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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the October issue of Europe in Review in which, among other things, we provide you with an overview of the conflict in Ukraine, reports on concerns in Europe after the hard-right won the Italian elections, and a rundown on how British Prime Minister Liz Truss's fiscal policy sent the pound tumbling.

The war in Ukraine has entered a new, unpredictable phase. Russia held sham referenda in the Ukrainian territory it controls, even as Kiev retakes key towns and logistics hubs in a counter-offensive led by Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi, who was officially named a "Hero of Ukraine" this year. President Vladmir Putin has threatened, again, to use nuclear weapons if territory that Russia claims as its own is endangered. Meanwhile, Russians are pushing back against Putin's partial mobilisation.

With the war now in its eighth month, economies and policy makers in Europe continue to struggle to protect their citizens from the impact of high energy costs and inflationary pressure. Governments are scrambling to fill natural gas stocks and find alternative sources of

fuel. Russia's economy has withstood the full force of Western sanctions, though economic indicators point to difficult times ahead.

As usual, we also 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

Raising the stakes, Russia launches mobilisation after Ukrainian counter-attack

September marked a turning point in the war in Ukraine – for both sides.

Ukraine launched a major successful counterattack against Russian forces outside Kharkiv in the east, re-taking the country's second most populous city and evicting Russian forces from a crucial border region, uncovering evidence of further suspected war crimes in the process. Two weeks afterwards, Moscow declared it would annex four Ukrainian regions which it does not fully occupy, while Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "partial mobilisation" to swell his army's numbers.

That set of moves raised the stakes in the seven-month conflict, with Putin warning he was prepared to resort to nuclear weapons to defend territory that Russia claims as its own.

Ukraine finds success on the offensive

Ukraine launched a rapid counter-offensive in the eastern region of Kharkiv on September 6, liberating around 6,000 square kilometres and inflicting a significant defeat on Russian forces. This is the first large-scale offensive action that Ukraine has taken in the war so far, with the country having fought primarily on the defensive for months.

Before Ukraine's counterattack, the Kharkiv front was marked by the same grinding artillery duels as much of the Donbas front. Russia had occupied much of the territory since the beginning of the war, being close enough at one point to attack Kharkiv city from its suburbs. This changed on September 6, when Ukrainian forces overran Russian positions and captured the strategic towns of Balakliia, Shevchenkove, Kupiansk and Izium in the space of a week.

Ukrainian soldiers were given a joyful reception by villagers who have lived – and in many cases suffered – under Russian occupation for almost 200 days. The Russian ministry of defence claimed that the loss of territory was an intentional "regrouping" operation. [Guardian] [BBC News] [Irish Times] [Telegraph] [Institute for the Study of War] [Washington Post]

Observers described Russian forces as "disorganised" and "thin" in places, lacking reserves to shore up places where Ukrainian troops had broken through defensive

positions. Vast amounts of hardware, including tanks, armoured personnel carriers and anti-air systems, were abandoned by Russian forces.

Many pro-Russian figures and outlets levelled heavy criticism at the Russian military. One prominent figure in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, a Russian-backed unrecognised state in the Donbas region, said: "If our Kremlin elders do not change their tactics, we will be seeing catastrophic defeats". Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Russia's Chechen Republic and a strong supporter of Putin, said that Russian commanders had "made mistakes" and that if they continued to do so he would "be forced to speak with the leadership of the defence ministry and the leadership of the country".

Others praised the "shrewd operational art" of the Ukrainian forces, pointing to what appeared to be a combination of high morale with "innovative and experimental" tactics in Kharkiv. Particular praise has been given to Ukraine's ability to reduce Russia's advantage in airpower through the use of surface-to-air missiles, which have "led Russian aircraft to be particularly cautious, degrading their ability to support Russian ground forces," according to John Hardie, a defence expert from the Long War Journal. [Atlantic] [Long War Journal] [Institute for the Study of War] [Guardian] [Guardian] [Economist] [Business Insider]

It appears that Ukraine is now attempting to use its gains in Kharkiv as a bridgehead to pressurise Russian forces in northern Luhansk oblast, a region which Russia controlled entirely until Ukraine retook the village of Bilohorivka on September 19. The town of Lyman appears to be the focus of Ukraine's efforts in the east, suggesting its advance in that direction has not stalled. The frontlines were quieter in the eastern Donbas region, where Russia has been laying siege to the town of Bakhmut, and in the south-eastern Zaporizhia region, where concerns remain over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. [Forbes] [Guardian]

Mass grave, reports of torture and rape

However, Ukrainians' joy at liberation was mixed with horror as evidence of war crimes was discovered.

A mass grave of hundreds of bodies was found outside Izium shortly after Ukrainian forces captured the town. Ukrainian authorities exhumed the remains and found that a majority were civilians, and that many bodies bore marks of torture and evidence of mutilation.

Russia's response to the offensive which revealed the graves was to launch a series of attacks against civilian infrastructure, such as power stations in Kharkiv and a

dam in the central city of Kryvyi Rih. Ukrainians who lived under Russian occupation in Izium spoke of an atmosphere of terror, reporting that occupying forces had used abductions and torture against the civilian population. [Guardian] [Politico Europe] [Associated Press] [CNN] [Euronews] [BBC News] [New York Times]

Russia has denied all these accusations, just as it did when evidence of war crimes was discovered in the town of Bucha, near Kiev.

However, the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has concluded that war crimes have been committed by Russian forces – but could not comment on the scale. Erik Mose, the chairman of the commission, said that the investigation had gathered evidence of a "large number" of cases of summary executions of prisoners of war, murder of civilians, and sexual assaults, the latter committed against victims ranging between four and 82 years old. The commission has not yet investigated the findings at Izium and will now turn its attention to allegations of forced population transfers, including claims that Russia has forced Ukrainian children from occupied territories into its adoption system. [Reuters] [UNHRC] [PBS] [Washington Post]

While the scale of events in Kharkiv caught many by surprise, a prospective Ukrainian counterattack had been in headlines for some time – just not at Kharkiv.

Ukraine telegraphed an offensive in the southern Kherson region which, like Kharkiv, had been occupied by Russia since the start of the war. While this helped thin Russian numbers at Kharkiv, the southern offensive is not a feint. Ukraine invested significant time in destroying Russian supply dumps and bridges over the Dnipro river, which separates Russian forces from the rest of occupied Ukraine.

While Ukraine is making gains in the south, these are coming at a higher cost and far more slowly than in Kharkiv. Russian forces, meanwhile, face difficulties resupplying and replenishing after the Dnipro bridges were destroyed. The fighting at Kherson looks likely to be decided by attrition rather than the dynamic offensive movement seen at Kharkiv. [New York Times] [Guardian] [Institute for the Study of War] [Deutsche Welle] [Foreign Policy] [Atlantic Council]

Russia mobilises reserves, moves to annex occupied territory

Russia's response to its defeat at Kharkiv has been two-fold.

First, on September 21, President Putin declared a "partial mobilisation" of Russia's military reserves. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said that 300,000 soldiers would be raised. Manpower has been a consistent issue for the Russian military, which has relied heavily on mercenaries. Earlier in the month, footage emerged of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner mercenary group, attempting to recruit inmates in a Russian prison.

Exactly how mobilisation will be implemented is difficult to determine with certainty, as events on the ground do not match up with the official announcement. While the official line from the Kremlin was that the 300,000 troops were to be drawn from those who had combat experience or "a speciality that is needed today in the armed forces", there are accounts of a chaotic mobilisation which has been far wider in scope.

Enlistment officials in Russian regions have issued call-up papers to men who were clearly unfit for service on medical grounds. In some cases mobilised personnel, referred to as "*mobiki*", have arrived in poorly-maintained bases, without personal first aid kits or beds. Russia Today editor and Putin ally Margarita Simonyan blasted the mobilisation process, saying that officials were "infuriating people, as if on purpose, as if out of spite. As if they'd been sent by Kiev". There were protests in several Russian cities after the mobilisation announcement – particularly in the Dagestan region – but these were suppressed in short order by the OMON riot police. Thousands of Russian men have fled the country after the announcement.

Mobilisation will bolster Russia's fighting force but will bring its own logistical challenge, as Russia will need to train, equip, support and deploy the new personnel. Pavel Luzin, an expert on the Russian military from the Foreign Policy Research Institute think tank, argued that Moscow would need to build new units from the ground up using the new reserves – a process that would take significant time to do properly, especially as many of Russia's training units have been deployed to fight in Ukraine. [Financial Times] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Foreign Policy] [Guardian] [The Hill] [Deutsche Welle] [Sky News] [Al Jazeera] [Forbes] [New York Times]

Second, Russian military authorities and proxies in the occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson held referenda to vote on joining Russia between September 23 and 27.

Russia has controlled Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014, installing proxy governments known as the Donetsk

and Luhansk People's Republics respectively, while its military occupied Zaporizhzhia and Kherson during the course of the war. Russia does not fully control all of these regions any more, having previously held all of Luhansk for several months before a Ukrainian counterattack took back the village of Bilohorivka in early September.

The referenda were held in territories where much of the population has fled, and soldiers were seen going door to door with ballots in a process widely derided as a sham. Moscow-backed authorities claimed turnout was in the millions, and that the results were over 95 percent in favour of joining Russia. The ballots were not secret and were to be marked openly in the presence of armed guards.

Nonetheless, Moscow trumpeted the results, with Putin declaring the territories to be "forever" part of "historic Russia" on September 30. In a somewhat rambling speech, Putin decried the "satanic" West and its faults, lurching between topics as disparate as the Opium Wars of the 19th century and gender reassignment surgery. A theatrical celebration was held in Moscow, where signs read "Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson – Russia!" as pop stars paid tribute to the Russian national identity.

Strategic reframing?

Experts such as the Royal United Services Institute's Emily Ferris have argued that Putin's speech – and the annexation – served an important strategic framing purpose. In her view, the move has allowed Putin to scale down his ambitions in Ukraine, which were previously of regime change, and to allow Russian forces to dig in on occupied territory without the obligation to advance further into Ukraine.

Ukraine's response to this was to launch an official bid to join NATO. While it is highly unlikely that the Western military alliance will admit a country that is at war, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO's focus was to "help Ukraine defend itself against the Russian brutal invasion".

September was a mixed month for Russian diplomacy. China and India refused to provide Moscow with support for its invasion, while stopping short of open criticism. At a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on September 15, Chinese President Xi Jinping was reported to have expressed his "concerns" about the war to Putin. But he added that China "fully understands and supports" Russia's core interests.

Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, told Putin that "today's era is not the era for war". [Royal United Services Institute] [Politico] [Guardian] [EUobserver] [BBC News] [Euractiv] [Reuters] [NHK] [Euronews] [Deutsche Welle]

Moscow's war goals now include expanding Russia's borders to cover a swathe of southern Ukraine. However, how Russia can accomplish this is more uncertain than at any point since the conflict started, given the battlefield setbacks inflicted on it by a Ukrainian army now buoyed by strategic success, higher morale, and a mountain of foreign weapons and equipment. It is also yet to be seen if Russia's mobilisation of potentially hundreds of thousands of soldiers will be sufficient to transform the situation at the frontline.

(wb/pk)

Russians push back against Putin's partial military mobilisation

President Vladimir Putin's September 21 announcement of a partial mobilisation of 300,000 soldiers following defeats in Ukraine has sparked protests across Russia, while many potential conscripts have fled the country.

Previous combat experience, military specialities, soldiers under 35 years and junior officers under 50 years are the official criteria for the call-up. [The Guardian] [Sky] But some analysts don't think the mobilisation will work.

It "may extend the Russian ability to sort of sustain this war but does not change the overall trajectory and outcome," Michael Kofman, a military analyst and head of the Russia Studies Program at the US-based think tank CNA, said in an online discussion on September 21. Rob Lee, a military expert and senior fellow at the US-based Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program, said that the mobilisation might solve the manpower problem "for a few months" but that it is not a long-term solution. [RFE/RL]

Chaos, Protests

Since mobilisation, there have been chaotic, bitter, and increasingly violent protests against what many see as indiscriminate or at least arbitrary conscription. In the North Caucasian republic of Dagestan, locals are challenging law enforcement with increasing boldness, while radical Telegram channels called on them, and

the residents of other regions, to burn military and administrative buildings. [CEPA]

Although the Russian government said that only those with military experience would be enlisted, there are reports that also those without any combat experience could be drafted too. While many young men who could be drafted are attempting to leave Russia and seek refuge abroad, most notably in Kazakhstan, Georgia or Armenia but also in the European Union, anti-war groups such as the Spring youth democratic movement have called for resistance. [Al Jazeera] [Al Jazeera]

On the border with Kazakhstan there was a sharp increase in traffic out of Russia. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, about 98,000 crossed the border. President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev is concerned about the situation and wants to hold talks with Putin. [Vzsar.ru]

Anti-War Demonstrations

Anti-war demonstrations were reported in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and more than 500 protesters were detained on September 22. More than 70 people were arrested in Novosibirsk in eastern Siberia after calling for peace. Across Russia, approximately 1,300 people were put into custody. [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian]

There has also been a push back on social media to the partial mobilisation.

One Russian who claimed to be a citizen had questions on Twitter for Putin: Why does the “easy and quick war in three days” last more than 200 days? Why was the goal “denazification” that then resulted in referendums in four regions plus “MOBILISATION?” Why did you exchange 200 “Nazis” for your relative?

