potent symbol of the country's resistance to Moscow's invasion. However, celebrations were muted elsewhere amid now-routine bombings by Russian forces.

In the eastern Donbas region, Russia and its proxies in the separatist Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) continued their efforts to capture the strategic town of Avdiivka, which is just 10 kilometres from the DPR's nominal capital in Donetsk. The city contains the DPR's civilian administration, the headquarters of which was shelled by Ukrainian forces on August 23. Russian forces captured the nearby village of Pisky but were rebuffed outside Avdiivka.

To the north, Ukrainian troops made slow but steady gains towards the town of Izium. These back and forth movements are emblematic of the strategic deadlock on this front. [Euronews] [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Associated Press] [Guardian] [BBC News]

Ukrainian cities along the eastern front continue to suffer bombardment. Kharkiv in particular has become a target for Russian gunners. Bombed-out apartment blocks remain an enduring image in the war in Ukraine. The United Kingdom's defence ministry has said that these strikes may be intended to tie up Ukrainian troops and prevent them from being relocated to the south.

The US intelligence community predicted that Russia may step up attacks on civilian infrastructure with the same goal in mind. Responding to an August 18 attack on a Kharkiv apartment complex, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said: "We will not forgive, we will take revenge". [Sky News] [Guardian] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Euractiv]

Warning of nuclear catastrophe

A vital piece of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure – the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant – has caused

international concern. The power plant, which is Europe's largest nuclear facility, has been occupied by Russian soldiers since March. Both sides have accused the other of endangering the facility. Ukraine accuses Russia of storing military equipment and mistreating workers at the plant. Russia accuses Ukraine of shelling the plant from across the Dnipro River. International observers, including the International Atomic Energy Agency, have warned that the combatants are risking a nuclear catastrophe. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a demilitarised zone to be established around the plant, but Russia objected to this. [BBC News] [Guardian] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Elsewhere on the southern front, Ukrainian forces have made advances on Kherson. Russia took the region in the first days of its invasion in February. Russian troops were previously repelled after they attempted to use Kherson as a staging area to attack nearby Mykolaiv. Talk of a Ukrainian counterattack to liberate more of the region has ramped up in recent weeks and such an effort may be about to begin. In July, Russia moved considerable forces to the southern front. In August, Ukraine embarked on a tactical bombing campaign, striking Russian ammunition depots and bridges across the Dnipro River. [Sky News] [Euronews] [Guardian] [Reuters] [BBC News]

The attacks in the Kherson region have been accompanied by strikes into Russian-occupied Crimea. Ukraine launched a slew of drone and missile attacks on a variety of targets, including airstrips, Russian barracks and ammo stores. These marked the first major strikes on the occupied region since Russia took control of it in 2014. The attacks have induced panic in Crimea, causing large numbers of civilians to flee. Ukraine appears to have made retaking Crimea a war goal, with President Zelensky insisting that his country would "take back Crimea" and would "do this in any way which we decide". However, occupied Kherson stands between the Ukrainian forces and this goal. [Euractiv] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Politico Europe] [Wall Street Journal]

This may be about to change. On August 29, a Ukrainian army spokeswoman, Natalia Humeniuk, claimed that its southern forces were "attacking in many directions". Kherson's regional governor, Sergey Khlan, described an uptick in artillery fire as "the beginning of the end of the occupation of the Kherson region". Ukraine has invested time in setting the groundwork for a counterattack in the region, having rendered most bridges across the Dnipro River uncrossable. This makes it more difficult for Russia to supply and reinforce its troops. However, there are

questions over whether this is a sound strategy for Ukraine.

Writing in the Evening Standard, British defence analyst Robert Fox argued that such an offensive is "symbol as much as substance". Fox believes the attack may be an attempt by President Zelensky to stop a sense of stalemate on the front lines from eroding support among Ukraine's Western allies, while running counter to advice from his military advisors that the attack should be delayed to allow a further build-up of troops.

Fox says that while Russia retains an "overwhelming superiority in numbers of military personnel and materiel", it suffers from ineffective leadership and defective equipment. Fox believes Ukraine may not be yet in a position to take advantage of this, as it does not have the numbers of professional, trained soldiers needed to execute mobile offensive operations. [Euronews] [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [Institute for the Study of War] [RFE/RL] [Evening Standard]

More aid from the West

However, Ukrainian resistance continues to be bolstered by military and economic aid from its supporters in the West.

The United States has pledged a further USD 3 billion in direct military aid, the largest package so far. While part of the money has been earmarked for new anti-air missile systems, anti-artillery radar, and drone systems, the US Department of Defense described the aid as having a long term focus, and "relevant to the ability of Ukraine to defend itself and deter further aggression a year from now, two years from now".

Many observers have underlined the effectiveness of Western weaponry in the war. Platforms like the Javelin anti-tank missile launcher, HIMARS artillery and Harpoon anti-ship missiles have made a name for themselves in Ukraine. However, it is far from clear if they can be deployed in sufficient numbers to impact the overall strategic direction of the conflict. [ECFR] [Euractiv] [Associated Press] [Euronews] [Reuters]

After half a year of war, Ukraine has paid a heavy price.

North-west of the capital, the town of Irpin, recovered by Ukraine after Russian forces were driven back from Kiev in late March, is ruined. Burials of civilian casualties continue in nearby Bucha, where Ukraine alleges Russia committed war crimes. In the frontline cities of Avdiivka and Siversk, constant shelling continues to cause death. Amnesty International

published a report which assigned some of the blame for these casualties on Ukrainian forces. In the report, Amnesty alleges the Ukrainian military put civilian lives in danger by storing equipment and stationing troops in civilian areas. The report caused uproar in Ukraine, with Amnesty's Kiev head tendering her resignation. Elsewhere on the frontline, Ukraine hopes to move almost 750,000 people away from conflict zones in Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. [Associated Press] [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [Euronews] [RFE/RL]

Manpower problem

While Russia's ability to inflict severe pressure on Ukraine remains strong, the Russian military has its own troubles to overcome. Manpower is a growing concern.

According to the independent Russian website Mediazona – whose accounts have been supported by reports from the British ministry of defence – several regions in Russia are attempting to raise infantry battalions but are struggling to find volunteers. Russia has already been making use of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, which has been accused by Western and independent Russian media of attempting to recruit prisoners. While the Kremlin dismisses these reports, Russia has formed a new military force, the 3rd Army Corps, though it is unclear exactly how many troops this may contain.

Both Russian and Ukrainian forces have taken heavy losses, though estimates vary on how many. Given Russia's larger population and reserves, Ukraine may not be able to stomach the same casualties. The commander-in-chief of Ukraine's armed forces gave an estimate of 9,000 military deaths among his countrymen on August 22, while Russia has claimed it has killed 23,000. Russia has not provided any estimate of its own casualties, though the US Department of Defense estimated that 20,000 Russian and Russian-backed separatist troops have been killed.

Whatever the actual numbers are, Russia appears to be taking a possible shortage of infantry seriously. President Vladimir Putin issued a decree on August 25 increasing the nominal size of Russia's armed forces from 1.9 million to 2.04 million. It remains to be seen where these additional numbers will come from as the country continues to avoid general mobilisation. [Institute for the Study of War] [Associated Press] [Guardian] [BBC News] [Forbes] [Euronews] [New York Times]

With no changes on the strategic level this month, expert observers remain comfortable in their

predictions of a long war – though there is no consensus on how it could end.

Writing for *Politico*, defence scholars Daniel R. DePetris and Rajan Menon argue that prospects of a negotiated settlement in Ukraine remain remote. Both sides see outright victory as within reach. Ukraine has been emboldened by its ability to resist and stifle Russian offensives. The country has inflicted severe losses on the Russian military even as it loses territory. Even in the face of immense destruction, which the World Bank believes will cost up to USD 750 billion to repair, Ukrainians appear united in their belief that the war can be won. Russia's leadership, for its part, believes that because its resources outstrip Ukraine's and because Ukraine remains dependent on foreign support, time is on Russia's side. Moscow believes that foreign support for Ukraine will eventually weaken as Europe is hit by rising gas prices and inflation. [Politico Europe]

However, John B. Barranco and Hans Binnendijk, defence analysts at the Atlantic Council think tank, argue that this advantage may have been overstated. Barranco argues that Russia's conscript-heavy military is squandering its advantages through "inferior" leadership and strategic planning. Binnendijk says that Russia's style of fighting, using large infantry formations supported by tanks, has been a weakness rather than a strength against more "nimble" Ukrainian forces. [Atlantic Council]

Unsustainable for both sides?

A commentary by the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank attributes Ukrainian military successes to Russian forces' inability to "quickly coordinate advances deep into enemy territory". For Russia to defeat Ukraine militarily, it will need to develop this capability. [ECFR]

Richard Dannatt, a former head of the British army, argues that while the war in Ukraine has turned into a "nightmare scenario" for Russian forces, the Ukrainians are unable to drive them out of occupied territories. Dannatt believes that this is unsustainable for both sides in the long term and that Ukraine has "got to start negotiating" – but there is no hint that either side is seriously pursuing peace talks of any kind. [Express]

August has shown Russia's inability to disable the Ukrainian military, and Ukraine's inability to launch a large-scale counteroffensive, leading to a stalemate. It remains to be seen if either side can decisively break it.

(wb/pk)

Italy: Right-wingers favoured to win election, links to Russia spark fears

Italians vote in general elections on September 25 which could bring a right-wing coalition with links to Russia to power, a prospect which has raised fears that Rome could undermine Western solidarity in the face of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

The anxieties of many in Europe have not been eased by Italian right wingers' pledges to adhere to Rome's NATO commitments and to be "fully part of Europe", or by pledges from Giorgia Meloni – potentially Italy's next prime minister – to back Ukraine. [Reuters]

A French government minister told Politico that he was "totally depressed" at the prospect of Meloni, the leader of the right-wing Brothers of Italy party, coming to power. As Italians prepare to head to the ballot box, Politico added that European unity on issues ranging from Ukraine to climate change could be tested by the rise of populists.

Italy's government collapsed when Prime Minister Mario Draghi resigned on July 21 after a loss of support from his coalition partners.

Draghi, a former European Central Bank chief, was appointed the head of a government of national unity in early 2021. He was not affiliated with any political party in Italy, a status that helped him form a technocratic-oriented administration with broad parliamentary support.

The parties in Draghi's government consisted of groupings from across the Italian political spectrum. These have now entered into separate coalitions based on their ideological alignment. The largest of them is a right-wing coalition which looks the most likely to win the September elections. [ilmessaggero]

Populist rhetoric

The coalition consists of Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party and Matteo Salvini's League party. All three are campaigning on a platform of anti-immigration and populist rhetoric, proposing a program that aims to rejuvenate the Italian economy and protect the income of families amid Europe's ongoing economic downturn.

Salvini in July made a visit to the Italian island of Lampedusa to highlight the effects of immigration and

underscore his own hardline policy on migrants. [Politico]

Berlusconi and Salvini have faced criticism for their links to Russia and Vladimir Putin – connections which have caused distaste and concern at a time when Europe opposes Moscow's war on Ukraine.

Italy's right-wing election coalition has pledged to adhere to the country's NATO commitments and says that it aims to be "fully part of Europe, the Atlantic alliance and the West."

Its program marks a turnaround of the right, from a mostly staunch Eurosceptic movement to one that has accepted European integration, according to some observers, who add that such a stance is designed to reassure allies and international markets.

Lorenzo Castellani, a professor of political history at Luiss University in Rome, told Politico that Meloni "has realised that to govern in Italy you cannot hold Eurosceptic positions." Castellani added that the right-wing coalition needed to appear as credible as possible, as Italian President Sergio Mattarella, "who will give the mandate to the next prime minister, is not moveable on Italy's international alliances." [Politico]

In its program, the right-wing coalition has committed itself to "support for Ukraine in the face of the invasion" by Russia. But many are suspicious.

Salvini's right-wing League and Berlusconi's centre-right Forza Italia have historically been supporters of the Kremlin. The League signed a cooperation agreement with President Putin's United Russia party in 2017. A long-time admirer of Putin, Salvini has appeared in public wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the Russian leader's face.

Friendship with Putin

Berlusconi maintains a close personal friendship with Putin, and the two have reportedly spent holidays together. Berlusconi once even gifted the Russian president a duvet cover displaying a life-sized picture of the two men. The former Italian prime minister did not condemn his Russian friend's February invasion of Ukraine until April, when Berlusconi said that he was "disappointed and saddened." [France24]

Oxford University historian Professor Margaret MacMillan told Politico that, should the Italian right win the upcoming elections, "Italy could be placing itself in the same pro-Russian camp as Hungary and Serbia and become a concern for Germany and France."

Meanwhile, leading newspapers Repubblica and Il Messaggero in August published front-page articles warning of Russian "interference" in the Italian election. [Thelocal] [Repubblica]

Concerns over the Kremlin's sway in Italy were raised in early May after an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was aired on the privately owned Rete 4 television channel. Lavrov claimed that Adolf Hitler "had Jewish blood". The interview sparked an Italian parliamentary investigation into disinformation and caused outrage in Israel. [Guardian] [Guardian]

(cg/pk)

Germany may face opposition-led protests, rise in extremism as hardships hit

Germany may witness opposition-led protests and a surge in extremism as Berlin struggles to prevent a decline in living standards due to higher basic commodity prices, a surge in household energy bills and possible gas shortages this winter, government officials and experts warn.

Opposition parties have already called for protests in September and October. The Chairman of far-right AfD, Tino Chrupalla, said his party will organise a large-scale demonstration in Berlin and in regional capitals in October. The party wants to "support the anger of the people," he said. [ZDF]

Martin Schirdewan of Die Linke, a left political party, called on August 8 for protests with labour unions, social organisations and climate movements. Schirdewan said that the public is carrying the burden of the economic crisis due to higher energy prices, rather than German companies. [ZDF]

The president of the German domestic intelligence service (BfV) in the federal state of Thuringia, Stephan Kramer, warned about the potential for an "explosive atmosphere" that might escalate before the end of the year. Kramer's BfV counterpart in Brandenburg, Jorg Muller, warned that extremist groups want a "winter of rage." [ZDF] [Süddeutsche][RT]

The calls for protests come as Germany faces an uncertain economic future, with surging costs and weakening growth as well as the spectre of energy rationing as Russia cuts its gas supplies. GDP stagnated in the second quarter with zero growth, and its

headline inflation rate for July, at 8.5 per cent, looks set to climb further. [MSN]

“The high level of uncertainty about gas supplies in the coming winter and the sharp price increases are likely to weigh significantly on private households and businesses,” the Bundesbank said. The central bank said it believes that the inflation rate in Germany could reach “in the order of 10%” by autumn. [Bundesbank]

‘Noticeably Gloomy’

Germany's finance ministry also warned in August of a “noticeably gloomy” economic outlook as a record surge in factory prices added to the country's inflation woes.

The producer price index, which measures the change in the cost of raw materials and industrial products, rose 37.2 percent in July compared with a year ago. That was the biggest increase since records began in 1949 and was driven by energy prices,which were up by 105 percent from last year. [MSN]

The uncertainty is having an impact on consumer behaviour.

A survey by broadcasting network ARD found that more people are trying to cut back on spending. According to the survey, 70 percent of the people polled in the survey are trying to use less energy, buy less (47 percent) and restrict spending in their free time, foregoing restaurants, cinemas or leisure facilities (50 percent).

The majority agree that saving on gas consumption is important, yet a quarter of the German people do not see any other way they can cut back on energy consumption, a survey by the Federation of German Consumer Organisations showed. About 76 percent of the people are worried about the financial strain that the energy crisis and high inflation is causing them. [vzbv][Tagesschau]

An unpublished survey from the Berlin Social Science Center showed that 22 percent of the German public have no trust in the government. This is where he sees the potential to mobilise for mass protests and riots, the center’s Edgar Grande said.[ZDF]

Raising concerns

The economic conditions in Europe’s largest economy are raising concerns among German officials.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s cabinet and the country’s domestic intelligence services have warned that rising

food and energy prices could lead to social unrest. These conditions can be exploited by various "radical" movements, Scholz said. [Tagesschau]

Advice by politicians, such as Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck or Prime Minister of the federal state of Baden-Wurttemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, to take shorter and less frequent showers and to stop using air conditioning has caused criticism on social media platforms and by opposition parties. [ZDF] [FAZ][DW]

State-funded ARD's Tagesschau news service reported that some groups have already sought to organise protests in Berlin under the slogans "Revolt," "Uprising" and "Civil War." The protests might be similar to those experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, when protests demonstrated against the government's lockdown and vaccination policies.

BfV warnings

The BfV said in a statement on August 17 that extremists will try to use the current situation to "find a connection to the center of society." [BfV]

BfV's Muller said that everybody has the right to demonstrate, but people should be careful to not work together with extremists who "abuse the worries and fears of people." [ZDF]

Kramer warned that extremists might try to infiltrate "legitimate" protests and would try to mobilise through social media. They will want to radicalise the mood, Kramer said, adding that peoples' trust in state institutions and authorities will decide whether social peace can be kept or not. [ZDF]

The east German state of Saxony will be a "hotspot" for protests, Piotr Kocyba, social science researcher at Technical University Chemnitz and Institute for the Study of Protest and Social Movements in Berlin, said. Protestors will be "further radicalised" in their potential for violence, according to Kocyba.

Oliver Decker, an expert in right-wing extremism and democracy research at University Leipzig, said that there will be "numerous public debates and outrage," but he doesn't expect "massive unrest." [Süddeutsche]

(mb/gc)

Britain is projected to enter economic recession as high inflation, political

uncertainty threaten living standards

The United Kingdom will likely enter an economic recession from the fourth quarter of this year, with real household income projected to fall sharply in 2022 and 2023 and political uncertainty hurting government efforts to address rising prices.[BoE]

“GDP growth in the United Kingdom is slowing,” the Bank of England (BoE) said on its website on August 4. “The latest rise in gas prices has led to another significant deterioration in the outlook for activity in the United Kingdom.” [BoE]

Inflationary pressures have intensified since May, largely reflecting a near doubling in wholesale gas prices since May, owing to Russia’s restriction of gas supplies to Europe and the risk of further curbs, the BoE said. Inflation accelerated to 9.4 percent in June and is expected to peak at 13.3 percent in October, though it will remain at very elevated levels throughout much of 2023, before falling to the 2 percent target in two years. [BoE]

“Domestic inflationary pressures are projected to remain strong over the first half of the forecast period,” the BoE said. “Firms generally report that they expect to increase their selling prices markedly, reflecting the sharp rises in their costs.” [BoE]

In a later prediction, US bank Citi estimated the UK’s inflation rate to peak at 18 percent in early 2023, factoring in a further jump in energy prices. US bank Goldman Sachs estimated that the UK inflation rate could even peak at 22.4 percent in January 2023, after the country's energy regulator announced that gas prices are expected to increase 80 percent from October. [Reuters][Reuters] [The Guardian]

Former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown has warned that people in the UK will go without food and be unable to heat their homes by October if the government doesn't take urgent action on the cost of living crisis. Brown said on Sky News that he was seeing poverty in his hometown in Fife "that I did not expect to see ever again in my lifetime", as he took aim at the Conservatives' policies. [SkyNews]

UK workers from various sectors have held strikes repeatedly for the past weeks to demand pay raises that keep pace with inflation, causing further stress to the economy. [Reuters] [BBC]

Interest Rate Hike

To fight rising prices and encourage saving money, the BoE hiked on August 4 interest rates by 50 basis points to 1.75 percent. Governor Andrew Bailey said the decision reflected a "real risk" of soaring prices becoming "embedded" in the economy. [BBC] [The Guardian] [Reuters][BoE]

"If we don't bring inflation back to target … it's going to get worse, and it will get worse precisely, I'm afraid, for those who are least well off in society," Bailey said. "Returning inflation to the 2 percent target remains our absolute priority. There are no ifs and buts about that." [Reuters][BoE]

Economists in a Reuters poll had expected the rate increase after other central banks, such as the US Federal Reserve Bank and the European Central Bank, announced increases in their rate to contain soaring prices. Some economists have argued that the BoE should have acted much sooner and is partly at fault for the current situation. [BBC] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly, Aug 2022]

This was the sixth consecutive hike since December 2021 when the BoE predicted inflation would peak at six percent in April 2022. [EuroNews] [NewYorkTimes]

Political Uncertainty

The deteriorating economic outlook comes amid ongoing political uncertainty in London.

A new prime minister will be announced on September 5 after Boris Johnson's resignation, with Conservative candidates Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak vying No. 10. Johnson said he would not make any decision on British energy policy before leaving office.

Critics say that urgent government action is necessary to avoid a severe energy crisis in the winter, threatening especially poorer households. Former chief scientific adviser to the government David King warned that unless Johnson acts now, there "will be extreme suffering, at the lower-paid end of our society." [The Guardian]

Truss, who is Johnson's most likely successor, plans on fighting soaring energy prices and inflation with tax cuts, the temporary suspension of the carbon tax for households (the so-called "green levy") and a decrease in the national insurance rate. [The Guardian] [BBC]

She also suggested that the BoE's prediction for the UK to go into recession was "not inevitable" and that immediate tax cuts could cause a "small business and self-employed revolution."

“We can change the outcome and we can make it more likely that the economy grows,” Truss said.

Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies economic think tank, said the tax cuts, as envisioned by Truss, would only cause a bigger recession of the economy in the long run. Referring to Truss’ tax plans, Conservative Party colleague Michael Gove said that she was on a “holiday from reality.” [BBC] [Bloomberg]

Her plans have also been criticised for not addressing the needs of non tax payers, such as pensioners and people without employment. [The Guardian]

Hurting Sentiment

This is hurting market sentiment.

In a research note, Saxo Bank’s head of macro analysis, Christopher Dembik, said the U.K. is “more and more looking like an emerging market country.”

The only factor missing from a characterisation as an emerging market country is a currency crisis, with the British pound holding firm despite the litany of macroeconomic headwinds, Dembik said.

“The recession will be long and deep,” Dembik said. “There won’t be an easy escape. This is most worrying, in our view. The Bank of England assesses the slump will last with GDP still 1.75 percent below today’s levels in mid-2025.” [MSNBC]

(jv-jk/gc)

Amid scorching summer, drought adds to Europe’s economic woes

A drought that has hit Europe could be the worst in 500 years, experts have warned as temperatures soared in August, fuelling forest fires and causing rivers across the continent to shrivel. Crops were devastated, adding to the woes of economies already reeling from surging energy prices and scrambling to find replacements for supplies from Russia.

Sweating in a scorching summer, Europeans felt the impact of climate change at first hand.

Harvests across the continent have suffered, with soybeans, maize and sunflowers the most affected. Lowered river levels saw power plants, including hydroelectric facilities, losing their main source of energy and cooling liquid. [AP News]

Authorities reached for emergency measures as drought hit countries including Germany, France and Netherlands as well as southern European nations like Spain and Portugal.

The European Commission Joint Research Centre said that the drought could prove to be the worst in 500 years. Senior researcher Andrea Toreti warned that if effective mitigation measures were not taken to deal with a lack of water, "this intensity and frequency will increase dramatically over Europe, both in the north and in the south." [Euronews]

Toreti added: "Our analysis... is pointing to extremely low flows affecting almost all the European rivers."

Dropping water levels in the Rhine in Germany, which is used by vessels to transport vital commodities, have driven freight costs up more than five-fold on the key commercial artery and triggered shipping delays.

In Italy, which faces its worst drought since 1952, farmers already burdened with high fertiliser and fuel prices have been experiencing problems with irrigation. Water levels in the River Po fell to historic lows, and a farmers' association said that drought in the breadbasket Po Valley region put 30 percent of the national agricultural yield at risk. [*see separate stories in this issue of the Europe Monthly*]

'Like nothing we've ever seen'

In France, the government set up a crisis team as municipalities faced a lack of drinking water. "This is a situation like nothing we've ever seen," said Christophe Bechu, the country's minister for ecological transition. [Euronews]

French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne unveiled a EUR 1.5 billion plan to help local authorities adapt to climate change and take action to cut greenhouse gas emissions. She also floated a potential windfall tax on energy corporation "super-profits" to help consumers facing rising prices in a cost-of-living crisis – an option Spain proposed in July, and one Germany is considering as well. [Business Standard] [Bloomberg]

In Britain, the mercury soared to above 40 Centigrade for the first time on record in the second half of July, causing train tracks to buckle and fuelling a spate of fires in a country poorly equipped to deal with such heat. [Reuters] August saw temperatures of more than 36C. [BBC News]

As European countries brace for a winter of unreliable energy supplies, the government in Spain banned

shops, offices and public spaces from setting air conditioning below 27C in the summer as part of an efficiency drive. With the northern Basque region seeing its lowest rainfall in 163 years, a cargo ship was brought in to deliver water to drought-hit areas.

Experts have long warned that Europeans need to change their habits in order to help fight climate change. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez took an unorthodox step by asking government ministers and public and private sector bosses not to wear ties unless necessary.

Wildfires and water deficit

In Croatia, the government announced a EUR 26 million aid package to help farmers who have been hit by severe drought and extreme temperatures as well as by higher production costs as a result of the war in Ukraine.

In Romania, drought is expected to cause the country's cereal crop to shrink by 30 million tonnes. Meanwhile, 99 percent of Portugal faced severe drought. [Euronews]

Greek firefighters battled hundreds of forest fires, while in Athens officials opened up public halls for people who do not have air conditioning in their homes. [Neos Kosmos] [People's Gazette] In North Macedonia, villages were flooded after torrential rain. [MIA]

Amid fears that the dangers of climate change are increasing, the United Nations General Assembly at the end of July adopted what officials described as a historic resolution which declared that access to a "clean, healthy and sustainable environment" was a universal human right.

With two-thirds of Europe under drought warning in late August, the EU's Research Commissioner Mariya Gabriel said that heatwaves had "created an unprecedented stress on water levels" across the bloc." She added: "Climate change is undoubtedly more noticeable every year." [BBC News]

(pk)

Baltic states dismantle Soviet monuments after Putin's invasion of Ukraine

Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted to send a clear message when he invaded Ukraine that he

wouldn't allow Moscow's dominance to be challenged in its historic sphere of influence. Instead, he inadvertently accelerated efforts by neighbouring countries to protect themselves from Russian aggression – and to shed remnants of the Soviet past.

Six months into the war, Sweden and Finland are set to join NATO, Ukraine is more closely tied to the West than before and the Baltic states, right in Moscow's backyard, are distancing themselves from all things reminiscent of Russia and Soviet nostalgia and militarism.

Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said that ordinary Russians "bear also moral responsibility for the passivity of legitimising this regime." The country's Minister of Interior, Lauri Laanemets, said Russians should not enjoy opportunities of European freedoms and values while endorsing the war in Ukraine after the country imposed a ban on visas. [Politico]

Russia issued a statement on August 30 condemning the Baltic states for what it described as "Russophobic" actions.

"The unprecedented barbaric campaign against monuments to Soviet soldiers in Baltic countries and in discrimination of their own Russian-speaking population has gone beyond common sense and humanness," the country's foreign ministry said in a statement. [TASS]

The Baltic states have significant Russian minorities, with 24.7 percent in Estonia, 24.9 percent in Latvia and 4.5 percent in Lithuania in 2020, according to a December 2021 paper by Sarah Coolican at London School of Economics. Clamping down on Russian culture and history may trigger unrest. [LSE]

Estonia, Latvia remove Soviet monuments

The Estonian government decided on August 3 to remove as many as 400 Soviet monuments, including a tank monument in Narva, in public spaces since they represent Soviet militarism and nostalgia. [ERR]

Some officials are concerned that removing the monuments may cause widespread protests among the Russian-speaking population, particularly in Narva, which is on the Estonian-Russian border. [ERR]

The Latvian government also decided in June that all monuments "glorifying the Soviet regime" not in cemeteries should be dismantled by November 15. The mayor of Riga, Martins Stakis, said at a press conference on August 4 that the dismantlement of the

Soviet “Victory” monument in Riga would be completed by the deadline. [The Baltic Times]

For safety concerns, as the deconstruction could trigger widespread protests, the company demolishing the monument was not disclosed, and the monument was taken down in one piece on August 26. The Riga City Council estimated the cost of deconstruction at EUR 2.1 million. [LSM] [The Baltic Times]LSM] [LSM] [The National Review]

The Riga City Council had decided on July 20 to remove two other monuments which are reminiscent of the Soviet past and militarism: the obelisk in Mezaparks and a memorial sign on Jaunciema gatve. [LSM]

Lithuanian municipalities act

As early as the 1990s after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, long before Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, Lithuanian citizens pulled down some statues of Soviet leaders and prominent figures. In the wake of the war in Ukraine, several municipalities officially decided to remove Soviet monuments from public space. [Economist]

The mayor of Klaipeda, Vytautas Grubliauskas, said on April 7 that the dismantling of Soviet sculptures in Klaipeda was started. Information boards with Russian and Lithuanian inscriptions about the liberation of Klaipeda were also taken down. The city administration of Kaunas said on April 11 that the removal of the Soviet monuments should remove any links to Soviet militarism and nostalgia. [LRT]

Saulius Rimas, head of the Cultural Heritage Division of the Kaunas city administration, said that “[o]nly isolated ideological relics of the Soviet era that were protected by their cultural heritage status have remained until today, but they are also disappearing from the city’s spaces.” He added that Kaunas would also rename streets and schools named after prominent Russian figures. [BNE]

The Lithuanian capital Vilnius was hesitant to follow suit. While the city administration received several proposals, Paulius Vaitekenas, a representative of the Vilnius municipality, said in May that no hasty decision should be made. He added that experts, mostly historians, should evaluate the cultural value of the monuments. [BNN]

Russia warns Baltic nations

Russia condemned the destruction of Soviet war memorials and accused them of persecuting their

Russian-speaking minorities. Moscow said Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were guilty of xenophobia, saying they were treating their ethnic Russian minorities as "second-class people." [TASS][Reuters]

Moscow also threatened to take "asymmetric" measures against the three countries.

"We don't want to become like those who have unleashed this campaign and use such barbaric methods," the foreign ministry said. "But what is currently going on in the Baltic states is unacceptable for us, and, naturally, it will affect bilateral relations with these countries, which are already at the lowest ebb. We have been taking and will continue to take asymmetric measures, first of all in the political and economic spheres."[TASS]

Russian hacker group KillNets said on August 18 that it took down Estonian e-services and payment services after the Soviet tank monument in Narva was removed. The hackers, whose motive was retaliation, shared screenshots of Estonian websites on Telegram, highlighting the impact of their attacks. [The Baltic Times][The Baltic Times]

The Estonian Information System Authority said that hackers struck the country's digital infrastructure without disclosing the magnitude of the cyber-attacks. Tonu Tammer, executive director of Computer Emergency Response Team Estonia of the Estonian Information System Authority, said that the hackers attempted to take down state-run websites, but were unsuccessful. He said that additional efforts are necessary to fund defensive measures. [The Baltic Times][The Baltic Times][The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Prime Minister warns of difficult winters through next decade

Prime Minister Alexander de Croo warned on August 22 that the next five to ten winters would be very difficult as fuel prices and electricity bills remain at record highs.

Gas hit EUR 291 per megawatt-hour on August 23, a 5 percent increase compared to the previous day. Electricity prices reached a new record high of EUR 561.94 per MWh in August. [Euractiv]

In response, Belgium's opposition party, Les Engages, called on the government to quickly implement the country's emergency energy plan to help secure gas supplies for consumers. The government's emergency energy plan includes a pre-alert phase, an alert phase, and an emergency phase. [Euractiv]

The party says that the move is now essential considering the potential energy crisis facing Belgium during the winter. Les Engages member of parliament, Francois Desquesnes, said the country is clearly at a point where it needs to "raise the alarm." It "is essential to extend as much nuclear power as possible," Les Engages parliamentarian Christophe De Beukelaerit said. "Even if the country extends the entire nuclear park, it will remain 82 percent dependent on gas and oil," he said. [Euractiv][BrusselsTimes]

Belgium's winter plan aims to ensure the Loenhout storage facility is fully filled while maximising the Zeebrugge's LNG terminal – for which Belgium wants to increase capacity in the longer term. The plan also urges energy companies to increase energy production and avoid maintenance during the winter months. [Euractiv]

Les Engages also supports the implementation of short-term energy-saving measures, such as limiting public lighting, reducing the heating of public buildings,

prohibiting short-distance flights, and reducing speed limits on the motorway. These measures will be needed to help reach the European target to reduce energy consumption by 15 percent. [Euractiv] [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Flemish Economy Minister announces plan for SMEs to save water

Flemish Economy and Innovation Minister, Jo Brouns, announced on August 16 a plan that will offer small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) a free-of-charge water audit in order to help them decrease their consumption. [VRTNews]

The audit will make it easier for companies to gain an insight into the potential for saving water. "This is not only good for the environment, but also good from a financial point of view", Brouns said.[VRTNews]

From the end of this year all SMEs that consume at least 500m^3 of water will be able to have their water consumption audited free-of-charge.

(gt/gc)

France: Macron warns French of 'an end of abundance'

President Emmanuel Macron has warned his countrymen that the country will face sacrifices and "an end of abundance" weeks after lawmakers approved a EUR 20 billion package to help households cope with higher energy and food prices, a legislative measure that was viewed as a win for the French leader. [France24][WSJ]

"What we are currently living through is a kind of major tipping point or a great upheaval," Macron said. "We are living the end of what could have seemed an era of abundance … the end of the abundance of products of technologies that seemed always available … the end of the abundance of land and materials including water," he said.[The Guardian]

The 395-to-112 vote on August 4 came after a heated debate at the National Assembly, where Macron no longer has a majority. The Senate approved the text, after three weeks of horse-trading between members of Macron's party and opposition legislators in both

houses of the French parliament. The measures include an increase in pensions, rebates at the gasoline pump and an elimination of France's yearly public-television levy. [France24][WSJ]

In France, annual inflation is estimated to be running at 6.5 percent. That is slightly lower than the record annual inflation of 8.6 percent for the 19 countries using the shared euro currency, swollen by a huge increase in food and energy costs fueled partly by the war in Ukraine. French people are also seeing price increases from increased shipping costs. [France24] [WSJ

The bill includes increasing pensions and some welfare payments by 4 percent. On fuel, a current state-financed rebate of 18 cents per litre will be increased to 30 cents in September and October. Private companies are also being encouraged to offer employees an annual tax-free bonus of up to EUR 6,000 euros.

"Your purchasing power is our priority," French government spokesperson Olivier Veran tweeted after lawmakers approved the package. "To protect you from inflation, we maintained the price cap on gas and electricity and set a price cap to limit rent increases to 3.5 percent." [France24][Twitter]

Cash for Cars

The French government has announced people who are willing to trade in their cars for a bike will be paid up to EUR 4,000, as part of plans to increase active mobility amid rising energy prices. The scheme is also expected to reduce carbon emissions in the country. [Cyclingweekly]

France is hoping to increase the number of people making daily trips on bikes from its current level of 3 percent to 9 percent by 2024. French citizens and organisations can apply for a 'conversion bonus' if they swap a polluting motor vehicle for a bike, e-bike or cargo bike.

(gc)

France: Top court rules that France-born Moroccan can be deported for inciting hatred

France's highest administrative court ruled that a France-born Moroccan imam whom the government

had accused of promoting hate could be deported, Reuters reported, citing a court ruling. [Reuters]

That decision overturned a previous ruling by a Paris court suspending a deportation order against Hassan Iquioussen in July for "inciting hate, discrimination and violence," notably against the Jewish community and women, according to Reuters. Iquioussen, 58, was born in France and his immediate family lives there, though he does not have French nationality. [Reuters]

The Conseil d'Etat ruled that contrary to the first ruling his deportation to Morocco would not be a disproportionate interference with his right to lead a normal private and family life. Conseil d'Etat acts as the supreme court for administrative justice. [Reuters]

(gc)

France: Transport, public service workers set to protest in September

French transport and public services workers are set to protest across France throughout September as they seek better pay and working conditions, according to local media reports. [AA][Crisis23Garda]

Romain Cusco, a representative of the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) union, told broadcaster France 3 that transport sector employees are "overworked." He said workers have been pressing for pay hikes for almost six months, but management failed to give them an adequate response, leaving them with no option but to strike. [AA]

The CGT has called for these work stoppages as part of a broader strike notice running through late September, demanding that authorities provide greater financing to public services, increase the size of the public-sector workforce, and reduce working hours, among other reforms.[AA][Crisis23Garda]

(gc)

France: Paris creates LBGTQ rights ambassador to combat global discrimination

France has created an ambassador for LGBTQ rights in an effort to fight discrmination around the world, French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne has announced.

The ambassador will be named by the end of the year and will notably be in charge of pushing for universal decriminalisation of homosexuality and trans identity. [France 24]

"The President of the Republic's approach, my approach, the government's approach is not ambiguous: we will continue to fight to make progress on the rights of the LGBTQ," Bourne said. France has also started a EUR 3 million fund to finance ten new LGBT+ centres, in addition to the 35 already existing in France. [France 24]

(gc)

Germany: Chancellor Olaf Scholz denies impropriety in Hamburg tax-scandal

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz denied on August 19 using any impropriety when lawmakers in Hamburg questioned him for three and a half hours about a multi-billion euro tax fraud allegation when he was the city's mayor.

The hearing yielded no leads into the so-called "cum-ex" tax scandal, involving Warburg Bank in Hamburg and whether Scholz, who was mayor between 2011 and 2018, helped the bank evade paying EUR 47 million in taxes. Scholz met with representatives of Warburg Bank in 2016 and 2017. [DW] [Reuters] [AP] [ZDF]

The scandal involved banks and investors trading company shares around their dividend payout day and receiving tax refunds by the government. The tax evasion scandal may be the biggest in German history, costing more than EUR 10 billion in lost taxes. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The August hearing on August 19 also focussed on new findings, including suspicious emails by Hamburg authorities and EUR 200,000 in cash found in the safe of a former lawmaker in Scholz's party of Social Democrats (SPD). Scholz said he "had no influence on the Warburg tax procedure" and that he couldn't remember the details. [Reuters] [Tagesschau][Reuters] [Euronews]

Scholz had already been questioned on the matter by a committee in April 2021, when he had also denied any involvement. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Members of the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) doubted Scholz's statements.

Richard Seelmacker, a CDU lawmaker, said it was "simply not credible." Friedrich Merz, CDU chairman, said he doesn't "believe a word the chancellor said." [Bloomberg] [Spiegel] [ZDF]

Scholz's handling of the investigation could add to already low approval ratings. A survey by polling institute INSA, published on August 21, showed that around two thirds of people in Germany were not satisfied with chancellor Scholz and the government. If the chancellor were to be elected directly, Scholz would come in third place, the survey showed. [DW] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Schroder remains in governing party, sues to regain perks lost over Putin ties

Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder can remain a member of the Social Democrats Party (SPD) despite efforts to have him expelled due to his relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, an internal party arbitration committee ruled on August 8. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

Schroder's business ties in Russia were not in violation of SPD rules, the committee said. The decision can be appealed within two weeks. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [AP]

Lars Klingbeil, SPD chairman, said that the ruling was a "loss" for the party. The committee made a "legal decision," but Schroder is "politically isolated from the party," he said. [ZDF] [Zeit]

The SPD party statutes make expulsion difficult, members said prior to the hearing. Seventeen SPD party branches had requested that Schroder be expelled, saying that his activities and refusal to distance himself from Putin were causing damage to the party. [Politico Europe] [AP] [Zeit]

The Bundestag's budgetary committee in May stripped Schroder's taxpayer-funded office and staff for his unwillingness to distance himself from Putin and resign from positions at Russian state companies. The budget committee said that it removed his benefits because he wasn't fulfilling his "ongoing obligations" as a former chancellor.

Schroder filed a lawsuit on August 12 against the German parliament to regain his benefits. His lawyer

said that ending his benefits was unlawful because there wasn't a clear definition of what "ongoing obligations" meant. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

After the end of his chancellorship from 1998 to 2005, Schroder worked for Russian energy companies and gas giants like Gazprom and was a chairman of the shareholder committee of Nord Stream, a gas pipeline that connects Russia and Germany. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Drought-induced lower Rhine water levels adds to Germany's economic woes

Germany is facing another economic challenge as Europe's biggest economy braces for slower growth and possible energy supply disruptions this winter – lower water levels of the Rhine River.

Water levels of the country's main commercial artery have dropped after weeks of baking temperatures and little rain this summer, causing delays to shipping and pushing freight costs up more than five-fold. Some cargo vessels can only load with 30 to 40 percent of their capacity. [Reuters] [DW] [FAZ]

The reference waterline level at the chokepoint of Kaub south of Koblenz was at 48 centimetres on August 10, according to Refinitiv Eikon data, down about 4 centimetres on the day. Vessels need about 1.5 metres of reference waterline to sail fully loaded. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Spot prices for transport in a liquid tanker barge from Rotterdam to Karlsruhe south of Kaub rose to about 110 euros a tonne on August 10, up EUR 16 from the previous day and up from only around EUR 20 a tonne in June before water levels fell, Reuters reported, citing traders. [Reuters]

Used by vessels to haul vital commodities, the Rhine snakes about 1,300 kilometres from its source high in the Swiss Alps through some of Europe's most important industrial zones before emptying into the North Sea near Rotterdam. Companies including chemicals giant BASF SE and steelmaker Thyssenkrupp AG rely on the river to supply major industrial plants with fuels and raw materials, according to Bloomberg. [Bloomberg]

BASF, with production sites on the upper Rhine, may cut production amid higher energy and transportation prices, the company said. Benchmark German power prices jumped to a new record last month. [Bloomberg]

Supply shortages will also affect coal power plants if ships are unable to load enough coal, a development that would add to Germany's existing energy woes.

Uniper, already hit by the energy crisis and bailed out by the German government on July 22, warned that it had to possibly cut output at two of its coal power plants, which account for 4 percent of Germany's electricity generated by coal. [Europe Monthly August 2022] [Reuters] [Bloomberg] [FAZ] [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government introduces new gas levy, reduces sales tax on gas

Germany announced on August 15 a gas levy of 2.4-euro cents per kilowatt per hour for households, effective from October 1, that will increase monthly bills by about EUR 500. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The levy by Trading Hub Europe, Germany's gas market operator, is supposed to help the country's energy companies offset higher import costs by passing them onto consumers. Germany's biggest gas importer Uniper asked for a government bailout in July as the company faced insolvency due to reduced gas flows from Russia. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

On average, gas bills may increase by 13 percent, or around EUR 480 a year, for German households after the levy is imposed, according to price comparison platform Verivox. The levy will remain in place until April 2024.[Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Germany's Industry will be subject to the charge, with the German Steel Federation saying it would add around another EUR 500 million a year to the sector's energy bills, on top of EUR 7 billion in extra costs already attributed to high energy prices. [Reuters]

The levy is necessary to save the German energy market from collapsing, according to Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck. It is a better alternative "even if it brings a heavy burden," he said. [ZDF] [Reuters]

Experts, though, said they expect it to accelerate inflation. Jorg Kramer, Commerzbank's chief economist, said inflation is expected to increase by about 1 percentage point with the levy. Inflation in Germany is running at about 8.5 percent. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Federal Statistical Office]

Opposition parties, consumer protection groups and members of the ruling coalition also criticised the gas levy as "unjust." The original design meant that not only financially threatened energy companies, but also profitable ones could benefit from the levy and impose higher costs on their customers. [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

Habeck agreed to revise the design of the levy on August 26. He plans to see if there is a "political solution" or else there would have to be a legislative change to the levy, which could be "complicated." [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

The biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) wants to stop the gas levy completely and is planning to make a request in the parliament. [Tagesschau]

Germany reduced its sales tax on gas to 7 percent from 19 percent on August 18, trying to ease the financial burden on households. Reducing the sales tax is estimated to cost about EUR 14 billion in lost revenue.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the energy companies are expected "to pass on this saving" to customers. Germany had first tried for permission from the European Commission for a sales tax exemption on gas but was denied on August 16. [Bloomberg] [DW] [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Summer demand weakness helps Germany boost gas storage levels faster than expected

Weak summer demand has helped Germany increase its gas reserves faster than expected, with storage levels at 82.2 percent of capacity ahead of the country's target of 75 percent for September 1, according to industry data from European operators group GIE of August 28. [Reuters]

Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said not to "relax," since storage levels were filling up faster

because of lower gas consumption in the summer months and are meant as reserves for the winter, which is still “unpredictable.” [Tagesschau]

The country’s gas storage capacity is expected to reach 85 percent on October 1 and 95 percent on November 1, levels required to meet winter demand. The government increased the country’s gas storage targets by 5 percent on July 21. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

On August 18, the head of Germany’s energy regulator, Klaus Muller, warned of missing the storage targets in the next few months. The November 1 target of 95 percent will likely be missed “in all our scenarios,” he said.

Local gas shortages are possible over the winter, according to Muller. He added that it will be “two tough winters” for Germany. German industries have also expressed concern about energy supplies. [Reuters] [ZDF]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Public broadcasters under increased scrutiny for alleged corruption

Germany’s public broadcasters are under scrutiny after the director of Berlin’s public broadcaster Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg (RBB), Patricia Schlesinger, was accused of allegedly using funds illegally.

Schlesinger has stepped down from her role as director of RBB. The broadcasters are also under scrutiny for the irregular allocation of consultancy contracts.

The broadcasting council of RBB initiated the termination of her contract on August 14 and cancelled her position as rotating chair of ARD, a nationwide network of nine regional broadcasters and international broadcaster Deutsche Welle. [DW] [ZDF] [Tagesschau]

New chair of ARD, Tom Buhrow, said that its directors lost trust in the management of RBB to manage “the events fast enough.” The RBB staff wants the resignation of the regional broadcaster’s management, said head of RBB editorial committee Ute Zill on August 20. [ZDF] [Tagesschau]

The controversy around Schlesinger caused new debates about reforming Germany’s public

broadcasting system, which includes 21 TV channels and 83 radio stations. They are publicly funded through a levy of EUR 18.36 per month per household. [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Chancellor Scholz open to possible extension on nuclear power

Germany will consider extending operations at the country's last three nuclear power plants as uncertainty over Russian natural gas and rising prices hurt energy security, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on August 3. [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV] [Tagesschau]

It "might make sense" to extend operations even though they account for only a small proportion – about 6 percent in the first quarter this year – of Germany's overall electricity supply, Scholz said. For states such as Bavaria, which are behind in developing renewable energy sources, nuclear power could help them meet their power needs, he said. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [Spiegel] [AP]

Authorities will make a decision based on the results in coming weeks of stress tests of the electricity grid run by the country's energy providers, Scholz said. The results will help determine whether power supplies can be guaranteed this winter. [Europe Monthly August 2022] [Politico Europe] [AP] [ZDF]

The governing coalition is split on whether to extend operations at the plants.

The Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens have said they want to stick to the phase-out date at the end of the year, but won't "rule out the option" of extending operations. The liberal coalition partner FDP and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the largest opposition party, support an extension of nuclear power. [ZDF] [AP]

Environmental groups oppose extending the use of the plants.

The debate "blocks the energy transition" to more renewables and "distracts from necessary cutbacks on energy consumption," according to Kai Niebert, president of the umbrella organisation for German nature, animal and environmental protection groups DNR. [Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Every sixth person threatened by poverty in 2021

Every sixth person, meaning 13 million people or 15.8 percent of the population, were threatened by poverty in Germany in 2021, a study by the Federal Statistical Office showed.

The number of people threatened by poverty slightly declined compared to 2020, when 13.2 million people or 16.1 percent of the population were affected, according to the study.

Single parents and people living alone are threatened by poverty, with every fourth person affected. The study also found that the risk of poverty was substantially higher for retired and unemployed people. [Tagesschau] [ZDF] [Zeit]

(mb/gc)

Germany: US sour crude oil shipment arrives in Germany as Europe looks to diversify energy supplies

Germany received a tanker of US sour crude on August 3, as the European Union looks to reduce its reliance on Russian energy supplies.

The German PCK Schwerdt refinery will test the oil's compatibility at its 233,000 barrel a day capacity facility, a German government source told Reuters. [Reuters] [EuroNews/Reuters]

Russia's Rosneft, which owns the PCK Schwerdt with Shell and Eni, warned on August 12 that the US oil was more expensive and would lead to a loss of EUR 300 million per year for PCK Schwerdt.. The Russian company also said it would impact the prices of refined fuels. [Reuters] [EuroNews/Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Electoral reform bill addresses population increase, online campaigning

The Irish legislature has enacted an electoral reform bill to address an increase in the country's population and issues related to online campaigning.

The bill, which was officially enacted on July 25, provides for the establishment of a new electoral commission that is independent of the government. It will review voter constituencies once the final results of the 2022 census are available.

To address the increase in the country's population during the past decade, the commission will add between 11 and 19 seats to the Lower House of Parliament before the next election in 2025. [The Irish Times] [Irish Parliament]

The body will also have powers to act against misinformation online during election periods. It can issue notices to the hosts of online platforms, requiring them to take down, correct or mark misleading information.

Political online ads will become more transparent under the new bill. Such ads must now include information about its buyer, how much was paid for it, and the expected target group, among other things. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [Irish Parliament]

Registering as a voter will be streamlined and made easier for people without fixed addresses, effectively enabling homeless persons to vote. People aged 16 and 17 can now pre-register as voters.

The electoral commission will be asked to review a proposal to lower the voting age to 16. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Irish Catholics demand reforms from Rome

Irish Catholics have demanded far-reaching reforms to the church, including a change in attitude towards women and LGBTQI+ people.

Irish Catholics called in a document sent to Rome for the church to allow women to hold religious posts. They also demanded that the church becomes more inclusive towards LGBTQI+ people, those who are divorced or remarried, and single parents. Celibacy should no longer be mandatory for priests, they say. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

The so-called National Synthesis document summarises the results of widespread consultation in all of Ireland's 26 Catholic dioceses since last October. It is part of worldwide preparations for a Synod of Bishops called by Pope Francis that is planned to take place in October 2023.

The document acknowledges that the Irish church is in a "crisis." Participation is declining steadily, already causing a shortage of priests in some areas. [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Far-right groups increase cooperation in response to Dublin's Covid-19 policies

Irish far-right groups increased their cooperation as they opposed Dublin's Covid-19 measures, a non-government organisation said.

The Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, a US watchdog, reported that the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to Irish far-right extremist groups, who found unity in shared conspiracy theories concerning the coronavirus. The groups connected domestically and increasingly fostered international connections, the project said. [The Irish Times]

Researchers from Ireland's Maynooth University surveyed organisations that are common targets of hate crimes. They found that all respondents had experienced far-right harassment online, while 50 percent reported physical threats. Most participants in the survey wanted the government to do more to combat right-wing harassment. [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Outrage over public letter by First Lady addressing war in Ukraine

Irish politicians criticised a letter by the country's First Lady Sabina Higgins calling for a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine because it didn't explicitly condemn President Vladimir Putin for the invasion.

The First Lady later issued a clarification condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine but defended her letter in the Irish Times.

“I cannot be but dismayed that people would find anything unacceptable in a plea for peace and negotiations,” she wrote. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner]

The Russian Embassy in Ireland praised Ms. Higgins’ position.

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Ireland may miss its 51% reduction target for greenhouse gas emissions

Ireland may miss its target of a 51 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, even as Dublin implements ambitious plans to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from livestock and fossil fuels.

The governing coalition agreed on July 28 on a 25 percent emission cut for the agricultural sector, which was the last major point of contention within the government. The agricultural sector is responsible for 38 percent of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. [Reuters] [The Irish Times][BBC] [Irish Examiner]

Several farmer associations criticised the reduction, saying it could potentially have a devastating impact on the sector even though the government has promised financial support to offset the costs of reducing emissions. Opposition parties and environmental groups said the target was not enough. [The Irish Times] [BBC] [Irish Examiner]

Following the passing of the Climate Action Plan in November last year, the government must reduce the country’s overall greenhouse gas emissions by 51 percent by 2030. Other emission reduction targets include 75 percent for the electricity sector, 50 percent for transportation and a35 percent drop for industry. [BBC] [Irish Examiner][BBC] [RTÉ] [Reuters]

The government-led Climate Action Advisory Council said that the sectoral targets only amount to a 43 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The governing coalition argues that the remaining eight percent would be achieved through technological innovation and reduction in sectors that have not yet been decided on. [BBC] [The Irish Times] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Thousands of undocumented migrants applied to have legal status regularised

An Irish government plan to regularise the legal status of undocumented migrants in Ireland received almost 8,000 applications, of which 1,450 had already been approved at the end of July.

The program, which was launched in January, offered an estimated 17,000 undocumented migrants the chance to apply for a Stamp 4 permission that allows them to work and live in the country. Prior to the program, immigrants had to live at least four years in Ireland to apply for the permission, or three years if they had children.

The application period ended on July 31.

Under a second scheme, migrants that had been in the international protection process for at least two years could apply for regularisation. More than 1,000 of them have already been granted permission to stay. This program closed on August 7. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Ukrainian refugees must leave student accommodations

Ukrainian refugees must leave student accommodations to make space for returning students.

Around 1,800 Ukrainian refugees housed in student accommodations would have to leave before the end of August, the Department of Integration announced earlier that month. Another 1,200 would be rehoused in mid-September. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner]

The government restricted visa-free travel for non-Ukrainian refugees after running out of state-run accommodation in July. Many Ukrainians are currently housed in temporary accommodation facilities while the government seeks help from the private sector to deal with the increasing number of refugees arriving in the country. [Europe Monthly August 2022] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Netherlands: Government's new immigration policy sparks political divide

The Dutch government's decision to force municipalities to accept asylum seekers has sparked political divide in the country, with local affiliates of the right-leaning VVD party calling for an end to the policy. [Euractiv]

Two dozen local VVD politicians have written a letter to the party's national political figures, which include Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and State Secretary Eric van der Burg, responsible for asylum policy, to scrap the new reception policy.

The government's recent purchase of a hotel in Albergen, a village in the municipality of Tubbergen for asylum seekers, sparked protests in the area. It was the first property designated by the national government for the reception of asylum seekers without agreement from the municipality involved. [NLTimes][Euractiv]

Mayor Wilmien Haverkamp said the government was forcing the decision on the villagers. Hundreds of people protested in front of the hotel last month with signs placed on the building, like, "Keep Albergen clean," "What are you doing to our beautiful little village?" and "Soon 10 percent immigrants, can we live here safely?" [Euractiv][NLTimes]

Municipalities can't handle the high intake figures, VVD politicians said in their letter. "We have experienced that the current working methods of both the VVD parliamentary party and the Cabinet have drastically diminished the base of support for receiving asylum seekers."[Euractiv]

Separately, the Dutch Council for Refugees is demanding better conditions for asylum seekers in the northern town of Ter Apel by October 1. They want improved access to clean water, showers, privacy, adequate food and healthcare. The council has filed a suit against the state, which will be heard on September 15. [Euronews]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Ministers want companies to raise salaries to combat inflation

The Dutch government has encouraged employers to raise salaries for their employees to help combat inflation, with several ministers saying that companies need to raise wages to protect Dutch residents' purchasing power, several Ministers said. [DutchNews] [NLTimes] [NOS]

"These are exceptional times and call for exceptional measures," Social Affairs Minister Karien van Gennip said. She met with her Finance and Economic Affairs counterpart to discuss wages one month before the presentation of ministers' 2023 spending plans. "Not everything can come from the government," Finance Minister Sigrid Kaag said.

The government may help protect low income households, Minister of Economic Affairs Mickey Adriaansens, said. Citizens have been encouraged to contact their municipalities or energy companies to relieve the financial burdens.

(gt/gc)

United Kingdom: Secret Rwanda passages in documents must be disclosed, judge rules

The majority of passages in internal documents related to a controversial plan to deport illegal immigrants to Rwanda must be disclosed to determine the legality of the policy, the High Court ruled.

Lord Justice Lewis decided that six out of ten secret passages in documents advising the government on the deportation of illegal immigrants to Rwanda must be made public before the court can make a decision in early September. The remaining four passages should remain secret because of the potential threat to international relations, especially with Rwanda, the judge said in his ruling on August 17. [BBC] [The Guardian]

In April, the UK agreed with Rwanda to deport illegal immigrants to the African nation. Lawmakers, human rights groups, the United Nations and the European Court of Human Rights criticised the agreement, a blowback that halted the policy until the British High Court of Justice decides on its legality. [Reuters] [BBC]

Security concerns and insufficient accommodations in Rwanda raised concerns about the policy. With the number of migrants crossing the Channel to the UK increasing, the policy was also considered ineffective, according to critics. [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC]

Both potential successors to current prime minister Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, are determined to continue the deportations. [Reuters]

While the country is still awaiting a decision from the High Court, the government is already preparing a new deportation flight, after the first had been forced to be cancelled by the European Court of Human Rights. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: Judges appointed to British Supreme Court

The Queen has approved the re-appointment of Lord David Lloyd-Jones and the appointment of Sir David Richards as Justices of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom. [UK Gov]

Lord Jones was re-appointed to his former position after the retirement age for Supreme Court judges was raised to 75 years old. He had retired earlier this year at 70. Richards will replace Lady Mary Arden, who retired in January. [UK Gov]

In the UK, judges to the Supreme Court are suggested by an independent selection commission and appointed by the prime minister after formal approval by the queen. [Supreme Court]

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: Ongoing strikes hit as workers demand pay raises in face of inflation

UK workers from various sectors have repeatedly held strikes during the past weeks to demand pay increases that keep pace with inflation. [Reuters]

The ongoing strikes have caused major economic disruptions, such as an eight-day strike by 1,900 dockworkers at the UK's biggest container port at the end of August. [Reuters] [BBC] [The Guardian]

The strikes have also affected basic infrastructure, such as public transportation, with temporarily only 20 percent of the UK's trains running, as well as waste management and postal services. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters]

General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Mick Lynch said the country might face a national general strike in the near future. “I think there will be generalised and synchronised action. It may not be in a traditional form,” he said. [The Guardian]

The UK’s inflation rate is currently at around ten percent, but it is expected to rise further in the next few months. [UK Government] [BBC] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: British imports of Russian oil, fuels drop to zero in June

The United Kingdom imported no oil and refined oil from Russia in June, according to data from the Office for National Statistics. British imports of Russian oil have steadily declined since President Vladimir Putin sent troops across the border into Ukraine, from GBP 521.8 million to zero in June. [National Statistics]

British imports of refined oil fell from GBP 485.74 million in February to zero in June, according to the statistics office. British imports of fuels also dropped to zero in June, according to Uk government data. [National Statistics]

The UK has pledged to phase out Russian oil imports by the end of the year and gas imports as soon as possible. It has steadily increased its imports of oil and refined oil from Saudi Arabia from February. [National Statistics][Yahoo]

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: Eurasian Development Bank to promote energy projects in Belarus

The Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) announced on August 4 that it is prepared to invest and finance energy projects in Belarus. [Belta]

EDB has an authorised capital of USD 7 billion and mainly invests in integration projects in infrastructure, digitalisation, agriculture, green energy, industry and mechanical engineering within the Eurasian Economic Union. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Foreign ministry presents initiatives to achieve a world without nuclear weapons

The international community should take collective action to strengthen non-proliferation, Belarusian foreign ministry official Vasily Pavlov said in New York on August 4.

Belarus is committed to nuclear disarmament to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation, Pavlov said during the Review Conference of the parties to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Belarus would ensure the implementation of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty, which has been ratified by 174 states, he said. [Belta]

Belarus supports its proposal for a nuclear-free zone and suggested implementing a legally binding agreement in which nuclear states reassure each other that they won't use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, Pavlov said. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Government suspends grain export

Belarus has decided to suspend grain exports to help meet demand needed for cattle farming and milk production, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on August 2. Belarus should also set up companies to cultivate and develop land for grain production and cattle breeding, Lukashenko said. [Belta]

Lukashenko added on August 5 that the on-going global food crisis is a chance for the country's agricultural sector. Belarusian farmers can maximise their output to increase exports, Lukashenko said

He also praised the quality of the country's agricultural products, expecting more consumers to buy them. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Prime Minister expects interest rates to fall

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said on August 10 that the country's interest rates should be reduced in order to stimulate economic growth and consumption. [Belta]

Interest rates have started to fall, though at a slower rate than expected, Golovchenko said. As citizens rushed to withdraw money and buy foreign currencies due to heightened concerns about inflation between March and April, banks increased the interest rates, he said. [Belta]

The situation has improved with greater liquidity and more financial resources available for the banks, Golovchenko said. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Piotr Parkhomchik presented as new vice prime minister

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko announced on August 17 that Piotr Parkhomchik has been introduced as his new deputy to the members of the government. [Belta] [Belta]

Parkhomchik served as the Minister of Industry and ran a company manufacturing heavy trucks before entering politics. [Belta] [Belarus]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Supreme Court seeks successor for Civil Chamber judge due to retire next year

Estonia is seeking, through a public competition, a successor for the position of Supreme Court justice in the Civil Chamber with the retirement of Judge Peeter Jerofejev, on July 15, 2023. [ERR]

Applicants must satisfy the requirements for judges as laid out in the Courts Act. The submission deadline is September 12. [ERR]

Supreme Court justices are appointed by the Riigikogu, the country's parliament, and candidates are submitted to the Riigikogu by the chief justice of the Supreme Court after the chief justice has first heard the opinions of the Council for Administration of Courts and the Supreme Court.

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Government signs into law 'pushbacks' for illegal migrants

Estonian President Alar Karls signed into law on August 1 an amendment to the State Borders Act that allows the government to take a harsher stance on illegal migration. [ERR] [Riigikogu]

The amendment, which the Estonian parliament passed on July 1, provides the Police and Border Guard Board to send back migrants who crossed into the country illegally and whose applications for asylum were refused. Such acts are considered "pushbacks" by EU institutions. [ERR] [Riigikogu]

The amendment proposed by the conservative Isamaa party, which is part of the coalition government, was passed with 68 votes in favour of implementation. An

illegal migrant can only be admitted for “humane considerations.” [ERR] [Riigikogu]

The amendment will ensure public order and safety in case of emergency situations, according to a statement by the country’s parliament. Estonia has become an important transition country for refugees seeking asylum in Nordic countries. Previously, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland also moved to legalise “pushbacks” under certain conditions. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Government imposes visa ban on Russian tourists

Estonia approved on August 11 measures to restrict the issuance of visas to Russian citizens and their entry to Estonia at external borders with Schengen visas. The ban started on August 18. [Politico] [Estonia] [Bloomberg]

Exceptions are made for close relatives of Estonian citizens, applicants seeking a humanitarian visa, students enrolled in Estonia, and businesspeople engaged in cross-border trade. [Politico] [Estonia] [Bloomberg]

Estonia’s Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said that ordinary Russians “bear also moral responsibility for the passivity of legitimising this regime.” The Minister of Interior, Lauri Laanemets, supported the visa ban, as Russians should not enjoy opportunities of European freedoms and values while endorsing the war in Ukraine. [Politico]

Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said Estonia’s decision will have a significant impact, especially if more EU members or even the EU follows this move. She added that while air travel is banned and Russian tourists are only able to enter the EU via adjacent countries, i.e. Finland, Latvia and Estonia, other EU countries such as Germany should also stop issuing Schengen visas to Russian citizens. [ERR]

The ban started amid recent data from the Police and Border Guard showing that 125 Russian citizens have applied for asylum in Estonia. The number of submissions has been tenfold in comparison to 2021. [ERR]

While 90 applications are still in the process of evaluation, 21 have been accepted and eight have been rejected. Six cases were withdrawn. [ERR]

In the wake of Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine and the tightening of legislation, thousands of Russians, mostly those with anti-government sentiments, have left their country to escape punishments and restrictions. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Students union criticises government ban on visas for Russian students

The Federation of Estonian Student Unions criticised the government's decision to stop visa and resident permits for Belarusian and Russian students, saying on August 9 that there should be exceptions for those already studying in the country. [ERR]

The government has overreacted, Union head Marcus Ehasoo said, adding that Russian students already enrolled in BA or MA programs would be unable to finish their studies. Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu disagreed with the students' union, saying any exception could be seen as "inconsistent". [ERR]

The government made the decision on July 28 to halt visas and residency permits in response to Russia's war in Ukraine. [The Baltic Times] [The Moscow Times]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Efforts to transition to all-Estonian language schooling is 'unrealistic,' educator says

Estonia's efforts to transition to all-Estonian language schooling were "unrealistic," the new head of the Tallinn Education Department, Kaarel Rundu said in an interview on August 6.