More than 200 Ukrainian and foreign citizens have been released from Russian captivity, including fighters who led the defence of the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol, in the biggest prisoner swap since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February. In return, Russia received 55 prisoners from Ukraine, including the former Ukrainian MP Viktor Medvedchuk, an ally of Vladimir Putin accused by Ukraine of high treason. [TheGuardian]

Another account named Aunt Rose tweeted: Rather than go to Ukraine to fight fictional fascists, risking death, maybe it's better to start fighting at home with real ones, risking going to prison!?

Dagestan Protests

Some people in Dagestan, southern Russia, condemning the war in Ukraine and mourning over the death of Dagestani fighters who died in Ukraine, have clashed with the police, which used violence and arrested more than 100 protesters. A motorway to Endirey, Dagestan was also blocked by protesters to prevent security officials from drafting the local population. [BBC]

Chechnya's capital Grozny was also a scene of an anti-war demonstration, with approximately 20 women protesting against the decision that their sons were to be dispatched to Ukraine. According to opposition media, they were eventually detained. The region's head, Ramzan Kadyrov, u-turned days after demands for mobilisation. After a protest started in Grozny, he advised members of the security forces and law enforcement to mobilise themselves instead. [CEPA]

Tumultuous scenes were reported in several other regions, including Yakutia and Omsk. In Yakutsk, approximately 400 women went out on the street to protest against the drafting of their sons and husbands, shouting "no to war" and "we will not give away our husbands." [Fokus] [Vesti Yakutii] [Novoe Vremya] [OC-Media][CEPA]

(mo-ad/gc)

Hard-right wins Italian elections, causing shivers in Europe

Italy swung sharply to the far-right as Georgia Meloni, head of the Brothers of Italy party, won a decisive victory in Italy's September 25 parliamentary elections. Supported by the two largest parties on the right, she is set to become her country's first female prime minister, heading a coalition that has many governments anxious over the fallout for Europe. [Euronews] [AP]

Observers now foresee a shift in the political balance of the continent, predicting that Italy will align with the nationalist governments of Poland and Hungary, which have often been overtly hostile to the EU despite being members of the bloc.

Meloni's triumph, which looks set to give Italy its first far-right premier since Benito Mussolini, came weeks after the victory of a right-wing bloc in Sweden that includes a party with white supremacist and fascist origins. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Meloni's Brothers of Italy, alongside former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Matteo Salvini's Lega parties, can now form a coalition government that, together with the centrist Us Moderates party, boasts 237 deputies in total in the 400-seat lower house and 115 in the 200-seat upper house. [Thelocal]

Despite the coalition's victory, only Meloni's party managed to gain more seats, with Salvini's and Berlusconi's parties both losing 59 each.

The rival centre-left coalition managed to gain only 85 parliamentary seats, in a disappointing outcome for the opposition that saw the liberal Democratic Party losing 43 deputies. The party said it had been a "a sad day for the country." [Euronews]

Meanwhile, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which won the most votes in 2018 elections, lost 175 seats on September 25 after being refused entry into any election coalition due to its role in helping to bring down the widely popular Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

Snap elections were called in the aftermath of a July political crisis that precipitated the collapse of Draghi's national unity government. Draghi, a former European Central Bank governor, was undermined when three major parties in his government withdrew their support.

The elections saw a historically low turnout of 63.9 percent. (*See separate story in this Europe Monthly*)

The results will see Italy with a far-right government for the first time since 1945. In Meloni, the country will have its first ever female prime minister. The Brothers of Italy leader describes herself as a Christian mother who defends "Europe's classical and Judeo-Christian historical and cultural roots and identity." She has long been accused of harbouring neo-fascist sympathies, a claim she denies.

Tougher migration policy

Italy's rightward shift has worried many across Europe, with fears fuelled by Meloni's firebrand election campaign, during which she advocated a tougher migration policy alongside a potential renegotiation of EU funds that could see an end to the broad market and judicial reforms carried out by Draghi. [AP] [Reuters]

Luca Tomini, a political scientist from the Free Brussels University, told Euronews that the election results

could see Rome pivoting away from Brussels and realigning itself with nationalist-populist governments in Warsaw and Budapest. Tomini added: “There will be definitely a shift in the positioning of the Italian government compared to the past two Mario Draghi governments.”

European policymakers are worried that Rome could now veto Brussel’s decisions on migration and on rule-of-law issues in countries like Poland and Hungary. [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Euractiv]

EU warning for Rome

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen had warned ahead of the Italian elections that the EU’s executive could use “tools” against Rome if “things go in a difficult direction.” [Euronews] The Commission has the power to freeze funds earmarked for EU governments which are deemed to be backsliders on democratic values.

Davide Vampa, a senior lecturer in politics and international relations at Aston University in Britain, told Euronews that the success of the Italian right had been “due to the divisions of the left, centre-left and Democratic Party and Five Star Movement”. Referring to Meloni’s Brothers of Italy, he said: “I wouldn’t define it as a fascist party or a neofascist party, but I would say that it's still linked to the post-fascist tradition.” [Euronews]

Sam Pizzigati, writing for left-wing online magazine CounterPunch, said that the election outcome did not show a “massive public roar of approval for a neofascist-leaning Italian future.” Instead, he said, the results reflected “a massive popular frustration” with a centre-left government “unwilling to challenge Italy’s increasingly concentrated distribution of income and wealth and unable, as a result, to meaningfully address the needs of average working people.”

Amid fears that Italy could undermine Western solidarity in the face of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine, Meloni has vowed to continue Rome’s support for Kiev. Meloni’s coalition partner Berlusconi is a personal friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin, while Salvini is also alleged to have had Kremlin ties, claims which he denies.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was quick to offer his support to Meloni on social media and said he was “counting on a fruitful collaboration with the new Italian government.” Meloni replied on Twitter: “You can count on our loyal support for the cause of freedom of Ukrainian people.” [Twitter]

(cg/pk)

Victory of Italian far-right hailed by nationalist in Europe, EU and US cautious

Russia and nationalist governments in Poland and Hungary have welcomed the victory of the far-right in Italy's September parliamentary elections, while Spain's foreign minister, from the Socialist party, warned that populist movements always end "in catastrophe". The EU and US, meanwhile, voiced cautious willingness to work with the new government in Rome.

The triumph of Georgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party and its allies, including politicians friendly to Russian President Vladimir Putin, has stoked fears that the incoming government in Rome could erode European unity in the face of Moscow's war against Ukraine. (*See separate story in this issue*)

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted that the United States is looking forward to working with Italy's new government but encourages respect for human rights and support for Ukraine. "We are eager to work with Italy's government on our shared goals: supporting a free and independent Ukraine, respecting human rights and building a sustainable economic future," he said, adding: "Italy is a vital ally, strong democracy and valued partner." [WorldNews]

Reactions from Italy's European neighbours were mixed. A spokesman for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told reporters: "Italy is a very Europe-friendly country with very Europe-friendly citizens, and we assume that won't change."

French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne issued what appeared to be a warning, saying: "We will be attentive, with the president of the European Commission, that... values of human rights, the respect of one another, notably the respect of abortion rights, are respected by all."

Eric Mamer, a spokesman for the European Commission, the EU's executive, said at a news briefing: "Of course, we hope that we will have constructive cooperation with the new Italian authorities."

On the other hand, Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares warned that "populist movements always grow, but it always ends in the same way – in catastrophe." [The Times of Israel][france24.com)]

Meanwhile, Meloni's nationalist allies across the continent, including in Poland, Hungary and Spain, offered their congratulations. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki wrote in a Facebook post: "Great victory! Congratulations!"

Hungary's populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban said in a Tweet: "In these difficult times, we need more than ever friends who share a common vision and approach to Europe's challenges." Santiago Abascal, leader of Spain's populist Vox party, also tweeted his support, writing that Meloni "has shown the way for a proud, free Europe of sovereign nations." [ABC News] [BBC News]

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "We are ready to welcome any political forces that are able to go beyond the established mainstream, which is filled with hate for our country... and show willingness to be constructive in relations with our country." [The Times of Israel] [The Guardian] [thejournal.ie]

(mr/cg-pk)

PM's fiscal policies tank British pound, force Bank of England market intervention

When British Prime Minister Liz Truss officially inherited 10 Downing Street after succeeding Boris Johnson, the country experienced one of its most difficult economic moments in decades, with the UK already teetering on the brink of recession and the pound plunging against the dollar.

After Truss's Finance Minister Kwasi Kwarteng announced the biggest tax cuts in 50 years to revitalise the country's economy, the pound fell to a record low and the Bank of England was forced to intervene. The package of tax cuts, which included a cancellation of a planned rise in corporation tax, could cost more than GBP 45 billion by the 2026/27 financial year. [The Guardian] [BBC][Reuters][CNBC]

Just weeks later, Truss scrapped the most controversial proposal of her so-called growth plan: the abolishment of a 45 percent tax rate on higher incomes. The flip-flop by Truss and Kwarteng was welcomed by investors, though it will take a lot more to restore their trust. [Reuters]

The announcement of the "mini-budget" on September 23 caused the yield of government bonds, known in the UK as gilts, to soar. It forced the Bank of England to

announce a two-week purchase program for long-dated bonds and delayed its planned gilt sales until the end of October. The intervention could cost about GBP 65 billion. [CNBC] [Fortune]

The Bank of England move came after a massive sell-off in UK government bonds — known as "gilts" — following the new government's fiscal policy announcements. The policies included large swathes of unfunded tax cuts that have drawn global criticism. [Fortune]

"There is never a good time for an irresponsible budget policy," Desmond Lachman, a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in Barrons. "However, Liz Truss, the United Kingdom's new prime minister, has chosen a particularly bad moment, both at home and abroad, to engage in reckless fiscal policy experimentation. This all too likely puts the United Kingdom well on its way to a full-blown sterling crisis." [AEI]

And the pound did drop. It fell to about parity with the dollar last month for the first time since 1985 as investors took fright at the prospect of a surge in government borrowing to pay for the sweeping tax cuts in Kwarteng's mini-budget. Issuing a punishing verdict on the chancellor's "dash for growth," traders sent sterling tumbling in a broad-based sell-off. [Reuters]

IMF criticism

The IMF criticised the amount of tax cuts and urged the UK government to reconsider them to prevent stoking inequality and to limit public borrowing. The tax cuts could lead to more than GBP 400 billion extra government borrowing over the coming years. [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC] [The Guardian] [The Guardian] [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters]

"We understand that the sizable fiscal package announced aims at helping families and businesses deal with the energy shock and at boosting growth via tax cuts and supply measures," the IMF said. "However, given elevated inflation pressures in many countries, including the UK, we do not recommend large and untargeted fiscal packages at this juncture, as it is important that fiscal policy does not work at cross purposes to monetary policy. Furthermore, the nature of the UK measures will likely increase inequality." [IMF]

The measures, as reported by CNBC, include:

- A reversal in the recent 1.25 percent rise in National Insurance contributions — a tax on income.

- A reduction in the basic rate of income tax from 20 pence to 19 pence.

- Significant cuts to stamp duty, a tax paid on home purchases.

- A network of "investment zones" around the UK where businesses will be offered tax cuts, liberalised planning rules and a reduction in regulatory obstacles.

- A claim-back scheme for sales taxes paid by tourists.

- Scrapping of an increase in tax rates on various alcohols.

- Scrapping of a cap on bankers' bonuses. [CNBC]

Threatened by poverty

Before Kwarteng's announcement, the British economy was already struggling. In September, the Bank of England estimated the economy had already gone into recession. Inflation has hovered around 10 percent since June, but it could rise up to 22 percent in the coming months, according to experts.

People have protested for weeks to demand pay raises that keep up with inflation. Households are increasingly threatened by poverty due to rising energy prices. [BBC] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC] [BBC] [Europe Monthly September 2022] [Reuters] [Reuters]

To help the British public manage higher prices, Truss will cap typical household energy bills at GDP 2,500 for two years. Businesses' bills will be capped at half the market price for six months. Costs exceeding this amount will be paid to energy companies by the state. [BBC] [Reuters] [BBC] [Reuters]

The measure is expected to cost up to GDP 150 billion (around EUR 168.3 billion), but it is unclear how it will be financed, given that Truss ruled out a windfall tax on gas and oil company profits to pay for the package. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters] [Reuters] [BBC]

Even with the price cap, millions are expected to fall into poverty this winter as energy bills could still almost double compared to last year. Average household energy prices were estimated to rise to GBP 3,549 a year from October. At the same time, many businesses could face bankruptcy without decisive action by the state. [The Guardian] [BBC] [The Guardian]

Further measures to ease the pressure of soaring energy prices included scrapping the household carbon tax, continuing an earlier GBP 400 energy price discount, lifting a ban on fracking, and boosting oil and gas production in the North Sea. [BBC] [BBC] [RTÉ] [Reuters] [Reuters]

Truss defiant

Despite the economic fallout and a public backlash, Truss has remained defiant.

Truss insisted she needed to take "decisive action," in her first public appearance since her government's budget threw markets into turmoil. In a round of interviews with local BBC radio stations, the prime minister refused to change course and said she had the "right plan." [Politico]

Asked whether she remained confident in her policies, Truss told the BBC: "I think we have to look at the situation we would be facing if the government hadn't acted. We are facing difficult economic times."