There is a considerable shortage of teachers of Estonian as a second language, Rundu said, adding that the goal in itself was laudable. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Government plans to connect Gulf of Riga offshore wind farm with mainland

Estonia plans to connect an offshore wind farm in the Gulf of Riga to the Estonian mainland as the government tries to improve energy security and renewable power. [ERR]

Connecting the wind farm and mainland will take as long as six years to complete. The wind farm will have as many as 100 turbines and has a capacity of 1000 MW. [ERR]

The Minister of Public Administration, Riina Solman, said by 2030 Estonia could produce as much renewable energy as it consumes. Solman said that wind and solar energy are the cheapest and most environmentally friendly alternatives to help Estonia cope with climate change and energy shortages. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Economics affairs ministry calls for faster substitution of natural gas

Estonia needs to use fuels other than natural gas in its district heating systems to ensure the availability of energy supplies this winter, the country's Minister of Economic Affairs and Communications, Riina Sikkut, said on August 5. [The Baltic Times]

With a shortage of energy supplies expected this winter for consumers, natural gas needs to be substituted with alternative fuels wherever possible, Sikkut said. Consumers "must mitigate the risks early," the minister said. [The Baltic Times]

The construction of a floating LNG terminal will be completed on time, Sikkut said. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Head of the NATO Centre for Strategic Communication detects less Russian propaganda in Latvia

Attacks against Latvia by Russian propagandists and hackers have subsided lately, though that may change as Riga takes a more assertive stance toward Moscow, Janis Sarts, the head of the NATO Centre for Strategic Communication, said on August 3. [LSM]

Sarts said that Russia still retains the capabilities to launch cyberattacks against Latvia, adding that Russian

propaganda could increase during an energy crisis this winter. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Parliament designates Russia as a sponsor of terrorism

The Latvian parliament said on August 11 that it would designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and called on other countries to do the same. [ABC News] [Reuters] [Le Monde] [LSM]

Latvia has accused Russia of genocide, using violence and intimidation against the Ukrainian people, paralyzing the functioning of the Ukrainian state, and deliberately killing Ukrainian citizens. [ABC News] [Euronews]

Parliament said that Russia has supported and funded terrorist organisations, backed the Assad regime in Syria and was responsible for the poisoning of the Sergei Skripal,a former Russian military officer and double agent for British intelligence agencies, and his daughter Yulia. The parliament commemorated all victims of Russia's war in Ukraine, expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people. [LSM] [VOA]

Russia denounced the Latvian parliament's decision as "xenophobia."

Sergei Tsekov, member of the upper house of the Russian parliament, added that Russia would take retaliatory measures against Latvia. [ABC News]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Government has sufficient gas for winter season, Minister of Economics says

Latvia's Minister of Economics, Ilze Indriksone, said on August 6 that the country has sufficient gas capacities for the upcoming winter season, even as national gas supplier Latvenergo seeks alternative fuel supplies for electricity generation. [LSM]

The Incukalns gas tank, the only underground gas tank in the country, has enough supplies for the demand this winter, Indriksone said. Many countries are looking for alternative energy supplies to meet demand, she said [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Parliament extends state of emergency at Latvian-Belarusian border

The Latvian parliament decided on August 11 to extend the state of emergency at the Latvian-Belarusian border until November 10, 2022. [LSM]

The parliament specified that the state of emergency applies to the Ludza, Kraslavas and Augsdaugavas municipalities as well as the city of Daugavpils. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Justice ministry prepares restrictions on public use of Russian

The Latvian ministry of justice announced on August 15 that it would prepare new restrictions on the use of the Russian language in public. [LSM]

Framing the new restrictions as a "decision of the people," the ministry referred to a referendum held in 2012, during which the Latvian population voted against the adoption of Russian as a second language. The new restrictions coincide with Latvia's ambitions to encourage people to communicate in Latvian, the sole official language in the country. [LSM]

Vadim Poleshchuk, specialist in European law, said that this decision could spark wide-spread protests among the Russian minority and that people who voted in the referendum did so to decide over the use of Latvian in the sphere of public administration. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Vilnius to propose ban on doing business with Russia

The Lithuanian government is considering a total ban on business and banking services with Russia in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, LRT reported on August 4. [LRT] [LRT]

The proposed ban on doing business with Russian companies has been the subject of discussion since July 19 when the parliamentary committee on national

security and defence analysed the impact of Russian business activities in Lithuania.

More than 300 Russian companies, mostly small businesses with an investment volume of EUR 300 million, still operate in Lithuania. They would be subjected to the proposed ban.

At least 73 Lithuanian companies operating in Russia, with an investment of EUR 103 million, would be affected by the decision. Some Lithuanian entrepreneurs noted that Russia is still an important transit country to reach Asian markets and called on the government to take this into consideration. [LRT] [LRT]

Coincidingly, Lithuanian banks plan to stop payment services with Russian clients, including those who want to pay for transit to Kaliningrad. Siauliu Bankas so far remains the only institution through which Russia pays for transportation to and from Kaliningrad, yet it announced to stop processing the payments, beginning September 1

Despite the note from the Russian charge d'affaires Sergey Ryabokon which condemns these practices, the Lithuanian Transport Minister Marius Skuodis said that Lithuanian banks could make their own decisions, as long as they abide by national law. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: New radio program will target audiences in Russia and Belarus to fight disinformation

The Lithuanian Radio and Television Centre said on August 12 that it would launch the Russian-language program 'Radio Pravda' to fight disinformation and propaganda. [LRT]

Valdas Kaminskas, a spokesperson for the Lithuanian Radio and Television Centre, added that Russian-speaking audiences in Russia and Belarus were the target of the new program. It aims to provide accurate reporting about the developments in the war in Ukraine. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Belarusian opposition in exile announced transitional cabinet in Vilnius

The Belarusian opposition in exile under Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, former frontrunner against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, announced on August 9 a transitional cabinet in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. [LRT]

Tikhanovskaya said that the cabinet is an important step in restoring the Belarusian constitution. The transitional cabinet is composed of various prominent politicians of the Belarusian opposition, including Pavel Latushka who is responsible for the transition of power; Alexander Azarov who is in charge of restoring law and order; Valery Kovalevsky who is responsible for foreign affairs; and Valer Sahashzyk who oversees defence and national security. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Prosecutors submit court request to cancel Russian land ownership

Lithuanian prosecutors submitted on August 19 a request to a regional court to cancel the purchase agreement for five plots of land in the Druskininkai municipality that were allegedly acquired illegally by Russian citizens. [LRT]

The prosecutors claimed that although the purchaser is a Lithuania-registered agricultural company, the founders were Russian citizens seeking to acquire land in Lithuania. Given that Russian citizens do not meet the legal criteria to do so, such practices present a breach of Lithuanian law. [LRT]

Evidence presented by the prosecutors to the Kaunas Regional Prosecutor's Office showed that the company does not engage in agriculture production and has generated no income. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: State Secretary says Moldova committed to non-proliferation and arms control

The Moldovan State Secretary of the ministry of foreign affairs and European integration, Ruslan Bolbochan, said during a UN session on August 2 that Moldova

would maintain its commitment to arms control and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. [Moldpres]

Bolbochan said he was concerned about nuclear security in Europe and called on the international community to strictly enforce the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation. [Moldpres]

His comments coincide with the deterioration of regional security in Southeast Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where there has been fighting around nuclear power plants in Zaporizhzhya and Chernobyl. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Authorities impose tighter security measures at Chisinau International Airport

Moldova has imposed tighter security controls for passengers and staffl at the Chisinau International Airport on August 1 after more than 20 bomb threats were reported in July. [Moldpres] [Al Jazeera]

Passengers can only enter the airport with a valid ticket, a passport and specific travel details, according to authorities. Tighter security measures for baggage and hand luggage have been imposed while parking in front of the airport was prohibited. [Moldpres]

The bomb threats prompted security institutions to increase safety standards. [Moldpres] [Al Jazeera]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Central Election Committee passes program for local elections

Moldova's Central Election Committee announced on August 5 a program that sets the date of the upcoming local elections for October 16 and specific procedures required to hold the elections. [Moldpres]

Political parties, local administrations and electoral organs have received details of the program, enabling them to become familiar with the procedures. The local elections will be held on October 16 in the following localities: Salcuta (Causeni district), Ialpujeni

(Cimislia district) and Braniste (Rascani district). [Moldpres][Moldpres]

The Moldovan committee confirmed on August 9 the list of parties and political organisations that have the right to participate in the local elections. [moldpres]

According to the Central Election Committee, 55 parties and political organisations are allowed to participate and can nominate their candidates until the election date, which is set for October 16. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Parliament approves reforms to Information and Security Service

Chairman of the Moldovan parliament, Igor Grosu, said on August 17 that the country's Information and Security Service needs to make operational changes to cope with new risks and threats to the state and political institutions. [moldpres]

Parliament supports the reform process through the committee of national security, defence and public order, in order to ensure the safety of Moldovan citizens. [moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Ukraine: Moscow-appointed mayor killed in car-bomb attack in Ukrainian town

A Moscow-appointed mayor of the Russia-occupied Ukrainian town of Mykhailivka died in a car-bomb attack. A representative of Russia-imposed authorities in parts of Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, Volodymyr Rogov, wrote on Telegram on August 24 that Ivan Sushko died in the hospital after a bomb "intentionally placed under the seat of his vehicle" exploded. [RFE RL]

This follows another assassination of a Russian official in Ukraine in August. The Russia-appointed deputy mayor, Vitaliy Hura,of the Ukrainian city of Nova Kakhovka, in the Kherson region, was shot dead on August 6 by an unidentified assailant while leaving his home.[RFE RL]

(gc)

Russia: Economy withstands brutal sanctions but difficult times lie ahead

Russia's economy has withstood the brutal economic sanctions imposed by Western nations after Moscow sent thousands of troops into Ukraine, but quarterly economic data show that there are difficult times ahead as the country plunges into a recession.

The Central Bank of Russia estimated the country's economy shrank an annual 4.3 percent in the second quarter of this year, compared with a 4.7 percent estimate of contraction by 12 analysts polled by Bloomberg. The economy likely "shed four years of growth, returning to its 2018 size in the second quarter," Bloomberg Economics Russia expert Alexander Isakov said. [Yahoo]

"We expect the contraction to slow into the fourth quarter with looser monetary policy supporting demand," Bloomberg economist Isakov said. "Still the economy will lose another 2 percent in 2023 as the European energy ban will depress exports."

Real disposable incomes in Russia fell 0.8 percent in the second quarter of 2022, according to Rosstat statistics service. Industrial output fell 1.8 percent year-on-year in June and retail sales continued their slump, down 9.6 percent when compared with June 2021. Unemployment hovered at a record low 3.9 percent. [Reuters]

Western sanctions are hurting important economic sectors of the economy. The *Washington Post* reported that the manufacturing of cars and other goods dropped because companies can't import components. Airlines slashed international flights to near zero and are laying off pilots and cannibalising some planes for parts that they can no longer buy overseas, according to the *Washington Post*. [Washington Post]

With the help of higher oil prices and from new markets for its commodities, Russia has been able to avoid the complete economic meltdown many predicted after Moscow sent its forces into Ukraine six months ago. The International Monetary Fund upgraded Russia's economic forecast, saying GDP would contract by 6 percent this year — an improvement from the IMF's April forecast of an 8.5 percent contraction. [IMF]

Oil exports

"Russia's economy is estimated to have contracted during the second quarter by less than previously projected, with crude oil and non-energy exports

holding up better than expected," the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook report in July. "Domestic demand is also showing some resilience thanks to containment of the effect of the sanctions on the domestic financial sector and a lower-than-anticipated weakening of the labour market." [IMF]

Russia's economy has been helped by the purchase of crude oil by China, India and Turkey. This has offset the decline in consumption by European countries. [Reuters] [CBR]

In May, for example, China increased crude oil purchases from Russia by 55 percent year-on-year, and Russia became the largest oil supplier to China, surpassing Saudi Arabia, according to the latest data from the Russian Central Bank. Due to a large discount on Russian oil, India increased its crude imports from Russia by 4.7 times year-on-year, or by more than 400,000 barrels a day in April–May 2022, the central bank said. [CBR]

Best performing currency

The ruble's initial plummet in value after Moscow sent troops into Ukraine quickly reversed as the government took steps to prop up the currency. Year-to-date, the ruble has become the world's best-performing currency as a result of capital controls that Russia imposed after the invasion. [Reuters] [Washington Post]

Despite a slight weakening of the ruble in July compared to June, its considerable strengthening over the last three months kept on producing a disinflationary effect, according to the country's central bank.

Inflation remained high at an annual 15.1 percent in July, although it has dropped each month from 17.8 percent in April. The central bank said inflation would fall to between 5 to 7 percent in 2023 and 4 percent in 2024, the central bank's target. [CBR] [CBR]

The central bank added that the fall in annual inflation in July occurred as the ruble strengthened and the country witnessed an increase in fruit and vegetable supplies. "Restrained demand and export restrictions for a number of goods produced an additional disinflationary effect," it said. "Restrictions on agricultural exports and a stronger ruble increased saturation of the domestic market." [CBR] [CBR]

(gc/pk)

Russia: Moscow backs increase in OPEC+ oil production by 100,000 barrels a day in September

Russia supports an additional increase in oil production in September to meet demand that has reached pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said following the 31st ministerial meeting of OPEC and non-OPEC countries.[RussianGov][Interfax][SPGGlobal]

The oil-producing countries at the meeting unanimously approved a resolution to boost crude oil production in September by a further 100,000 barrels a day. With every member of the alliance incapable of sustainably raising production, except for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the actual supply increase will be much smaller—about 34,000 barrels a day, between the two countries. [RussianGov][Interfax][SPGGlobal]

The additional increase in oil production would help support the upward trend in demand for oil, Novak said. The next OPEC+ ministerial meeting is scheduled for 5 September 2022.

“We are seeing economic recovery,” Novak said. “Demand for oil is back to pre-pandemic levels. At the same time there are also negative factors, including the increasing incidence of COVID-19 and the uncertainties caused by the disruption of global transport and logistics chains. That is why cautious decisions like this are being taken.”.[RussianGov] [Interfax]

(gc)

Russia: Moscow accuses Ukraine of killing daughter of Russian ultra-nationalist

Russia has accused Ukraine’s secret services of killing of Darya Dugina, the daughter of an ultra-nationalist, in a car-bomb attack twenty miles west of Moscow, an accuation Kiev denied. [Reuters][FT]

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak called the accusation “propaganda.” Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov said “we don’t work in this way.” [Reuters][FT]

Dugina, whose father Alexander Dugin is a prominent ideologue, was killed on August 20 when a bomb blew up the Toyota Land Cruiser she was driving. President Vladimir Putin said the attack was “evil” and

posthumously granted Dugina the Order of Courage, a prestigious state award, “for courage and selflessness shown in the performance of professional duty.” [Reuters][FT]

Russian state television described the powerful explosion that shattered the windows of nearby homes as a “terrorist act.” Russian police have launched an investigation into Dugina’s death. [Reuters][FT][NYT]

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Former President dismisses claims that he was communist secret police informer

Albania’s former President Ilir Meta dismissed claims that he worked as a secret police informer during the country’s Communist era, saying they were a “politically motivated game.”

Pro-government media published claims alleging that Meta was an informer after the Authority for Information and Former State Security Documents verified a claim that a high-ranking politician with the initials “I.M.” was closely collaborating with Sigurimi, Albania's Communist-era secret police. [Balkan Insight] [Euronews]

Chairman of the Democratic Party and former Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, said that the media were making false claims. I.M. was someone under the name Ilir Murati, he said.

The claims started after Meta completed his tenure as president earlier this year and announced that he will take over the leadership of his party, the Socialist Movement for Integration, which was renamed the Party of Freedom. [AP]

The Authority for Information and Former State Security Documents has urged the government to amend its law on background verification to sufficiently identify politicians that have previously engaged in such activities during former dictator Enver Hoxha's regime. [Euronews]

Amend the Law

Parliamentarian Taulant Balla has announced that parliament is expected to amend the law related to politician background checks from September. The aim is for the law to become more thorough and strict, he said. [Euronews]

Parliament has requested that the Files Authority – who is responsible for handling communist-era files – provide a list of names of people currently working in "public administration" and the government, who have been linked to the communist secret services.

Previously, the Files Authority had urged the parliament to amend the law to correct a loophole that allowed such individuals to hide their past actions from the public and run for office. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Protests and political turmoil emerge after the death of a minor hit by a speedboat in Himara

Protests erupted in Albania after a former police officer killed a 7-year-old while driving a speedboat off the coast of a beach resort, marking the third boat related accident during the course of one month.

The child's death in Himara sparked a major political debate and various protests, including a group of demonstrators vandalising the interior ministry by throwing red paint at its wall on 8 August. Opposition politicians and protesters claim that private managers do not follow the already loose state-mandated safety standards, resulting in multiple accidents. [Euronews]

They also have accused the government of allowing private beach administrators to prioritise profits and of failing to implement basic safety regulations. Prime

Minister Edi Rama has dismissed the allegations, claiming that "this has been the most secure [summer] season." [Balkan Insight] [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Alleged ISIS supporter arrested by police

Albania has arrested an alleged supporter of the Islamic State for inciting calls and for propaganda for the commission of acts with terrorist purposes and "inciting hatred or strife," according to the Special Court against Corruption and Organised Crime. [Alfapress]

The investigation started after Bledar Zeneli made a series of posts supporting the Islamic State and against the global anti-terrorism coalition on social media. He is still being detained by Albanian authorities.[Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Citizens report being targeted by smuggling operation ads on TikTok

Albanian TikTok users have reported that anonymous accounts are posting smuggling operation ads that promise to take them to the United Kingdom.

The TikTok advertisements include smuggling operations by boat across the English Channel from France, or by road via Belgium, and urge viewers to text a UK contact number for more information. The vast majority of the accounts appear to have been created earlier this year and promise safe transport to the UK for anything between GBP 3,500 and GBP 5,000. [Albanian Daily News] [Daily Mail]

A TikTok spokesman reaffirmed that this goes against the application's community guidelines and that advertising life-threatening and illegal activities constitutes a crime. He pledged that the accounts are being sufficiently reviewed and banned.

Last year, Albania and the UK signed a deal regulating the removal of illegal British residents of Albanian origin, while another deal relating to the deportation of Albanian prisoners from the UK back to their home country is currently being implemented. [Balkan Insight] [Thomson Reuters Foundation]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Tirana plans to offer passports to rich foreigners, investors despite EU warnings

Albania is reportedly proceeding with a law that would allow foreign investors to gain citizenship in what many have dubbed a “golden passport” scheme despite EU criticism.

Prime Minister Edi Rama first proposed the law in 2019, saying it was something that Albania needed to do despite being risky. [Exit]

After first changing the law on private-public partnerships (PPP) by adding the citizenship programs to lists in which the law can be used, the Albanian government is considering hiring private firms to promote this scheme to foreigners. The government published on August 9 a decision that envisaged that forms of PPPs could also be used for this citizenship program. [Balkan Insight]

The European Union claims that such schemes “pose risks as regards security, money laundering, tax evasion, terrorist financing, corruption and infiltration by organised crime and are incompatible with the EU acquis”, implying that it would have consequences for Albania’s EU candidacy. [Balkan Insight] [European Commission]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Central Bank increases interest rates amid rising inflation

The Bank of Albania increased interest rates by 0.5 percentage points to 1.75 percent as the country, like many in Europe, confronts higher prices.

Inflation of about 7.4 percent is “the main danger for the country’s economy,” the Bank of Albania’s Governor Gent Sejko said. The World Bank has projected economic growth of 3.8 percent in 2022. [Albanian Daily News] [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Police officer under investigation for insulting journalists

Albania's Police Supervision Agency announced an "in-depth investigation" of police officer Anisa Kostani, who took to social media to criticise the coverage of a murder in Elbasan by local journalists. She has been suspended from duty.

Her online remarks were branded as "inappropriate, threatening and unacceptable" by the media. Kostani said journalists might "burn in hell" for their coverage. She also questioned the credibility of female journalists working on the case and their education. [Balkan Insight]

The investigation will examine Kostani's past alleged inappropriate use of social media and will consider the incident as a "serious violation of State Police regulations." They were prompted by various journalists questioning the police's tolerance for press intimidation, and freedom of speech violations. [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Two Russians, Ukrainian national arrested for alleged espionage

Albanian authorities announced that two Russians and one Ukrainian national are currently under investigation, after being arrested in a military factory near the city of Gramsh.

The three foreign nationals illegally entered the factory and attempted to photograph the facilities, before being stopped by Albanian soldiers. Two soldiers were injured and it has been reported that the intruders used "paralysing spray". [Radio Free Europe]

A few days after the attack, the website of Gramsh's mayor was hacked, and his social media accounts were intercepted. [Albanian Daily News]

Prime Minister Edi Rama and Defence Minister Niko Peleshi said the individuals are "suspected of espionage." They said it was too early to make such claims and that the investigation should not be done in a hurry. Rama said on Twitter that citizens should "wait for the full clarification of this event" by authorities. [Albanian Daily News] [The Guardian]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Accusations of domestic spying roil Athen's political class

Greece has been roiled by accusations of domestic spying after a senior Greek political figure filed a lawsuit in the country's Supreme Court alleging that he was the target of an invasive surveillance software on his mobile phone, an accusation that led the prime minister to deny any knowledge of the efforts. [Euronews]

Nikos Androulakis, head of the socialist-democratic PASOK-KINAL, Greece's third largest political party, said he received a text message with a link that would have activated the so-called "Predator" software. He was informed by the European Parliament in which he has served since 2014. [Balkan Insight]

The software allows for the interception of passwords, documents, photos, contacts and the user's search history, whilst also being able to take screenshots and activate the user's camera and microphone. It also can take screenshots and activate the user's camera and microphone.

Many claim that Greece's National Intelligence Service has previously used "Predator" against persons of interest. This would include journalists, politicians, lawyers and prominent entrepreneurs. [Reporters United]

Earlier this year, journalist Thanasis Koukakis reportedly had also been under surveillance with the same software. The National Transparency Agency - who is actively investigating Koukakis' case - claimed the government was not behind the surveillance attempt.

Maria Spyraki, a Member of the European Parliament, recently revealed that she had been the victim of a cyberattack in 2021. She said that according to the briefing she had with the Chief of Security of the European Parliament, there was an attempt by a "third-party state" to intercept her parliament email. [AMNA]

Resignations, Denials

Both the head of the National Intelligence Service and the secretary of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, his nephew, Grigoris Dimitriadis, quit their positions in response to the surveillance accusations. According to recent reports, Dimitriadis allegedly owns a company that frequently collaborated with Intellexa - a company

which sells the aforementioned “Predator” software in Greece.

Mitsotakis insisted he knew nothing about Androulakis’ surveillance attempt and claimed that “despite everything happening in a legal manner,” the attempt “should not have happened.” [Euronews] [Balkan Insight]

Androulakis said that “this is not a personal matter, but a matter of democracy.” He characterised the government’s stance as suspicious, urged them not to downplay the issue, or spread misinformation in order to do so.

Spyraki explained that many of her colleagues handling “certain topics” have been targeted and that this is not an issue that should be politicised or used as a tool for domestic political confrontations. [AMNA]

The Parliament returned early from its summer recess a week earlier to debate the issue, after requests by opposition leader Alexis Tsipras. [CNN] [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Athens will allocate more than EUR 1.5B for youth housing, employment projects

Greece’s Public Service of Occupation will implement a EUR 1.5 billion project to provide affordable housing opportunities to young workers and young couples to combat higher rents and the increasing cost of living.

The service also announced that it will allocate EUR 45 million to unemployed freelance workers between the ages of 18 and 29 years old, with an emphasis on the digital economy and incentivising the creation of startup businesses. The grants are expected to reach a maximum of EUR 14,800 per person. [Kathimerini]

This is why “young couples do not have children,” Employment Minister Kostis Hatzidakis said. [Kathimerini]

The new projects come amid increased inflation, which has disproportionately affected young workers and sectors, such as energy and rent. Hatzidakis said that the government is expected to start the procedure for further increasing the minimum wage, in January 2023. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: 2018 Mati wildfire trial set for 31 October

The trial date for the 2018 wildfire in Mati, east of Athens, has been set for 31 October. The blaze killed 103 people and destroyed a major part of the town, [Proto Thema]

The 21 defendants are accused of "manslaughter and bodily harm through negligence and/or dereliction of duty." They include civilians accused of starting the fire, former Attica regional governor Rena Dourou, as well as mayoral and regional officers. Firemen and policemen have also been charged.

The trial is expected to last a long time given the number of witnesses and defendants. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Police to investigate a series of linked fraud cases

The cyber-security department of Greece's police force announced that it will launch an investigation into three criminal groups that allegedly stole more than EUR 5 million, either via email or telephone. [Balkan Insight]

The alleged scammers pretended to be bank employees, police officers, workers of technology companies or promised that they would add money to victims' accounts, in order to intercept passwords and bank account information.

They also installed remote control software on electronic devices, allowing them to manage transactions and steal large sums of money. Their victims included various entrepreneurs - in one case even managing to steal EUR 192,000 before they were stopped by the authorities. [Proto Thema]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Athens to exit EU 'enhanced surveillance' framework

Greece exited on August 20 the European Union's "enhanced surveillance" program after being

monitored by the framework since 2018 as Athens seeks greater fiscal and monetary policy control amid an improving economy outlook. [Euractiv]

Greek Finance Minister Christos Staikouras said the decision marked the end of the country's 12-year economic crisis with lower unemployment rates and expansion of the economy. Despite improved economic indicators, experts warn that the rising inflation that hit 11.5 percent, in combination with rising living standards and structural issues such as bureaucracy could mean the crisis is far from over. [Politico][Reuters] [Kathimerini]

From 21 August onward, Greece joined the "post-framework surveillance." This is a looser form of EU surveillance that is already implemented in Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus. [Reuters] [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Moody's says Athens has few policy options to combat higher prices

Stagflation may have a longer-term impact on Greece's economy since Athens has few monetary policy options to combat higher prices, the ratings agency Moody's said in a report. [Ta Nea]

Greece is less exposed to embedded inflation but its "policy capabilities to combat a stagflationary cycle are among the weakest in the EU," Moody's said. Greece will struggle to service its fiscal debt, the credit ratings agency said.

Greece's inflation risk is low compared to other EU countries, where more than half have double-digit inflation, it said. But prolonged stagflation could hinder the long-term recovery of the Greek economy and progress that was made after its financial crisis. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Tensions rise as construction of Athens' Exarcheia metro station starts

Protests and tensions erupted in Athens' historically leftist Exarcheia neighbourhood in August over the construction of a subway station in its central square.

For some residents, the station threatens to "transform the square into a concrete space of air shafts, elevators and stairs," claiming that their opinion was not valued before the project was green-lit. Others argue that the move is politically motivated and used as an excuse to police the area on a constant basis. [The Guardian]

Since the project commenced, there have been extensive clashes, arrests and injuries in the neighbourhood, which is known as a hub of radicalism and anarchist ideologies and is often the site of clashes between protesters and riot police. Riot police are reportedly continuously stationed on the site.

Athens Mayor Kostas Bakoyiannis said he "finds it hard to understand how someone can politically invest in the failure of a city," adding that the project was part of efforts to modernise the city. He also claimed that there were only a small number of protesters. [CNN] [Kathimerini] [Proto Thema]

Members of the opposition SYRIZA party have also extensively voiced their disagreement against the project, which the government also dismissed. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Top crime prosecutor suspended after accusing Financial Police of pressure

The head of North Macedonia's Organised Crime Prosecution, Vilma Ruskovska, was suspended after accusing the head of the Financial Police, Arafat Muaremi, of "pressure" after she launched an investigation into the institution's activities.

The country's chief state prosecutor, Ljubomir Joveski, suspended Ruskovska, over suspicion that she had made a "major professional mistake" while recently probing the premises of the Financial Police for alleged crimes. Two of Ruskovska's colleagues, Elizabeta Josifovska and Ivana Trajcevska are also facing disciplinary measures. [Balkan Insight]

Before being suspended, Ruskovska had accused Muermi of attacking her integrity, as well as that of her colleagues. She urged the embassies of the US and various European Union countries, as well as the EU's Chief Prosecutor, to intervene. Muermi challenged Ruskovska to present any evidence of the alleged

crimes and maintained that the information she has presented is unsubstantiated.

At the time of the accusation, the Social Democrat-led government had declined to comment on the allegations. Opposition party VMRO DPMNE claimed that the institutions "have been misused" and that the clash will lead to further abuses by both.

The dispute between the two North Macedonian institutions erupted after the country's recent induction into NATO and amid its ongoing EU accession talks. University of Skopje professor Gordan Kallajxhiev said the feud reflects the crisis that the country's justice system is undergoing. [Deutsche Welle][Albanian Daily News] [Balkan Insight]

Ruskovska said she started the investigation into the Financial Police after a report was issued by a group of citizens against Muaremi. The local media said the investigation was meant to determine if the Financial Police targeted specific businessmen to extort money or influence.

Complaint Filed

Muermi had filed a complaint against Ruskovska to the State Prosecution, claiming that the search and investigation was not legal. He asked for the dismissal of the judge who authorised it.

Chief State Prosecutor Ljubomir Jovevski reaffirmed Muermi's claims, saying that the information presented to the judge who authorised the search by Ruskovska was false.

The Association of Prosecutors has condemned Ruskovska and said they were "surprised" by her claims, and that they "tarnish the reputation of the prosecutor's profession and goes against the ethical codex of the prosecutors". [Balkan Insight]

Professor Kallajxhiev said that the clash between the two institutions has a political dimension, rather than a legal one, as evident by the various violations of procedural norms.

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Government considers jail time for freedom of opinion and media violations

North Macedonia is considering imposing jail sentences for people that violate freedom of opinion, expression and media with sentences that could range from six months to five years.

The measures would target individuals who order censorship or prevent a journalist's freedom of reporting. The article also orders a ten-year prison sentence for the murder of a journalist. [Balkan Insight]

The law is part of North Macedonia's new Criminal Code, which would be the country's first written Civil Code. It also includes provisions against hate speech - something that has caught the attention of many amid the recently proposed amendment to the constitution recognising the Bulgarian minority, which is often a victim of hate speech. [Akademik]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Opposition calls for referendum on controversial EU accession talks

North Macedonia's VMRO DPMNE opposition party has called for a referendum to decide on whether or not the country should start the country's accession talks with the European Union.

VMRO DPMNE held protests in July and August against lifting Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonian accession talks, as a result of an agreement, known as the "French Deal," which guarantees ethnic-minority Bulgarian rights in the country. The opposition party called it unilateral action by the government, with critics saying it represents a "Bulgarisation" and a threat to the North Macedonian national identity. [Bulgarian News Agency] [Deutsche Welle]

North Macedonia's EU accession is not going to be easy. The government needs a two-thirds majority in order to alter the constitution to recognise its Bulgarian minority, which it cannot achieve without the opposition's support. Members of the party have stated that they intend to vote against the proposal.

North Macedonia has also signed a protocol with Bulgaria, allowing the latter to interfere in any stage of the accession talks if it believes Skopje is not fulfilling its promises. The process is also expected to stall Albania's EU accession, which is in the same package deal as North Macedonia. [Balkan Insight] [MIA]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: President accuses Russia of interfering with domestic affairs

North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski has accused Moscow again of meddling in his country's internal affairs. [Euronews]

Pendarovski said in an interview in late July that Russia "finances some political subjects" and sends Russian agents to North Macedonia in order to expand its sphere of influence - which according to Pendarovski is a known fact among all state institutions.

He did not specify further in what ways Russia had meddled with the country's affairs. He said that it was suspicious that mere days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, left-leaning parties invited the Russian ambassador to the North Macedonian Parliament and awarded him for his contribution to bilateral relations. [Meta]

Russia has refuted similar claims in an embassy statement, saying that Russia has never meddled nor does it intend to meddle with the internal affairs of any other state, as this goes against the philosophy of Russian foreign policy. [N1]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Municipal elections had low voter turnout

North Macedonia's State Election Commission said that the country's municipalities had low voter turnouts even though they ran smoothly. The municipality of Mavrovo-Rostushe reported a 34.4 percent turnout, Centar Zhupa with 32.9 percent and Tetovo with 21.3 percent. [MIA]

The opposition party VMRO DPMNE used the results of the elections in Tetovo to demand earlier parliamentary elections, claiming that opposition parties enjoy "twice as much support as the ruling SDSM." SDSM officials responded by alleging that VMRO DPMNE is manipulating election results and statistics for its benefit. [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Kosovo War-era general accused of war crimes elected as Parliament official

Serbia's parliament elected a former Kosovo War general as one of seven vice-presidents despite being accused of allegedly committing war crimes in 1999.

The right-wing opposition NADA coalition nominated Bozivar Delic for the role as vice president. He received 197 votes in parliament, both by ruling and opposition party members. This will be his third term as a Vice-President, whereby he is currently one of the three opposition Vice-Presidents in office. [Balkan Insight] [TRT]

Delic commanded the Yugoslavian Army's 549th Motorised Brigade, which according to documentation was allegedly responsible for the deaths of 885 civilians, including children. He has said that he was unaware of the killings of the Albanian population despite being investigated numerous times.

He has said he only directed attacks against villages used as the base of "terrorists." He has never been indicted for any of his alleged crimes. [Exit]

He has previously served as a member of parliament.

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Media regulatory body awards TV licences to pro-government stations

Serbia has awarded four broadcasting licences to pro-government stations, while it rejected applications of 10 other stations, including those that have been critical of the ruling party, a result that has sparked concerns about media freedoms in the country.

The country's Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) awarded licences to Pink, Prva, Happy and B92 stations.

Stations critical of the ruling Progressive Party, such as N1 or Nova S, did not receive licences.

Non-governmental organisations and stations critical of the government said this was "a clear political message" and a danger to media freedom in the country. They called for greater transparency in the process.

Dissenting REM member Judita Popovic challenged the decision, saying that the four selected stations do not

meet the requirements for the licences and that they "broke the law in every possible way." [Balkan Insight] [N1]

Earlier this year, when the bidding process began, Hungarian politician Lorinc Meszaros, who is a stakeholder in Serbia's TV2 station, submitted a request for a Serbian media licence. TV2 was not given the licence. [Euractiv]

REM announced that a fifth licence would be granted to any station willing to re-apply, under the condition that they do so within 60 days from 11 August. The ten stations that failed to get a licence - including Meszaros' TV2 - are expected to submit new bids. [Advanced Television]

(hi/gc)

Serbia may be only EU candidate to ignore bloc's new policies on counter-terrorism

Serbia may not aligned itself yet with the European Union's amended policies on counter-terrorism and updated its list of people and groups subject to counter-terrorist measures.

The EU press release announcing the changes stated that all European Free Trade Association member states and all EU candidate states, including the prospective candidate state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, had agreed with the changes. Serbia was not included in the press release. [Council of the EU]

Serbia did not support the EU's restrictive measures against Iran. It remains unclear what Serbia's stance could mean for its candidacy and what repercussions it could have, as no EU officials have addressed it yet. [N1] [Sloboden Pechat]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Orthodox Church bishop's controversial remarks on Belgrade Pride evoke swift condemnation

Serbian Bishop Nikanor of Banat said he would curse the organisers of the country's first EuroPride event in nearly a decade in remarks that sparked condemnation from activists and non-government organisations. They said that the Orthodox Church was

"abusing its position of legitimacy" in order to spread discriminatory ideas. [Balkan Insight]

Between 5,000 and 10,000 people protested against the event - which is scheduled to take place in September. They said EuroPride represented an "occupation by the West."

President Aleksandar Vucic accused local media of failing to address the issue and claimed that despite what protesters want, the state is not in the position to ban the parade. He alleged that the organiser of the riots was convicted for domestic violence and that drug traffickers attended. [N1]

More than 110 people were injured and approximately 200 were arrested by riot police after the vandalisation of the entrance of state-owned TV station RTS and the seats of the ruling Democratic Party and the Socialist Party. [Balkan Insight] [Deutsche Welle]

At a later date, Vucic announced that the government decided to "postpone or cancel" the parade, citing the "bigger crisis" that has hit the country as the reason. He said that the move is "encroaching on the rights of a minority", but the government has limited choices as a result of "pressure". [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Turkey: Central Bank cuts rate despite record inflation at 80 percent

Turkey's Central Bank cut its interest rate by 1 percentage to 13 percent on August 18, in a surprise move that pushed the Lira lower, even with the year-on-year inflation rate of 80 percent.

The Central Bank cited the "weakening effects of geopolitical risks on global economic activity continue to increase." It also said that global growth forecasts for the upcoming period are being revised downwards and recession is increasingly assessed as an inevitable risk factor. [TCMB]

The bank had been expected to keep the rate at 14 percent, which has already pushed real Turkish yields into deeply negative territory, according to a poll by broadcaster Bloomberg HT. Turkey has ignored the policies of other central banks that are increasing borrowing costs to rein in global inflation. [Financial Times]

The continued policy of lowering rates comes at the insistence of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who believes — contrary to well-established economic principles — that reducing interest rates can slow inflation, rather than fuel it. Erdogan wants to boost domestic demand and thus economic growth with low interest rates as he eyes upcoming elections next year. [Financial Times] [DW]

Ceyhun Elgin, an economics professor at Bogazici University, said that this could bring Erdogan votes in the presidential election. "The aim may be to carry things forward, for better or for worse, until the election," Elgin said. [Financial Times] [DW]

The lira lost more than half its value against the dollar in the past 12 months and it was worth roughly six times more against the dollar in August 2017 than at present. It has fallen 25 percent this year. [DW]

It is unlikely that the central bank will alter its monetary policies. The central bank said it will "use all available instruments decisively within the framework of a Liraization strategy until strong indicators point to a permanent fall in inflation." It argued that stability in the general price level will foster macroeconomic stability and financial stability.

(go/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Eyeing PM's job, hard-right leader distances her party from neo-fascist roots

The leader of the right-wing Brothers of Italy party, which is the favourite to win the country's September 25 national elections, has attempted to distance her grouping from its neo-fascist roots amid accusations that it is still infiltrated by the extreme far-right.

Such tactics by Giorgia Meloni appear to be increasing her popularity, and she is being touted as Italy's potential next prime minister. (*See separate story in this issue of the Europe Monthly*)

Meloni began her political career as a 15-year-old activist in the Italian Social Movement, a party founded by Italian fascists, with links to extremist elements. Her grouping, which has in the past fielded descendants of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini on its candidate lists, is campaigning in the September elections on a platform of populism and anti-immigration.

Laura Boldrini, a senior member of the centre-left Democrat party, said that Meloni "represents the far right in Italy which has not had a reckoning with its past," adding that the "Brothers of Italy is infiltrated by declared fascist elements."

Meloni, aware that such an image is problematic, has distanced her party from its roots, saying in an interview last year that there is "no room for those nostalgic for fascism" in the Brothers of Italy. She compared herself in a recent video message to the "British Tories, the US Republicans and the Israeli Likud." [Politico] [Politico]

Meloni has recently attempted to change her public image to one of a Christian mother who defends "Europe's classical and Judeo-Christian historical and cultural roots and identity." That message has helped boost her popularity among Italians, and polling in early August showed that Meloni was the second most trusted Italian political figure, behind caretaker Prime Minister Mario Draghi. [France24] [Euractiv] [ilmessaggero]

(cg/pk)

Italy: Migrant death raises concerns about racism as hard-right vies for power

The killing of a migrant in Italy has sparked outrage and heightened concern about racism as the hard-right vies for power in elections on September 25.

Footage aired on social media appeared to show a Nigerian man being beaten to death in the streets of

Civitanova Marche, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, on July 29. Father of two Alika Ogorchukwu, a street vendor, was reportedly attacked by a passer-by who struck him with a crutch and then with his bare hands, police investigator Matteo Luconi told reporters.

The recording, apparently made by onlookers who did not try to intervene, triggered outrage on social media. [BBC] The suspect was later tracked down by police and held on suspicion of murder.

Witnesses reported that Ogorchukwu had repeatedly asked his attacker for pocket change. The director of an association that helps integrate migrants, Daniel Amanza, said that the attacker killed the victim after the latter complimented his female companion. [Euronews]

Italian political parties were quick to react, with politicians from both the left and right condemning the killing. The leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, Enrico Letta, wrote in a Twitter post: “Unheard of ferocity. Widespread indifference. There can be no justification.” [Euronews]

The head of the hard-right Brothers of Italy party, Giorgia Meloni, who is campaigning ahead of the country’s September elections on a platform of halting migration, denounced the attack. [DW] Meloni is doing well in pre-election polls and could succeed Mario Draghi as prime minister following the collapse of the latter’s government in July. [Euronews] (*Also see separate story in this issue of the Europe Monthly*)

Accused of electioneering

Meanwhile, Meloni caused outrage and drew accusations of populist electioneering after she shared a video on social media which appeared to show a Ukrainian refugee being raped by a migrant on August 21 in the streets of the city of Piancenza in the northern Emilia Romagna region. [Reuters]

Meloni commented: “One cannot remain silent in the face of this atrocious episode of sexual violence against a Ukrainian woman carried out in daytime in Piacenza by an asylum seeker.” She said an immigration emergency was taking place in Italy. [Guardian]

Carlo Calenda, leader of the centrist Azione party, labelled Meloni’s post as “immoral,” while Democratic Party leader Letta said: “It is indecent to use images of a rape. Even more indecent to do so for electoral purposes.“ [Aljazeera]

Meloni denied accusations of electioneering in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, and called the criticism of her "lies and grim propaganda." [Ansa]

(cg/pk)

Italy: Centrist alliance falls apart days after agreement

An election coalition agreement between the centrist Azione and centre-left Democratic Party has collapsed after the former withdrew on August 7 – just a week after the bloc was founded – in a blow to those hoping to prevent a right-wing coalition taking power in Italy.

Carlo Calenda, the leader of Azione, cited the inclusion of parties that had undermined Prime Minister Mario Draghi's government as a factor in his decision to withdraw from the centrist alliance. [Reuters]

Draghi's government collapsed at the end of July after three major parties in his national unity government withdrew their support.[Europe Monthly August 2022] Italians head to the ballot box on September 25 to choose a new government. (*See separate story in this issue of the Europe Monthly*)

The now failed centrist alliance had been aiming to challenge a right-wing coalition of the Brothers of Italy, Forza Italia and League parties, a task that now seems impossible. Calenda described the decision to withdraw as "the most painful decision of my life."

The leader of the Democratic Party, Enrico Letta, tweeted: "I listened to Carlo Calenda. From all the things he said, it looks to me as if the only possible ally for Calenda is Calenda [himself]." Previously Letta had fancied the coalition's chances of taking on the right, saying on August 6: "We feel the responsibility on our shoulders to prevent Italy from having a right-right government for the first time." [ilmessaggero] [Reuters]

Azione has since signed an agreement with the centre-left Italia Viva party, and hopes to gain 4 percent of the election vote, in what Calenda described as "a serious and pragmatic alternative to the right-wing and left-wing populism that has devastated this country." [Reuters]

Italy's electoral system favours coalitions following a 2017 reform, and consists of a mixture of first-past-the-post and proportional representation voting. Under the old electoral system, 40 percent of the vote

was enough to secure an automatic majority, which is no longer the case. [Reuters] [Ansa] Election in 2018 necessitated an 80-day wait for a coalition government to be formed.

(cg/pk)

Italy: Five Star Movement faces election woes as votes, alliances dry up

The Five Star Movement, a populist, anti-establishment party that in 2018 swept through Italian politics, winning the most votes in that year's elections, is now facing a shortage of allies as its position looks weak ahead of the country's September 25 parliamentary ballot.

The centre-left Democratic Party has ruled out an election alliance with the movement following the collapse of Mario Draghi's broad national unity government in July amid turmoil precipitated by the Five Star Movement.

Many politicians saw Draghi as a popular prime minister who had managed to unify Italy. After it undermined Draghi, the Five Star Movement was left lacking friends.

Democratic Party leader Enrico Letta said he had told Giuseppe Conte, the leader of the Five Star Movement, "that if he took that sort of decision, this would be the consequence." Letta added: "The rift with the Five Star Movement for this election is irreversible." [Politico]

Many had expected that the Democratic Party would join forces with the Five Star Movement in order to limit the reach of the right-wing alliance that is leading the polls. Current surveys estimate that the Five Star Movement will only garner 10 percent of the vote in the upcoming elections, in stark contrast to the party's previous successes. [DW]

(cg/pk)

Italy: Shots fired at MP's office, mafia suspected

The office of a parliamentary candidate from the centre-right Forza Italia party was reportedly fired on three times from a .38 calibre pistol on August 23. The MP, Francesco Cannizzaro, was in his office in the

southern Italian city of Reggio Calabria, holding a meeting with his staff at the time. He was uninjured.

The Forza Italia party had 24 hours earlier released its candidate list for the country's September 25 parliamentary elections.

Prosecutors have opened an investigation into the shooting as they seek to find out whether it was politically motivated. [Repubblica]

Regional governor Roberto Occhiuto came out in support of Cannizzaro, and pointed a finger at the Italian mafia, writing: "Ours is a region of respectable people, which disgusts the 'Ndrangheta, the mafia and organised crime, and which wants to isolate the violent and the bad apples."

Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing League party, also criticised the possible involvement of organised crime, saying: "My solidarity with Francesco Cannizzaro, the activists and the citizens of Reggio, with the certainty that no one will be frightened by violent people and criminals." [Lastampa]

(cg/pk)

Italy plans justice reforms to unlock EUR 200bn in EU funds

Italy's outgoing government has passed legislation for large-scale reforms to the country's justice system, a step needed to unlock EUR 200 billion in post-pandemic recovery funds from the EU.

The reforms aim to counteract one of the Italian justice system's largest flaws and have caused controversy. Trial times in Italy are three times higher than the European average, with some court cases lasting years. Gian Luigi Gatta, a professor of law and advisor to the Italian justice minister, said: "Initial criminal cases in Italy last three times as long as the European average, appeals last eight times as long."

The European Commission wants the processing time of criminal court cases in Italy reduced by 25 percent and in civil cases by 40 percent. In order to meet such goals, outgoing Prime Minister Mario Draghi has sought to scrap trials in cases in which the verdict takes too long to deliver.

Draghi has faced strong criticism over the plans, as many say that criminals will be allowed to escape justice. Gian Carlo Caselli, a retired judge and former

prosecutor, said: “You can't simply cut trial lengths by decree. You need a range of measures to make the system work better.” Caselli and others have called for measures to limit the use of appeals, which often extend verdict times considerably.

Anti-mafia prosecutors have called the reforms a “guillotine”. One such prosecutor, Nicola Gratteri, said they would “hurt confidence in the justice system and criminals will be the winners.” [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

In order to unlock a further EUR 19 billion worth of EU recovery funds, Italy’s parliament at the start of August approved a bill to promote increased competition in markets for products and services. Exceptions to the new rules were made for taxi drivers, who were unwilling to compete against multinational rivals. [Reuters]

Draghi resigned as prime minister after his government collapsed in July but he stayed on to lead a caretaker administration in the run-up to elections on September 25.

(cg/pk)

Italy approves EUR 17bn aid to counter inflation

Italy’s Mario Draghi, in one of his final acts as prime minister, has drafted a EUR 17 billion aid package to combat rising energy, fuel and consumer goods prices and to help low-income families.

The package is the fourth such initiative by the government as part of its National Recovery and Resilience Plan, as the effects of the war in Ukraine and global economic stagnation hit the Mediterranean nation. [Reuters]

Draghi resigned from his post in July after he was undermined by coalition partners, but stayed in office to lead a caretaker government in the run-up to national elections scheduled for September 25.

He told a news conference: “This package is aimed at protecting Italy’s economic recovery in the face of a worsening international environment.”

Among the measures, the government has extended a bonus of EUR 200 handed out in July to low and middle-income families and to employees who were previously ineligible for such support, including workers with insecure jobs. [Reuters]

Old-age pensions are set to increase by 2 percent from October. Meanwhile, EUR 200 million has been allocated for farmers without insurance coverage against drought, as part of a national solidarity fund. [tgsky24]

Additionally, an existing measure that saw excise duties on fuel cut has been extended until late September.

(ab/pk)

Italy: Drought reaches record levels

Italy is facing its worst drought since 1952, with farmers worried they may lose part of this year's harvest amid problems with irrigation and soaring temperatures – a further burden for an agricultural sector already saddled with high fertiliser and fuel costs.

A state of emergency was declared in the northern part of Italy on July 5. The authorities have announced EUR 36 million in emergency aid for the affected region, yet it is estimated that farmers have already lost billions due to a reduced harvest. [AP] [Politico] [CNBC] [BBC]

Italy's National Confederation of Direct Farmers has warned that droughts in the central Po Valley region threaten 30 percent of the national agricultural yield. The region produces an estimated 40 percent of Italy's total food output.

Some parts of the country have not experienced rain in over four months, according to secretary-general of the Po River District Basin Authority, Meuccio Berselli. He added that problems have been further compounded by rising levels of desertification and salt, which have compromised freshwater irrigation in some areas. "We risk not completing the corn, tomato and wheat harvests," Berselli said.

Barbara Di Rollo, an agricultural irrigation expert, told Euronews: "The lack of water is a structural problem that has been postponed for the past 20 years and has never been properly addressed."

Both experts have proposed anti-drought measures including building reservoirs, streamlining irrigation and preventing tap water waste. [Euronews]

Attempts have been made to mitigate declining water levels in Italian rivers by redirecting flows from lakes,

but this was reduced after Lake Garda, the largest in Italy, faced record low levels. [Euronews] [thelocal]

(cg/pk)

Italy: Femicide rises by 16%

The number of femicides in Italy has risen by 16 percent over the last year, according to statistics published by the interior ministry, with a woman killed every three days on average in the Mediterranean country.

A total of 125 femicides were recorded between July 2021 and August 2022, with 68 being murdered by a current or previous partner. A previous such study found an 8 percent increase from 2020 to 2021. [Euractiv]

Elisa Ercoli, the head of Differenza Donna, an organisation attempting to prevent gender-based violence, called the data "a clear consequence of a total underestimation of institutional policy for this type of crime." [The Guardian]

A study carried out by research group AstraRicerche found that one in four Italians did not believe that violence against women constituted violence, news outlets reported last year. [Euractiv]

Pope Francis in December condemned violence against women as "almost satanic," amid a rise in domestic abuse internationally during lockdowns that left many trapped with their persecutors. [Europe Monthly January 2022]

(cg/pk)

Malta: Conflict in opposition party amid call for leader to resign

Malta's biggest opposition party, which lost a general election earlier this year, faces internal conflict amid calls for the grouping's leader to resign.

Robert Arrigo, until recently the opposition Nationalist Party's deputy leader, called on the grouping's chief, Bernard Grech, to stand down over the latter's handling of an ethics probe into the mayor of Naxxar, a small town in the north of the country.

Arrigo accused Grech of lying to the public, and said in a Facebook post that the party's leader had "indicated the report [from the probe] was not done, when in fact it was." A spokesman for Grech said Arrigo's claim was false.

Naxxar mayor Anne Marie Muscat Fenech Adami had in December voted in favour of a controversial residential development project which went against the wishes of her Nationalist Party, leading to Grech attempting to expel her from the grouping. Grech conducted an ethics probe into Adami shortly afterwards. [Times of Malta]

Arrigo claimed the Nationalist Party leader was not happy with the results of the probe, adding that was why Grech had chosen not to reveal its findings.

The Nationalist Party was left weakened after it lost to the Labour Party by a large margin in an April general election.

(kk/pk)

Portugal: Political row over rising energy prices

Portugal's largest opposition party has condemned the government's "persecution" of one of the country's main energy providers after a dispute triggered by rising power prices.

The government introduced a cap on energy prices in June. But Nuno Ribeiro da Silva, head of energy supply company Endesa Portugal, said that the capping mechanism would not protect Portuguese consumers from steep increases in their bills. He said such hikes could exceed 40 percent. [Jornal de negocios][Reuters]

The Portuguese government reacted by declaring on August 1 that the state would not pay any bills issued by Endesa without prior approval by the Portuguese energy secretary, Joao Galamba.

Endesa, according to local media, has contracts with various public entities in Portugal worth close to EUR 100 million. Prime Minister Antonio Costa said the government needed to look for other energy providers who could deliver state services at "appropriate prices".

The opposition Social Democratic Party has denounced the government's response as "persecution" and has called on the Portuguese Energy Services Regulatory

Authority to conduct a review of the price cap mechanism.

Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, however, has expressed his support for the government, condemning Endesa's warning of price hikes as "alarmist". [Lusa] [Diario de noticias] [Intereconomia]

Endesa has since promised to maintain contractual prices for its Portuguese customers until December and to comply with the price cap rules. [La Vanguardia]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Consultant to finance minister quits amid heavy criticism

A newly appointed consultant to the Portuguese finance minister has resigned in an atmosphere of scandal following heavy public criticism of how he got his job.

Opposition parties and anti-corruption agencies slammed Portugal's finance minister, Fernando Medina, for hiring his former superior as a consultant on public policy. [Publico]

Medina previously worked as a television commentator under Sergio Figueiredo, whom he hired at his ministry on August 8. Figueiredo was to receive a salary well above the usual wages for consultants, domestic media reported. [Diario de noticias]

The decision to hire Figueiredo had been denounced by the opposition as an "exchange of favours". The Portugal branch of anti-corruption organisation Transparency International said Figueiredo's appointment was part of a pattern of political patronage. [Diario de noticias] [Lusa]

The controversy culminated in Figueiredo resigning on August 16, complaining that the situation had become unbearable due to the aggressiveness of his critics. Medina lamented that decision but said that he understood Figueiredo's reasons. [Jornal de negocios] [Diario de noticias]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Prosecutors probe alleged sexual abuse by clergy

Portuguese prosecutors have launched ten inquiries into alleged child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy amid suspicions that senior Church officials concealed cases.

A commission to investigate abuse of children in the country's Roman Catholic Church began work in January. Since then, it has collected around 350 testimonies. It said that the number was "just the tip of the iceberg".

Most of the alleged crimes can no longer be investigated under Portugal's statute of limitations as they were committed decades ago. However, the commission has submitted 17 testimonies to public prosecutors, based on which the ten inquiries have been launched. [Reuters]

According to a report published by Portuguese newspaper Expresso on August 5, a number of bishops are suspected to have covered up alleged abuse cases by not reporting them to the authorities. [Expresso] [Jornal de noticias]

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has called on more victims to come forward. He said investigations should be carried out no matter how long it takes and how many cases need to be examined. [Diario de noticias]

(sr/pk)

Portugal moves to reform public healthcare

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has approved a government decree that aims to lay the ground for a reform of the country's public healthcare system. [Diario de noticias]

Rebelo de Sousa said changes were long overdue and needed to come into force as soon as possible. However, the president has demanded that the government should clarify some aspects of the decree. He pointed out that the measure enables the creation of a central executive board while the government had promised to decentralise health services. [Diario de noticias] [TSF]

Health Secretary Lacerda Sales said the government would study the president's comments and make any adjustments necessary. [Diario de noticias] [CNN Portugal]

Luis Montenegro, the leader of the Social Democratic Party – the biggest opposition grouping – claimed that the government would not be able to "stop the degradation" of the national health system. He said that the health service sector faced structural problems, especially a lack of staff, and added that politicians had been ignoring such problems for years. [Diario de noticias]

(sr/pk)

Portugal: Foreign-born minors entitled to benefits under new law

Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has signed into law legislation that will entitle foreign-born minors resident in the country to receive child benefits. [Diario de noticias]

The measure is part of a set of moves announced by the minister of labour and social security, Ana Mendes Godinho. These include assigning a social security identification number to such minors as well as increasing benefits to a minimum of EUR 600 per child per year, in line with increases in Portugal's minimum monthly salary. [Jornal de noticias]

The legislation will benefit children who were not born in Portugal but have resident status in the country. [Lusa]

(sr/pk)

Spain sets limits on AC in bid to save energy, fights climate change

The Spanish government has issued a decree in an energy saving drive that will prevent shops, offices and public spaces from setting air conditioning at below 27 degrees Celsius in the summer, and will ban premises from being heated to above 19 degrees during the winter. [El Mundo]

The government also plans fines for companies which flout new rules designed to tackle climate change and food waste.

A decree limiting the use of air conditioning was officially announced on August 2 as part of an effort to reduce Spain's gas consumption by 7 percent and to limit dependence on Russian energy at a time when power prices are rocketing.

However, the new measures have sparked debate. The president of the Madrid region, Isabel Diaz Ayuso, said on Twitter: "This generates insecurity and frightens tourism and consumption." [The Verge]

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez defended the move, saying that Spain needed to cut energy consumption. Amid a scorching summer, he has also resorted to unorthodox methods to help employees stay cool, asking government ministers and public and private sector bosses not to wear ties unless necessary.

Laura Berge, a civil servant from Valencia in eastern Spain, questioned the practicality of the measures. "Generally you can work at 27 degrees, but to reach that temperature in hot areas you need to put the air conditioner on 22 or 23 degrees for a couple of hours," she said. [Euronews]

Greece, Italy and France have already announced similar energy saving measures as European countries brace for a winter of unreliable Russian supplies.

Cutting food waste

Meanwhile, the Spanish government has approved a bill that will bring in fines for businesses which do not follow new rules aimed at combating food waste and climate change.

Restaurants and food retailers will be expected to work with local organisations such as food banks in order to donate unused food, while any unsafe or expired items will be used for animal feed or biofuel.

Restaurants will also be required to provide containers to their customers for any left-over food, and supermarkets will be asked to lower prices for products that are close to their expiration date. Larger businesses will also need to prepare a donation plan for food prior to its expiration date. [Euronews] [earth.org]

Companies breaking the rules could face a fine up to EUR 60,000 and potentially more for repeated violations. The new plan may undergo some changes before its finalisation but is expected to take effect on January 1. [Euronews]

Spanish populist opposition party Vox on August 4 registered a proposal in parliament to repeal the government's new energy saving measures.

Vox leader Santiago Abascal put forward his own plan for Spain to reduce its foreign energy dependency and to ensure "a sufficient energy supply and at affordable

prices" through the use of nuclear and coal power plants and by preventing thermal plants being dismantled. [abc] [europapress]

(ab-km/pk)

Spain: Tanker to supply water amid drought in Basque region

The Spanish government and local officials have agreed to work with public utility Consorcio de Aguas Bilbao Bizkaia (CAAB) to deliver water via cargo ship to supply the Busturialdea area in the northern Basque region amid drought.

In recent months, the Basque region of Spain experienced the lowest rainfall in 163 years, with a lack of water reserves affecting more than 45,000 people. Local authorities have reduced water usage by shutting down public fountains and irrigation systems and reducing water pressure during the night.

CAAB has also decided to facilitate the movement of two million litres of water a day to supply the Busturialdea area from August 18 through October. The rest of the Basque region is able to continue relying on reservoirs for supplies.

In preparation for future water shortages during the summer months, Basque officials and CAAB have commissioned the construction of a 15-kilometre pipeline to connect the drought-hit area to the Zadorra reservoirs in the Basque Mountains. The project is estimated to cost over EUR 44 million but does not have an established date for completion. [El Mundo] [Bloomberg] [El Pais]

(km/pk)

Spain: Parliament approves law to remember victims of dictator Franco

Spain's parliament has approved a law under which the government will be responsible for recovering the bodies of thousands of people who went missing during the Spanish Civil War and Francisco Franco's dictatorship.

Under the law, the government will be tasked with investigating cases of human rights violations involving the Franco dictatorship, which lasted from 1939 to 1975, and searching for missing victims of the 1936-

1939 Spanish Civil War. Organisations that publicly support Franco's policies will be banned. [Euronews]

The so-called Law of Democratic Memory aims to remember Franco's victims. Around 100,000 people thought to have opposed the dictator and his regime are still unaccounted for. Many were executed and buried in unmarked graves.

The governing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) has supported the new law but the main conservative opposition grouping, the People's Party (PP), has said it plans to repeal the measure if elected in the 2023 national elections.

The far-right Vox party said that the law, which is expected to take effect later this year, would "divide Spaniards once again." [Euronews] [National Geographic]

(km/pk)

Spain: Opposition criticises intelligence staff pull-out from Basque country, Catalonia

Spanish opposition parties Vox and the centre-right People's Party have criticised a decision by Madrid to withdraw national intelligence agency staff from the autonomous communities of the Basque country and Catalonia.

The populist Vox party wants the government, specifically the minister of defence, the minister of the interior and the head of the national intelligence agency – the CNI – to explain to parliament the reasons behind the decision and the effect this will have on national security.

Intelligence staff stationed in the two regions were tasked with investigating radical groups and preventing their expansion, a task that has now been entrusted to the gendarmerie and local police. [elmundo] The Basque country in northern Spain was the base of operations for the Basque secessionist group ETA, labelled as a terrorist organisation by the EU and US. The group announced its dissolution in 2018, after a 50-year campaign that killed 850 people. [Reuters]

But Vox leader Santiago Abascal said: "The truth is that separatist activities continue to be carried out with total impunity." He added that the move to pull out intelligence staff was part of "policies that put Spain's

sovereignty, unity and very survival at risk." [Europapress]

The CNI was at the centre of a scandal earlier this year after it was revealed that the agency had used Israeli-made spyware program Pegasus to spy on Catalan leaders and separatists. The scandal prompted a reform of the agency and saw its then-chief resign. [Euractiv]

The affair strained relations between the left-leaning government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and a Catalan party on which he relies in parliament. [Euractiv]

Catalan leaders attempted to declare their independence from Spain in a referendum that was labelled as illegal by Madrid and the European Commission in 2017, resulting in multiple leaders from the north-eastern region receiving jail sentences for sedition. [European Commission]

(cg/pk)

Spain: Memorial service for terror victims disrupted amid claims of conspiracy

A minute of silence at a memorial service held by the government on August 17 to remember the victims of a deadly 2017 terrorist attack in Catalonia was disrupted by protestors who believe that the Spanish intelligence services were involved in the killings.

The ceremony, which took place in Barcelona, was interrupted when demonstrators began to boo politicians and chanted: "Spain is a murderous state. We want the truth, hypocrites." [elmundo] [abc]

On August 17, 2017, 16 people were killed and a further 152 injured in a series of coordinated attacks across Catalonia in north-eastern Spain. The attacks, during which a van ploughed into a crowd in Barcelona and victims were stabbed, have been linked to the so-called Islamic State. [BBC] [Reuters]

According to the protestors, there are links between an imam who they allege planned the attacks five years ago and the CNI Spanish intelligence agency. The government previously refused to investigate such alleged links, while magistrates said that a request to do so was "not relevant or necessary." [lavanguardia]

(cg/pk)

Spain: Proposed national security law causes arguments

Plans for a new law that aims to improve Spain's national security have caused controversy, with arguments breaking out about whether the measures are compatible with the country's constitution. [La Moncloa]

Under the proposals, unveiled on August 1, there would be a change in the timeframe for the declassification of official confidential documents. This would range from four to 50 years – considerably longer than in many other European countries.

The plan has caused disagreement, with the Basque Nationalist Party favouring the automatic declassification of such material after half a century, but the governing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party in favour of keeping such documents classified until a request has been made for their release. [La Vanguardia] [Associated Press]

Another point of controversy surrounds the issue of payment for services provided by government order in times of crisis. Under the national security law, the government wants to grant itself additional powers in a crisis, including the right to confiscate property and require services from individuals that benefit the state, but without financial compensation.

The opposition conservative People's Party and centre-right Citizens parties are among those against the measure, questioning the constitutionality of this portion of the law. [ABC Espana 1] [ABC Espana 2] .

Due to the controversy, the proposed law is expected to require additional discussion before moving forward. [ABC Espana 1]

(km/pk)

Spanish research centre hit by cyber attack with suspected links to Russia

The Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Spain's leading research body, was targeted by a cyberattack on July 16-17 that is suspected to have come from Russia.

The attack used ransomware. Typically in such incidents, a hacker encrypts a computer system

through a downloaded program and requests a financial reward in exchange for freeing the system. [Associated Press]

Although no confidential information was taken, Spain's science ministry said that the attack was similar to others that previously targeted NASA in the United States and the Max Planck Institute in Germany. [Associated Press][El Pais]

Following the attack, the Spanish research council's internet access was cut for over two weeks to resolve the issue.

Spain's National Cybersecurity Institute has reported an increase in ransomware attacks in the country since 2020. In March, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Spain raised its cybersecurity alert to a level three out of a possible five. [El Pais]

(km/pk)

Spain eases rules on work visas amid labour shortages

The Spanish government has decided to ease restrictions on foreign work visas in an effort to aid struggling sectors of the economy amid labour shortages. [Associated Press]

Spain's economy was badly dented by the coronavirus pandemic, with GDP plunging by 11 percent in 2020. Unemployment remains relatively high in relation to other countries in Europe, at around 13 percent. [Reuters]

Under new rules, foreign students can begin working directly following the end of their studies as opposed to the previous wait-time of three years. Students will also be able to work up to 30 hours a week rather than 20 while studying. [Associated Press] [European Commission]

Social Security and Migration Minister Jose Luis Escriva said that the changes would offer legalisation to many undocumented workers while at the same time providing a more accurate picture of the Spanish labour market. [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Ex-vice chancellor acquitted of corruption charges

Former Austrian Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache has been acquitted of corruption charges after a court found there was insufficient evidence to convict him.

Strache was accused of securing a businessman a place on the supervisory board of Asfinag, a state-owned company that manages Austrian highways, in return for donations to an association connected to the politician's former grouping, the national-conservative Freedom Party. Strache denied the charges. [Der Standard]

Exchanges between Strache and the businessman, which were central to the case, were open to interpretation, and the court gave Strache the benefit of the doubt. Austria's prosecutor's office for economic crime and corruption has appealed against the court decision. [Der Standard]

It was the second trial Strache faced since a political scandal in which he was involved led to the fall of the Austrian government in 2019. In August last year he received a 15-month suspended jail sentence in a separate corruption case. [AP] [Kurier]

(phr/pk)

Austria: Opposition party hit by scandal amid claims of misuse of public funds

The right-wing populist opposition Freedom Party of Austria (FPO) was rocked by a crisis in mid-August as it became public that a former member of the country's third largest parliamentary grouping has accused numerous colleagues of misappropriating public funds.

Suspicions were voiced that the party's leader, Herbert Kickl, was behind such claims as part of an internal power play, but he denied any knowledge of the allegations made against FPO members.

Police last September searched the house of Kickl's close friend and party colleague Hans-Jorg Jenewein in connection with a political scandal from 2017 involving the two men. In August it became public that, during the search, officers found a document with allegations that members of the FPO had been involved in the misappropriation of public funds.