Her policies have undermined the British public's confidence in her leadership. More than half of Britons think Truss should quit as premier, according to a YouGov poll that adds to her woes less than a month into the job. The survey underscores the damage done to Truss's standing and that of her Conservative Party. [Yahoo]

Forced to raise rates

Truss's tax cuts also put the government on a potential collision course with the Bank of England, as it tries to reduce inflation by increasing interest rates. [BBC] [Reuters] [BBC] [The Guardian]

"There has been a severe drop in the value of the pound given market concerns over the United Kingdom's debt sustainability," said Robin Niblett, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"This will raise prices for consumers and businesses (Britain imports 46 percent of its food and 80 percent of its energy use, for example), eroding purchasing power and profits, respectively." [CSIS]

The Bank of England "will be forced to raise interest rates higher and faster than planned, not just to cap inflation, but now to prop up the pound and keep convincing investors to buy British gilts," Niblett said. "This will put additional stress on British business and mortgage holders." [CSIS]

Higher borrowing costs for lenders means the average monthly cost of a two-year fixed-rate mortgage will rise by 70 percent by March from January this year, Bloomberg Economics estimates. The cost of a two-year fixed-rate mortgage on an average-priced home will rise to about GBP 1,325 at the end of the first quarter from about GBP 779 last January, according to Niraj Shah, an economist at Bloomberg Economics. [Bloomberg]

(jv/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Flemish regional government plans measures to support businesses hurt by energy crisis

Belgium's regional Flemish government will take temporary measures to support companies most affected by the energy crisis during budget discussions, Flemish Economy Minister Jo Brouns said on September 5. [BrusselsTimes]

The framework, devised after consulting with many stakeholders, consists of a "two-track approach," including provisions for improving companies' energy efficiency and compensating part of the increase in energy-related costs for households and businesses.

"We must preserve our competitiveness and employment," Brouns said. "Each government must

ask itself what it can do to lighten the bill for our families and our businesses."

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Belgium's constitutional court finds Covid-19 contact tracing not entirely constitutional

Belgium's constitutional court ruled that some aspects of the country's Covid-19 contact tracing legislation are against constitutional law, particularly regarding violations to the right to privacy and the protection of citizens' personal data. [BrusselsTimes]

The court referred to the absence of oversight bodies to grant access to the National Health Institute Sciensano's central database and the absence of a maximum retention period for stored data. The court decision was made following complaints by non-profit organisation "Vivant Ostbelgien," several German-speaking deputies and the League of Human Rights. [BrusselsTimes]

The court declared these provisions unconstitutional, but said the legislation will remain "until the legislators concerned approve a complementary cooperation agreement" to resolve the unconstitutional elements. This will be completed by 31 March 2023. [BrusselsTimes]

The court has also annulled the authority granted to the Information Security Committee to let third parties access personal data for the purposes of scientific research. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Germany takes control of energy companies in attempt to stabilise markets and secure supply

The German government has nationalised its biggest gas supplier and taken control of oil refineries in response to the growing energy crisis caused by the Russian war in Ukraine. [Tagesschau] [Politico Europe] [AP]

Germany's three biggest gas suppliers, Uniper, the former Gazprom unit SEFE (Securing Energy for Europe) and VNG, an EnBW division, have struggled

financially since natural gas supplies were stopped through the Nord Stream pipeline from Russia on September 1 and due to rising energy prices. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Berlin finalised the nationalisation of Uniper on September 21. Uniper, threatened by insolvency, was the first energy company to ask for a government bailout, which was agreed in July, but was insufficient with natural gas prices increasing. [Reuters]

The nationalisation of Uniper cost about EUR 29 billion and left the German government with a 99 percent ownership of the company. It bought out Finland's Fortum, which had held 78 percent of Uniper's shares, 56 percent belonging directly to the Finnish government. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV]

The European Commission's competition authority has to approve the plan, something that could take up to three months, according to the German economy ministry. [EURACTIV] [AP]

Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said that Germany will "do everything possible to always keep the companies stable on the market." Uniper is responsible for 40 percent of Germany's gas supply. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Euronews]

The government may also nationalise SEFE, a former Gazprom unit that has been under the state's trusteeship since April, a spokesperson of the economy ministry said on September 22. A nationalisation is likely but could take weeks according to experts. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [DW] [Reuters]

Germany's third largest gas supplier VNG, which is responsible for 20 percent of the country's gas demand, will receive government support, Habeck said early September. [DW] [Reuters]

Between Uniper, SEFE and VNG, Germany is paying EUR 40 billion to support its three biggest natural gas suppliers. [DW]

Emergency gas levy cancelled

The German government on September 29 cancelled the emergency gas levy, which was supposed to take effect on October 1 and help energy companies that are struggling financially, and introduced a gas price cap instead. [Tagesschau]

The nationalisation of Uniper has caused debate about the planned gas levy. The Finance ministry had to

check whether a levy for a state-owned company would be constitutional, Habeck said. [Politico Europe] [ZDF]

Government Adviser Jens Sudekum said that after nationalising Uniper, there is no legal basis for the gas levy anymore and that direct financial aid from the regular government budget would be more suitable. Finance Minister Christian Lindner questioned the "economic sense" of the levy. [FAZ] [ZDF]

The gas price cap is part of a "defensive shield" against rising energy prices, said Chancellor Olaf Scholz. "The German government will do everything in its power to bring prices down," he continued.

The government would set a price limit for gas consumers and then pay the difference of what energy companies had to pay on the world market. Further details of the plan, estimated to cost about EUR 200 billion, will be introduced in October. [Reuters] [ZDF] [Politico Europe]

It will be financed through an emergency fund to bypass the country's strict debt rules and therefore "separate crisis spending" from "regular budget management," said finance minister Christian Lindner. [Politico Europe]

The price brake will also only cover about 80 percent of normal household consumption, according to Robert Habeck. This way he wants to encourage energy saving and avoid potential shortages. He also said that the price for gas will not be subsidised down to what it was in 2021. [Reuters]

Germany's Federal Audit Court criticised the plans, saying that the special funds "create non-transparency" and "obscure budgetary truth and clarity." Special funds are federal debt, said the Federal Audit Court's president Kay Scheller. [Politico Europe]

Taking control of Russian-owned oil subsidiary

Germany also took control of a subsidiary of Russian oil company Rosneft, placing it under the trusteeship of the state regulator on September 16, as the European Union prepares sanctions on oil from Russia that will come into force at the end of the year.

The subsidiary is one of Germany's biggest oil processing companies and includes three oil refineries. They account for 12 percent of the country's demand. [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV] [AP]

According to the regulator, the original owner no longer has any authority. [Reuters]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said it was a decision to "protect" the country and that Russia is not "a reliable supplier for energy anymore." [AP]

Russia's Rosneft said taking control of its units was illegal and that it will "consider all possible measures to protect its shareholders, including legal action." [Bloomberg]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Chancellor Scholz wants a stronger German military, more European cooperation

Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on September 16 that he wants Germany to be the "best equipped" armed force in Europe and take more responsibility internationally. [Tagesschau] [Euronews]

Germany adjusted its stance on military spending in response to Russia's attack on Ukraine in February and approved a EUR 100 billion fund to upgrade the armed forces in early June. [Europe Monthly July 2022] [Tagesschau]

The status quo and the one-time extra funding isn't enough to "fill the gaps" in the capability and equipment of the German military, Scholz said. Improving the equipment is the most pressing issue, but there needs to be a "paradigm shift" as well, he said.

Scholz wants the government to have annual military spending of two percent of the GDP, a requirement by NATO. [Tagesschau] [Spiegel]

Germany has to take more responsibility for European security as the "most populous nation with the greatest economic power and a country in the centre of the continent," he said. Germany needs to "review its strict national reservations and rules," Scholz said. [Euronews]

Berlin is allowed under current laws on arms exports to veto exports of jointly developed weapons on ethical grounds. This is viewed as hindering cooperation between European countries. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

Scholz wants to strengthen European cooperation on defence and build a joint European defence force so that weapon systems could be developed and used together and decrease competition between arms suppliers. [Tagesschau] [Euronews]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Berlin to extend operations at two nuclear power plants until April 2023, minister says

Germany's Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said on September 27 that two of the country's three remaining nuclear power plants may extend their running time until April 2023 after a stress test by France's nuclear providers showed that shortages might be more severe than expected in winter. [Tagesschau] [ZDF] [AP]

Habeck had previously planned to shut down the German nuclear plants at the end of the year and simply keep two as an emergency reserve, with no new fuel elements added, after the country's own stress test results in September. [EURACTIV] [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

The government will decide in early December if the running time will actually be extended.

Extending the running time past the end of 2022 will require a change to the country's legal framework and will need the approval of the Green party of the ruling coalition. The Greens have been against a longer operational time for the nuclear power plants. [ZDF]

The biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the liberal FDP of the governing coalition welcomed the decision to keep two nuclear plants active until April, though they would prefer to keep them running indefinitely to meet the country's power demand.

Christian Durr of the FDP said the country needed a "real extension" because "every kilowatt hour counts." Michael Kretschmer of the CDU said a "temporary solution" is not enough. [Tagesschau]

Both parties had previously criticised the plans of complying with the exit date at the end of the year. [Tagesschau] [Politico Europe] [ZDF]

Michael Kruse, energy spokesperson for the FDP, had called the results of the stress test on Germany's

power grid in early September “politically influenced and not derived from reality.”

It is “an unnecessary burden on electricity customers” not to extend on nuclear power, Kruse said. Nuclear power makes up five to seven percent of Germany’s electricity production. [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government introduces EUR 65 billion energy relief package, changes power market rules

Germany introduced a EUR 65 billion relief package on September 4 to help its citizens cope with rising energy costs and imposed new rules on the country’s power market, including putting a cap on electricity prices and taxing energy providers’ “excess profits.” [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that his government would crack down on energy providers that are making excess profits amid the high energy prices that have been largely caused by Russia's war against Ukraine as well as Moscow's reduction of gas exports to Europe. The government wants to change market rules so that “such windfall profits no longer occur, or that they are skimmed off,” Scholz said. [Politico Europe]

“The many, many billions” in excess profits that the state would collect from such energy providers would be used to finance relief measures and introduce “a price cap for those in the electricity market who do not have to pay the high gas prices,” Scholz said. [Politico Europe] [AP]

The planned relief measures for citizens include higher subsidies for low-income households, including reduced social security contributions and increased child allowances. Pensioners and students will receive a one-off payment of EUR 300 and EUR 200 respectively. [Tagesschau] [Bloomberg] [Politico Europe]

Germany’s main industry lobby BDI criticised the focus on private households and the lack of government support for companies impacted by high energy prices. [Politico Europe]

The relief package “will probably fall short in preventing the broader economy from falling into recession,” Carsten Brzeski of financial institution ING Groep NV, said. The package doesn’t include support

for companies or households that don't receive social benefits, Brzeski said. [Bloomberg]

The latest package brings the total amount allocated to offset inflation to EUR 95 billion since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February. By contrast, the government spent 300 billion euros on propping up the economy over the two years of the pandemic. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Two ministry officials suspected of spying for Russia

Germany's domestic intelligence service is investigating two economy ministry officials, who work on energy policy issues, on allegations that they were allegedly spying for Russia. [Zeit] [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV]

Advisers of Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said there were "inconsistencies" in internal documents on energy policy issues, such as Nord Stream 2, gas storages and supply security. The weekly German news outlet "Die Zeit" reported that internal documents didn't fit the official government position and were supportive of the "Russian point of view." [Zeit] [Politico Europe][Politico Europe]

The country's domestic intelligence service found that one alleged suspect went on a study trip to Russia. It also found that there was internal talk of "emotional closeness to Russia" in the ministry, which alone is not damning evidence. [Zeit] [EURACTIV] [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Justice ministry plans to loosen German insolvency rules

Germany's justice minister plans to temporarily loosen insolvency rules to keep smaller businesses from filing for bankruptcy as they struggle to cope with rising energy prices, inflation and ongoing supply chain bottlenecks. [DW] [ZDF] [Zeit] [Reuters]

A survey by the Federation of German Industries (BDI) showed that rising energy costs represent a "big challenge" to 58 percent of the country's industrial companies and threaten the existence of 34 percent of responding companies. Nearly one in ten companies

has already cut back or completely suspended production, the BDI said. [DW]

Companies in skilled trades are also affected.

Hans Peter Wollseifer, president of the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts, said he receives "emergency calls" from businesses daily, adding that there might be more insolvencies from the energy crisis in Germany now than during the pandemic. [DW] [ZDF]

According to the Halle Institute for Economic Research (IWH), the number of insolvency proceedings in August rose by 26 percent compared to the year before. The institute expects the number of insolvencies to increase in autumn. [IWH]

The German government plans financial assistance to smaller companies facing insolvency, for a limited time. This would only "postpone the problems for a few months," according to Steffen Muller, a professor at IWH. "Rising energy prices, as well as skyrocketing interest rates on loans, are not a temporary phenomenon," he said. [DW]

German Justice Minister Marco Buschmann wants to temporarily loosen insolvency rules to keep smaller companies in business. Companies have to be able to show their continued existence for the next 12 months and are otherwise obligated to file for insolvency.

Buschmann's plan should benefit small companies with a "sound business model" but are suffering from high energy costs. [Reuters] [FAZ]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Court continues to hear climate case against Volkswagen

The German district court of Detmold said on September 9 that it would continue hearing a climate case brought against Volkswagen by a Greenpeace backed farmer.

The court scheduled a new hearing for February 3, 2023, asking for further details. [AP] [Euronews]

The farmer Ulf Allhoff-Cramer filed a lawsuit against Volkswagen. He accused the automaker during a hearing on May 20 of being partly responsible for the negative impact climate change is having on the farming industry. He also wants Volkswagen to stop

making combustion engines by 2030. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Volkswagen has denied claims that it could be linked to climate-related damages and said it is making efforts to shift production to electric cars. The current deadline for Volkswagen to stop production of combustion engines is 2040. [Euronews]

It is the first time a court will consider if a car manufacturer can be obligated to change its business practices to prevent climate-related harm, according to Greenpeace. [AP]

A district court in Stuttgart on September 13 dismissed a climate case by NGO Deutsche Umwelthilfe against car manufacturer Mercedes-Benz. The NGO claimed Mercedes-Benz infringed on people's freedoms by aggravating climate change with its business practices.

The plaintiff wants Mercedes-Bent to implement a tighter carbon-emission budget and halt production of combustion engines by November 2030 and plans to appeal the court decision. [Reuters]

(mb/gc}

Germany: Chancellor Scholz expects independence from Russian gas by end of 2030

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on September 13 that he expects the country to be independent from Russian gas by the end of 2023. [DW] [Zeit]

Germany, one of the biggest importers of Russian gas, has tried to diversify its energy imports since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February. [Reuters]

The first new terminals for LNG will start operations in January 2023 and be ready for gas imports by the end of 2023, enabling Germany to import all the gas needed "independently of Russia," Scholz said.

The gas storages are filled to 91.5 percent capacity as of September 30, but Sebastian Bleschke, a representative of gas storage association INES, said he was sceptical if the targeted storage levels could be kept. [Tagesschau]

Increasing gas consumption due to sinking temperatures are reducing storage possibilities, Bleschke said. The gas consumption of private households and industries is currently higher than

compared to the years before, said the national regulator on September 29. [Tagesschau] [Bundesnetzagentur]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Population at all-time high, conservative leader accuses refugees of “welfare tourism”

Germany’s population has reached an all-time high because of the number of Ukrainian immigrants fleeing the Russian invasion of their country, according to a report by the Federal Statistics Office on September 27. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

In the first half of 2022, the German population, with one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, grew by one percent, or 843,000 people, compared to a 0.1 percent growth in the entire year of 2021, the report said. The net immigration of Ukrainian refugees is recorded at 750,000 people. [Reuters]

Friedrich Merz, leader of the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU), accused Ukrainian refugees of practising “welfare tourism.” They would allegedly collect social benefits in Germany and return to Ukraine, he said. [Politico Europe]

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser criticised Merz, saying that his comments were “vile” and “propaganda.” Merz later said via Twitter that he regretted his words and that he apologises, if his “choice of words was considered hurtful.” [Tagesschau] [FAZ] [Süddeutsche]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Citizens sue government over air pollution

Seven German citizens, supported by an environmental law firm and NGO, sued the German government over inaction in meeting recommendations on air quality levels by the World Health Organisation (WHO). [Tagesschau] [EURACTIV] [Politico Europe]

Air pollution in German cities has decreased but remains higher than what the WHO’s 2021 recommendations consider to be safe. This is an

infringement of their constitutional rights, the claimants said. [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

The citizens, together with law firm EarthClient and environmental NGO Deutsche Umwelthilfe, filed their case at the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany and say they have a legal basis per the German constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [EURACTIV]

The European Commission plans a revision of air quality directives in the third quarter of the year, but the claimants think that too much time will pass until member states are obligated to comply with the new guidelines. [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Government budget for 2023 allocated funds to tackle cost-of-living crisis

The Irish government has allocated EUR 11 billion to help its citizens manage financial pressure related to higher energy and food costs.

Measures announced on September 27 included tax cuts, a EUR 600 energy credit for households, increased social welfare payments, cuts to childcare expenses and lower school and university costs. It also included a EUR 10,000 a month payment for small and medium-sized businesses to help with higher energy prices. [Reuters] [Irish Examiner] [Irish Independent]

Earlier, the department of finance announced that Ireland is in danger of slipping into a recession, with economic growth in 2023 predicted to slow amid inflation that is expected to be higher than previously forecast. [The Irish Times]

As budget negotiations took place, thousands of people demanded that the government do more to help with soaring prices. Opposition parties criticised the spending plans for not going far enough in terms of easing the pressure on households. [The Irish Times][The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Independent]

High corporate profits in 2022 allowed Ireland to draw from a EUR 4.4 billion tax surplus while negotiating the budget. The government said it would allocate a total of EUR 6 billion to a reserve fund to help with future emergencies. [Reuters] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Government raises minimum wage, unions and business groups criticise

The Irish government has announced an EUR 0.80 minimum wage increase to support low-paid workers during the cost-of-living crisis, a decision that was criticised by unions and business groups.

The cabinet approved an increase in the minimum wage from EUR 10.50 to EUR 11.30 per hour from January 2023. It follows a recommendation by the government's Low Pay Commission.

Unions and social democratic parties criticised the decision, demanding an increase to a minimum of EUR 12 an hour. The current increase does not cover for the rise in inflation, they said. [RTÉ] [The Irish Times] [Irish Independent] [Irish Examiner]

Employer groups fear the decision might put further pressure on businesses already struggling with rising energy costs. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Government agrees to help train Ukrainian troops despite country's neutrality

Ireland's Defence Minister Simon Coveney announced on August 31 the government's decision to participate in an EU-sponsored training mission for Ukrainian troops, despite the country's strict tradition of military neutrality.

Peace activists have criticised the decision, saying it was a breach of the constitution. The Irish constitution states that "participation" in any war needs the assent of the lower house of parliament.

Legal experts disagree, arguing that military training is unlikely to fall under the term "participation." Experts do not expect that the Irish supreme court will deal with this matter as it has traditionally refused to interpret this part of the constitution. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

Ireland has so far contributed EUR 55 million worth of non-lethal military aid to Ukraine since the start of

Russia's invasion. This sum is likely to increase, Vice Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said on September 24. He further announced that Russian citizens fleeing conscription would be allowed to apply for international protection in Ireland. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Junior minister's resignation sparks debate about politicians' property holdings

An Irish junior minister's resignation after failing to report property assets sparked a political debate about the behaviour of politicians amid Ireland's housing crisis.

Junior minister in the Department of Enterprise, Robert Troy of the conservative Fianna Fail party, resigned on August 24 after it was revealed that he did not properly report all eleven of his properties to parliament's register. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner]

Political pressure forced Troy out of office. The media accused him of supporting policies that allegedly served his self interest. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

Three more Fianna Fail politicians sought changes to their declarations of interest in the wake of the scandal, including Health Minister Stephen Donnelly. Members of parliament of other parties admitted errors, including in the largest opposition party Sinn Fein. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner]

The scandal has opened a debate about how to overhaul the Irish ethics regime. More than a third of Irish MPs and senators are at least either landlords or landowners. At the same time, Ireland is facing a housing crisis, with rising rents making it difficult for young people to afford property. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: Teacher jailed after refusing to use student's preferred pronouns

An Irish teacher, who refused to use a student's preferred pronouns, was jailed after breaching a High Court order.

The teacher, Enoch Burke, was sentenced to prison on September 5 because he had attended school despite there being an injunction against him.

Earlier, Burke got into a disagreement with the then-principal because the teacher refused to address a transgender student by the pronoun “they.” He was placed on paid leave, while waiting for the outcome of a disciplinary process against him.

But Burke continued to show up to school, despite his suspension and a later injunction prohibiting him from teaching and entering school grounds. A court then sent him to prison until he chooses to comply with the order. [RTÉ] [New York Post] [The Irish Times]

Burke explained his behaviour by saying that his Christian values did not allow him to accept what he called “transgenderism.” After spending two nights in prison, Burke still refused to purge his contempt of court, saying he would “never leave Mountjoy Prison.” [New York Post] [Irish Independent]

(jv/gc)

Netherlands: Prime Minister Rutte’s cabinet submits proposed budget for 2023 to parliament

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s cabinet submitted on September 20 the 2023 budget to the country’s House of Representatives for approval. [NOS] [NLTimes]

The budget includes EUR 17.2 billion to help boost purchasing power by nearly 4 percent, as part of the EUR 395 billion allocated to expenditures in the budget. Revenue is expected to equal EUR 366.4 billion, or well below spending levels. Economic growth should hit 4.6 percent this year, and about 1.5 percent next year. [NOS][NLTimes]

The spending deficit was calculated before the Cabinet unveiled its plans for an energy price cap and other measures to help households cope with gas and electricity prices that shot up this year. [NOS][NLTimes]

According to Rutte, lower middle incomes in particular will benefit from the measure, as they consume less energy on average than higher income groups. The opposition criticised the measure, saying it will only reach 50 to 60 percent of all households, and it should have been discussed earlier. [NOS]

Rutte has confirmed that the cabinet wants a plan to support small and medium-sized enterprises as they manage higher energy prices by introducing a separate subsidy for “energy-intensive SMEs”. [NOS]

Rutte said that the Netherlands will continue to support Ukraine with weapons.

“The urgency of the support is and remains high,” he said. The effects of the sanctions against Russia could be “very severe” for Dutch households and companies, but still, it is not an option to stop supporting the sanctions to get gas from Russia again, Rutte said. [NOS]

To tackle the shortage in the labour market, the government is emphatically looking at a bonus for people who work full-time, by offering them extra money on top of their wages. [NOS]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Agriculture minister Staghouwer resigns

Dutch Agriculture Minister Henk Staghouwer resigned on September 5 only nine months after taking office as farmers pushed back against government plans for them to reduce their nitrogen emissions. [DutchNews] [NLTimes][NOS]

Staghouwer concluded that he was the “wrong man for the job.” During a press conference announcing his resignation he said: “I have asked myself if I was the right person to oversee the tasks in front of me. I came to the conclusion last weekend that I am not that person.”

Staghouwer was the first minister to depart the fourth cabinet of Prime Minister Mark Rutte. As a member of the ChristenUnie (CU), the smallest of the four coalition parties, Staghouwer will be replaced by a party colleague, but in the meantime his duties will be taken over by his predecessor, Carola Schouten, who is currently minister for combating poverty. [DutchNews] [NLTimes][NOS]

Rutte’s government has set a target for farmers to cut their nitrogen compound emissions to 50 percent of 2019 levels by 2030. Livestock farmers, who are responsible for more than 40 percent of emissions, will feel the brunt of the emissions’ cut.

Staghouwer's decision also came just hours after he returned from Brussels, where he had agreed to end the Netherlands' exemption from EU limits on manure spreading from 2026. Farmers will be given a total of EUR 130 million to compensate for the increased drainage costs. [DutchNews][NLTimes][NOS]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Member of Parliament launches new party to represent older population

Dutch Member of Parliament Liane den Haan has founded a new elderly party, under the name Goud Nederland, which focuses on helping "good ageing for all." [NLTimes][NOS]

Den Haan was the leader of the elderly party 50Plus, founded in 2012, which won one seat in the elections in March last year. Shortly after taking office in the House of Representatives, she left her party largely due to a conflict about reforms in the pension system. [NLTimes][NOS]

Den Haan says on the site of the AD that her party program does not differ much from that of 50Plus, which she wrote herself. She does, however, want to be "a little more left-wing" on climate and migration. She also argues for a flexible state pension, whereby people who want it and who have a savings scheme can stop working at the age of 65. [NOS]

(gt/gc)

United Kingdom: Queen's death raises questions about monarchy inside and outside the UK

The death of Queen Elizabeth II has been widely mourned by many UK citizens and world leaders, who travelled to London to express their grief, even as it renewed a debate about abolishing the monarchy for the establishment of a republic.

The Caribbean Commonwealth nations of Jamaica, Antigua and Barbados have signalled that they might want to abolish the monarchy soon. The British monarch is currently the official, although mostly ceremonial, head of state of 14 former British colonies. [Reuters] [Reuters]

Numerous peaceful republican protesters in the UK were arrested during public events following the Queen's death. Welsh Prime Minister Mark Drakeford reacted by saying peaceful protests would be allowed during King Charles' visit to Wales. [The Guardian][BBC] [The Guardian]

The late Queen died peacefully at age 96, Buckingham Palace said on September 9. She has been Britain's longest reigning monarch, having ascended the throne more than 70 years ago. Her oldest son has officially been proclaimed King Charles III the day after her death. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: Government ignores warnings about Rwanda as third country destination, court heard

The British government chose Rwanda as a third country destination for the placement of asylum seekers despite repeated warnings and concerns by ministers about the African nation's human rights record, claimants told the British High Court in early September. [The Guardian] [BBC]

During a five-day hearing, government lawyers, defending the plans, argued that sufficient precautions had been taken to guarantee the safety of asylum seekers. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Under the agreement originally negotiated under the government of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, all refugees crossing the English Channel would be sent to Rwanda and have their asylum claims dealt with there, without a chance of returning to the UK. The government implemented the policy to manage the increasing numbers of refugees crossing the Channel to Britain.

More than 28,000 have so far entered the UK this way in 2022 – already exceeding last year's total. The government of new Prime Minister Liz Truss wants to continue the policy. [BBC] [The Guardian]

A charity found that there are multiple torture victims among the people chosen for deportation. [BBC]

No refugees have been flown to Rwanda since the plans were put on ice after a series of legal complaints. The British High Court has yet to determine the policy's legality. A second hearing is expected to take place in October, but a ruling is unlikely to be made within the

next few months. [Europe in Review September 2022] [BBC] [The Guardian]

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: Prime Minister Truss reiterates British support for Ukraine

British Prime Minister Liz Truss said that the UK will spend at least GBP 2.3 billion to provide aid to Ukraine in 2023. Since Russia's invasion, the UK has been one of Ukraine's biggest supporters, sending weapons and training soldiers. [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters]

Truss further pledged to foster international security relations against Russia and China. Among British politicians, she has been one of the most critical towards China and is determined to counter global Chinese economic influence.