It was suspected that Jenewein had drawn up the complaint at the bidding of Kickl, but the latter denied such claims. As tensions in the party rose, Jenewein quit the FPO and tried to commit suicide.

While the party's regional factions internally demanded explanations, they publicly got behind Kickl. On September 17 Kickl stands for re-election as leader at a party congress. [Kurier] [Der Standard]

The FPO was in government alongside the liberal-conservative Austrian People's Party until a political crisis brought down the ruling coalition in 2019. Investigations have since revealed several instances of wrongdoing by FPO members. [Reuters] [Der Standard]

(phr/pk)

Austria: Opposition wants more democracy after country's ranking downgraded

The centre-left opposition Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPO) has proposed a set of measures to enhance transparency and democracy after the central European country was downgraded in an international report on democracy.

In its annual survey, the Varieties of Democracies Institute based at the University of Gothenburg in April downgraded Austria from the status of a "liberal" to "electoral" democracy, signifying problems with democratic standards. [Der Standard]

Besides reducing official secrecy and extending parliament's rights to oversee the work of the government, the SPO proposes involving the public more in the political decision-making process and livestreaming meetings of parliamentary committees. [Kurier]

Such measures will enable the public to "participate more actively in politics and strengthen parliamentarism" in Austria, the report said. [Der Standard]

(phr/pk)

Austrian gas dependency on Russia lowered, says gov't

Austria has made progress in cutting its gas dependency on Russia and in increasing its reserves, according to the government.

Austria has stored the equivalent of over 50 terawatt hours, moving closer to its goal of 76 terawatt hours, Chancellor Karl Nehammer said in early August. The country had around 15 terawatt hours stored in March, he added. [Reuters]

Environment Minister Leonore Gewessler said some 55 percent of Austria's annual gas use was now stored, while the goal of 80 percent by the beginning of the heating season was within reach. [ORF]

(jg/pk)

Austria: Doctor commits suicide after threats by anti-vaxxers

An Austrian general practitioner has committed suicide after months of death threats from anti-vaccination activists.

Dr. Lisa-Maria Kellermayr had publicly promoted the effectiveness of vaccines in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. In July she said that threats by opponents of Covid-19 restrictions and vaccines made her work impossible, and closed her practice. [AP]

She received police protection for some time but felt that this was insufficient and spent over EUR 100,000 on her own security.

Her death caused widespread shock and concern, with pickets being held across the country. Austrian President Alexander van der Bellen called on the public to "put an end to this intimidation and fear mongering." He added: "Hate and intolerance have no place in our Austria." [Kurier] [Reuters]

The prosecutor's office has re-opened an investigation into those who sent the death threats, with the home of a suspect being searched on August 5. [Kurier]

(phr/pk)

Austria: Migrants die in suspected smuggler's van

Three people died in a road accident in Austria on August 13 when a van carrying 20 migrants evaded a police checkpoint and overturned. Four of those aboard were children.

Austrian police tried to stop the van near the border with Slovakia, but the driver fled at high speed. He lost control of his vehicle on a corner and it overturned. Two men and a woman died, while seven others were seriously injured. [AP] [Der Standard]

The Russian driver of the van was arrested on suspicion of negligent homicide and of being a member of a criminal smuggling ring. The origin and identities of the 20 migrants remain to be determined.

Austria's interior minister, Gerhard Karner, called for resolute action against people smuggling, saying the death of the migrants once again showed "the brutality and unscrupulousness of the smuggler mafia."

Around 330 people-smugglers have been arrested in Austria so far this year, a third more than in the same period last year. [Der Standard]

(phr/pk)

Croatia: EUR 26m aid for farmers hit by drought, higher production costs

The Croatian agriculture sector will be boosted by a EUR 26 million government aid package that is aimed

at supporting farmers who have been hit by higher production costs as a result of the war in Ukraine as well as severe drought and extreme temperatures.

The package includes direct payments of up to EUR 15,000 for farmers who fulfil certain environmental conditions. In areas where a “natural disaster” is declared due to drought, all farmers are eligible for support. [Total Croatia News] [HRT]

(aml/pk)

Croatia: European bank provides EUR 43m loan for wind farms

Croatia will receive a loan of EUR 43 million from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development for the construction of two wind farms.

The facilities, to be built in the southwestern Zadar region, will provide power for up to 85,000 households while helping the country avoid more than 78,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions annually. The goal is to boost renewable energy production by more than 10 percent. [Reuters]

(aml/pk)

Czech Republic plans its own version of Magnitsky Act

The Czech Republic is set to soon have its own version of the US Magnitsky Act – a measure that would allow the country to impose national sanctions on individuals or companies for breaches of international law.

Under such an act, Prague would have the power to bar individuals from entering the country, to freeze their assets, and to ban companies from public tenders, without waiting for the European Union to agree on collective action.

The proposed law is being debated by the Czech parliament’s foreign affairs and constitutional law committees and is expected to be enacted in the coming months. [Radio Prague International] [Wolf Theiss]

(aml/pk)

Czech police probed over response to protesters at ex-PM's rally

An investigation has been launched into whether police were too heavy-handed in dealing with protesters at election campaign rallies held by former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis.

Babis has been conducting a campaign tour, promoting the populist Ano party of which he is the leader, ahead of local and Senate elections scheduled to be held in October. [Radio Prague International]

There are often protesters at Babis's events. At one such event in August, a 15-year-old autistic boy took Babis's loudspeaker and walked away. Three plain-clothes police officers then pushed the boy down to the ground and one knelt on the youth's neck, according to weekly magazine Respekt.

Interior Minister Vit Rakusan of the STAN party, which is part of the governing coalition, called the officers' actions an "inexcusable failure of the police". [Radio Prague International]

Babis, a millionaire, populist and Eurosceptic, lost Czech parliamentary elections last year.

(jg/pk)

Czech Republic: Record rise in defence spending to meet NATO 2% goal

The Czech defence ministry's budget will rise to a record 110 billion crowns – around EUR 4.5 billion – by next year to meet the NATO target of allocating at least 2 percent of national GDP to defence.

The increase from the current military spending of 90 billion Czech crowns was agreed on by the ministers of defence and finance, who expect such expenditure to rise further, hitting 155 billion crowns by 2025. The government has previously announced it wants to expand the Czech military, with plans for more soldiers and new equipment such as vehicles, helicopters and munitions. [Radio Prague International]

Alarmed by the war in Ukraine, many countries including Germany, Italy and Sweden have pledged to reach the NATO goal of spending at least 2 percent of their GDP on their militaries in the next few years. [UK House of Commons Library]

(aml/pk)

Hungary: Opposition party wants referendum in bid to prevent potential EU exit

The Hungarian opposition Jobbik party has launched a bid to hold a referendum aimed at preventing parliament from triggering a potential exit of the country from the EU.

The referendum question – "Do you agree that parliament should not be allowed to support a proposal or motion that could result in Hungary leaving the European Union?" – was officially submitted to the National Election Committee by Jobbik leader Marton Gyongyosi on August 8. [Budapest Times]

The move comes amid fears that right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban could make a move to leave the European Union, which he has often criticised. Critics say that under Orban, Hungary has become an "illiberal democracy". The premier has clashed repeatedly with Brussels, and Hungary is at risk of losing EU funds after accusations that it has violated the rule of law. [Hungary Today 1] [*alsosee separate story in this issue of Europe Monthly*]

Hungary's constitution does not allow referendums on obligations arising from international treaties, such as EU membership. The proposed referendum question is phrased in a way to circumvent this rule and refers to the actions of the parliament, rather than asking voters directly about whether they want Hungary to remain in or leave the European Union.

If at least 200,000 voters endorse a referendum, the Hungarian parliament is obliged to hold it. However, before that, the question needs to be approved by the National Election Committee, which in the past has been close to Orban's ruling Fidesz party. Observers say that the committee is expected to rule that the question is ineligible since it is not in Orban's interest to hold such a referendum. [Hungary Posts English] Most of his supporters are against Hungary leaving the EU.

Jobbik is the largest opposition party in the Hungarian parliament. It has been accused of far-right antisemitism in the past but has moved in a more centre-right direction over the last several years.

In the run-up to a parliamentary election in April, Jobbik was part of a coalition of opposition parties trying to end Orban's 12-year rule. After a landslide

win by Orban's Fidesz, Jobbik is undergoing a crisis due to a loss of voters as well as internal conflicts.

(aml/pk)

Hungary: Thousands protest against tree felling decree

Thousands have protested outside the parliament in Budapest against a new decree that allows more forest trees to be felled amid rising demand for firewood as energy prices rocket because of the war in Ukraine.

Hungary has declared an "energy emergency" and banned the export of fuels, including firewood, amid supply disruptions across Europe. [Europe Monthly August 2022] To meet the rising demand for firewood, Prime Minister Victor Orban's government decided to relax rules on felling trees. [Daily Times]

The move has been heavily criticised by opposition parties, especially the green LMP party, who say it accelerates the destruction of nature that is already occurring as a result of climate change. LMP co-leader Erzebet Schmuck noted that Hungary would need six times its 2 million hectares of forest area to achieve climate neutrality and that central and eastern parts of the country were already suffering from desertification. [Daily News Hungary]

The LMP has turned to local authorities, hoping that they will prohibit logging in forests they own and put pressure on other forest owners to do the same. The LMP announced that it will use "every legal and civil mechanism available" to prevent deforestation as a result of the new government decree. [Budapest Times]

(aml/pk)

Poland: School textbook amended after critics say it compared IVF to human 'breeding'

A controversial passage that appeared to compare in vitro fertilisation (IVF) to human "breeding" has been removed from a school textbook in Poland following widespread criticism. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland] [AP News] [TVN24]

The book – which according to critics also suggested that children born as a result of IVF will not be loved – had been approved by the conservative government in Warsaw for a new high school subject called "History and the Present." [Notes From Poland] [AP News]

One excerpt from the textbook reads: "Increasingly sophisticated methods of separating sex from love and fertility lead to the treatment of sex as entertainment and fertility as human production, one could say breeding. This raises a fundamental question: who will love the children produced in this way?" [Notes From Poland] [AP News]

Members of Poland's political opposition accused the ruling nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party of using the new school subject to promote its own staunchly conservative ideas, with the new book also containing sections on liberalism, feminism, and "gender ideology". [Euronews] [Notes From Poland] [AP News]

"You can read that children conceived using IVF are children from breeding farms that no one loves," said Donald Tusk, leader of the country's largest opposition party, the Civic Platform. [AP News] [Notes From Poland]

"There is no limit to villainy for them. There is no line for them they will not cross," added Tusk, referring to Education Minister Przemyslaw Czarnek and other members of the government. [AP News] [Notes From Poland]

'Sick and mad with hatred'

The Polish education ministry rejected the idea that the textbook passage had referred to IVF, saying in a social media statement that only a mind "sick and mad with hatred" would interpret it in such a way. [Euronews] [AP News]

Czarnek, who insisted that neither he nor his ministry had authored the textbook, accused Tusk of slander and threatened the opposition leader with legal action. [AP News]

A man whose daughter was born as a result of IVF began an online campaign against the textbook, raising money so that he could sue its author, Wojciech Roszkowski, as well as Czarnek himself. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland] [AP News] [TVN24]

Kamil Mieszczankowski aimed to raise the equivalent of EUR 6,400, but collected more than ten times his goal. [Notes From Poland] [Euronews] [AP News] [TVN24]

Mieszczankowski said: “I will not allow my daughter to have fingers pointed at her in… school as an object of experimentation and a child unloved by her parents, so I will do everything to ensure that by the time she goes to school, this textbook will be a thing of the distant past and an infamous testimony to the times we all live in.” [Notes From Poland]

In the face of mounting opposition, the book’s publisher decided to remove the controversial passage. [Euronews]

“Taking into account the social good… we decided with the author to remove the controversial fragment from the textbook” said publishing company Bialy Kruk, while adding that it disagreed with the criticism and the “wrong interpretation” of the passage. [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Probe into ex-PM delayed

An investigation of former Prime Minister Robert Fico has been delayed after the office of the Slovak special prosecutor said that more evidence needed to be collected. The supervising prosecutor said he had discovered errors while studying the case file.

Fico, along with his colleague Robert Kalinak, a former interior minister, have been accused of founding and leading a criminal organisation, abuse of public office and of endangering tax secrecy. Fico and Kalinak deny the allegations against them.

Slovak lawmakers in May refused to lift Fico’s immunity from prosecution, a privilege he enjoys as a member of parliament. That move prevented him from being arrested.

Jana Tokolyova, a spokeswoman for the prosecutor’s office, said: “Due to a procedural error on the part of the investigator, certain things will have to be carried out again and additional evidence added to the case. So the prosecutor returned it to the investigators with instructions.” [The Slovak Spectator]

Meanwhile, Fico and his colleagues have accused a special prosecutor of bias, and claim that the former prime minister was not properly informed of what crimes he was alleged to have committed.

Fico is suspected of heading a group with links to officials in top government jobs which was able to start or stop probes into political opponents, according

to The Slovak Spectator. The newspaper added that the group also allegedly worked to amass classified data and carry out blackmail.

(cg/pk)

Slovakia: PM calls for cuts in gas use amid energy crisis

Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger has called for his nation to reduce its gas consumption in line with EU goals, as the country faces diminishing supplies in light of Europe's growing energy crisis.

Heger said Slovakia was grateful for exceptions granted to Bratislava amid EU moves that aim to reduce dependency on Russian gas by 15 percent. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

The European Union's moves "will not affect industry, and a more favourable reference period will also be used for Slovakia (with regards to current levels of gas storage)," he said.

Heger added that voluntary gas saving would help promote a transition to green energy. He thanked European leaders for remaining unified on the issue of Russian resource imports. [Pravda] [Aktuality]

(cg/pk)

Slovakia: Prosecutor shoots down attempt to disband neo-Nazi party

The Slovak Prosecutor General's Office has decided not to pursue a request by the country's justice minister for a lawsuit to disband a neo-Nazi party, saying that the grouping lacked the ability to threaten democracy. [Dennikn]

The Prosecutor General's Office announced on August 5 that it had taken many factors into account, including the size of the People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) and its potential to win parliamentary seats in elections.

Although the prosecutor office found that the far-right party had committed what it considered as "misdemeanours", it said that these did "not reach the level of an immediate threat to democracy and constitutionality."

Slovak Justice Minister Maria Kolikova called for further discussion and publication of documents related to the prosecutor's move, in order to "to better understand why the Prosecutor General made such a decision." [Aktuality]

Prosecutor General Maros Zilinka said that parties could only be dissolved if they presented a direct threat to democracy. [Pravda] The leader of the L'SNS, Marian Kotleba, has previously been found guilty of using neo-Nazi symbolism.

(cg/pk)

Slovakia: Ruling on Roma 'marked by racial prejudice', says lawyer

A court in Bratislava has rejected an appeal by a human rights organisation which complained about what it said was a practice of segregating Roma women at a maternity ward in the eastern Slovak city of Presov.

The Slovakia-based Counselling Center for Civil and Human Rights filed a lawsuit in 2013 under anti-discrimination laws against "the long-term practice of placing Roma women in separate so-called Roma rooms." The human rights organisation argued that "this practice constituted... segregation on the basis of ethnicity." [Poradna Prava]

The Bratislava court rejected an appeal by the rights group against an earlier verdict, and ruled that there was a lack of evidence to support the claim of segregation and racial discrimination.

Vanda Durbakova, a lawyer for the rights group, said that the latest verdict did not surprise her. She added: "This judgment is further confirmation that deciding cases of racial discrimination is still a challenge for Slovak courts. I know from experience that court decisions are often marked by racial prejudices, which are not unique in our society."

"This judgement is no exception," Durbakova said. "In this case, too, the court gave more weight to the statements of the medical staff than to the statements of the Roma women themselves, who confirmed this practice." [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: In U-turn, new rights-based migration policy planned

Slovenia's interior ministry is drawing up a new migration policy that emphasises human rights, as the recently formed government of liberal-leaning Prime Minister Robert Golob moves away from the tough approach of the previous right-wing administration.

The new strategy is expected to take shape by the end of the year, with a body to be formed to ensure the safety and inclusion of migrants in Slovene society.

Simona Zavratnik, a spokesperson for the interior ministry, announced in a televised conference that integration and protection were the new prerogatives for asylum seekers in the country. "That means moving away from razor wire and fences," she said. She added that migrants would no longer be treated as cultural, economic or security threats. [Delo]

In June, Ljubljana announced that it was beginning to remove reinforced border fences that had been erected during the 2015 European migrant crisis on the border with Croatia to prevent the flow of migrants into Slovenia.

The new policy starkly contrasts with the tough migration stance of neighbouring Hungary whose prime minister, Viktor Orban, was an ally of the previous Slovenian government.

Orban is in hot water over controversial comments he made about the alleged effects of migration on Western society *[see separate story in this issue].*

Slovenia, meanwhile, has made clear that it wants to reorient its policies towards Western Europe. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: PM meets with NGO chiefs, aiming to boost cooperation

Slovenia's recently elected, liberal-leaning Prime Minister Robert Golob has met with leaders of non-governmental organisations in Ljubljana in an effort to increase cooperation between such groups and government branches.

A previous meeting was held earlier this year, but left attendees unsatisfied with the results and feeling that

they had not been consulted on government anti-inflation measures or health reforms.

Golob told a press conference that he wanted to engage and become acquainted with representatives of NGOs, and to discuss their gripes with government policies and the bureaucratic hurdles that they faced.

Slovenia is home to over 27,000 NGOs, Sanja Hovnik, the minister of public administration, has estimated.

Goran Forbici, the head of a network of Slovenian NGOs, was cautious over the prime minister's plans. He said that some government ministries were hesitant to cooperate on issues such as healthcare or taxes. He added that he was surprised by "the statement of the state secretary from the ministry of finance that the ministry does not feel the need to talk to anyone about taxes and tax reform." [Delo]

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: PM under pressure as Greens call for no-confidence vote

Denmark's non-aligned Free Green party has said it wants a vote of no-confidence against Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, adding to pressure on the premier over her controversial 2020 decision to cull the country's entire mink population.

Frederiksen has drawn flak as she continues to offer support to ten civil servants who were criticised for their role in the decision to hold the cull. A

parliamentary inquiry said in June that the cull had no legal basis.

Frederiksen, who barely escaped impeachment in July over the controversy, received an official reprimand from the parliamentary inquiry for ordering the cull in November 2020. She took that move amid concerns of Covid-19 spreading in the mink population.

The same parliamentary inquiry that investigated the prime minister also announced in its report that ten leading officials should be held accountable, adding that they did not clarify the legal situation regarding the cull to Frederiksen.

The prime minister told journalists: “I have confidence in all civil servants employed by the state.” [Politiken]

One of the ten civil servants, Tejs Binderup, the head of the Ministry of Food, was criticised by the chairman of Danish mink breeding organisation, who said: “You can't [have] an employee who has failed so grossly in a profession continue working with it.”

The parliamentary inquiry into the cull found that Binderup had “committed misconduct of such a serious nature that there are grounds for the public authorities to hold him accountable for his complicity in breaching the duty of truthfulness and the principle of legality.”

The left-wing Free Green party has announced its support of the centre-left Social Liberal Party’s plans to proceed with a vote of no-confidence against Frederiksen if she does not call national elections by October 4. The Social Liberals, one of the few parties that had been offering parliamentary support to Frederiksen’s centre-left minority government, threatened to bring the motion of no-confidence in June, following the release of the mink inquiry’s findings.

In a newspaper article, Sikandar Siddique, leader of the Free Greens, said: “We support a vote of no confidence in the government because it has been a long time since we lost confidence in Mette Frederiksen’s government.” [Politiken]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: New right-wing party garners 10% in polls, fuelling its ambitions

Despite having been founded less than three months ago, Denmark's new force on the right, the Danish Democrats, have reached 10.8 percent support in an opinion poll.

That would make the party the fourth largest in Denmark, according to the survey by pollster Epinion for Danish news publisher DR.

Party founder and leader Inger Stojberg, who was fired from her post as immigration minister following a jail sentence for illegally separating asylum-seeking couples, was elated at the poll results.

She told DR: "I am of course happy about the great support that has come to the Danish Democrats here at the beginning, but I am also very aware that we must first earn it, and then there is a long way to go until the election."

Meanwhile, the rival far-right Danish People's Party saw its support plummet in the same poll, barely keeping the grouping over the 2 percent electoral threshold. Many of its parliamentarians are seeking to jump ship, amid offers from Stojberg and the promise of election success. [Politiken]

Surprising many, Stojberg's previous party, the centre-right Venstre, has come out in support of the Danish Democrats, viewing it as an opportunity "to help overthrow Mette Frederiksen as prime minister," said Venstre spokeswoman, Sophie Lohde, who added: "I welcome them very much."

In spite of its short-term term success, the new party recognises that it lacks the strength to come to power and rule the country alone. Instead, it will align itself with players in the opposition in an attempt to overpower the minority Social Democrat government and replace it with an administration headed by a prime minister from the right and centre-right. [dr.dk]

Incumbent Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen of the Social Democrats has seen support dwindle as her government comes under increasing flak for her alleged mishandling of a controversial mass mink cull. That scandal barely saw her escape impeachment in July.

(cg/pk)

Delay in gas drilling extends Denmark's reliance on Russia

The Danish Energy Agency (DEA) has announced that plans to restart drilling in the country's Tyra gas field, the nation's largest, will be delayed until at least the end of 2023 amid what the operator of the field says are problems with key equipment.

Copenhagen had sought to become a net energy exporter by next year. But the delay means that Denmark will be forced to rely on existing partners in Europe and Russia for gas supplies at a time when the latter is restricting its exports amid EU sanctions due to the war in Ukraine. Once production is restored, the Danish field will produce an estimated gas equivalent of 60,000 barrels of oil a day. It previously supplied 90 percent of domestic consumption. [Reuters]

French energy provider TotalEnergies, the operator of the field, said in a statement that the delays were due to "some unexpected manufacturing issues concerning key equipment." The company added that it was experiencing Covid-19 related hold-ups in outsourced manufacturing in Indonesia, where drilling equipment is being produced. [Politiken]

The import of natural gas has become paramount for European countries as the EU has set goals that storage facilities be 90 percent filled by November to ensure winter heating supplies. Danish storage is reportedly already at 85 percent capacity. However, critics claim that the Danish Energy Agency is not communicating the potential risks that a gas shortage could bring and is falling short of preparing for what could be serious problems.

Trine Villumsen Berling, a senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies, said she believed the energy agency would soon have to "announce much more concretely that it is a serious situation we are in." She added that the agency needed to announce contingencies for gas saving, including handing out instructions to households. [dr.dk]

Growing criticism

Peter Mollgaard, the chairman of the Danish Climate Council – an independent body of Danish climate experts – has suggested that with current government policies, ambitious environmental goals set in place by Climate Minister Dan Jorgensen of the ruling Social Democrat party only last year will not be met. He said: "I think it can be done, but we're just not there yet. We have not seen concrete policy that allows us to believe that we will achieve it."

The environmental goals include a planned reduction of Danish CO2 output by 50 to 54 percent in just three

years, a task that the minister called extremely ambitious, according to Danish publication DR. By 2030, the government intends to reach a 70 percent emissions reduction.

Opposition parties have joined the growing criticism of the ruling Social Democrats as it becomes increasingly likely that the goals may not be met. Katrine Robsoe, a spokesperson for the Social Liberal party, said that she was "worried that we will not reach the target in 2025. And there is no excuse for not reaching the target." [dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Cash handout for pensioners as prices rocket

Danish retirees are expected to be given a one-time bonus pension payment to help them cope with rising energy and consumer goods costs as the war in Ukraine drives up prices across Europe.

An estimated 290,000 pensioners are set to benefit from the initiative, which is expected to cost the government EUR 416 million.

Employment Minister Peter Hummelgaard said: "There is no doubt that many Danes find it difficult to make ends meet due to rising prices, which are, among other things, a consequence of the war in Ukraine." [Berlingske] [Politiken]

Retirees stand to receive a tax-free extra pension payment of EUR 672 in two instalments between September and January. At the same time Danish citizens on disability benefits are to receive a lump sum, tax-free payout of EUR 270.

The plan was first agreed in a June session of the Folketing – the Danish Parliament – by a broad majority. However, no bill was adopted, and parliament does not open again until October. The government has conveyed the urgency of the issue to the parliamentary Speaker and wants to have legislation on the pension increase passed by the beginning of September.

(cg/pk)

Danish Navy to build new ships in EUR 5.5bn spending spree

Danish Defence Minister Morten Bodskov has announced an ambitious plan to invest EUR 5.5 billion in the country's Navy, with new warships to be built over the next 20 years.

After Moscow's February invasion of Ukraine, Russia has increasingly violated Danish maritime boundaries, prompting increased Scandinavian naval cooperation. (*See separate story in this issue of the Europe Monthly*)

Bodskov is seeking to prioritise Danish industry and wants domestically-built ships to replace ageing vessels. He added that the construction of new shipyards would be necessary for this task, which "could mean that Denmark can become a new superpower for shipbuilding." [dr.dk]

The funding for the initiative is to come from new finances available under the country's commitment to hit the NATO target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence. Denmark aims to reach that level by 2033. [Reuters]

(cg/pk)

Finnish ex-PMs flew in Russian oligarch jets: report

A Finnish president and three prime ministers took trips on private jets owned by Russian oligarchs between 2007-2011, when the top politicians were in office, investigative journalists from Finland's YLE news outlet have reported.

The Office of the Finnish President and the Prime Minister's Office said they were not informed about the owners of the aircraft which they had leased.

The aircraft in question were operated by Finnish executive aviation company Jetflite Oy, which has been tasked with flying Finnish government officials for decades, using mostly the company's own fleet of jets but also some leased aircraft.

The journalists reported that some aircraft used to fly the Finnish politicians were owned by Russian corporations and individuals, hidden behind tax entities and shell companies.

Most of these corporations are linked to Russian oligarchs, including the state-owned Otkrytie Financial Corporation, which has been under Western sanctions since Moscow's February invasion

of Ukraine, according to the journalists. Others have links to Russian President Vladimir Putin. [yle]

Elina Karjalainen, CEO of Jetflite Oy, said in an email to the journalists: "Jetflite's own planes are used for most charter flights. If our own planes suddenly become unavailable, for example due to maintenance, we will arrange another plane instead."

Top Finnish government security official Ahti Kurvinen said: "We constantly evaluate the trips taken by state leaders and a risk assessment is made for every flight. In the procurement of charter flight services, the safety requirements are defined very precisely in the procurement phase."

(cg/pk)

Finnish parliament targeted by cyberattack

The website of the Finnish parliament was brought down by suspected Russian hackers on August 9. The site was unavailable for around half an hour, and service disruptions continued until August 10.

A hacker group that calls itself NoName057(16) claimed responsibility on social media, saying: "We decided to make a 'friendly' visit to neighbouring Finland, whose authorities are so eager to join NATO." [HelsinginSanomat]

Finland, along with Sweden, in June made a decision to join the Western military alliance, a move that has antagonised Russia.

The deputy director of the Finnish National Cybersecurity Centre, Sauli Pahlmann, said the parliament's website had been targeted in a so-called denial-of-service attack of the type that generally "does not cause long-term harm or inconvenience, but is specifically a momentary interruption." The Finnish parliament said it would conduct an investigation.

Finland's Information Affairs Advisor Max Hamberg said that a Russian group was attempting to cause disunity among Finns. [HelsinginSanomat]

Helsinki has sought to raise awareness of cyberattack vulnerabilities in the wake of an increased threat from Russia, following a host of denial-of-service attacks on Finnish government websites in April. [HelsinginSanomat] Finland's state telecommunications agency Traficom has warned that

the risk of such attacks could increase as the country strives to join NATO.

Meanwhile, Finnish news agency STT said that it was targeted by a cyberattack that caused service outages and brought its website down on July 29.

(cg/pk)

Finland rejects EU plan for new rail gauge

Finnish Transport Minister Timo Harakka has announced that his country will not accept a recent European Commission proposal to bring in a standard rail gauge across the continent. Finland uses a 1,524-millimetre gauge, compared to the 1,435-millimetre gauge proposed by Brussels. [HelsinginSanomat]

Harakka said that the Commission proposal "would not be economically or operationally feasible. Decisions of this importance should not be made hastily; instead, their impacts should be properly scrutinised." [HelsinkiTimes]

Despite strong opposition from within the government, many in Finland see advantages to making the gauge switch. Paivi Wood, a senior advisor at Finland's Chamber of Commerce, said there would be strategic benefits such as increased access to EU funding and better military mobility within the country. In a war, future NATO allies could easily deliver vast military reinforcements in a relatively short time via rail, she said. [HelsinkiTimes]

(cg/pk)

Finland seeks ways of tackling surge in energy prices

Amid the spectre of recession and fears of energy shortages in the winter, a working group has been set up by the Finnish finance minister, Annika Saarikko, to brainstorm strategies for countering rocketing energy prices. [HelsinginSanomat]

The options being explored by the group include energy saving moves, taxation measures and subsidies for the energy market. Saarikko said that "in these exceptional circumstances, the availability of affordable electricity is a common national issue."

She added that there was a high chance of a recession in Finland. The working group is to have compiled its strategy by September, when the Finnish budget is debated in parliament. [aamulehti] [aamulehti] [HelsinkiTimes]

(cg/pk)

Finland: Undocumented migrants to have guaranteed healthcare

The Finnish government is drafting a bill to expand healthcare rights which could benefit an estimated 3,000 to 6,000 undocumented migrants in the country. [aamulehti]

Such people will have the right to both urgent and non-urgent services like examinations for pregnant women, general check-ups and vaccinations. The legislation is expected to enter into force by next year.

Human rights groups have drawn Finland's lack of support for undocumented people to the attention of the government, as currently there is no legal guarantee of equal healthcare access for such individuals.

Meanwhile, the government is drafting a law that will make it easier for foreign postgraduate researchers to extend their residency permits.

Labour Minister Tuula Haatainen said: "The changes in the law would enable researchers to have better opportunities to focus on their work and establish roots in Finland. The changes would facilitate the immigration of skilled workers and strengthen Finland's innovation environment." [HelsinginSanomat] If the draft is adopted, it is expected to come into force by 2023.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Bodies of Sami people to be returned to burial sites

The Finnish government has announced that the bodies of native Sami people which were exhumed for research purposes in the 19thand 20th centuries will be returned to burial sites.

A total of 172 remains that had been kept in a museum since 2001 are now to be reburied. Previously they had been in the possession of the University of Helsinki departments of biomedicine and anatomy. [HelsinginSanomat]

The Sami are a minority group living in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia who have historically faced large-scale discrimination and who still, according to many, lack proper representation.

(cg/pk)

Norway to cut foreign aid after experts warn of fraud risks

The Norwegian foreign ministry has announced that funding for the nation's foreign aid programme is to be reduced. The decision comes after experts warned there were problems with such expenditure, including a risk of fraud and a lack of oversight, and recommended that fewer countries should be given help.

Oslo has pledged to spend 1 percent of its gross national income – approximately EUR 4 billion a year – on assistance to poorer nations. However, a third-party committee of experts tasked with reviewing such expenditure said there were challenges in disbursing the money such as "a significant risk of errors and omissions, fraud and weak target achievement."

Past spending was aligned with Norway's foreign policy goals and included peace and reconciliation, climate, human rights and women's rights projects involving cooperation with a range of governmental and non-governmental organisations, the experts said.

But they added: "Viewed from the outside, it is difficult to see what assessments are made of where and when it is strategically correct to use one or the other channel or organisation." [Aftenposten]

(cg/pk)

Sweden: Close race in parliamentary election

Swedes go to the polls in September 11 parliamentary elections, with the efforts of Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's ruling Social Democrats to extend their

eight-year rule impeded by rising costs of living and a wave of gang violence that worries voters.

The election comes after tumultuous years in national politics, with the rise of the far-right Sweden Democrats among issues causing concern. That party was initially seen as a threat to core Swedish values like tolerance, but has now led to a tougher stance on immigration and crime among both the centre-left government and the opposition. [AP]

Since last November, when a political crisis saw the government collapse, the country has been led by a single-party minority government comprising only Andersson's Social Democrats. [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly Dec 2021]

Andersson has been campaigning on promises of generous handouts to help Swedes cope with soaring energy prices, and pledges to improve the welfare system and implement a stricter migration policy. [Dagens Nyheter]

Her closest rival for the job of prime minister is Ulf Kristersson, the leader of the conservative Moderates, who has promised to expand nuclear power production and to overhaul the government's policy on crime through "the most powerful legal political offensive in modern times." [Dagens Nyheter] [*see separate story in this issue of the Europe Monthly*]

Despite their differences, on one topic the two rivals agree: the Swedish bid to join NATO. In May, Sweden along with Finland, formally applied to join the Western military alliance – heralding a tectonic change in European security and geopolitics triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly June 2022] [Dagens Nyheter]

Whichever candidate wins, Sweden's fragmented political landscape means that the likely outcome is a minority government that needs to cooperate with like-minded parties.

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Migration minister wants limits on non-Nordic residents in crime-prone areas

Sweden's minister for migration has called for the proportion of non-Nordic residents to be restricted in crime-prone urban areas amid a wave of gang violence

that has become a key issue in a September 11 general election. [Dagens Nyheter]

Migration Minister Anders Ygeman proposed influencing population structures in certain districts through housing policies, pointing to similar measures implemented in Denmark. He sees this as a way to prevent segregation, which he says is connected to gang crime.[The Local]

Parliamentary parties which have stood behind Sweden's Social Democratic minority government have criticised the proposal as one that would divide people based on ethnicity. But Ygeman has received support from his Social Democrat colleagues. [Dagens Nyheter]

The ruling party has struggled to stop a surge in gang violence, despite implementing a number of measures to fight crime. Over 40 people have died in shootings this year so far.

In the latest incident, a teenage boy has been arrested by police after shooting two people, and killing one of them, at a shopping centre in the southern city of Malmo on August 19.

Investigators have linked the death to gang violence. Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's main rival for the job as premier in September elections, Ulf Kristersson – the leader of the conservative Moderate party – has called gang crime the government's "biggest failure." [Goteborgs-Posten]

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Police disarm explosives found in Stockholm park

Police in Stockholm destroyed a bag containing an explosive charge that was found on August 21 in a park near an annual cultural festival. So far there have been no leads indicating that terrorists were involved. [Dagens Nyheter]

The area was cordoned off after police found an abandoned bag, the contents of which were assessed as dangerous. A bomb squad neutralised the object on site.

The Stockholm Cultural Festival was taking place nearby at the time the bomb was found, with musical acts, family activities and performances attracting numerous visitors. [AP] Sweden's terrorist threat level has been elevated since 2010. [Reuters]

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Gov't promises billions to ease pain of record energy prices

In the run-up to a general election, Sweden's government on August 17 said it would pay out around EUR 5.8 billion to help reduce household and business electricity bills, as energy prices hit record levels after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

"When it comes to the energy sector, we are in a situation which resembles a wartime economy," said Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, adding that Stockholm would not let Russian President Vladimir Putin "hold Swedish households and industry hostage."[AP]

Swedes go to the polls on September 11 in an election amid a cost-of-living crisis that will make it more difficult for Andersson's governing Social Democrats to win another term in power. [Reuters]

Sweden's power supplies mainly come from hydro, wind, and nuclear plants, but a drought and bad wind conditions have recently hampered renewable energy production. [Euractiv] [Dagens Nyheter]

In August, high prices prompted energy group Uniper to fire up the oil-powered Karlshamnsverket reserve plant in southern Sweden. A spokesperson said that none of the oil used comes from Russia. [Reuters]

(phr/pk)

Sweden: Foreign ownership of schools under scrutiny

The government in Stockholm on August 19 tasked a defence research agency with investigating the influence of foreign owners on the country's education system amid concern at the sway that nations such as China and Russia have over Swedish schools.

"We must get a clear picture of who owns and who has interests within Swedish schools," Education Minister Lina Axelsson Kihlblom said.

Since 2019, assessments have been carried out to check if school owners are suitable, but inspectors have repeatedly struggled to get to the bottom of

ownership structures, said Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson.

The new review by the defence research agency will include a risk analysis of how foreign actors, especially China and Russia, collaborate with and make donations to Swedish schools.

Opposition parties welcomed the review but said it came too late and demanded a broader investigation into the finances of student associations. [Goteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Ukraine war, summer heat cause record gas, electricity prices in Europe

Natural gas prices have hit a record in Europe due to supply shortages caused by the war in Ukraine, while the costs of electricity climbed to unprecedented levels after a spike in demand for air conditioning amid summer heat waves. [Bloomberg 1] [Bloomberg 2].

Russian gas pipeline monopoly Gazprom suspended natural gas shipments to Europe on August 31 through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline for the second turbine maintenance halt in consecutive months, claiming three days of additional maintenance were required. [Bloomberg] The Russian announcement of the move had an immediate effect on natural gas prices, which reached record levels six days in a row in August. [S&P

Global]. Gas shipments were scheduled to restart on September 2 but markets remained uncertain.

Klaus Muller, President of the German Bundesnetzagentur pipeline regulatory authority, subsequently announced that Germany had filled its natural gas storage tanks to 80 percent capacity and was on schedule to reach its 95 percent capacity goal by winter, assuming the stoppage of Nord Stream 1 flow was temporary. [S&P Global] However, there is a significant chance that Russia may choose not to allow Gazprom to restart the gas flow, whether in reaction to changing battlefield dynamics in Ukraine deemed to be caused by Western arms shipments, or by prior design.

Natural gas prices reached a record EUR 236 per megawatt hour at the Dutch Title Transfer Facility (TTF), equivalent to EUR 410 per barrel of oil, while German power prices reached approximately EUR 500 per megawatt hour. [Oilprice.com]

Inflation, driven by increasing natural gas prices, drove the euro below parity with the dollar for the second consecutive month. [WSJ]

Three crises

French and German electricity year-ahead futures prices rose 70 percent in one week and reached new highs across Europe, exceeding EUR 1,130 per megawatt hour in France and EUR 995 in Germany on August 26. [Bloomberg] This record price, equivalent to over EUR 1,600 per barrel of oil, is a result of three simultaneous energy crises.

Europe is suffering from the worst drought in 500 years and has endured an unprecedented heat wave which reduced hydropower reservoirs while vastly increasing the demand for electricity to support air conditioning. [CNBC] [*See separate story in this Europe Monthly*]

Over half of French nuclear reactors are currently offline for maintenance, meaning that France – which usually produces surplus energy that can supplement the continent – is unable to satisfy its own needs and must import energy. Meanwhile, Russian natural gas shipments are being reduced to Europe to penalise European support for Ukraine and for sanctions on Russia.

Additionally, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic experienced a temporary interruption of oil supplies from the southern portion of the Druzhba pipeline, one of the two main pipelines supplying oil to Europe

through Ukraine, from August 4 through 10. [Reuters] The Ukrainian UkrTransNafta company stopped oil shipments after a Western bank refused to process Russian payments, citing European sanctions on Russia. [Ukranews] The matter was resolved when Hungarian oil company MOL, supported by payments from other oil companies, agreed to pay the transit fees. [Euractiv]

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said that Europe should expect ten years of difficult winters and power shortages based upon current EU decisions to end Russian gas imports. [Bloomberg] Belgium in July signed a deal with France's Engie to extend the operation of its nuclear power plants for a decade. [Euractiv]

German U-turn

German officials confirmed that the government in Berlin now planned to keep its last three operational nuclear power plants open beyond the end of the year, and to restart coal plants, in a reversal of Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the Green Party's pre-Ukraine war plans to end nuclear power in Germany in 2022. [WSJ]

German power company RWE confirmed it would be reopening three coal plants in October at the request of the government, even as it announced a 30 percent increase in spending on renewable energy projects in 2023 to reduce future dependency on fossil fuels. [Transition Economist]

Long-term European policy initiatives to diversify away from fossil fuels also continued as Chancellor Scholz visited Norway and Canada in August. Norway supplies Europe with hydropower as well as natural gas. Comments by Scholz in Oslo focused on support for Norwegian hydropower. In Canada, discussion focused on automakers Volkswagen and Mercedes Benz securing battery materials, lithium, nickel and cobalt, and on a new agreement to provide hydrogen to displace natural gas in Germany starting from 2025. [Reuters][Bloomberg].

Talks in Norway focused on water, and Norwegian requirements to maintain hydropower output following a heat wave in Europe reducing reservoir levels. [Reuters] Norway provides power to Germany through the Nordlink cable, as well as to Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands.

Meanwhile, short term crises continued unabated. Zaporizhzhia, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, had to be shut down when the last transmission line connecting the plant to the Ukrainian

energy grid temporarily ceased functioning after being damaged by fire, causing local blackouts in the country before power could be restored the following day. [Washington Post] [WSJ] An International Atomic Energy Agency team entered the plant to attempt to ameliorate the situation. Only one of the plant's six reactors is currently operational. While nuclear catastrophe may be avoided, the resultant significant reduction in the capacity of the Ukrainian energy grid, now synchronised with Europe's, may further strain continental energy supplies.

The coming months will bring increased stresses on the European energy system. A complete gas interruption from Russia is possible, which would bring rolling blackouts in multiple countries. Meanwhile, the current weather-induced strain on electricity grids is hampering preparations for the winter across the continent.

(rw/pk)

ANALYSIS: Europe's push for renewables carries political risk

The EU has committed to ending imports of Russian oil in 2022, and is accelerating plans for a renewable energy based future. [EU Commission] This commitment to an energy transition has its own risks, however.

First, many raw materials are sourced from regions of the world with increasing political risks. Second, production of solar panels is currently concentrated in China to a far greater degree than global oil production is concentrated in Russia or other non NATO allied countries.

African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe, account for the majority of cobalt in the world, which is a key element for wind turbine magnets and a central element for electric vehicle batteries. [Cobalt Institute] They also have significant lithium production. The largest lithium deposits in the world are in South America – in Argentina, Chile and Bolivia. Chinese companies play a central role in the extraction of these elements on both continents.

Meanwhile, working with NATO nations such as Canada or allied countries like Australia, as well as the United States, to supply raw material needs for battery production lessens risk and provides a politically secure solution for European battery production.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Norway and Canada in August, but short-term natural gas solutions were not the topic of discussion, even though both these countries are prominent fossil fuel producers.

Instead, Scholz facilitated an agreement between the two largest German car manufacturers, Volkswagen and Mercedes Benz, with Canadian mining firms for long-term electric vehicle battery material supplies, including lithium, nickel and cobalt. [Reuters]

Reliance on Canada for raw materials to produce batteries for electric vehicles – and thereby reduce fossil fuel reliance – greatly reduces the political risk of relying on Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil production. The European Commission, together with the US, was also able to sign a global Minerals Security Partnership with Australia to broaden Europe's ability to source lithium and other critical elements from this stable Western partner in July. [PV Magazine]

The problem with solar

Solar panels are more problematic. Europe produced the largest number of solar panels in the world until the 1990s and has a long history in this field. French physicist Edmond Becquerel first produced electricity from sunlight in 1839, in 1883 American inventor Charles Fritts created the first solar cell, and in 1954 Bell Laboratory developed a solar cell based on silicon powerful enough to power satellites. [Smithsonian] However, the majority of solar panels are now produced in China, making Europe dependent upon Beijing for building new solar capacity. Solar panel life is currently around two decades, but repair and maintenance are dependent on Chinese-manufactured components.

Europe, and especially Germany, was the world solar power leader ten years ago and – with current EU plans to reach 100 percent renewable power by 2035 – is poised to be again. Germany is currently producing more solar power than ever in its history, adding 5.3 Gigawatts (GW) in 2021 to enable approximately 10 percent of German energy this summer to be produced from solar power. [Bloomberg]. The current German goal is to accelerate its long-term solar installation plan by a decade, raising solar capacity from 59 GW to 200 GW by 2034. [Bloomberg].

Two leading solar panel providers, France's Schneider Electric SE (SBGSF), a leading solar heat system provider, and Germany's Sonnen, a leading solar battery provider, experienced over 100 percent growth this year in Germany as customers prepared for a

possible complete shutoff of Russian gas due to the war in Ukraine. [CNN]

Road to 100% renewables leads through China?

Much of the investment in new solar capacity will by definition go to China, because China is the leading producer of solar panels in the world today, and accelerated energy transition plans will only increase Chinese leadership in this sector without a change in EU industrial policy. While long lasting solar equipment does not create the same short-term vulnerability as pipeline-sourced petroleum or gas, it does create industrial dependency. Currently, renewable energy comprises approximately 30 percent of annual global energy generation.

The road to 100 percent renewables will be paved in China if purchases of renewable energy equipment are made without concern for their source, and the development of Chinese dominance in the solar industry will largely be underwritten by the EU. This pattern has a precedent: between the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the broader invasion of Ukraine in 2022, financing from German, French and Italian export credit agencies played a key role in the construction of the Russian petrochemical complex that currently supplies Europe with dwindling fuel supplies. [Bloomberg]

The top five solar panel manufacturers will all be Chinese in 2022, and eight of the top ten are already from that country – Chinese producers account for over 90 percent of solar panel manufacturing output in the world today. [Solar Power World].

Current European policies to expand solar production at record speed risk exchanging energy dependency on Russia for a form of energy dependency on China. However, this does not have to be the case. Solar cells are essentially semiconductors, and fit well into the overall Western strategy to reshore semiconductor production. An EU policy focus on producing solar panels in Europe, and reshoring the production of solar cells as part of an overall effort to expand semiconductor production capacity in Europe, could address this current vulnerability in industrial capacity. The future policy direction in this area remains under development, and the outcome remains to be seen.

(rw/pk)

EU aims to strengthen security in Mozambique amid LNG plan

The European Union plans to increase its financial support for a military mission in Mozambique fivefold to EUR 15 million, amid plans by Western energy firms to build a major liquefied natural gas terminal in the African country, according to Reuters.

The EU money would reportedly provide the military mission, which is led by a bloc of southern African countries, with non-lethal equipment such as radar systems, mine detectors, medical equipment and vehicles to help in a fight against Islamist militants. [NorthAfricaPost]

Citing an internal document by the EU's External Action Service, Reuters reported that the EU hoped to stabilise Mozambique's north coast region, where Western oil companies aim to build an LNG terminal.

The European Council in April increased financial support for a European military training mission in Mozambique by EUR 45 million, bringing the mission's total funds to EUR 89 million. [EuropeanCouncil]

Since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has been looking for alternatives to replace Russian energy imports.

(jk/pk)

Czech Republic's oil shipments from Russia resume

Oil shipments from Russia to the Czech Republic through the Druzhba pipeline resumed on August 12 after more than a week of interruption as a problem over transit fees was resolved.

Supplies by Russian state pipeline operator Transneft had been suspended to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia after, according to some sources, EU sanctions prevented the payment of transit fees to Ukrainian transit company Ukrtransnafta. According to the Slovak economy minister, the interruption was caused by a Western bank that refused to authorise the payment. [AP News]

Hungary and Slovakia had managed to make a payment through Hungarian-owned refiner Slovnaft on August 10. The Czech industry and trade minister announced two days later that a solution had been found, adding that the interruption did not negatively affect the functioning of Czech refineries or the fuel market. [Reuters]

While European sanctions have banned Russian oil imports by sea, oil and gas deliveries via pipelines are still allowed since many countries in central Europe are heavily dependent on Russian energy. The Czech Republic receives almost half of its oil through the Druzhba pipeline. [Prague Morning]

(aml/pk)

Greek PM sends energy proposals to European Commission president

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has submitted a proposal to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to curb high energy prices and prioritise energy security for the coming winter. [Kathimerini]

EU countries need to compensate industrial users that reduce their consumption of gas and electricity in the coming months in an effort to incentivise rather than just mandating interruptions or usage caps, according to the proposal. This will likely lead to a "sizeable response" by the industry, the proposal said. [Reuters]

Greece also recommended that the EU restructure its electricity markets and divide them into renewable, nuclear and flow-hydro power versus fossil fuel-generated and stored hydro power. Representatives of Italy, France and Spain expressed interest in the recommendation, while Luxembourg and Denmark expressed concern about its long-term consequences. [Euractiv]

(hi/gc)

Hungary approves construction of two nuclear reactors by Russia

Budapest has approved the construction of two nuclear reactors by Russian state-owned company Rosatom, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto announced on August 25.

The move, which came as other EU countries try to wean themselves off Russian energy, underlined Budapest's close relationship with Moscow, despite the war in Ukraine. [The Guardian 1] [BBC] [Politico]

The two new 1,200 MW reactors will be built at the existing Paks nuclear power plant 100 km south of Budapest, which generates 40 percent of Hungary's

electricity supply. The extra reactors will double the plant's capacity and are expected to enter service by 2030.

The expansion of the Paks facility has been planned since 2014. The EUR 12.5 billion project is largely financed by Russia with a EUR 10 billion loan.

Citing heightened risk due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Finnish energy company Fennovoima in May cancelled a deal under which Russia's Rosatom was to build the Hanhikivi 1 nuclear power plant on the west coast of Finland. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Even amid the war in Ukraine, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban has maintained a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Hungarian premier has tried to water down EU sanctions against Russia, upsetting other European leaders. Orban has defended what he calls his "diplomatic" approach by citing Hungary's energy dependency on Moscow – the country receives about 85 percent of its gas from Russia. [Reuters] [The Guardian 2]

(aml/pk)

Spain says gas link to France could be ready in less than a year

Amid Europe's problems with power supplies due to the war in Ukraine, Spain's energy minister has said that a pipeline which could transport Algerian gas via her country to France, from where it could be sent on to other EU countries, could potentially be finished in less than a year.

The project, originally named Midi-Catalonia (MidCat), was first launched in 2003 because of Spain's ability to import a large amount of liquefied natural gas (LNG) through its connections to North Africa but inability to export similarly high quantities due to limited pipeline connections to the rest of Europe. The project was worked on until 2019, when it was eventually abandoned amid doubts over its financial viability. [Reuters] [France24] [The Wall Street Journal]

But the project has prompted renewed interest as the European Union works to reduce its dependence on Russian natural gas. The cost of building the new pipeline has been estimated at EUR 600 million to 700 million. The original timeline for completion was two-and-a-half years. Spain's Energy Minister Teresa Ribera

said in August that the pipeline could be completed in just eight to nine months. [Reuters]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz said that a link connecting Spain to other countries in central and western Europe would "massively relieve the supply situation now." Meanwhile, Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa said in a tweet on August 11: "Germany can count 100 percent on Portugal's commitment to the building of a gas pipeline." [Reuters] [Financial Times]

Some doubts about the project remain. Thierry Bros, an energy expert at Sciences Po university in Paris, said that it would be "much simpler to bring gas directly by boat to Germany." [France24/AFP]

Spain also wants the pipeline to be able to transport green hydrogen to appeal to countries such as Belgium, which prioritise renewable energy projects. The European Commission has not yet committed to funding the project. [France24]

(km/pk)

Zelensky holds talks with Erdogan, Guterres on grain exports, nuclear plant fears

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met on August 18 with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in the western Ukrainian city Lviv to discuss maintaining grain exports and fighting around the largest European nuclear power plant near the city of Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine. [CNN] [Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye] [DW]

The three evaluated the Istanbul Agreement of July 22 when Ukraine and Russia reached an agreement with the United Nations and Turkey to resume Ukrainian grain exports via the Black Sea. They also considered how to increase Ukrainian grain exports to help alleviate a global food crisis.

Since the agreement was reached, 25 ships have left Ukraine with grain for international markets. Grain exports have surpassed one million metric tons and eighteen additional ships are currently on their way towards Ukrainian ports to load grain. [Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye][WSJ]

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. Oleksandr Kubrakov, Ukraine's infrastructure minister, said two or three ships will soon begin leaving daily, with a view to traffic ultimately reaching 100 outgoing vessels each month. [Europe in Review, August Monthly][WSJ]

Kubrakov said Ukraine could return to exports of 3 million metric tons of grain a month by mid-to-late September, bringing about USD 1 billion into an economy that has been decimated by Russia's invasion. Ukraine accounted for about 10 percent of global wheat exports and 14 percent of corn exports before the war, and was a key supplier to countries in the Middle East and North Africa. [WSJ]

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 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. [Europe in Review, August Monthly]

Nuclear Plant Talks

The three leaders also discussed the shelling of Zaporizhzhia.

Erdogan expressed concern that the nuclear plant could turn into a nuclear catastrophe like Chernobyl. Zelensky called for the demilitarisation of Zaporizhzhia, where Ukrainian media has reported that Russia has allegedly stockpiled weapons. Russia denounces these claims and rejected a UN proposal to demilitarise the nuclear power plant. [CNN]

"An agreement is urgently needed to restore Zaporizhzhia as a purely civilian infrastructure and to ensure the security of the area,"Guterres said. [DW]

China also issued a thinly veiled attack on Russia's brinkmanship over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in Ukraine, following a near-miss at the site. A senior Chinese official told the UN that just one incident might cause a serious nuclear accident "with irreversible consequences for the ecosystem and public health of Ukraine and its neighbouring countries." [Inews]

(go/gc)

US warship takes part in Baltic Sea exercises

The USS Kearsarge, a US Navy amphibious assault ship, took part in two-week Baltic Sea exercises with Finland and NATO members in August.

The aim of the drills, which ran until August 19, was to increase coordination capabilities between Helsinki and its allies, including the United States, as Finland and neighbouring Sweden prepare to enter NATO. [yle] [aamulehti]

The warship, which docked in Helsinki on August 5, carries a complement of 2,000 US marines and Navy personnel and is designed to support large-scale coastal landings. It boasts its own helicopters and a small fleet of landing craft. [yle]

The USS Kearsarge has been deployed in the Baltic Sea since May, and has made previous visits to Stockholm, Sweden and Tallinn in Estonia, to support other exercises.

On August 3, the US Senate ratified Finland and Sweden's NATO accession by 95 votes to one, in a rare show of bipartisan decision-making in Washington.

Speaking on the floor prior to the vote, the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Bob Menendez, said the move signalled the United States' "ongoing commitment to peace, stability and democracy in Europe and around the world." [yle]

Helsinki and Stockholm still have to clear the biggest hurdle on their path to joining NATO, as Turkey has yet to ratify the acceptance of Finland and Sweden as members of the alliance. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned that any deviation from a deal with Helsinki and Stockholm would result in the accession process being halted.

The two Nordic countries' membership bids, which they formally launched in May, have to be approved by the parliaments of all 30 NATO states, including Turkey.

(cg/pk)

Denmark, Sweden, Norway plan joint sea patrols to deter Russia

Denmark, Sweden and Norway have agreed to share radar data and host joint naval patrols in order to curb

Russian maritime incursions in those countries' respective waters.

The agreement was made following a joint meeting between the defence ministers of the three Nordic nations and will include the stationing of liaison staff and defence attaches in the three countries to facilitate easier cooperation.

After the meeting in the Swedish coastal city of Malmo, Danish Defence Minister Morten Bodskov said: "We know that Russia is aggressive, and since Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine we have seen several violations of our airspace and our maritime areas."

Russian activity has increased in the Baltics after Moscow invaded Ukraine at the end of February. Since then, Russian fighter jets and warships have violated Swedish and Danish airspace and waters in at least four separate incidents, causing anger in Stockholm and Copenhagen.

Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist said at the meeting in Malmo on August 8: "It is good and important that we can gather here today to mark the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish joint responsibility from the [Swedish] west coast, [and] from Oslo down to the entrance to the Baltic Sea. That together we can take responsibility for this part of our geography." [dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Estonia, Finland to integrate coastal defence systems, minister says

Estonia's Minister of Defence, Hanno Pevkur, said on August 12 that Estonia and Finland intend to integrate their coastal missile defence, which would enable both countries to close the Gulf of Finland to Russian warships. [ERR]

Pevkur added that Estonia and Finland will connect their missile defence and share all relevant information. [ERR]

Estonia is going to buy Blue Spear missiles from Israel, which have a range of 290 kilometres, while Finland uses MTO 85M missiles with a range of 100 kilometres. By cooperating with each other, Estonia and Finland can cover the entire Gulf of Finland, which ranges between 45 and 120 kilometres. [ERR]

While Finland's NATO membership bid is still subject to ratification by member states, NATO has already acquiesced to Estonia and Finland's plans to secure the Baltic Sea. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Foreign Minister says Russia must be held accountable for genocide in Ukraine

Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said on August 8 that Russia must be held accountable for the invasion of Ukraine and genocide. [ERR]

Reinsalu added that humanity "needs a new Nuremberg," referring to the trial of the leading decision-makers in Nazi Germany and insinuating that Russia has not only military, but also a legal responsibility. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Sweden to train Ukrainian troops in UK

Sweden will send 120 instructors to the UK to provide basic military training for Ukrainian citizens, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson and Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist announced on August 7.

The aim is to help Ukraine maintain and strengthen its defence capabilities as it battles Russian invaders. [Government Offices of Sweden]

The training courses, an initiative by Britain, will continue until the end of the year under the framework of the Joint Expeditionary Force, a UK-led rapid reaction force focusing on security in the Baltic region.

Around 10,000 Ukrainian citizens are expected to take part in the training programme in the UK. They will be instructed in combat tactics, healthcare and international law among other things.

"It is important to develop support for Ukraine in different ways," Sweden's Hultqvist said. "We have sent five different weapon and material deliveries so far from the Swedish side. This is a new way to develop support for Ukraine." [Dagens Nyheter] [Goteborgs-Posten]

(phr/pk)

NATO to examine Albania's proposal about a military port in Durres

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the alliance was evaluating Albania's proposal to co-finance a military base in the new commercial port of Porto Romano in Durres, northwest of the capital Tirana.

He also reiterated the importance of the Western Balkans and said that the Adriatic Sea is of particular interest to them. [Albanian Daily News]

The proposal was made earlier this year by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who claimed the government would be willing to co-finance the project with NATO. Rama had previously said that Albania is also offering its Pashaliman base, south of Tirana, to NATO. [Reuters]

(hi/gc)

EU ministers agree to suspend Russian visa deal, but stop short of full ban

Russian citizens will find it more difficult to enter the EU after foreign ministers from the bloc on August 31 agreed to suspend a visa facilitation deal between the European Union and Russia.

The bloc's top diplomats did not, however, agree on an EU-wide ban on issuing visas to Russian tourists. Despite growing demands for such a step amid Moscow's war in Ukraine, France and Germany joined forces to oppose a full interdiction.

European Union foreign ministers meeting informally in Prague on August 31 decided to suspend a visa facilitation agreement signed with Moscow in 2007 that allowed Russian tourist visas to be processed faster and made acquiring such documents easier.

The top EU diplomats also agreed in Prague that passports issued by Russian-backed administrators in occupied Ukrainian territories would not be recognised.

European foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told reporters in Prague: "This will significantly reduce the number of new visas issued by the EU member states.

It's going to be more difficult, it's going to take longer." [Reuters]

EU ministers were unable to reach a consensus on a full visa ban, a step urged by some governments, predominantly Eastern European countries which share a land border with Russia.

Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky wrote in a Twitter post: "Total halting of visas for Russians should be another effective sanction against Russia."

The visa facilitation agreement between Brussels and Moscow was seen by some as a sanctions loophole that allowed Russian tourists to enjoy holidays in Europe even as their country's forces wage an assault on Ukraine that has killed tens of thousands, displaced millions and turned cities into rubble.

France and Germany, the biggest players in the EU, opposed a full visa ban, arguing that this would affect Russians such as political asylum seekers who have valid reasons to enter the bloc. Paris and Berlin justified their position in a joint document, writing: "Our visa policies should [...] continue to allow for people-to-people contacts in the EU with Russian nationals not linked to the Russian government." [Euronews] [Euronews]

(cg/pk)

Germany wants clearer debt rules for European Union states

Germany wants European Union rules on states' debt to be more clearly defined and more strictly enforced, the country's Finance Minister Christian Lindner said on August 5. [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

Berlin has called for annual structural deficits of no more than 0.5 percent of gross domestic product, Lindner said. The budgetary targets should be binding and the European Commission should issue a warning followed by sanctions if a country continues failing to do so, Lindner said. [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

The existing EU rule allows for an annual deficit of as much as 3 percent of economic output and total debt to GDP of 60 percent. These targets were suspended due to higher government spending caused by the pandemic. [Reuters]

Germany wants to have a bigger role in discussions about debt reform among EU members. Berlin wants

to reduce pandemic-driven fiscal deficits and build financial buffers in case of future crises.

(mb/gc)

EU coordinates evacuation of 1,000 Ukrainian patients

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has coordinated the evacuation of around 1,000 Ukrainian patients in need of urgent medical treatment to 18 European countries which have available hospital capacity. [CNN]

The EU said it coordinated the evacuations via its Civil Protection Mechanism, which aims to improve prevention, preparedness and response to disasters. [European Commission]

"The EU Civil Protection Mechanism has allowed patients in urgent need of treatment and care to receive it in hospitals across the EU, while relieving pressure on the healthcare systems of Ukraine's neighbouring countries. This is true European solidarity in action," European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides said in a statement.

She added: "Together with Ukrainian authorities, we are also looking into ways to bring patients back home when they have finished their treatment, if they choose to do so."

(acn/pk)

EU court says ships cannot be detained for overcrowding after saving migrants

In a decision welcomed by NGOs, the EU's top court has ruled that migrant-rescue ships which have saved people at sea cannot be impounded by ports on the grounds that such vessels are overcrowded.

The ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union on August 1 came after Italian port authorities in 2020 detained two ships used by German migrant rescue organisation Sea Watch. Italian officials said that the ships had taken more people on board than they were "authorised to accommodate" and that the vessels were not certified for search and rescue missions. [EuroNews]

The European court, which was asked for a preliminary ruling by Italian courts, said that port authorities can detain a ship only if officials can demonstrate a "clear risk to safety, health or the environment." The court added that ports do have the power to take "suitable, necessary, and proportionate" measures when checks reveal deficiencies or safety risks.

The Reuters news agency reported that the court verdict offered mixed guidance in a case which tested Europe's response to refugees. However, Sea Watch welcomed the ruling, tweeting that the decision "provides clear legal security for NGOs and is a victory for sea rescue."

The case underlines tensions between NGOs and southern European states such as Italy, which are faced with thousands of migrants trying to enter the European Union by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, often on dangerously overcrowded vessels, according to news outlet DW.

Data provided by the United Nations refugee agency indicates that so far this year, over 60,000 migrants have arrived in Europe by the Mediterranean route, with more than 40,000 of them landing in Italy. The agency estimates that over 900 people have died or gone missing this year while attempting to reach European soil.

Justice and home affairs ministers from EU countries agreed in June to set up a redistribution mechanism to support member states facing an influx of migrants amid the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(jk/pk)

European Commission allocates EUR 171m to fund refugee infrastructure

The European Commission has allocated EUR 171 million to support the improvement of refugee infrastructure in various European countries, such as Greece, and the creation of new infrastructure in Cyprus. [Defence Redefined]

The European Commission will allocate funds in Greece to international non-governmental organisations to improve asylum seeking processes, the handling of migrants belonging to "vulnerable groups" and the education of migrant children. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

European Parliament drops bid to force EU action on rule of law

The European Parliament has dropped a lawsuit that aimed to pressure the EU's executive to freeze funds for member states which are judged to be violating democratic standards. [Politico]

The European Parliament in October 2021 launched the legal case against the European Commission for failing to use a new so-called conditionality mechanism, which allows payouts of EU money to be linked to the respect of rule-of-law principles. [Europe in Review June 2022]

After the Commission acquired those powers on 1 January 2021, the mechanism was challenged by Hungary and Poland. Both countries have been accused of democratic backsliding, charges which they deny.

The Commission agreed with the two member states that it would only take potential action after a court ruling had been issued on whether the executive's new powers conformed with European treaties.

That approach was strongly criticised by the European Parliament, which said that EU laws should be applied as soon as they enter into force. [Reuters]

The European Parliament in May withdrew its complaint against the Commission after its legal service found the basis of the case against the EU's executive to be too weak, according to a Politico report in August. The news outlet said the withdrawal had previously gone unreported.

Moreover, the Commission triggered the new punitive mechanism against Hungary in April – the first time it has used such powers.[Europe in Review May 2022]

A European Parliament spokesperson said that "a broad majority" of group leaders were in favour of withdrawing the legal action against the Commission. The step-down by the parliament marked an easing of tensions between two key EU institutions.

Corruption concerns

Budapest has been accused by the Commission of putting EU funds at risk because of corruption. According to Reuters, concern has been voiced over tenders for EU-funded projects in Hungary involving only one bidder often linked to the governing party.

For payouts from Brussels to EU member states to be frozen, the Commission can only initiate such a procedure. To actually enforce it, a qualified majority in the Council of the European Union is needed – at least 55 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU population must back such a move. That has not yet happened. [Euronews] [Politico]

(acn/pk)

European Parliament leaders condemn Hungarian PM's 'openly racist' remarks

Leaders of political groups in the European Parliament have condemned "openly racist" remarks by Hungarian right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban, while the head of the EU's executive said that discrimination based on race is forbidden by the bloc's laws.

In a speech in Romania in July, Orban said that he did not want Hungary to become a "mixed-race country". He added that countries where Europeans and non-Europeans merge "are no longer nations." [Politico]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that all EU member states, including Hungary, had signed up to common values. She added that "discriminating on the basis of race is to trample on those values. The European Union is built on equality, tolerance, justice and fair play."