She has also committed to spend three percent of national income on defence spending by 2030, but experts argue that this would cost money not available to the household. [Reuters] [The Guardian] [BBC]

(jv/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: Prisoners may be pardoned if they deserve it, Lukashenko says

Belarusian prisoners seeking amnesty could only be pardoned if they deserve it, the country's President Alexander Lukashenko said on September 6. [Belta]

With Belarus under threat of Western sanctions, it is essential that the country is united, Lukashenko said. A report from the internal affairs ministry is required to verify whether the prisoners seeking amnesty could be pardoned, he said. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: International forum on economic cooperation held in Minsk

More than 100 foreign delegates from Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan, participated in an international forum on economic cooperation in Minsk on September 9. [Belta]

Belarusian entrepreneurs and representatives of ministries presented Belarus' economic potential to deepen economic cooperation and arrange business and investment deals with the participants, Belarus's Deputy Chairwoman of the Economic Committee of the Minsk Executive Committee, Tatiana Selivonchik, said. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Center Party expels member of parliament over controversial remarks about Soviet monuments

Estonia's Chairman of the Center Party and Speaker of the Estonian parliament Juri Ratas condemned on September 3 statements made by Mihhail Stalnuhhin, member of the Center Party, about the removal of a Soviet tank monument in Narva. [ERR] [Postimees]

Stalnuhhin said that the Estonian was pursuing a "Nazi ideology" by removing the tank monument. He accused those who dismantled the monument as "Nazis," saying that "regardless of how they may refer to themselves...to me, now, they are just ordinary fascists." [ERR]

Ratas said that such comments were inappropriate and Stalnuhhin would be expelled from the Center Party. He added that what Stalnuhhin said was

“completely wrong” and “such opinions have no place in the Center Party, neither today, nor in the future.” [ERR] [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Ministry of finance raised concerns about distribution of state funding

Estonian Finance Minister Keit Pentus-Rosimannus said on September 19 that Estonia will soon have a gradually increasing budget deficit if policy-makers do not respond appropriately. [ERR]

Pentus-Rosimannus added that while many financial resources are distributed to defence and energy, a little proportion has been used for investments and transportations. She expects that the budget deficit will increase by as much as three percent during the next four years due to increased defence-spending. [ERR]

Subsidies for people seeking to cope with higher energy costs also contribute to a higher budget deficit, according to her assessment. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Consumer protection authority announces tender to develop 5G networks

The Estonian Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority said on September 6 that it would launch a tender for six 5G licences to develop Estonia’s digital infrastructure. [ERR]

Companies can submit their applications to the Consumer Protection and Technical Regulatory Authority to bid for the licences until October 10, according to the tender. Each company can submit two proposals. [ERR]

Every competitor must ensure sufficient coverage in designated areas, at least 50 percent in two years and 95 percent in four years. Exceptions are made for the areas adjacent to Russia, which involve Ida-Viru, Jogeva and Voru. In these counties sufficient coverage is, under certain circumstances, not possible due to restrictions. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Prosecutor General dismisses two judges for interfering in on-going proceedings

Estonian Prosecutor General Andres Parmas dismissed on September 7 two judges of the Southern District due to their alleged interference in on-going legal proceedings and attempts to conceal evidence. [ERR]

Judges Aro Siinmaa and Kaire Hanilene, who have been working for the prosecutor general for almost 30 years, were accused of blocking investigations in misdemeanour proceedings. They allegedly deleted emails that were to be presented as evidence in a case. [ERR]

They were also charged with allegedly influencing the course of an on-going proceeding by creating a defence for a suspect that they both know personally. [ERR]

Parmas said that while both Siinmaa and Hanilene are long-serving and meritorious prosecutors, their crimes should be punished according to existing legislation, adding that the termination of employment was a conceivable decision. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Government supports EU intervention in electricity market

Estonia's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said on September 8 that she strongly supports EU intervention in the electricity market and the decoupling of natural gas and electricity prices. [ERR]

Such measures were necessary to gain investors' confidence, stabilise prices and spur efforts to create alternative energy supplies, including renewables, Kallas said. Estonia would also support measures to change consumption habits to save energy, she said. [ERR]

Estonian Economics Minister Riina Sikkut presented six points outlining Estonia's position before the meeting of the energy ministers of the European Union on September 9.

They include: a temporary intervention in the electricity market, increasing transparency, preventing

bankruptcies by supporting energy companies, reducing electricity consumption, ending energy imports from Russia and building alternatives and reforming the Emission Trading System. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Experts expect global energy crisis to last another four years

The current global energy crisis could last another four years, Estonian presidential economic adviser, Kaspar Oja, and Estonian economists Raivo Vare and Heidor Vitsur said on September 5. [ERR]

Russia is playing a "tactical game" to break Western unity over the winter months, Vare said. Russia's oil and gas production has decreased, requiring financial efforts to restore the output, he said.

While there are opportunities for further sanctions, their impact would be trivial because Russia uses outdated technology, Vitsur said. [ERR] [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Eesti Energia unable to produce sufficient electricity during peak hours

Chairman of the Estonian company Eesti Energia, Andres Vainola, said on September 14 that Estonia is unable to produce sufficient electricity to cover demand during peak hours of consumption. [ERR]

Power plants require maintenance and repair periods, which will further constrain the production of electricity, Vainola said. [ERR]

While Eesti Energia could build new production capacities and renovate existing facilities to create an additional 500 megawatts of electricity, Vainola was sceptical whether there is an actual need for such steps, taking into account the fluctuating price for electricity and the uncertain future. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Reform Party suspends nomination for board of Bank of Estonia

The parliamentary group of the Reform Party, a member of the coalition government, announced on September 14 that it would temporarily suspend the nomination for the board of the Bank of Estonia. [ERR]

Former Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology Andres Sutt was supposed to replace Jurgen Lipi as the representative of the Reform Party in the board of the Bank of Estonia. Lipi requested the decision to be suspended. [ERR] [ERR]

Andres Sutt became a member of the supervisory board of the Bank of Estonia in 2020 before being replaced by Lipi when Sutt was appointed as a Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology in 2021, a position he had held until the government collapse in July 2022. Reinstating Sutt indicates that Lipi is to step down from his post, according to some observers. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: PM says government won't recognise the results of the Russian-implemented referenda in Donbas

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said on September 20 that Estonia would never recognise the results of the referenda held in Russian-occupied territories between September 23 and 27. [ERR] [Twitter]

Estonia's foreign ministry added that the referenda, which Russia organised in the territories Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, are "fake" and "the EU must recognise the Donetsk [and] Luhansk republics as terrorist organisations." [Twitter]

The Russian-occupied territories in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson organised referendums on whether they want to join the Russian Federation. According to international observers, they were neither free nor fair and transgressed Ukrainian constitutional law. [BBC] [Spiegel] [Washington Post]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Anti-corruption bureau launches investigation into cases of illegal pre-election agitation

The Latvian anti-corruption bureau said on September 3 that it would launch an investigation into 33 cases of potential election campaign violations and two cases of using administrative resources for illegal pre-election agitation. [LSM]

Most investigations are related to non-compliance with the procedure of placing campaign materials and the appropriate use of state or municipal funding for the election campaign. The two cases involving administrative violations pertain to publications in which the anti-corruption bureau found evidence of election campaigning that is not allowed according to Latvian legislation. [LSM] [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: President's initiative moves to detach Latvian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate

The Latvian President Egil Levits proposed a bill on September 5 to the country's parliament that stipulated that the Latvian Orthodox Church would be autonomous and independent from the Moscow Patriarchate. [LSM]

The Latvian Orthodox Church is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, which has been a vocal supporter of Russia's war in Ukraine. A majority of Latvian worshippers are strongly opposed to the war. [LSM] Levits received approval from parliament, saying that the leaders of the Latvian Orthodox Church have been informed about the bill.

The Latvian Orthodox Church said it would now be independent from any ecclesiastical centre outside Latvia. It would nevertheless maintain Orthodox traditions and seek to establish links with other Orthodox churches. [LSM] [Orthodox Times]

The Russian Orthodox Church condemned the decision. A senior clerical official said that such an act would contradict the principle of secularism that is the principal determinant of the relations between religion and state in Europe. [Orthodox Times]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Defence ministry wants to make military service more attractive for

conscripts

The Latvian State Audit Office said on September 7 that the national armed forces are no longer an attractive career option for potential recruits. [LSM]

According to the assessments of the State Audit Office, the armed forces strongly need to reconsider their management of human resources, suggesting a long-term policy to make it more attractive to younger people. [LSM]

Kristine Janzueme, member of the Council of the State Audit Office, said that the mandatory conscription could alleviate the cadre situation in the Latvian armed forces, although she has not yet evaluated the impact. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Russia must be defeated in Ukraine to be cured of imperialism, defence minister says

Latvia's Defence Minister Artis Pabriks said at the Congress of Free Russia in Lithuania on September 2 that Russia should be defeated in Ukraine to cure Moscow of its imperialist roots. [The Baltic Times]

Pabriks said Russia's military defeat would be "the end of imperial wars." He added that a military defeat in Ukraine would not mean that Russia has lost its dignity as long as the Russian people show the willingness to change their mentality. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Daugavpils City Council to remove two Soviet monuments

Latvia's Daugavpils City Council submitted a schedule on September 14 to dismantle two Soviet monuments. [LSM]

According to existing legislation, the city council must launch a procurement procedure to determine the amount of funding required to remove the monuments. Upon successful completion, a meeting must be held to raise the necessary funding. [LSM]

The mayor of Daugavpils, Andrejs Elksnins, said that while he would comply with the national law to remove all Soviet monuments by November 15, a meeting to discuss funding could only be possible when the procurement procedure had been finished. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Government declared state of emergency along Russian border amid Moscow's military mobilisation

The Latvian government decided on September 27 that it would declare a state of emergency in three designated areas at the Latvian-Russian border until December 26, following Russia's military mobilisation. [ERR] [LSM]

The Latvian ministry of interior said that after Russia's military mobilisation an influx of refugees is expected. [ERR] [LSM]

The state of emergency pertains to the municipalities of Aluksne, Balvi and Ludza as well as all border checkpoints at the Latvian-Russian border. The Pededze checkpoint will be closed. Moreover, the Latvian border patrol will conduct increased surveillance to monitor the situation along the border. [ERR] [LSM]

While the Latvian government has closed the borders for Russians citizens, except for dissidents and family members among others, since September 19, it said that Latvia would not accept those seeking escape from mobilisation. [ERR] [LSM]

A state of emergency is already in place in Ludza, Kraslava, Daugavpils and Augsdaugava, which are adjacent to Belarus, due to attempts of illegal migration to Latvia and, beyond that, the rest of the Schengen area. [ERR] [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Russians and Belarusians continue property acquisitions in Lithuania despite sanctions

Russians and Belarusians have continued to purchase property in Lithuania, despite sanctions, according to a report published by LRT on September 6. [LRT]

In 2022 so far, Russian citizens have bought 520 properties, including 184 residences. Belarusians have acquired 240 properties this year. [LRT]

Russians own approximately 12,000 properties in Lithuania. They commonly acquire real estate through Russian companies registered in Lithuania. [LRT]

Laurynas Kasciunas, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Defence, said that Russian property owners are not a security threat to Lithuania, even though Russian entrepreneurs are supporters of Russian imperialism. They are trying to move their money out of Russia and are seeking secure and more favourable investment conditions under European Union laws, Kasciunas said. [LRT]

Vytis Jurkonis, professor of political science at Vilnius University, added that each purchase should be assessed on case-by-case investigations to verify the purchaser's identity and to ensure that no member of the Kremlin's inner circle, oligarch or government officials are buying assets in Lithuania. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Authorities increase security around its LNG terminal after Nord Stream explosions

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda said on September 29 that Lithuania has increased its security around the LNG terminal in Klaipeda after the Nord Stream explosions in the Baltic Sea. [LRT]

Following recent security instructions, the number of guards of the facility has been increased and a rapid response team has been established to step in whenever necessary. [LRT]

The Public Security Service was already placed on high alert status when Russia intervened in Ukraine on February 24. According to unit commander Anatolijus Didenko, increased security standards are nevertheless necessary to respond quickly to attacks. [LRT]

Three leaks, which were likely caused by explosions according to Swedish and Danish seismographic data, were detected in the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines on September 26. The Swedish coast guard found a fourth leak on September 29. While the Danish government assumed that these were deliberate

actions, a perpetrator has not yet been identified. [NPR] [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Despite Russian mobilisation, military threat to Lithuania remains unchanged

Kestutis Budrys, advisor to the Lithuanian president, said on September 26 that the level of military threat to the country remains unchanged even with Russia's mobilisation of additional forces. [LRT]

Budrys added that Russia is deliberately fuelling tensions in the Baltics, considering the referenda in eastern and southern Ukraine as well as the mobilisation of reinforcements and additional military units. . [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Energy ministry proposes plan to save energy

The Lithuanian energy ministry presented an energy-saving plan on September 8 that will put limits on heating and cooling systems in buildings. [LRT]

The plan stipulates that the temperatures inside buildings should be below 19 degrees Celsius during the heating season. During the summer, air-conditioners should not be used when the temperatures are below 27 degrees Celsius. [LRT]

Energy Minister Dainius Kreivys said on September 8 that the plan could save EUR 800 million in energy costs during the next two years. [LRT]

The plan, if enforced properly, could save the public sector EUR 100 million, businesses EUR 300 million and private households EUR 400 million, Kreivys said. Deputy Energy Minister Inga Ziliene added that the measures would mainly target the management of buildings and transportation, which her ministry sees as consuming the most energy in the country. [LRT] [LRT]

Under the plan, the public sector has to switch off hot water supplies and is required to switch off lights between midnight and 6:00 am. The proposal to limit

the maximum speed on motorways to 110 km/h has been removed upon opposition from the ministry of transport. [LRT]

Businesses are also encouraged to work remotely and engage in working from home on Fridays and Mondays to save additional energy resources. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Parliament proposes holding mayoral and municipal elections on March 5, 2023

The Lithuanian parliament submitted a proposal on September 9 to hold mayoral and municipal council elections on March 5, 2023. [LRT] [Delfi]

Mayors and municipal councils are elected every four years, as prescribed in the Electoral Code. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Parliament extends state of emergency

The Lithuanian parliament voted on September 13 to extend the state of emergency until December. [LRT]

While five members of parliament voted against the motion and 26 abstained, 68 were in favour. The state of emergency will be in place only at the borders with Belarus and Russia and other border checkpoints such as airports or train stations. [LRT]

This decision coincided with a ban that Lithuania – along with Latvia and Estonia – imposed on Russian citizens. Only dissidents, freedom fighters, independent journalists, those seeking to enter the Schengen area due to humanitarian reasons as well as family members of EU citizens and those transiting to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad via land are allowed to enter. [LRT] [Reuters] [Politico]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Parliament imposed temporary ban on Russian and Belarusian media

The Lithuanian parliament decided on September 22 to temporarily impose a ban on Russian and Belarusian media channels. [LRT]

The law was passed with 113 members of parliament in favour and 0 against, with 4 abstentions remaining. [LRT]

Vytautas Juozapaitis, member of the Lithuanian parliamentary committee on culture, previously proposed on September 13 to ban all Russian and Belarusian state media channels across Lithuania. [LRT]

Juozapaitis said that while Russian TV channels are contemporarily banned under the national state of emergency, the measure soon expires, requiring amendments to cope with the propagandistic impact of Russian and Belarusian state TV. [LRT]

He added that "[f]or Lithuania, which has an external border with both Russia and Belarus, it is of utmost importance to effectively protect the public and information space from information threats." [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Military Academy confronts decrease in military personnel recruits

Lithuanian Deputy Defence Minister Zilvinas Tomkus said on September 13 that fewer candidates who studied at the Lithuanian Military Academy renewed their contracts, which has led to a decrease of more than a third in enrollment in comparison to 2021. [LRT]

While some candidates did not pass the school exams, experts believe that the war in Ukraine has discouraged them from pursuing a military career. Military expert Darious Antanaitis said that the current number of freshmen, at 84 so far, were insufficient as the government tries to increase the size of the Lithuanian army.

Major Donatas Suchockis, who is the head of the Outreach Department of the Lithuanian Military Academy, said potential military recruits were being deterred by the threat of military deployment and military engagement. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: President Sandu met with Gagauz leaders

Moldovan President Maia Sandu undertook a working visit to Comrat to meet with the Gagauz leaders and deputies of the people's assembly of Gagauzia, an autonomous territorial area in Moldova. [Moldpres]

Sandu said at the meetings that national and local politicians must work together to ensure peace and stability in Moldova, specifically in the wake of the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. She added that they also must combat corruption, expand agricultural output, monitor the impact of climate change and modernise infrastructure. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Moldovan political representatives held talks with Transnistrian counterparts about medical supplies

Moldovan and Transnistrian representatives met on September 5 to discuss supply of medicine and medical equipment to Transnistria, a pro-Russian region in Moldova seeking secession from the central government in Chisinau, to help manage the Covid-19 pandemic. [Moldpres]

The representatives agreed to specific procedures and conditions with which Moldova and Transnistria must comply, such as quality standards, medical effectiveness, and patients' safety. Moldova and Transnistria agreed to meet again during the next months to discuss the results and the changes of the epidemiological situation. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova resigns after 4-year term

President Maia Sandu met on September 5 with Claus Neukirch, head of the OSCE mission to Moldova, who will finish his term of office. [Moldpres] [Moldova] [OSCE]

During his term of office, Claus Neukirch tried to resolve the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria. At the meeting with the Moldovan president, he

reiterated the importance of diplomacy in achieving a peaceful solution to the conflict. Sandu expressed her gratitude on behalf of the Moldovan people and said that Moldova would continue cooperating with the OSCE. [Moldpres] [Moldova]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Minister of environment resigns

Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita said on September 8 that she accepted the resignation of Environment Minister Iuliana Cantaragiu. [Moldpres]

Gavrilita expressed her gratitude for Cantaragiu's commitments, saying the ministry of environment promoted reforms and engaged in projects designed to achieve a better life for Moldovan citizens under Cantaragiu. Her achievements include protection of the Lower Dniester National Park, launching a national waste management system and increased transparency in administering environmental protection. [Moldpres]

Cantaragiu, on her side, announced her resignation on social media without providing a reason for her decision. Gavrilita reportedly may have been dissatisfied with the way Cantaragiu's ministry dealt with the distribution of wood as the winter approached. [TV8] [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Parliament make changes to state budget budget

The Moldovan parliament adopted changes to the law on the state budget on September 8, with 53 deputies having voted in favour. [Moldpres]

Moldova will increase government spending from EUR 3.8 billion to EUR 3.9 billion, decreasing the country's budget deficit from EUR 1 billion to EUR 900 million. Social protection was increased by EUR 94 million to ensure necessary financial support for pensions and social benefits that are deemed necessary for the winter. [Moldpres]Moldpres]

The changes of the law also take into account the refugee influx from Ukraine as well as the on-going energy crisis, requiring additional support from the state. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Party Shor is charged with having violated the Electoral Code

The Moldovan Central Election Committee announced on September 9 that the political party Shor would be stripped of state funding from January to June 2023 due to alleged violations of election campaign funding rules during local elections held in May. [Moldpres]

Pavel Postica, deputy chairman of the Central Election Committee, said that Shor transgressed the Electoral Code, given that its financial report allegedly lacked credibility. Other parties participating in election campaigns may view the punishment as an effort to get them to comply with the existing financial legislation and their responsibilities. [Moldpres]

The Central Election Committee announced on September 13 that it would accredit 12 national observers of the association "Promo-Lex" to monitor the local elections on October 16. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: EIB recommends providing Moldova EUR 15 million to ensure energy efficiency

The European Investment Bank (EIB) said on September 13 that it would recommend a grant of EUR 15 million to enable Moldova to help the government manage the energy crisis and to ensure energy efficiency. [Moldpres]

Moldovan Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Andrei Spinu said that the grant would be used to ensure energy provisions at schools, kindergartens and hospitals and would help Moldova to ensure energy security. [Moldpres]

The head of the EU delegation to Chisinau, Janis Mazeiks, welcomed the initiative, saying it reflected the EU's commitments to ensuring Moldova's energy neutrality and environmental diplomacy. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Russia: External environment remains challenging for Russian economy

The Russian economy remains challenged by its "external environment" as Moscow tries to limit the damage being caused internally by Western sanctions due to its invasion of Ukraine in February.

The Central Bank of Russia decided on September 16 to cut its key interest rate by 50 basis points to 7.50 percent to help spur economic growth and consumer spending. The decline in gross domestic product in 2022 may be closer to the upper bound of the July forecast range of -6 percent to -4 percent. [CBR]

"The external environment for the Russian economy remains challenging and significantly constrains economic activity," the central bank said. "Concurrently, Q2 GDP and high-frequency indicators point to stronger dynamics of business activity than the Bank of Russia expected in July. At the same time, trends across sectors and regions remain clearly mixed." [CBR]

Both demand and supply factors are having a negative impact on economic activity, the central bank said. Surveys suggest that a significant proportion of enterprises are still confronted by difficulties in production and logistics. "However, their sentiment is continuing to improve as suppliers of finished products, raw materials and components diversify, as do sales markets," it said.

While other central banks around the world raise interest rates to slow inflation, the Central Bank of Russia has decreased them. This may further exacerbate inflation as it has in Turkey, where Ankara has pushed interest rates lower despite steep inflation and a weakened Turkish Lira.

The Russian central bank is mindful of inflation. Moving forward, it will take into account "actual and expected inflation dynamics, as well as risks posed by domestic and external conditions and the reaction of financial markets," it said. [CBR]

Annual inflation declined in August to 14.3 percent, after 15.1 percent in July. According to a 9 September estimate, it is down to 14.1 percent. [CBR]

"The decline in headline inflation is largely due to continued adjustment of prices for goods and services, after they went up sharply in March," the central bank said. Current consumer price growth rates remain low, contributing to a further slowdown in annual inflation, it added.

Inflationary Forecasts

Moving forward, the Central Bank of Russia expects inflation to ease further. Taking into account emerging trends in consumer prices, it expects annual inflation to decline to 11 to 13 percent by the end of 2022, it said.

According to the Bank of Russia's forecast, given the monetary policy stance, annual inflation will decline 5 to 7 percent in 2023 and return to four percent in 2024. [CBR]

Consumer activity remains low, which will help move inflation lower.

The decline in consumer activity is "due to the recent drop in real incomes of households as they maintain their propensity to save," the central bank said. Specifically, the latter factor is explained by, beyond overall economic uncertainty, the reduced supply of several types of goods and services.

The situation in the labour market remains stable in general. Although the number of vacancies has decreased, the unemployment rate is near historical lows. The adaptation of the labour market to the changed conditions largely occurs through the mechanism of part-time employment and the adjustment of real wages. [CBR]

(gc)

Russia: Government plans to fund budget deficit 'primarily' through loans

Russia plans to fund its two percent budget deficit to GDP next year "primarily" by using loans to close the gap as the government increases spending to modernise the economy, strengthen infrastructure and assist the regions and other essential aspects of the country's development, according to Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin. [government.ru]

The government estimated next year's budget revenue at 26 trillion rubles (EUR 458 billion), including all proposals on additional revenue that we explored at the president's instruction and expenses at 29 trillion rubles. The budget deficit will account for two percent of gross domestic product. [government.ru]

"We plan to primarily use loans to close the gap," Mishustin said. "It is important to make progress with the strategically important projects that will help us

achieve the national development goals set by the president." [government.ru]

The government budget policy aims to protect the economy from external risks. Additionally, in 2023 and 2024, Russia will plan a transition period during which expenses will be higher by 2.9 trillion and 1.6 trillion rubles respectively. This measure should gradually alleviate the budget deficit from two percent of GDP in 2023 to 1.4 percent in 2024 and 0.7 percent in 2025. [government.ru]

"With this approach, we will not have to use the money from the National Wealth Fund (NWF) and it ensures that the national debt will remain at a proper level," Mishustin said [government.ru]

Cut-off Price

Russia's Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said domestic borrowing would increase to about EUR 44 billion next year, with extra borrowing to reduce NWF spending also possible. "We are planning on big volumes on the borrowing market - 2.5 trillion roubles next year on a gross basis," Siluanov said. [Reuters]

"Plus, the government will be given the right to carry out additional borrowing of up to 1 trillion roubles to replace the use of NWF funds under favourable market conditions," Siluanov said. "That's a total of 3.5 trillion roubles."

Russia estimates the new cut-off price for its budget rule that diverts excess oil revenues into its wealth fund at EUR 63-EUR 64 per barrel and may resume foreign currency purchases as early as this year, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said. [Reuters]

The rule, designed to replenish state reserves by buying foreign currency when oil prices are high, was fully suspended after Moscow launched what it calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine on Feb. 24.

(gc)

Ukraine: Ground Forces Commander Syrskyi considered mastermind of Kharkiv counteroffensive

The Ukrainian armed forces under the leadership of Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi launched on September 6 an offensive on Russian-occupied territories in the Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, commonly known as the Kharkiv

counteroffensive, which has led to the collapse of the Russian administration in Kharkiv. [ISW] [The Guardian]

The Ukrainian army was able to recapture approximately 2,500 square kilometres by September 10, forcing the Russian troops to withdraw from Izium after the capture of Kupiansk. It was able to breach the frontline at the Oskil River on September 17 and retook important bridgeheads thereafter. [Yahoo] [ISW] [Reuters]

Ukrainian forces have put up fierce resistance, inflicting serious losses on Russia's military. In early August, before Ukraine's counteroffensive in the east, a Pentagon official estimated that 70,000 to 80,000 Russian soldiers had been killed or wounded. [RFE/RL]

Syrskyi is considered the chief architect behind the counteroffensive, along with Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian armed forces Valery Zaluzhny, Chief of General Staff Serhiy Shaptala, Commander of the southern defence operation Andriy Kovalchuk as well as Deputy Defence Minister Hanna Malyar. [Kyiv Post]

"I am grateful to Colonel-General Oleksandr Syrsky and the officers of his staff — everyone who planned and successfully conducted the military operation to liberate the Kharkiv region," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said. "Ukrainians once again managed to do what many considered impossible."

Syrskyi was awarded "Hero of Ukraine" in 2022.

'Glory to Hero'

Anton Gerashchenko, an advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine and Founder of the Institute of the Future, wrote on Twitter "Glory to Hero" about Syrskyi. The Commander of Ukrainian Land Forces, Hero of Ukraine, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi is leading the Ukrainian offensive in this sector. The Ukrainian flag has been raised in the town centre, Defense of Ukraine.

The Ukrainian general is also being recognized outside of the country for military acumen.

Eerik N Kross, ex intelligence director & adviser in Georgia, Iraq, Ukraine, Moldova and Estonian Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee member, wrote that "he should be made a hero of the free world." The Colonel-General "who gives hope to Ukrainians" is how journalists from the German newspaper Spiegel described the 57-year-old Syrsky, in their recent article about him.

The Washington Post described him as “bookish and pensive.”

Graduate of USSR command school

Syrskyi graduated from USSR’s Moscow Higher Military Command School in 1982 and, with honours, from the Academy of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 1996. He received the gold medal from the National Defence Academy of Ukraine in 2005. [Kyiv Post] [Logos]

Syrskyi served as a commander of a motorised rifle platoon of the 426th motorised rifle regiment in 1986. From 1993 to 1995, he was promoted to battalion commander, and later commanded a regiment, as part of a Ukrainian National Guard division.