Meanwhile, the leaders of the European Parliament's main political groups issued a statement condemning Orban's "openly racist" remarks. They said that such comments constituted a breach of the EU's values and declared that "racism and discrimination, in all forms, must be unequivocally condemned and effectively tackled at all levels." [European Parliament]

In the statement, the group leaders also urged the Council of the European Union to condemn Orban's comments. [European Parliament]

(acn/pk)

Polish leader accuses EU of trying to 'break' his country in renewed dispute

A long-running dispute between Brussels and Warsaw over rule-of-law was renewed after the Polish governing party's leader accused the EU of breaking an agreement aimed at unlocking billions in blocked funds

for Poland. [Notes From Poland] [Politico] [Euronews] [Bloomberg]

The head of the ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, accused the European Union of trying to "break" Poland and force it to submit to Germany as part of wider "German-Russian plans to rule Europe." [Euronews]

In an interview with pro-government news publication Sieci, Kaczynski said "there was an agreement – kept to on our part, broken on their part." [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

Kaczynski, who was a deputy prime minister until his resignation in June but is still Poland's most powerful politician, was referring to a long-running dispute between Warsaw and Brussels over sweeping changes to his country's legal system. The EU says the changes undermine the political independence of the Polish judiciary and erode rule-of-law principles. [Europe Monthly July 2022] [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

The European Commission has withheld EUR 35.4 billion in loans and grants from the bloc's post-pandemic recovery funds until key changes to Poland's judiciary are reversed. [Europe Monthly July 2022] [Notes From Poland]

In response, Poland passed a law replacing a controversial disciplinary chamber for judges with a "chamber of professional responsibility" in July. The move followed an agreement between Warsaw and Brussels on a series of "milestones" which, when met by Poland, would allow the EU funds to be released. [Europe Monthly July 2022] [Notes From Poland] [Politico]

However, critics have said that the new legislation contains only cosmetic changes and simply substitutes the disciplinary chamber with a new body equipped with similar powers designed to keep judges toeing the ruling party's line. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the new chamber does not go far enough to ensure the independence of the judiciary, despite it being an "important step." [Notes From Poland]

In his interview with Sieci, Kaczynski added that "since the European Commission is not fulfilling its obligations to Poland in this area, we have no reason to fulfil our obligations to the European Union."

He went on to accuse the EU of attempting to pressure Poland to submit to Germany as part of a scheme

hatched in Berlin and Moscow to dominate Europe. [Euronews]

"An independent, economically, socially and militarily strong Poland is an obstacle for them. From a historical perspective, this is nothing new," said Kaczynski. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland] Critics deride the Polish leader for peddling what they say are conspiracy theories, though his ideas are soaked up by many conservatives in Poland.

His PiS party's general secretary, Krzysztof Sobolewski, said that Warsaw is ready to fight "eye for an eye" and use all the "cannons in our arsenal" against the Commission. Vetoing EU policies and building a coalition to dismiss von der Leyen were a few actions he said Poland could take. [Euronews] [Politico] [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Spain supports Western Balkan integration into EU

Spain publicly declared its support of Western Balkan integration into the European Union on August 1 following Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's visit to five countries in the region.

The term Western Balkans is used by the EU to refer to seven countries in southeastern Europe: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Croatia. In 2013 Croatia became the first of the Western Balkan countries to join the EU and other nations are now at various stages of the process. [European Parliament]

Countries seeking admittance to the European Union must first fulfil the so-called Copenhagen political criteria, which include maintaining a stable democracy, a functioning market economy, and upholding EU law.

EU officials have been urging governments in the region to press ahead with reforms amid concerns at Russia's attempts to secure a stronger foothold in the Balkans. [euronews]

At a news conference with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, Sanchez said: "The EU cannot be conceived without the Balkans." He added that the "Balkans' incorporation will strengthen and add EU members." [Associated Press]

Sanchez concluded his trip without visiting Kosovo since Spain does not recognise its independence from Serbia. [euronews]

(km/pk)

Spanish gov't agrees to request Catalan language rights in EU Parliament

Following an agreement between the Spanish central and Catalan regional governments, Spain has agreed to petition for the official use of the Catalan language in the European Parliament. [Reuters]

Such a request must receive approval from the European Council, which consists of the leaders of the 27 member states of the European Union. [Reuters] [European Council]

Supporters of the move point out that the population of the north-eastern Spanish region of Catalonia is larger than that of several European Union member countries, and say that the Catalan language deserves official recognition and use in the European Parliament.

Opponents point to the cost of translation between Catalan and other languages. [Reuters] [Diari ARA]

The decision to request Catalan language rights in the European Parliament has brought attention to other debates regarding the use of the language in the Spanish government. Spain also plans to consider extending the use of Catalan in the national senate. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

New rules aim to ensure work-life balance in EU nations

All European Union member states are required to apply bloc-wide rules aiming to improve work-life balance for parents and carers as of August 2.

The rules, stemming from an EU directive adopted in 2019, mean working parents and carers are now entitled to paid paternity leave of ten working days, and to parental leave of four months – half of it paid – per parent until a child's eighth birthday.

The directive, which also aims to help more women access the labour market, stipulates that parents must be allowed flexible working arrangements. [EU Reporter]

The European Commission, the EU's executive, said that it would "assess the completeness and compliance" of measures taken by individual countries, and that it would "take action if and where necessary." [European Commission 1]

European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency Vera Jourova said: "Across the EU, parents and carers now have more guaranteed leave with fair compensation. It means we can care for the people we love without sacrificing the love of our work."

(acn/pk)

Belarus calls on UN to remove restrictions on supplying fertilisers

Belarus wants the United Nations to remove sanctions against its potash fertiliser industry, Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Ambrazevich said on August 5. [Belta]

Belarus can help relieve global food supply shortages if sanctions were removed, Ambrazevich said. The UN has not done enough to solve the international food crisis given the lack of political will among some member states, he said. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

West praises Gorbachev after his death, condemns Putin's 'aggression'

Global leaders paid tribute to former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev after his death, acknowledging his commitments to a peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. That praise stands in stark contrast to much of the Western world's view of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has become a pariah after his invasion of Ukraine.

Gorbachev, also a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, died in Moscow after a serious and prolonged illness, Moscow Central Clinical Hospital said on August 30, where he was being treated. Mikhail Gorbachev, 91, will be buried at Novodevichy Cemetery next to his wife

Raissa who passed away in 1999. [Kommersant] [Anadolu]

US President Biden said that Gorbachev would be remembered as a true leader, having embraced political reforms and contributed to a "safer world and greater freedoms for millions of people." [Al Jazeera] [The Washington Post]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron expressed their condolences, saying that Gorbachev tore down the Iron Curtain and opened the way for a free Europe. [Al Jazeera]

In Germany, many prominent politicians, including President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Chancellor Olaf Scholz and former Chancellor Angela Merkel, expressed their appreciation for Gorbachev's commitment to German reunification. They also praised his decisions to avoid military escalation during anti-government demonstrations in the former German Democratic Republic. [Deutsche Welle] [Welt] [Bild]

This sentiment stands in sharp contrast with the US and European views of Putin. Western nations have imposed brutal sanctions against Russia, including officials and businessmen close to Putin, seized Russian financial assets and cut the country off from global payment networks. Biden said in March that Putin was a "war criminal." [CNN]

Von der Leyen said in August that Putin's invasion brings back memories of Europe's totalitarian past, adding that "we stand united against the Russian state-controlled propaganda that distorts history, spreads conspiracy and punishes those who oppose it." Outgoing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Twitter that in a time of Putin's "aggression," Gorbachev's "tireless commitment to opening up Soviet society remains an example to us all." [GoldNews][Twitter]

Although Gorbachev was widely praised in the West, he was unpopular in Russia and allegedly had a complicated relationship with president Putin. Gorbachev was viewed as responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union, which Putin said was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." [The Guardian] [The Times of Israel]

Putin said Gorbachev "remarkably influenced the course of history." Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov added that Putin would send a telegram to Gorbachev's family, expressing his sincerest

condolences. [Kommersant] [The Guardian] [The Times of Israel] [Meduza]

Gorbachev was born in 1931 in a peasant family. He made a successful career in the Communist Party and headed the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991. He announced a policy of perestroika, designed as a transition to a more democratic and free country, but which led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. [Anadolu]

(mo/gc)

Turkish Foreign Minister accuses several NATO countries of wanting war in Ukraine to go on

Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu accused several Western nations, including some in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, of wanting the war in Ukraine to continue, including the US, Russian News Agency, TASS reported, citing an interview with Haber Global TV channel. [TASS][Newsweek]

Cavusoglu accused some European countries of wanting to prevent an agreement to restart Ukrainian grain exports. He added the US was not one of the countries that tried to block the deal. The US contributed to the conclusion of the grain deal, including lifting restrictions on the exports of Russian fertilisers, unblocking ports and lifting restrictions on banking operations, Cavusoglu said.

Ukraine and Russia reached an agreement on July 22 with the United Nations and Turkey to resume Ukrainian grain exports via the Black Sea.

(go/gc)

EU calls for respect of indigenous people's rights

The European Commission has warned that indigenous peoples worldwide are at risk of climate change, and said that such communities should have their representatives and institutions involved in international politics. [European Commission]

The Commission's call came in a statement issued on August 9, the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, which pays tribute to the

indigenous communities of the world and aims to raise awareness of the need to protect the rights of such people.[United Nations] [National Today]

The Commission stressed that the principle, under international law, that indigenous peoples must be consulted on decisions that affect them is crucial.

The Commission underlined the EU's commitment to advocating for more effective corporate governance rules to ensure responsible and sustainable practices by companies operating on indigenous lands.

The Commission said that at least 358 human rights defenders were killed in 2021, of whom 60 percent were defenders of indigenous peoples' rights or the environment, or indigenous people themselves. The Commission added that the EU would "continue to leverage its policies, dialogues, financing instruments and all other tools to support indigenous peoples, and to end impunity." [European Commission]

(acn/pk)

EU chief says solar power plant could 'facilitate reunification' of Cyprus

The European Commission is championing the idea of a solar power plant that would contribute to the energy needs of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "If well implemented, we believe that this confidence-building measure would facilitate the reunification of Cyprus."

In an interview with the Cyprus News Agency, Von der Leyen added that the Commission had prepared the ground for a pre-feasibility study. [Financial Mirror] [CNA]

Von der Leyen also said that a potential deal on the distribution of power produced from natural gas utilising the Floating Storage and Regasification Unit Terminal under construction in Cyprus could spark a wider conversation about energy management in Cyprus. [Financial Mirror]

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.

(kk/pk)

Lithuania seeks to consult with EU over migration policy to turn away irregular migrants

Lithuanian Interior Minister Agne Bilotaite said on August 2 that the government would consult with the European Union on a law to turn away irregular migrants. [The Baltic Times]

EU policies have not adapted to on-going conditions of irregular migration, primarily from Belarus, Bilotaite said. Lithuania wants to close various loopholes amid the current refugee crisis and the war in Ukraine, she said.[The Baltic Times]

Lithuania introduced harsher measures against irregular migration on July 29 in response to a refugee influx from Belarus, which the Lithuanian government accuses Minsk of orchestrating. Its new immigration regime allows border patrols to turn away irregular migrants instantly. [The Baltic Times]

Since August last year, the Lithuanian border patrol has turned away more than 11,000 refugees and has been accused of violating international law. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Journalist for Polish media jailed in Belarus; Brussels protests

A journalist for Polish state media has been jailed in Belarus, prompting condemnation by the European Commission of the Minsk regime's efforts to silence independent reporting. [Reuters] [Notes From Poland] [Radio Poland] [AP News]

Iryna Slaunikava – who was working for Polish state broadcaster Belsat – had been arrested in Minsk in October 2021. She was sentenced to five years in prison on August 3 following a trial held mostly behind closed doors. [AP News] [Reuters] [Notes From Poland]

Slaunikava was convicted of "organising or participating in gross violations of public order" and "creating an extremist group." The sentence comes amid widespread repression of human and media rights in Belarus, which increased following a 2020

presidential election viewed largely by the international community as rigged. [AP News] [Notes From Poland]

Poland's foreign ministry filed a protest in response to the sentencing and summoned Belarus's charge d'affaires, Aliaksandr Chasnouski. The diplomat accused Warsaw of interfering in Belarusian affairs, according to Polish foreign ministry spokesperson Lukasz Jasina. [Notes From Poland] [AP News] [Radio Poland]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in a social media post described the jail sentence for the journalist as "unacceptable" and a "violation of all civilisation norms, human rights and journalistic standards", and vowed that Poland would immediately respond with a "decisive reaction at an international level." [Reuters]

The European Commission also condemned the Belarusian court's ruling, with Peter Sano, a spokesperson for the EU's executive, calling it "another example of how the regime in Minsk is trying to silence independent journalism." [Notes From Poland]

Exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya said: "We must do everything to support our independent journalists who risk all to report the truth." [AP News]

Slaunikava is the second journalist working for broadcaster Belsat to recently receive prison time in Belarus. Katsyaryna Andreeva was charged with treason and sentenced to eight years in prison in July. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

Belsat – which broadcasts for Belarusian audiences – has previously been labelled an extremist organisation by Minsk. [Reuters] [Notes From Poland] [AP News]

According to the Belarusian Association of Journalists and rights group Vesna-96, it is estimated that there are close to 1,300 political prisoners in Belarus, of whom 29 are journalists. [Reuters] [Notes From Poland] [Radio Poland]

(ek/pk)

Kurdish activist remains in Serbian custody despite calls to release him

Kurdish politician and activist Ecevit Piroglu, who is on Turkey's "red list" of people wanted for terrorism,

remains under Serbian custody, despite calls to release him and stop his ongoing hunger strike since June 2.

The United Nations Torture Committee urged Serbia not to extradite Prioglu until his case has been sufficiently reviewed, as there is fear that he will face torture and imprisonment if he is returned to Turkey. Huseyin Ates, coordinator of the Freedom for Ecevit Piroglu Initiative, said his detention in Serbia is unjustified and illegal.

Piroglu is wanted for his involvement in the 2013 anti-governmental Gezi Park Protests and is a former director of the Turkish Human Rights Association's Izmir branch, as well as a member of the Socialist Democratic Party. [ANF]

The Belgrade Higher Court has ruled that based on the documents submitted by the Turkish government, the conditions for his extradition have been met. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

Slovenia vies for UN Security Council seat

Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon has met with American Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to press the case for Slovenia taking a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council from 2024 to 2025.

Ljubljana will need to compete with Minsk, as Belarus is seeking the same seat on the council. Minsk's candidacy is opposed by the United States. A decision on whether to admit Slovenia to the council will be decided on the floor of the General Assembly, regardless of Washington's preferences. [Vecer]

Fajon has outlined reasons for her country to be given the seat in an open letter published on the Slovenian government website. She said Slovenia was committed to United Nation values and principles.

Her country advocates smaller nations taking on larger roles in international politics, especially regarding topics such as climate change, multilateral relations and conflict prevention. Ljubljana promises that "if elected, Slovenia will always act as a bridge – in a constructive, engaged, resolute and active manner." [gov.si]

(cg/pk)

Moldova, Russian-backed Transnistria held talks about conflict resolution

Moldova and the Russian-backed breakaway region of Transnistria held talks to reduce the prospects of conflict in the disputed territory. [moldpres] [Transnistria]

Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Serebryan and Transnistria's Foreign Minister Vitaly Ignatiev held a virtual meeting on August 16 to discuss the objectives of working groups that will each hold 10 sessions. The groups will include experts in education, healthcare, agriculture and defence. [moldpres]

The two sides need to restart the negotiation process, Serebryan said during the virtual meeting. They also need to define conditions for teachers teaching in Romanian, Moldova's official language, at Transnistrian schools, he said.

Other issues discussed at the meeting included: continuous access to agricultural areas, the removal of barriers for cross-border traffic from and to Transnistria, the utilisation of water resources and the avoidance of negative political connotations. [moldpres]

Moldova expressed concerns about the restrictions that residents in the security zone face, given the barriers imposed on certain goods, strict checks at the border, and detentions for a comparatively long period when crossing unauthorised checkpoints. [moldpres]

Ignatiev also expressed his country's concerns about the difficulties in the banking sector. He also said that medical and phytosanitary product imports should be carried out according to existing standards. [moldpres][moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moscow demands Swedish journalist take down article on gay man

A Swedish independent journalist was told on August 18 by Russia's state communications regulator to take down an article on her website or access to it from within Russia would be blocked.

The article, which Moscow says violates Russian law, is an interview from 2018 with a gay member of the

native Scandinavian Sami population. He talks about his fight against mental illness and his attempts to take his life after experiencing prejudice because of his sexual orientation.

The article was published in English and Russian by the Barents Observer, an online newspaper based in Norway, as well as on the website of Swedish journalist Marianne Hofman, who conducted the interview.

The Barents Observer's editor-in-chief, Thomas Nielsen, said the interview was relevant to Russians due to "the situation for homosexuals and minorities" in that country.

Russia's state communications regulator Roskomnadzor demanded the article be taken down by the newspaper, claiming the text violated a Russian law that prohibits publishing descriptions of ways to commit suicide. After the newspaper did not comply, its website was blocked to users in Russia. Now Hofman has received a similar demand.

Media censorship by Moscow has escalated since Russia invaded Ukraine, with the Kremlin trying to control narratives by blocking thousands of Russian-language websites. [Dagens Nyheter] [The Barents Observer]

(phr/pk)

Amnesty International report on war in Ukraine sparks outrage

Human rights organisation Amnesty International on August 4 published a report accusing Ukrainian military forces of endangering civilians, triggering international criticism. [EuroNews]

After investigating Russian strikes in the Kharkiv, Donbas and Mykolaiv regions they found that Ukrainian forces had set up military bases in residential areas, including schools and hospitals, and launched attacks from such areas in several cases, Amnesty said. This fighting tactic endangers civilian life and breaches international humanitarian law, it said. [AmnestyInternational]

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky on the same day reacted furiously, saying that Amnesty was "trying to shift the responsibility from the aggressor to the victim." Amnesty's Ukrainian head on August 6 quit the organisation, saying that she no longer agrees with Amnesty's values.

She added that “In an effort to protect civilians, this study became a tool of Russian propaganda." [DW] [Reuters]

‘Grossly misguided’

Estonia criticised the report as “grossly misguided.”

The foreign affairs ministry said on Twitter that Amnesty overlooked the fact that “Ukrainian forces are fighting to defend their country and people.” The ministry also said that Russia has deliberately targeted civilians from the very beginning of the war by systematically destroying schools, kindergartens, hospitals and theatres. [Twitter] [ERR] [Twitter]

The Russian Mission in Geneva on August 6 on Twitter said: “When a civilian house is used for military purposes, it turns into a legitimate target for a precision strike,” referring to Amnesty’s report.

The human rights group published a statement on August 7, saying that they regret the pain, anger and distress caused by the report. They added that while they stand by their findings, they want to stress that tactics used by Ukrainian forces in no way justifies Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine and respective violations of international law. [AlJazeera]

(jk-mo/gc)

Council of Europe, EU help Roma in Bulgaria, Romania

The Council of Europe human rights organisation and the EU have renewed an agreement to support marginalised Roma communities in Bulgaria and Romania.

The ROMACT initiative organises and finances housing, education, and employment projects. It has already mobilised more than EUR 140 million in funding and trained more than 7,000 local officials, who play a crucial part in providing infrastructure such as roads and children’s playgrounds for Roma communities.

The new agreement provides an additional budget of EUR 1.7 million and will run for 20 months from January 2023. [Council of Europe]

(aml/pk)

Stabbing of writer Salman Rushdie condemned by EU leaders

Acclaimed writer Salman Rushdie, who has faced decades of death threats over a novel that many Muslims consider as blasphemous, was stabbed repeatedly at a public appearance in the US on August 12. The attack drew condemnation from politicians, authors and advocates of free speech in Europe and around the world.

The 75-year-old writer was stabbed in the face, neck and abdomen by an attacker who ran onto the stage before Rushdie was due to give a speech about how the United States has served as a haven for authors under threat of persecution.

The writer, who hails from India and who has lived in Britain and America, was rushed to hospital in a critical condition, but after a day was taken off a ventilator and was able to speak again. [BBC]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "appalled" by the stabbing, while French President Emmanuel Macron voiced support for the writer. [CNN]

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell strongly condemned the attack, adding in a tweet: "International rejection of such criminal actions, which violate fundamental rights and freedoms, is the only path towards a better and more peaceful world."

A prosecutor said the incident at an education centre in western New York state was a pre-planned crime. The man accused of the stabbing, 24-year-old Hadi Matar, pleaded not guilty to attempted murder and assault. [AP]

Link to extremism?

The suspect was born in the US to parents who had emigrated from Lebanon, an official in that country said. [AP] According to NBC News, a review of the suspect's social media accounts by law enforcers indicated that he is sympathetic to Shia extremism and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Washington accuses the latter organisation of waging a global extremist campaign. [Reuters]

In 1989, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, or edict, calling for Rushdie to be murdered after deeming the writer's novel *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous. Many Muslims said the way the book portrayed the Prophet Muhammad was an insult to their faith. The author was then forced into

hiding for nearly 10 years. [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC]

Iran justifies attack

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Iranian state institutions had "incited violence against Rushdie for generations, and state-affiliated media recently gloated about the attempt on his life." Blinken described that as "despicable," but stopped short of directly blaming Tehran for the attack.

A spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry denied Tehran was involved in the stabbing, but suggested that Rushdie had brought the attack on himself. [AP]

Tensions between the US and Iran, which have been simmering for years, rose after an American drone strike in Baghdad killed a top Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps general in 2020. [Al Jazeera]

US President Joe Biden said he was "shocked and saddened to learn of the vicious attack" on Rushdie.

In a statement, Biden praised Rushdie for what he said was his refusal to be intimidated or silenced. Biden added that the writer stood for "essential, universal ideals. Truth. Courage. Resilience. The ability to share ideas without fear. These are the building blocks of any free and open society."

(pk)

Pelosi's Taiwan visits sparks Chinese military posturing, diplomatic discontent

Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives, sparked Chinese military posturing and diplomatic discontent when she visited Taiwan on August 2, a trip that raised tensions between Western nations led by the US and Beijing and its allies.

China conducted its first military drills in sea and airspace around Taiwan since 1996 and hauled in G7 envoys in Beijing to voice its anger. Taiwan responded by putting its military on alert and the US moved several naval vessels into the area. Taiwan said the Chinese drills were a simulation of an attack on the island state. [EuroNews] [AlJazeera]

Under the One-China policy, Taiwan is a breakaway province that is not recognised as an independent nation by China. Only 14 countries worldwide

contradict this policy and recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state. [BBC]

Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 2 said he condemns Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and that Russia supports the One-China policy. The Belarussian foreign ministry said the visit escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait and threatened the one-China principle and that it shares China's concerns. [Xinhua][Reuters]

The G7 and the EU on August 3 in a joint statement called the Chinese military drills "unjustified" and stressed their commitment to maintain peace in the region. They added that none of the G7 members would contradict the One-China policy.

Wasted Paper

China called in Japanese and other European G7 members' envoys on August 5 to protest the statement. The Chinese foreign ministry called the G7's statement "a piece of wasted paper that distorted the facts and confused right and wrong." [Global Times]

The US ignored China's anger. A second group of US lawmakers, led by Senator Ed Markey, visited Taipei for talks about trade, regional security, climate change and US-Taiwanese cooperation from August 14 to 15. [Bloomberg] [France24]

The US announced on August 18 to begin formal trade negotiations with Taiwan. The Office of the US Trade Representative said it expects first talks to start in early fall. [BBC]

Baltic States

The Baltic states also continued to distance themselves from Beijing. Latvia and Estonia on August 11 said they would leave a forum hosted by the Chinese foreign ministry, which aims to improve cooperation between China as well as Central and Eastern European countries.

While both Riga and Tallinn want to establish pragmatic ties with China within EU contexts, they simultaneously view the Chinese government's "no limits" friendship with Russia and its punitive moves against Lithuania with increasing scepticism. [EurActiv] [DW] [Politico] [Time] [ERR]

Lithuania, the only European country to publicly endorse Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, left the forum last year. Lithuania has improved diplomatic relations with Taiwan by allowing Taipei to open a de facto embassy

in Vilnius. China reacted with trade restrictions and travel sanctions on Lithuanian officials. [EuObserver]

China on August 12 announced it had imposed further sanctions on a Lithuanian Minister for visiting Taiwan shortly after Pelosi. [Reuters]

(jk-mo/gc)

Belarus condemns Pelosi's Taiwan visit

The visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of RepresentativeS, intensified tensions between China and the US, the Belarusian foreign ministry said on August 5. [Belta] [Xinhua]

Belarus supports China's concerns about the US interference in Beijing's internal affairs, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said, adding that Belarus recognises that the visit escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait and threatened the one-China principle and Beijing's measures to achieve reunification. [China]

Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2 prompted a fierce response from China over alleged interference in domestic affairs. China organised military drills and imposed sanctions against Pelosi and her family. [ZDF]

(mo/gc)

EU plans stronger presence in Pacific amid geostrategic competition

The European Union is working to deepen economic and security ties in the Pacific as it looks to strengthen its presence in the region amid jockeying by major powers for geostrategic advantage. The EU already has several development projects underway in the region and is looking for more.

The EU's ambassador to Pacific Island nations, Sujiro Seam, said during a visit to New Zealand on August 16 that the bloc wants to be seen as an economic and strategic partner in the Pacific, as well as a development partner.

Seam said that the EU's position in the region "is not against anybody. We're not here to contain China."

The EU's drive comes as geostrategic competition heats up in the region, with major powers like the

United States and China, as well as Australia, stepping up their presence.

China signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands earlier this year and provides assistance to several other countries through loans. [Reuters]

On a visit to Cambodia from August 3 to 5, the EU's foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell attended an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Post-Ministerial Conference and an ASEAN regional forum. During his trip, Borrell said the EU intended to engage more in the Asia-Pacific and deepen EU-ASEAN relations.

Borrell met with ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi and they adopted a plan to implement the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership covering 2023 to 2027, under which both parties are to pursue political and security cooperation under international law and according to ASEAN members' domestic laws. The EU and ASEAN also plan to sign a Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (CATA) later this year. [EU External Affairs]

(ar/pk)

Estonia and Latvia to withdraw from China-sponsored forum

Estonia and Latvia announced on August 11 that they would no longer participate in the 16+1 Forum that is sponsored by China to expand cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries. [ERR] [Foreign Policy] [Reuters]

The Estonian ministry of foreign affairs said that while Estonia seeks to establish constructive and pragmatic relations with China within EU engagement, it views China's 'no-limits' friendship with Russia as well as the Chinese government's punitive moves against Lithuania sceptically. [Politico] [Time] [ERR]

Latvia issued a similar statement, announcing that it would still seek productive relations with China bilaterally and in the context of EU-China cooperation. [Politico] [Time] [ERR]

Lithuania already left the forum, which was then labelled as 17+1, as it sought closer political and economic engagement with Taiwan. The forum has sparked significant criticism by the EU. [Politico] [Politico]

(mo/gc)

France, US condemn Myanmar Regime's sentencing of Aung San Suu Kyi

France and the United States have condemned Myanmar's junta for sentencing ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi to six more years in prison under various charges, ranging from corruption, electoral fraud and violating the official secrets act. She has now been sentenced to a total of 17 years in prison.

The junta sentenced Suu Kyi, 77, who has been Myanmar's face for democracy for over 30 years, after she was detained by the military, which overthrew her government in February 2021. France called for an end to violence in the country, while the US called for the release of Suu Kyi and other democratically elected officials. [France2] [Reuters]

(ar/gc)

Greek Foreign Minister joins ASEAN summit, signs Friendship and Cooperation Agreement

Greek Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Dendias met with his counterparts from the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as China, during the organisation's 55th Foreign Minister Summit in Cambodia, where he signed a Friendship and Cooperation Agreement between Greece and ASEAN.

He emphasised the importance of respecting the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and adhering to international customary and codified law. He stressed that UNCLOS must be the sole basis for resolving relevant international territorial disputes and that there must be no tolerance for revisionist stances. [Kathimerini] [AMNA].

Tensions between Greece and Turkey have escalated over territorial rights in the Aegean Sea, which Athens says should be resolved based on UNCLOS and international law. Similarly, the member states of ASEAN, and China have engaged in a long history of disputes over territorial rights in the South China Sea. [AMNA]

(hi/gc)

Lithuania criticised by China after welcoming Pelosi's trip to Taiwan

Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis welcomed the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the US speaker of the House of Representatives, to Taiwan, prompting a fierce response from China on August 5. [LRT] [Global Times]

The Chinese diplomatic mission to Lithuania said that Landsbergis's comments would undermine bilateral relations and damage Lithuania's credibility. [China]

Lithuania's relationship with China has deteriorated after it abandoned China's 17+1 forum and adopted a hawkish view on Beijing's domestic and foreign policies. [Politico]

(mo/gc)

Putin and Erdogan agree on further cooperation during meeting

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on August 4 agreed to improve cooperation in economic and energy affairs after a meeting in Sochi. [DW] [TheGuardian]

The two countries plan to use the ruble for some payments, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said after the meeting. Both parties also agreed to continue and to improve cooperation in their military efforts in Syria, where the countries had acted opposingly before. [Reuters / EuroNews]

The meeting comes after Turkey and the UN negotiated a deal between Russia, and Ukraine in which the parties agreed on a system to resolve the blockade of grain exports from Ukraine. [Europe Monthly, Aug 2022]

(jk/gc)

Belarusian refugees do not have sufficient access to Lithuanian humanitarian visas, opposition says

Belarusians fleeing the Lukashenko regime can only enter Lithuania illegally as they no longer have access

to humanitarian visas, according to representatives of the Belarusian opposition. [LRT]

Olga Karach, a member of the Belarusian opposition, said that all EU countries, including Lithuania, made it impossible to get an EU visa while being in Belarus after the forced landing of the Ryanair passenger plane that was en route from Athens to Vilnius in May 2020. She added that Belarusians have turned to crossing the border illegally. [LRT]

Karach also said that such conditions would weaken the resistance to the Lukashenko administration. She said that Belarusian activists against the regime would be more active if they had the opportunity to apply for a humanitarian visa and leave Belarus in case of facing detention. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Lukashenko approves military-technical cooperation program with Russia

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko approved on August 17 a draft of an intergovernmental agreement with Russia to implement a program to deepen military-technical cooperation until 2025. [Belta]

The program is designed to engage in research and development on the modernisation of weapons and military equipment. Belarus and Russia will also launch joint productions of weapons, military equipment and components as well as establish common policies in the fields of standardisation, cataloguing and supply of military products and services befitting to Belarus and Russia's security interests. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Former Czech PM Babis investigated by French prosecutors

France's National Financial Prosecutor's Office has opened a preliminary investigation into former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis over suspicion that he was involved in tax evasion, according to French newspaper Le Monde.

Babis, the Czech Republic's fifth richest man, is accused of acquiring properties in France worth EUR 14 million in 2009 through a chain of offshore companies, with the complex setup allegedly being hidden from French authorities.

A spokesperson for Babis denied such claims and said that all transactions "took place in a perfectly legal manner and we paid all the required taxes." [Prague Morning]

French media started looking into Babis's finances last autumn after he was mentioned in the Pandora Papers, documents detailing how numerous world leaders and celebrities were hiding their assets via offshore companies.

According to Le Monde, Babis's appearance in these documents contributed to him losing the Czech parliamentary elections and his post as prime minister last year. [Radio Prague International]

(phr/pk)

Millions in EU funds to boost ties between Czech Republic, Saxony

The European Commission has approved a programme that will use EUR 152 million in funds from Brussels to strengthen cooperation between the eastern German state of Saxony and the neighbouring Czech Republic.

With the approval of the Interreg programme, "we can continue the successful work of recent years together with our Czech partners and thus allow the border regions to grow together further," said Saxony's state minister of regional development, Barbara Meyer. [Euractiv]

The European Union's Interreg programme was introduced in 1990 to help economically weak regions catch up with wealthier parts of the bloc. Meanwhile, news outlet Euractiv reported that the newly approved part of the programme was important for another reason.

Saxony is home to German far-right party AfD, which came first in the state in the 2021 national parliamentary election. Euractivsuggested that a reason for the party's strong performance there was the fact that Saxony is among Germany's poorer states, and many of its inhabitants felt left behind after Germany's reunification in 1990. [Bundeswahlleiter]

(jg/pk)

Greek and North Macedonia pledge to increase law-enforcement cooperation

Greece and North Macedonia have pledged to reinforce their bilateral, law-enforcement cooperation as they seek to curb cross-border organised crime, including illegal immigration, human trafficking and drug trade.