From 2000 until 2002, he held the post of Chief of Staff and First Deputy of the 72nd Mechanised Division of the 8th Army Corps., which he eventually commanded. [Kyiv Post] [Logos]

He was further promoted in 2007 when he became the Chief of Staff and First Deputy Commander of the Joint Operational Command of the Ukrainian armed forces. From 2011 until 2012, Syrskyi was the first deputy chief of the Main Department of Military Cooperation and Peacekeeping Operations of the General Staff of the Ukrainian armed forces.

In 2014, he assumed the position of the deputy commander of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine and, later, became its commander. Since 2019, the land forces of the Ukrainian armed forces have been under his control. [Kyiv Post] [Logos]

Due to his long-term service in the Ukrainian armed forces, he received the “Valour and Honour” Award in 2005, the Badge of Honour in 2010, and the “Glory and Honour” Badge and the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in 2015. [Kyiv Post] [Logos]

On September 9, during Ukraine's rapid offensive in Kharkiv Oblast, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine named him as one of Ukraine’s leading lights of victory on every axis: "The Atlantes who hold the operation on their shoulders,” referring to the ancient Greek legend of the god responsible for carrying the planet on his shoulders. [Yahoo]

Syrskyi is married and has two sons. [Logos]

(mo/gc)

Ukraine launches $400b foreign investment drive

Ukraine has launched a drive to attract USD 400 billion in foreign investment in projects across the country even though it faces a protracted war with Russia, the Financial Times reported. [TodayUKNews]

Kiev has identified hundreds of initiatives in technology, the agro-industry, clean energy, defence, metallurgy and natural resources where it hopes to attract international investors backed up by loan guarantees and insurance from western donors. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described the investment potential in his country as "the greatest opportunity in Europe since world war two."

Economic Development Minister Yulia Svyrydenko said Kiev was preparing to allow larger investors to operate in Ukraine under English commercial law to reassure Western businesses concerned about widespread corruption in the country's judicial system. [Financial Times]

"We are grateful to our Western partners for international financial aid," Svyrydenko said in an interview with the Financial Times. "But today we are not asking for humanitarian aid. We are asking for investment that can provide a growth opportunity for Ukraine. We understand it as blood for the Ukrainian economy." [Financial Times]

When asked why international investors would enter the Ukrainian market with no end to war in sight, Svyrydenko said:

"You might say it is too early to ask for foreign direct investment, but for businessmen, for those who are ready to take risks, they understand that...they will achieve the most and gain the benefits."

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Democratic Party and Freedom Party confirm coalition in case of election win

Albania's Democratic Party and Freedom Party, the country's two largest opposition parties, have confirmed that they may form a potential coalition if the current government wins the next elections.

Former prime minister Sali Berisha, who heads the Democratic Party, said the two parties are "in full tune" and that he expects the opposition to win. Former president Ilir Meta heads the Freedom Party. [Albanian Daily News]

In response to an increasing cost of living in the country, Berisha said Prime Minister Edi Rama is "an enemy of the Albanians" and said "protests and, if necessary, civil disobedience" are the only options for the public to show their disapproval of the government. [Albanian Daily News]

Parliamentary elections are not expected to be held in Albania until 2025.

(hi/gc)

Albania: Police chief dismissed amid increased murder rates

Albania's Interior Minister Bledi Cuci has decided to dismiss the Chief of Police, Gladis Nano, for failing to meet pre-defined "objectives."

Cuci said the decision was "mainly related to the situation created in recent months" relating to an increase in crime and the murder rate in the country. [Balkan Insight]

There has been a reported increase in murders in Albania, including the number of targeted killings among criminal groups, domestic violence incidents and malpractice by police officers. Earlier this year, protests were organised across the country as a response to a child being killed at Himara beach after being hit by a speedboat driven by an off-duty police officer. [Tirana Times]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Transparency board lowers fuel prices amid reactions by the market

Albania's Transparency Board - which was established recently to combat the rising costs of fuel - announced that it would reduce the price of gas, oil and gasoline, in an effort to make energy more affordable to citizens. [Albanian Daily News]

Employer's federation Confindustria, supported by various companies in the energy industry, claimed the Transparency Board is "destroying the Albanian economy" and expressed its disagreement with the decision. [Albanian Daily News]

Albania previously saw mass protests due to the rising fuel and energy prices, which have reportedly increased by up to 50 percent since last year. [Exit]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Pro-opposition media accuse the government of harassment

Irfan Hysenbelliu - the owner of various pro-opposition news outlets in Albania - has accused the government of targeting his businesses in an effort to change his media group's editorial line.

His media group recently published a series of reports relating to corruption and nepotism within sections of the government, such as the customs office. [Exit]

Hysebelliu said that the government allegedly demolished part of the property owned by his business to intimidate him, a claim that the government has rejected by saying that this is not the first time his media "play the victim's role". [Balkan Insight]

Albania's media freedom landscape has long been threatened by partisan news sources, business moguls

running major media outlets and political pressure from the government. [Reporters Without Borders]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Government increases pensions and minimum wages

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has announced a "social resistance package" that aims to aid vulnerable citizens amid rising inflation and energy costs.

The package will increase pensions by six percent, raise the minimum wage from EUR 278 to EUR 295.5 and provide benefits for single mothers, people with disabilities and primary sector workers. [Albanian Daily News]

He added that the measure is expected to help up to 678,000 pensioners and 200,000 low-income employees. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Assassination plan against former foreign minister revealed

An assassination attempt was planned against former Albanian Foreign Minister Lulzim Basha in 2017, according to an anti-terror directorate report leaked by a hacker group that attacked the government. Basha was serving as the chairman of the opposition Democratic Party at the time. [AlfaPress]

According to the report, three suspects aimed to "destabilise the country." [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Government committee investigates wiretapping claims as political scandal escalates

The Greek parliament approved the creation of a committee that will investigate wiretapping allegations that emerged in August.

Head of socialist opposition party PASOK-KINAL, Nikos Androulakis, publicly reported that he was the victim of

a wiretapping attempt. In response, the head of the country's National Intelligence Service (EYP), and the prime minister's secretary lost their jobs, while the government stated the surveillance was wrong but legal. They refused to take responsibility for the attempt to hack Androulakis' phone using remote access software.

The committee will investigate Androulakis' allegations as well as a similar surveillance attempt against journalist Athanasios Koukakis earlier this year and the headquarters of the Communist Party of Greece in 2016. The surveillance cases concern the ruling liberal-conservative Nea Dimokratia party and the democratic-socialist opposition SYRIZA. [Kathimerini]

In committee hearings, the former head of EYP and the former secretary of the prime minister cited confidentiality when they refused to answer questions about monitoring politicians or if a file on Androulakis exists. EYP officials that worked for the organisation during the SYRIZA administration said there were no politicians being monitored at the time and reinstated that wiretappings "cannot be illegal" since they are only done in the interest of national security. [Kathimerini]

All committee hearings are done under secrecy. The minutes, transcripts and testimonies will not be released to the public. Local media are only able to report on parliament members' statements.

During the committee's original meetings, opposition parliament members stormed out after the government rejected certain witnesses that the opposition considered "essential." They accused the Nea Dimokratia party of a "cover-up." [Kathimerini]

Former minister and SYRIZA member Christos Spirtzis went to Greece's top court prosecutor to report an alleged wiretapping attempt against him in late 2021. He said telecom experts confirmed to him that various links he had been receiving via text were related to the Predator software - the same remote access software that was used against Androulakis and Koukakis. [Reuters]

Athens said it would be "happy to work with Brussels in a spirit of cooperation" to address the surveillance allegations but made it clear that the issue was a matter of national security and does not fall within European Union jurisdiction. Various members of the European Parliament expressed their disagreement, saying the matter concerned fundamental human rights, the rule of law and democracy. [Politico]

Multiple Greek Journalists

Multiple Greek journalists, including Koukakis, were invited to testify during a European Parliament inquiry on the "use of spyware in Greece." Koukakis' participation was blocked by the Greek parliament, which voted against the proposal to summon him.

The journalists said they received questions from various members of the European parliament. They were asked their opinion on the direction in which the European Parliament should move legislatively. Koukakis said he believes the European Parliament will "exert pressure and highlight aspects of the case that have not yet been clarified." [Balkan Insight]

A group of Greek journalists and foreign correspondents based in the country wrote a joint statement to the European Parliament's committee, asking it to further investigate the matter and provide funding to check their devices for illegal spying software. They said "Greek democracy is in danger." [Balkan Insight]

The government was criticised after an arrest warrant was issued against journalist Petros Kousoulos, for publishing classified documents that revealed the wiretapping of two officials during the SYRIZA administration in 2016. The move was condemned by various media freedom watch dogs such as the International Press Institute. Kousoulos said that it is "unthinkable" that a journalist would be prosecuted for "simply doing his job." [Balkan Insight]

In an interview with Bloomberg, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said "a mistake was made" and that the government is taking measures to ensure "stricter filters when it comes to the issue of wiretapping." He said the "proliferation of illegal spyware" across Europe needs a European response, so as to find a balance between protecting fundamental rights and not compromising the ability of national security services, urging the ban of software such as Predator. [Bloomberg]

The Greek parliament's inquiry committee is expected to conclude its hearings with the testimony of Androulakis in early October. According to local media, the committee is expected to adopt four key measures: increase the filters and requirements for EYP to surveil politicians, increase transparency in disclosing the motivations behind each surveillance instead of citing national security, allow the surveilled person to know when and why they are being surveilled and will ban Predator and other similar software sales. The state is expected to still be able to purchase Predator, but under "strict rules of transparency." [Kathimerini]

Mitsotakis's Nea Dimokratia party has maintained a nine percent point advantage over SYRIZA in recent election polls, despite the scandal. Elections are expected to take place in May or June 2023. [Politico]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Energy Minister assures government is ready for winter energy demands

Greek Energy Minister Kostas Skrekas said that the country is prepared to meet winter heating demands as the government takes measures to combat the ongoing energy crisis.

Skrekas pledged that the government will "absorb" as much as 89 percent of the increase in energy costs for businesses and that the public sector will significantly cut back on its energy use. He added that saving energy should be incorporated into every citizen's life, reaffirming that there had already been a 15 percent reduction in energy consumption by Greek households in July alone. [Kathimerini] [Euronews]

The Greek government continues to be sceptical of the various measures proposed by the European Commission, to force lower consumption targets and for price ceilings exclusively for Russian gas. Government representative Giannis Oikonomou said that there is "no examination" of any measures of a "mandatory character" on a domestic level. [Kathimerini] [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Protests erupt over university police decision

Protests have erupted at universities in Greece in response to the implementation of a controversial decision to use special police forces to patrol campuses a few weeks before students are expected to resume their studies.

This comes three years after Greece banned the so-called "university asylum," which granted students asylum within university grounds and did not allow authorities to intervene. [Ta Nea] [Deutche Welle]

The campus police aim to combat violence in Greek academic institutions but has been met with strong opposition from student associations and opposition parties. Recent protests have led to clashes between students and police, as well as multiple injuries. [Euronews]

Local media reported that university police intend to patrol only outside campuses, but with local police force protection.

In a relevant civil protection ministry statement, it was reiterated that campus police will not meddle with student events and that they "are not rivals" of student political factions. The new strategy was also met with opposition and protests. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Supreme Court's special tribunal starts trial against former minister, prosecutor

Greece's Supreme Court started the trial of former Deputy Justice Minister Dimitris Papagelopoulos and former Chief Corruption Prosecutor Eleni Touloupaki for alleged misconduct and abuse of power charges. [Kathimerini]

Their charges are related to the alleged Novartis scandal in 2016, when various politicians and health officials were allegedly bribed by the pharmaceutical company.

Papagelopoulos was accused of intervening in the investigations of multiple prosecutors and baselessly victimising journalist Giorgos Papachristos. Touloupaki is accused of neglecting to present the case file to parliament on time, thus preventing proceedings against allegedly corrupt ministers. [CNN] [Ta Nea]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Authorities arrest suspects over undercover migrant smuggling operations

A joint operation by Greek authorities and the European Police Office arrested two hotel owners on the country's Rhodes island for directing an illegal migrant trafficking operation.

The criminal organisation charged up to EUR 6,000 per person and transported migrants to Greece from the Turkish coast, before forging travel documents that would allow them to go to Athens. Greek authorities also arrested two expats that were allegedly involved in a trafficking ring that primarily transported migrants across the northern Greco-Turkish land border. [Kathimerini][Skai] [Eleftheros Tipos]

The arrests come amid increased refugee crossings into the country. Various European Union entities have called on Greece to reconsider its treatment of migrants, and have condemned past incidents of pushbacks. [Greek Reporter] [Aljazeera]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Mitsotakis announces 21 new support measures amassing EUR 5.5 billion

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced 21 measures that will cost as much as EUR 5.5 billion to support millions of the country's citizens in a speech that unofficially marked the beginning of his re-election campaign.

The measures aim to help the country's 2.3 million most vulnerable citizens and include subsidies, state benefits and tax relief initiatives. He also announced an increase in pensions and the minimum wage in 2023, infrastructure plans and a EUR 250 handout for low-income earners. [Kathimerini] [Reuters]

Mitsotakis said the Greek economy is expected to grow by more than five percent in 2022, despite earlier lower estimates. He also denounced Turkish and Russian provocations and discussed the energy crisis.