The Chief of Greek Police, Konstantinos Skoumas, met with his North Macedonian counterpart, Sasho Tasevski, in late July. They expressed their interest in improving information and data sharing between the two national police departments. [Euronews] [Liberal]

Earlier this year, a US report claimed that the majority of Balkan states failed to uphold minimum anti-human trafficking standards and regulations, and urged the various governments of the region to work harder to curb the phenomenon. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

Greece will expand Turkish border wall amid increased immigrant influxes

Greek Immigration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarakis said the government will expand a wall along the Greek-Turkish border to slow the flow of illegal immigrants into the country, adding that refugees can be returned across the border with minimal danger since Turkey is not a "war-torn country." [Kathimerini]

Civil Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos said that 1,500 migrants tried to enter Greece through its land border with Turkey in a single day, adding that more than 60 human traffickers were arrested last month. Turkey is using migrants as a political instrument, he said. [Kathimerini]

Greece had asked the European Commission to fund the extension of its border wall to help offset the cost to Athens. The Governmental Council on National Security, chaired by prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, discussed the border wall during a meeting. [Aljazeera] [Ethnos]

(hi/gc)

Hungary summons ambassador after Estonian politicians criticise Budapest

Estonia's ambassador has been summoned by the Hungarian foreign ministry after several Estonian politicians made critical remarks about Budapest's relationship with Moscow and questioned Hungary's stance towards Ukraine.

The Hungarian foreign ministry did not say which statement had caused offence. However, Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu had in an interview called Hungary's attitude towards Moscow's aggression in Ukraine "extremely regrettable" and accused Budapest of undermining the West's sanctions against Russia. [Hungary Posts English]

Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, who has been criticised as being over-friendly to Moscow, has repeatedly opposed European Union sanctions against Russia and threatened to veto the adoption of the sixth EU sanctions package in June. [DW] [Radio Free Europe] Hungary is dependent on Moscow for energy and receives about 85 percent of its gas from Russia.

Senior Hungarian official Tamas Menczer called criticism of Budapest "unacceptable" since Hungary is "on the side of peace." He added that Hungary supported Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and integrity.

In a phone call, the Hungarian and Estonian foreign ministers agreed that a key priority was ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible. At the same time, Hungary's top diplomat, Peter Szijjarto, insisted that energy sanctions hurt Europe more than Russia. [About Hungary]

(aml/pk)

Icelandic newspaper angers Russian embassy, threatened with cyberattack

An Icelandic newspaper has been criticised by the Russian embassy and threatened with a cyberattack by hackers after it published a picture of a person stepping on a Russian flag.

On August 11, a day after an article with the photograph was published on newspaper *Frettabladid*'s website, the outlet received an email threatening a cyberattack and revelation of "kompromat" if it did not apologise for running the picture. *Frettabladid*'s editor, Sigmundur Ernir Runarsson, told local media the threat

had been reported to the police. [The Reykjavik Grapevine]

Runarsson said he would not apologise for the picture, captioned “Ukrainians have found a new use for the Russian flag”, despitecriticism by the Russian embassy in Reykjavik. The embassy demanded an apology for the publication of “materials insulting the state symbol of the Russian Federation.” [The Reykjavik Grapevine]

In a letter to Runarsson, the embassy mentioned a law in Iceland under which “anyone who publicly insults foreign state symbols shall be fined or even imprisoned”.

Article 95 of the General Penal Code of Iceland has rarely been enacted but can carry a sentence of up to six years in prison. Online news outlet *Iceland Review* said Article 95 had a “fairly colourful history”.

In the lead up to World War II, this provision was used in 1934 to fine an author who called German leader Adolf Hitler a “sadist” in a newspaper article. It was also under this provision that four men were prosecuted and given suspended prison sentences for cutting down and trampling on a swastika flag the same year at a German consulate in the Northern Icelandic town of Siglufjordur. Most recently it was applied in 2002 against rapper Erpur Eyvindarson and two men who threw molotov cocktails at the American embassy in Reykjavik. [Iceland Review]

Iceland’s foreign minister, Thordis Kolbrun Gylfadottir, said she recommended treating national flags with respect, but added that she believed “the horrific and inhumane crimes being deliberately committed by the Russian government” were “the greater disrespect for the Russian flag”.

(qv/pk)

Kosovo-Serbian tensions increase after Kosovar decision to replace Serbian licence plates

Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia increased last month after the Kosovar government announced that Serbian nationals that want to enter its borders will need to apply for a special “entry/exit document” and that all Serbian licence plates in its territory would need to be replaced. [Euronews]

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic urged ethnic Serbs in Kosovo to avoid doing anything that could lead to

conflict and urged the representatives of Kosovar Albanians to prioritise peace and stability in the region. The move prompted ethnic Serbs in the north of Kosovo to block various main roads with trucks as a form of protesting.

Vucic said that Serbia prioritises stability in the region but "[they] will not surrender, and in the end, Serbia will win." He held an image of a t-shirt depicting Kosovo with the Serbian flag and the phrase "we won't give up". [Euronews] [Euronews] [AMNA]

Kosovo made the decision due to the fact that Serbia doesn't recognize Kosovo's identification documents either. After enquiries by the United States and the European Union, Kosovo opted to delay the application of the measures until September 1. [AMNA][Euronews]

Vucic and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti met on August 19 in Brussels during EU-mediated efforts to resolve the conflict but initially failed to reach an agreement on the new Kosovar measures or any aspect of their long-standing dispute. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the bloc "will not give up" and further talks will take place in the future. [Reuters] [France24]

Vucic said that Kosovo presented a "six-point agreement" including mutual recognition and allowing Kosovo to enter international organisations, to which he said Serbia could not agree. Similarly, he claimed, Kosovo rejected Serbia's "compromises". He also vowed to protect the Serbs in Kosovo if the West fails to intervene. [Balkan Insight] [N1] [Albanian Daily News]

However, at a later date, Borrell took to Twitter to announce that "[they] have a deal," saying that Kosovo decided not to introduce the measures, whereas Serbia will also ban entry/exit documents for Kosovo citizens.

NATO Deployed

According to various reports, NATO troops were deployed in the northern part of Kosovo after the collapse of the talks, in order to de-escalate and prevent further tensions. [N1]

Misinformation has also spread across social media about what is happening between the two countries.

Various Twitter and Facebook users, including Ukrainian MP Oleksiy Goncharenko and Turkish writer Huseyin Hakki Kahveci, have implied or explicitly alleged that war has or is about to start in northern

Kosovo. There were allegations of Serbian troops crossing the border and clashes with local police, all of which are yet to be substantiated by facts and have been denied by the Serbian ministry of defence. [Balkan Insight]

Despite the Kosovar government's partial compromise, local police reported that two major crossing points remain closed "due to the continued blocking of the roads" by "organised criminal groups." Various restaurants and businesses in North Mitrovica remain closed. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

Latvia donates four helicopters to Ukraine

Latvia will donate four helicopters to Ukraine as a sign of its support for Kiev. [LSM]

The defence ministry said it would provide two Mi-17 and two Mi-2 helicopters. Defence Minister Artis Pabriks said the helicopters would enable the Ukrainian Air Force to expand its military operations and save civilian lives. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

North Macedonia to donate military aircraft to Ukraine

North Macedonian media have reported that the government has donated four Soviet-era military aircraft to Ukraine to aid in the war against Russia. The jets in question have been retired since 2004 and have remained in a Skopje airbase since then. [Balkan Insight]

This comes after North Macedonia donated 30 Soviet-era tanks to Ukraine, according to government announcements, which was labelled as "a mistake" by Russian officials. North Macedonia has also donated medical and humanitarian equipment to Ukrainian citizens. [Euronews]

Unlike the tank donation, the North Macedonian government has refused to comment on the aircraft donation, saying that all details about military donations will be declassified at a later date. However, Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak took to Twitter to thank North Macedonia for "giving Ukraine a

(supportive) shoulder in the form of tanks and planes", seemingly confirming the donation. [Reuters]

(hi/gc)

Norwegian consul expelled after 'I hate Russians' comment

A Norwegian consul based in the Russian city of Murmansk has been expelled following social media footage that appeared to show her making offensive comments about hotel staff, including the statement: "I hate Russians."

Amid an outcry, Norway's ambassador was summoned to the Russian foreign ministry on August 4 and Oslo apologised to Moscow.

The Norwegian foreign ministry said in a statement: "The ambassador repeated the Norwegian foreign ministry's apology, and reiterated that the employee's words in no way reflect Norwegian policy or Norwegian attitudes towards Russia or the Russian people." [Reuters]

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova described the consul's comment as a "terrible act [of] hate, nationalism and xenophobia." Meanwhile, Andrej Tsjibis, governor of Russia's north-western Arkhangelsk region, wrote on social media that "anyone who hates Russians can go to hell." [nrk]

Murmansk is situated in the Russian Arctic northwest, close to the Norwegian border. [nrk]

(cg/pk)

Serbian authorities close to convicting Croatians for crimes, sparking a Croatian threat

Serbian authorities are close to convicting Croatian admiral Davor Domazet and general Pavao Miljavac for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity, Brussels-based Euractiv, a European-wide news service, reported. Croatian Parliament Speaker Gordan Jandrokovic reacted by saying that "Croatia rejects these indictments, which are politically motivated".

He added that Croatia will use EU negotiations to send a message to Serbia that such things will not be

tolerated, implying that Croatia could block Serbia's path to join the Union unless they drop all charges against Domazet and Miljavac - both of which maintain they are innocent. [Euractiv] [B92]

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic questioned on Twitter Jandrokovic's remarks and how an EU member state could publicly say that "if you seek justice for the murder of Serbian children [...] - then you cannot be an EU member". It remains unclear in what terms or ways Croatia could block Serbia's EU accession. [N1]

(hi/gc)

Serbia and Azerbaijan reach agreement on "favourable terms" for electricity buying

Serbian government representatives announced that Azerbaijan has agreed to sell energy to Serbia "on favourable terms" after an appeal by Serbian president Alexandar Vucic to his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev. [N1]

The exact terms of the agreement have not been announced. Serbia said that Aliyev pledged to provide "secure, sufficient amounts of electricity."

The move is part of Serbia's extensive efforts to diversify its energy supply chains, amid the ongoing global energy crisis that has hit the Balkan nation hard. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

Slovakia's rift with Budapest grows

Slovak Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Ivan Korcok has said that he understands the political messages coming from Budapest "less and less" as a rift between Hungary and its regional neighbours widens.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban took aim at both the European Union, of which his country is a member, and at Slovakia and other members of central Europe's Visegrad Group regional cooperation platform at the end of July.

Orban said that "the Czechs and Slovaks had recent changes in government, and they are now striving to get into Brussels' good graces. This is a decision similar

to you trying to stable horses in a barn that's on fire." [Abouthungary] [Politico] [Spectator]

A centre-liberal government in Prague replaced populist Czech leader Andrej Babis after he lost elections last year.

Meanwhile, Orban drew condemnation over what was seen as an openly racist speech in which he claimed that Western nations "are no longer nations" due to migration policies and "race mixing". Korcok criticised Orban's claims, calling them "quite offensive".

Budapest has diverged from the other three Visegrad Group members over Russia's war in Ukraine. Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland have been steadfast in their support for Kiev, while Orban has been criticised for his links to Russia. In spite of this, Korcok emphasised the importance of Slovak-Hungarian relations. [Pravda] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

Slovakia took over the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group in July as the bloc continues to struggle with internal conflict. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

Meanwhile, Korcok spoke at a meeting with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the end of July, when both nations agreed to deepen their dialogue and cooperation.

They struck an agreement that will run from 2022 to 2024, seeking to encourage respect for the rule of law, human rights, democracy and European security, particularly regarding German commitments to Slovakia's defence and support of Ukraine. Korcok said in a statement: "For Slovakia, Germany is a strategic partner. We are united by a strong value bond, a common view on many topics."

Joint economic development was also a key subject of the meeting. Korcok said: "German capital plays an important role in the development of engineering and the automotive industry," as trade between Bratislava and Budapest reaches EUR 36 billion annually. [Pravda]

(cg/pk)

Slovenian, Turkish presidents hold talks

Slovenian President Borut Pahor held talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on August 10, discussing bilateral relations, the Western Balkans and the war in Ukraine. [Sta.si]

While in the Turkish capital, Ankara, Pahor also met with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. [Sta.si] Slovenia and Turkey maintain strong ties. The two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2011. [Vecer]

(cg/pk)

Sweden summons Russian envoy over comment on dead soldier

The foreign ministry in Stockholm in early August summoned Moscow's ambassador after the Russian embassy claimed that a Swedish soldier who died in Ukraine "got what he deserved."

The former member of the Swedish armed forces was killed fighting for Ukraine in July. The Russian embassy used the death as a warning for volunteers not to fight on Kiev's side. [Dagens Nyheter]

The comments in a social media post by the Russian embassy were condemned by members of all Swedish political parties. Sweden's foreign minister, Ann Linde, called the post "reprehensible and tasteless." [Göteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

(phr/pk)

Turkey doubles imports of Russian oil in 2022

Turkey has more than doubled its imports of Russian oil this year as the two countries strengthen trade ties after Western nations imposed sanctions on Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine in February.

Turkish imports of Russian oil increased to more than 200,000 barrels per day in 2022 from about 98,000 barrels per day in 2021, according to data from Refinitiv Eikon. Turkey's main refiner Tupras has significantly increased the intake of Russian Urals and Siberian Light oil this year, while decreasing purchases of the North Sea, Iraqi and West African grades, the data showed. North Sea and Iraqi oil grade prices as Russian oil prices dropped to "historical lows". [Reuters] [Daily Sabah]

Turkey did not sanction Russia due to its actions in Ukraine, saying it remains reliant on Russian energy supplies. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan met early in August and

agreed to boost business cooperation. [Daily Sabah] [Reuters]

(go/gc)

France, Algeria launch new relations 60 years after independence

French President Emmanuel Macron and his Algerian counterpart Abdelmadjid Tebboune met in Algiers, where they declared a "new, irreversible dynamic of progress" in their countries' ties. [France24][EFE]

The declaration came during a three-day visit in August by Macron, whose trip aimed at ending months of tensions. The visit also came less than two months after Algeria marked six decades of independence following 132 years of French rule and a devastating eight-year war of independence.

"France and Algeria have decided to open a new era," the two leaders said in a joint declaration. They laid "the foundation for a renewed partnership expressed through a concrete and constructive approach, focused on future projects and youth."

(gc)

Taliban must change course, uphold rights of women, EU says

The European Union has urged the Taliban to change course and uphold the rights of girls and women, whose rights have been "severely violated and abused" since the hardline Islamist movement seized power in Afghanistan.

In a statement, the EU said that girls remained deprived of secondary school education, adding that women were also excluded from aspects of public life by new restrictions on dress codes and freedom of movement.

The statement was released by the European Union's External Action Service – the bloc's diplomatic body – on August 14, a year after the Taliban took power in Kabul following a chaotic withdrawal by the United States.

The EU said that protection against forced marriages had diminished in Afghanistan, and domestic violence

was on the rise. [European Union External Service] [Reuters]

Previously, in a resolution adopted on April 7, the European Parliament condemned the Taliban's "persistent focus on erasing women and girls from public life" and said that both the EU and its member states must increase their support for women's rights activists in Afghanistan. [Europe in Review May 2022]

An EU spokesperson also pointed to the situation of minorities in the country, saying that Hazars, the third largest officially recognised ethnic group in Afghanistan, and the Shia population in particular were experiencing "institutionalised abuse of their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights." [European Union External Service]

(acn/pk)

Greece and Saudi Arabia sign major deals on energy, strategic cooperation and data sharing

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud during his trip to the European Union state, a visit that underpinned the Saudi prince's emergence back on the international stage of the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The two states signed 16 deals, on multiple issues such as energy, data sharing, strategic cooperation, defence and culture, among others. Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Kostas Fragogiannis described the signing of the 16 business agreements and memorandums of cooperation as a "special moment" in bilateral ties between the two countries. [Kathimerini]

A landmark deal establishes the Supreme Strategic Cooperation Council, between the two states, which will handle matters relating to mutual cooperation and bilateral partnership in issues of common interest. The two leaders signed a deal relating to building an undersea data cable, dubbed the "East to Med Data Corridor" that will connect Europe and Asia, making Greece a "data entry gateway" into the European Union and the Middle East. [Reuters][AMNA]

The Saudi Crown Prince pledged to "provide Greece and Southwest Europe with much cheaper renewable energy". This is one of the Greek government's many

attempts to diversify its energy supply chains amid the ongoing energy crisis. [Aljazeera]

The murder of the Washington Post journalist, Khashoggi, had cast a shadow over the Crown Princer's image of being a reformer. 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. [Europe in Review, Monthly August]

Gulf Oil

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.

Mitsotakis met with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, on an official state visit. They discussed issues ranging from regional stability and their mutual interest to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the tourism, infrastructure and energy sectors. Mitsotakis reinstated that Greece could serve as an "energy bridge" that would link Qatar and Europe.

(hi/bur)

Turkey receives warning from US Department Treasury of sanctions due to Russian ties

Turkey's top business association has confirmed receiving a letter from the US Department of Treasury warning of possible sanctions if it continues doing business with Russia. [Yahoo][AsharqAlawsat]

US Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo sent a letter to Turkey's TUSIAD business association and the American Chamber of Commerce in Turkey warning that companies and banks were in danger of being sanctioned themselves. Adeyemo visited Ankara and Istanbul in June to express Washington's worries that Russian oligarchs and big businesses were using Turkish entities to avoid Western sanctions. [Yahoo] [AsharqAlawsat]

“Any individuals or entities providing material support to US-designated persons are themselves at risk of US sanctions,” Adeyemo wrote. “Turkish banks cannot expect to establish corresponding relationships with sanctioned Russian banks and retain their corresponding relationships with major global banks as well as access to the US dollar and other major currencies.” [Yahoo][AsharqAlawsat]

Turkish Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati said it was “meaningless” for Turkish businesses to worry about the letter from Washington. “Turkey is one of the most important political and economic power centres of the world. Our business world should feel the power of the state alongside it at all times,” the minister tweeted. [ABC]

(gc)

Turkey and Israel reappoint ambassadors, restoring diplomatic relations

Turkey and Israel said they will re-appoint respective ambassadors more than four years after they were called back due to the Gaza crisis. [Reuters] [NYT]

The two had expelled ambassadors in 2018 over the killing of 60 Palestinians by Israeli forces during protests on the Gaza border. The opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem sparked the protests. [Reuters]

The improvement of ties started last year with the visit of Israeli President Izchak Herzog to Ankara. Following Herzog’s visit, their respective foreign ministers visited Ankara and Jerusalem. [NYT]

“It was decided to once again upgrade the level of the relations between the two countries to that of full diplomatic ties and to return ambassadors and consuls general,” Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid said. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the resumption of diplomatic relations was one of the first steps in the normalisation of ties. [Reuters]

(go/gc)

Berlin police open investigation into Palestine leader after Holocaust comments

Police in Berlin opened a preliminary investigation into Palestine leader Mahmoud Abbas's comments on August 16 that downplayed the Holocaust, a criminal offense in the country. [Politico Europe] [AP] [ZDF]

Abbas said during a press conference with German chancellor Olaf Scholz that Israel had committed "50 Holocausts" when asked about the 50th anniversary of the attack on the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics in September 1972 by a Palestinian militant group. [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

Chancellor Scholz Tweeted that "any trivialization of the singularity of the Holocaust is intolerable and unacceptable" for Germans. Politicians and media criticised Scholz for not responding directly to Abbass comments at the conference.[Politico Europe] [Reuters]

Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid wrote on Twitter that the comments made by Abbas were "not only a moral disgrace, but a monstrous lie." Scholz and Lapid spoke by phone on August 18 to solidify ties between Israel and Germany. [Politico Europe]

A Berlin citizen filed a criminal complaint with the police in Berlin. The police opened a preliminary investigation on the grounds of possible incitement to hatred. Denying or downplaying the Holocaust is a criminal offense in Germany. A preliminary investigation doesn't automatically result in a full investigation. [AP] [ZDF] [Spiegel]

The German foreign ministry said that Abbas would have diplomatic immunity as he visited Germany as the representative of Palestine, but Germany doesn't recognise Palestine as a sovereign state. [ZDF] [AP] [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Russia launches Iranian satellite into orbit triggering Western concerns

Russia launched on August 9 an Iranian satellite into orbit from a base in Kazakhstan amid Western concerns that Moscow could use the satellite to its advantage in the ongoing war in Ukraine. [Reuters]

The Washington Post cited two Western security officials on August 4 as saying that the satellite would be used by Russia for an unknown period of time in order to better observe military targets in war torn

Ukraine before handing control over to Iran. [WashingtonPost]

Iran, whose nuclear and space ambitions have caused tensions with Western countries, said the satellite would be used for environmental surveillance and will be completely under Tehran's control. The director of the space agency said that the successful launch of the satellite was a milestone for Russian-Iranian space cooperation and a good foundation for further projects. [NewYorkTimes] [BBC]

The Iranian satellite was launched into orbit by Russia after the countries were in talks about further cooperation in July. [AlJazeera]

(jk/gc)

Russian Minister of Trade meets with his Iranian counterpart

Russia's Minister of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov, met with Iran's Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade, Fatemi Amin, to discuss industrial cooperation in auto manufacturing, shipbuilding, railway, agriculture, energy engineering and the pharmaceutical industry. [RussianGov]

"The current situation in the world is not only creating new challenges but also opening new windows of opportunity for deepening partnerships," Manturov said. "We are ready for stronger cooperation with our Iranian partners in all areas of mutual interest." [RussianGov]

(gc)

Turkey threatens to halt purchase of F-16s if US imposes conditions on their use

Turkey has threatened to halt its purchase of F-16 fighter jets if conditions are imposed on their use after US lawmakers passed a bill making it harder for Ankara to acquire them.

Ankara has voiced its opposition to conditions on the sale of the Lockheed Martin-made F-16s sought by the U.S. House of Representatives and has called on the US not to fall for the "game" being played by certain lawmakers. On August 15, a Turkish delegation flew to Washington after US President Joe Biden pledged to

convince US lawmakers to follow through with the sale of the F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. [Daily Sabah]

“We’re expecting the US administration to continue to work to convince Congress for the sale,” Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said. “Why should we buy a product that we can’t use?,” he said. [Daily Sabah]

The US House of Representatives' bill will bar the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Ankara unless the Biden administration certifies that the sale is necessary for US national security. The bill includes a description of concrete steps taken to ensure they are not used for repeated unauthorised overflights of Greece. [Reuters]

Ankara made a request in October to purchase 40 F-16 fighter jets and 80 modernisation kits as it moves to upgrade its fleet in a deal valued at USD 16 billion. [Daily Sabah]

This is the latest effort by members of Congress to exert control over the sale of the Lockheed Martin aircraft to NATO ally Turkey. It would require Senate approval. Senator Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who reviews major international weapons deals, has said previously he opposed the sale. [Reuters]

Many U.S. lawmakers soured on Ankara after its 2019 acquisition of a Russian-made missile defence system. The purchase triggered US sanctions as well as Turkey's removal from the F-35 fighter jet program. [Reuters]

(go/gc)

EU condemns closure of Catholic radio stations in Nicaragua

The European Union has condemned the closure of seven Catholic radio stations and two community radio/TV stations in Nicaragua by the authoritarian government of President Daniel Ortega, and demanded an end to repression in the Central American country.

The Catholic stations are linked to a bishop who has criticised Ortega. [Reuters] “This constitutes yet another violation of freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief,” the EU said in a statement.

Relations between Ortega and the Catholic Church have been deteriorating since 2018, when prolonged protests took place against the president.

Since then, the EU said in its statement, the Nicaraguan government has unleashed "unprecedented levels of violence against its own people, using killings, forced disappearances, incarceration, harassment and intimidation against political opponents as well as journalists, human rights defenders, religious and other leaders."

When the radio stations were shut down, the Nicaraguan Telecommunications Authority said that they did not meet the technical requirements to go on air. However, it did not specify what the requirements were. [Reuters]

The European Union urged Nicaragua to "put an end to all repression and restore full respect for all human rights." It said that it would monitor the situation closely and "support the people of Nicaragua in their legitimate aspiration for democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law". [Delegation of the European Union to Nicaragua]

(acn/pk)

Hungarian PM holds talks with Donald Trump

Hungarian right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban held talks with Donald Trump in the US on August 2, with the two men discussing stances they share, such as a tough line on migration and a distaste for liberal values.

The pair also discussed the war in Ukraine during the meeting at one of the former US president's luxury golf resorts. On his social media platform, Trump said that they had celebrated Orban's "great electoral victory". [Hungary Today] [Bloomberg]

Orban won his fourth consecutive term in power in April, beating an alliance of opposition parties that had united in an attempt to end Hungary's drift into "illiberal democracy". [Europe in Review, May 2022]

Two days after meeting Trump, Orban spoke at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Texas. He complained about liberalism and migration, saying: "This war is a culture war. We have to revitalise our churches, our families, our universities and our community institutions." The CPAC is a conference of

conservatives that supports Trump. [nbc news] [Politico]

(al/pk)

Moldova receives USD 63 million loan from US to help offset economic costs of Ukraine war

Moldovan Finance Minister Dmitri Budyanski said on August 18 that the US Agency for International Development granted a USD 63 million loan to help Moldova manage the economic implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to support its accession to the EU. [SeeNews] [moldpres] [IPN]

The US Agency for International Development underlined that USD 46.3 million will be used to boost sustainable economic growth and maximise agricultural production. The fund will also ensure Moldova's energy security, combat corruption, and provide conducive conditions for investments and innovations. [moldpres] [IPN]

The remaining funds will be used for programmes designed to consolidate participatory democracy and governance. According to the finance ministry, they will strengthen independent media and democratic institutions, amplify the reform process, and combat propaganda and disinformation campaigns. [moldpres] [IPN]

(mo/gc)

Moldovan interior ministry will cooperate with FBI

The Moldovan interior ministry signed on August 5 a memorandum with the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation to combat terrorism. [Moldpres]

The memorandum deepens the cooperation between Moldova and the US, stipulating that Moldovan institutions and FBI agents share information on criminal and terrorist groups as well as experience and methods to improve law enforcement. Moldova will also have access to FBI data on suspects, terrorists and transnational perpetrators. [Moldpres]

According to the Moldovan Minister of Interior Anna Revenko, the memorandum shall improve public

security and law enforcement and will facilitate the prosecution of criminals. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Norway seeks to fine tech giant Meta for US data sharing

Norwegian data protection authority Datatilsynet has said that American tech giant Meta should be fined for violating a 2020 European court ruling to prevent US online surveillance of EU citizens.

Meta, the owner of Facebook, has been found by various European data protection authorities to have been using a legal instrument called standard contractual clauses to make data transfers to the US, thereby breaking EU regulations.

Irish data regulators initiated a court case against the American corporation in July, but only sought to stop the use of standard contractual clauses rather than pressing for Meta to be fined.

In the meantime, a new data transfer deal is being worked out by EU and US officials.

A spokesperson for Meta said: “This issue relates to a conflict of EU and U.S. law which is in the process of being resolved. We welcome the EU-U.S. agreement for a new legal framework that will allow the continued transfer of data across borders, and we expect this framework will allow us and others to keep families, communities and economies connected.” [Politico]

(cg/pk)

Ukrainian President seeks Chinese help to end war with Russia

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in an interview with the South China Morning Post that he hopes that China will use its political and economic clout to pressure Russia into a peace settlement to end the war that Moscow started in February. [Asia in Review, No.32, August/2022, 2][South China Morning Post]

Zelensky said that he has tried to directly contact China’s President Xi Jinping since the beginning of the invasion but he has not yet been given the opportunity to hold talks with the Chinese leader. He said that he

"would like China to review its attitude towards Russia" but at the same time respects Beijing's decision to maintain a "balanced" stance regarding the war. [South China Morning Post]

Zelensky also urged China to support the implementation of international norms through its permanent membership in the UN Security Council. [South China Morning Post]

(ar/gc)

Russia's Minister of Industry discusses industrial cooperation with Chinese counterpart

Russian Minister of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov, and China's Secretary of the Party Committee of the Chinese industry and information technology ministry, Jin Zhuanglong, co-chaired the 7th meeting of the sub-commission on industry cooperation under the Russian-Chinese Commission.

Manturov underscored the importance of expanding their industrial cooperation between the two countries. "Industrial products certainly make the biggest contribution to expanding bilateral trade. The share of these is close to 55 percent now, and we can see opportunities to significantly expand the range of mutual supplies," he said.

(gc)

Belarus opens Consulate General in Mumbai

Belarus's First Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Aleinik, attended the opening on August 4 of a Consulate General in Mumbai. [Belta]

Aleinik added that the opening coincided with the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Belarus and India. He said Belarus seeks to deepen cooperation with India. [Belta]

Secretary of the Department of Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection of Maharashtra, Vijay Waghmare, as well as the head of consular offices and journalists attended the ceremony. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Russia: Major Japanese companies consider keeping stakes in Russian Sakhalin 1 & 2

Japanese Industry Minister Koichi Hagiuda said on August 8 that Japan intends to keep its stake in the Sakhalin-1 Russian project and has asked two large Japanese trading companies to join the new company running Sakhalin-2.

These decisions come after Russia temporarily banned Western investors from selling Sakhalin-1 shares in key energy projects and after Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree to bring Sakhalin-2 under the government's control by creating a new operating company affiliated with Gazprom, a Russian energy company.

Japanese consortium Sakhalin Oil and Gas Development owns 30 percent of Sakhalin-1, while trading companies Mitsui & Co. and Mitsubishi Corp. own 12.5 and 10 percent of Sakhalin-2, respectively.

(ar/gc)

Lithuanian bus manufacturer UAB signs MOU with Taiwanese company

Lithuanian bus manufacturer UAB Vejo projektai signed on August 10 a memorandum of understanding with Taiwan's Tangeng Advanced Vehicles Co., the country's largest manufacturer of passenger and cargo vehicles, to deepen cooperation. [The Baltic Times]

The two companies intend to explore the demand for electric vehicles in the European Union, East Asia and the United States and to increase cooperation to combat climate change. They plan to establish a joint venture that develops electric vehicles and battery module technologies. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Lithuanian Vice Minister's visit to Taiwan spurs China to cut transport ties

The Chinese foreign affairs ministry announced on August 12 that China would cease cooperation with the Lithuanian transport and communications ministry

following Lithuania's Vice Minister of Transport Agne Vaiciukeviciute's visit to Taiwan. [LRT] [The Baltic Times]

Qu Baihua, China's Acting Charge d'Affaires in Lithuania, said that any visit to Taiwan undertaken by state representatives violates the one-China principle and will entail far-reaching consequences. [The Baltic Times]

Vaiciukeviciute and a business delegation from Lithuania visited Taiwan to discuss the prospects of cooperation in the transport sector, prompting a harsh response from China. Lithuania also intends to open a trade office in Taipei. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Turkey awards Malaysian King with Order of State of the Turkish Republic

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan received Malaysia's King Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah in an official ceremony on August 16 at the presidential palace in Ankara. [AA] [Daily Sabah]

Erdogan awarded the Malaysian king with the Order of the State of the Turkish Republic, which is the highest state order awarded to foreigners. Erogan was given the Order of Chivalry by the King. [AA] [Daily Sabah]

Turkey and Malaysia are planning joint steps on oil and gas operations through Turkish Petroleum (TPAO) and Malaysia's state energy firm Petronas, Erdogan said, adding that China could join the efforts.[Nasdaq]

(go/gc)

Belarus: Minsk's Ambassador to Vietnam meets with VinFast Trading and Production Vice President

Belarus's Ambassador to Vietnam, Vladimir Borovikov, met with Tran Le Phuong, the Vice President of VinFast Trading and Production, on August 4 to discuss potential cooperation. [Belta]

The Belarusian embassy announced that VinFast is interested in cooperating with Belarusian company OAO Belkommunmash to produce electric buses. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Irish troops withdrawn from Congo due to security concerns

Ireland has withdrawn three army officers from the Democratic Republic of Congo over security concerns. The defence personnel were stationed in the country as part of the UN's MONUSCO mission.

The three officers held observer roles. Two of them returned to Ireland on August 12 after being evacuated on a secret mission. The third one had already been on leave in Ireland at that time.

Growing unrest and discontent over the UN mission inside the Democratic Republic of Congo have made Irish Minister for Defence Simon Coveney put it under review.

At the end of July, four UN peacekeepers were killed during riots caused by the dissatisfaction over the MONUSCO mission's performance in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ireland has no plans to replace the officers in the near future. [The Irish Times] [Irish Independent] [RTÉ]

(jv)

Museum in London will return stolen artefacts to Nigeria

The London Horniman Museum will return artefacts stolen by British soldiers during colonial times to Nigeria, making it the first government-funded institution to do so.

The museum announced on August 6 that it would return 72 artefacts, including a collection of Benin bronzes, to the Nigerian government. About 10,000 artefacts were stolen by British troops from Benin city in 1897 and are now scattered in museums and private collections worldwide.

The decision was made unanimously by its board of trustees. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

Team:

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