(hi/gc)

Greece: Athens proceeds with sale of Kavala and Alexandroupoli ports

Greece has moved forward with its plan to sell the ports of Kavala and Alexandroupoli in the country's north as interest in the ports increases due to their geopolitical importance as a trade route connecting the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as their connection to Serbian and Hungarian railway systems. [Proto Thema]

The port of Kavala has already been sold to American investment group Black Summit-GEK TERNA, whereas bids for the Alexandroupoli port have been submitted by both Black Summit-GEK TERNA and American group Quintana Infrastructure & Development.

Bids have also reportedly been submitted by the international Cameron SA-Goldair Cargo-Bollore Africa Logistics joint venture and the Greek-Cypriot Thessaloniki Port Authority. [Kathimerini]

Local media have claimed that the US intends to use the Alexandroupoli port as a military naval base if their bid is successful. [Hurriyet]

Thessaloniki Port Authority has Chinese ownership ties, with state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings controlling 33 percent of the company. China also controls Greece's largest port - Piraeus - after acquiring a majority stake in 2016.

Piraeus has been incorporated into China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is primarily of commercial nature, but its new ventures closer to Greece's borders have prompted critics to question if Beijing's motivations are "more strategic than commercial". [Janes IntelTrak]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Greek group hacks ministry of education website

A Greek group which calls itself "Netwatchers" said it hacked the website of North Macedonia's ministry of education. Authorities assured citizens that there are no concerns over data leaks and citizens' personal information being intercepted as the website served solely an informative role. [Nova Makedonija] [MIA]

The country's agriculture ministry said that it had also been attacked by a group called BlackByte, but no public documents or citizen information has been compromised. Leaders of the VMRO DPMNE opposition party had previously accused it of a cover-up, a claim which it also dismissed. [Balkan Insight]

These are the second and third cyberattack**s** against North Macedonian government servers over the last two months, whereas a fourth attack took place in February. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Decision to ban the name Macedonia in legal entities annulled

North Macedonia's top administrative court has annulled a previous decision that banned the use of the name "Macedonia" in the registration of legal entities and citizen associations in the country. The ministry of justice has been given 60 days to find an alternative solution to the banned law. [Nova Makedonija]

Lawyer Toni Menkinoski - who won the case against the state - said the use of the name "Macedonia" is a "basic human and genetic right", which North Macedonians will persist on. He likened his government's previous decisions to actions by the Bulgarian government and their refusal to recognise the North Macedonian minority. He said the ban went against European law. [Nova Makedonija]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Violent clashes between Europride parade participants, protesters and police

Thousands of Serbian LGBT+ activists marched in Belgrade as part of the country's controversial Europride event, despite an earlier ban. Counter-demonstrators clashed with police, leading to 64 arrests and 10 police injuries. [The Guardian]

According to local media, protesters holding religious symbols attempted to verbally and physically assault Europride participants but were stopped by riot police. In response, they threw stones, flares and stun grenades. Various journalists were also assaulted. [N1]

Prime Pinister Ana Brnabic - who is openly gay - said she was "proud" of the event and happy that there were "no major incidents." Belgrade's higher prosecutor's office announced that they will be investigating all recorded attacks on journalists and activists, whereas the internal affairs ministry will be investigating incidents of online hate speech and homophobia. [France24] [Euronews]

At the same time, the ministry of interior announced that eight foreign Europride participants have been banned from entering the country, for committing "offences against public morals," including "inciting national, racial and religious hatred", without further specifying. [N1]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Vucic nominates Brnabic to serve second term as prime minister

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic announced that he has appointed Ana Brnabic to serve as the country's prime minister, for the second time.

Vucic said that Brnabic will serve as the prime minister until 2024 - half a term - after which the position would be given to someone else. When asked if that would entail new elections in 2024 or a reconstruction of the government, Vucic said he remains open to either scenario. [Euronews][Reuters]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Vucic accuse Kosovar authorities of 'quietly trying to occupy' northern Kosovo

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that Kosovar Albanians are "trying to occupy" northern Kosovo after a statement by the Kosovar ministry of interior claiming that the country now controls the region around Lake Gazivode.

Vucic said his statement should serve as a "warning" to Kosovo that Serbs will "no longer tolerate violence and disrespect for international law." [N1]

Kosovo announced that its authorities started regular patrolling across the northern border with Serbia, and in Lake Gazivode, which Serbia believes is a violation of the Brussels agreement, which guarantees ethnic Serbs in Northern Kosovo relative autonomy.

Tensions between the two governments heightened last month over a dispute related to travel documents and licence plates. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: 19 media freedom violations reported in 2022 so far

There have been 19 media freedom violations in Serbia in the first six months of 2022, according to the media

freedom watchdog Media Freedom Rapid Response. The majority of the violations were related to attacks against persons or entities within the field of journalism. [N1]

“The majority of these alerts concern cases of harassment and psychological violence, with two trends standing out: online harassment and harassment in the workplace,” said the organisation. [Journalists’ Association of Serbia]

(hi/gc)

Turkey: Thousands demonstrate in Istanbul to ban LGBTQ organisations

Several thousand people demonstrated against sexual and gender diversity in Istanbul, calling for a ban on groups that campaign for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersex and transgender people. Their demonstrations had been banned in Turkey in recent years. [NBC News]

The march had been advertised as “The Big Family Gathering” among the participants, with many supporters of conservative right groups close to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [NBC News]

Demonstrators spoke of national security issues. More than 150,000 signatures were collected to demand a new law from the Turkish parliament banning alleged “LGBTQ propaganda” including media shown on Netflix, social media and sport events. Demonstrators held banners that read, “Protecting the family is a national security issue.”

(go/gc)

Turkey plans to increase military supplies to Northern Cyprus after US lifts arms embargo on south

Turkey plans to increase its military presence in the North of Cyprus after the US announced the end of the arms embargo imposed on the island nation 35 years ago. Starting from October 1,the Southern Republic of Cyprus can obtain military equipment from the US again. [Reuters] [Politico]

Turkey’s foreign ministry replied by claiming the lift would ”further strengthen the intransigence of the

Greek-Cypriot side and negatively affect efforts to settle the Cyprus issue." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in an interview with the TV channel CNN Turk that Ankara would send more weapons, vehicles and ammunition to support the 40,000 Turkish soldiers stationed in the north.

(go/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: General election turnout at all-time low

Turnout in Italy's September 25 parliamentary elections was 63.9 percent – the lowest ever recorded in the country, the interior ministry has said. Turnout dropped 9.1 percentage points compared to the 2018 parliamentary elections, where 73 percent of the electorate voted. [ANSA] [Repubblica] (*See separate story in this issue on the elections*)

From parliamentary elections held in 1948 until the late 1970s, turnout was always around 90 percent. However, the figure has progressively decreased, especially since the start of the century. [Skytg24]

On September 25, a significant proportion of citizens failed to vote in all Italian regions, but the number of stay-at-homes was especially high in the south, where only half of eligible voters went to the polls. [ANSA]

There are three main factors behind this phenomenon, according to Nando Pagnoncelli, an Italian pollster and academic: the social marginalisation of many voters who do not feel politically represented, the passivity of those who feel it is pointless to vote for parties which are the underdogs in the polls, and a growing indifference of citizens to politics. [Corriere]

According to a study by the Italian Centre for Electoral Study, which analysed 406 general elections in Europe since 1945, Italy is among the 10 Western European countries where turnout has declined the most over the years. [cise]

The September 25 elections saw a right-wing coalition emerging victorious, triggering concern among many governments over Italy's future in Europe.

(fs/pk)

Italy: European Commission approves EUR 21bn in recovery funds

The European Commission on September 27 gave preliminary approval for the pay-out of EUR 21 billion in post-Covid recovery funds to Italy after the country met a set of targets for reforms in key policy areas. The EU's executive urged the new government in Rome to stick to reform plans amid fears that it may not do so. [Reuters] [ANSA] [ABC News]

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said: "Italy is showing continued important reform momentum in key policy areas, such as public employment and public procurement. So congratulations, Italia, and keep up the good work!" [Italian Government]

To receive the recovery funds, the outgoing Italian cabinet promptly gave final approval to a set of judicial reforms on September 28.

For Italy to gain part of a EUR 200 billion tranche earmarked for it in such funds, the European Commission set a requirement for the country to cut the length of trials by 25 percent in criminal cases and 40 percent in civil cases over five years. [Reuters] The reforms were required to become effective by the end of 2022 for Italy to receive the funding.

The reforms, approved by the outgoing government led by Prime Minister Mario Draghi, have caused controversy. They will see trials without a verdict scrapped if they drag on beyond an established

timeframe. Critics said that this would allow criminals to escape justice.

Italian Justice Minister Marta Cartabia said that the reforms would simplify some procedures and help with judges' workloads by providing for the hiring of additional clerks. [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

(mr-km/pk)

Italy aims to cut heating in homes, companies amid gas supply worries

The Italian government has announced plans to cut heating in private homes and businesses amid uncertainty over gas supplies from Russia and the prospect of energy shortages in the winter.

Italian officials announced on September 6 that heating in apartment blocks would be limited to 19 degrees Celsius, and to 17 degrees in industrial premises, with one hour less heating per day.

The authorities want to save some 3.2 billion cubic metres of gas between August and March, and an extra 2.1 bcm by seeking alternate energy sources. [Reuters] [Ansa]

Italian business owners are worried about the future. They voiced their concerns at a September 4 forum, criticising a move in July to dissolve the Italian government. Armando De Nigris, a vinegar producer, told Reuters: "Before the new government's ministers get their bearings it'll be Christmas, but we face problems that need tackling in days, not weeks."

Industry lobby group Confindustria has warned that high gas prices and political instability could cause an "economic earthquake". Some industrialists have called for ousted Prime Minister Mario Draghi to continue as a caretaker leader. [Reuters]

Draghi's policies favoured the acquisition of EU recovery funds in order to help the Italian economy.

(cg/pk)

Italy: Thousands of firms may shut as energy bills soar, warns business chief

High energy prices, which have added to problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, may force thousands of Italian firms to close, the head of the country's Confcommercio business association has warned.

In an interview with the Corriere della Sera daily, Carlo Sangalli was quoted as saying that energy prices are higher in Italy than those in Germany and France. "In terms of energy costs, our hotels, bars, restaurants and stores will pay 40-60 percent more on their bills this year than in Germany, and three times more than in France."

He added: "Already today many companies are reorganising or reducing services... Between now and the first half of 2023, at least 120,000 small businesses in the service sector are at risk... This is a cautious estimate that does not take into account the largest companies." [Confcommercio]

Italy relies heavily on imports of energy. At the beginning of the year, it imported 40 percent of its gas from Russia, a figure which in July dropped to 25 percent due to sanctions on Moscow. In early September, Italy lost much of its supply when Russian gas giant Gazprom halted flows via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline.

(mr/pk)

Italy: Schools lack 200,000 teachers, say unions

Italy is facing a severe lack of teachers that is impacting the working hours of school staff in some regions and leaving serious gaps in certain subjects, according to unions, which estimate that the country has some 200,000 teaching posts unfilled.

Patrizio Bianchi, Italy's education minister before the country held parliamentary elections in September, told broadcaster Rai Radio 1 that much had been done to alleviate staff shortages, adding: "This year ... we have hired over 50,000 [teachers] or we are hiring them."

However, he admitted that many students would be taught by older teachers, a sign of a lack of new recruits to the profession. [Corriere]

(cg/pk)

Italy: Energy sector hit by string of cyber attacks

The Italian energy industry was targeted by a series of cyber-attacks in September, though no major damage was reported.

The first target was Gestore dei Servizi Energetici, a company that promotes the development of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency. The firm was hit by malware. [Key4biz]

Next, it was the turn of energy company Eni, which was attacked by ransomware. A further victim was the Canarbino Group, a leading Italian gas and electricity supply company, which was hit by latest-generation ransomware. [Key4biz] [Key4biz]

Investigations into the attacks are ongoing. The country's Cyber Security Agency recommended that the "protection levels of energy operators' digital infrastructures" should be increased. [Ansa]

According to a report published earlier this year by CLUSIT, an association for the IT security industry in Italy, one of the groups most active in targeting Italian computer systems is the pro-Russian collective Killnet. [Key4biz]

(fs/pk)

Portuguese justice system absolved by European court in McCann case

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled against the parents of Madeleine McCann, a British child who disappeared in 2007 during a family trip to Algarve in southern Portugal, finding that the Portuguese judicial system had not failed to protect the parents' rights. [Lusa]

The ECHR said on September 20 that Portugal had given Kate and Gerry McCann a fair hearing when they sued former police inspector Goncalo Ameral for libel. Ameral had suggested on several occasions that the parents were involved in the disappearance of their young daughter. [Reuters]

A Portuguese court ruled in the McCanns' favour in 2015, ordering the former policeman to pay compensation, but the decision was reversed by Portugal's highest court two years later.

The McCanns then took their case to the European court, claiming the Portuguese judiciary had violated their right to a fair trial, to private family life and to freedom of expression. But the ECHR ruled that Portuguese courts did not fail to uphold the rights of Madeleine's parents, and absolved Ameral from the obligation to pay them damages. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Personal data of president, PM stolen in cyberattack on airline

Data belonging to Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Prime Minister Antonio Costa, and the country's intelligence chief has been stolen during a massive cyber attack on state-owned airline TAP.

Among customers whose personal information was leaked were government staff and members of the security forces.

In a letter to clients, TAP said that hackers had obtained the names, nationalities, emails, addresses, phone contacts and frequent flier numbers of customers. However, the airline said there were no signs of payment data being disclosed.

While the official number of affected clients is unknown, local media estimated the figure at around 1.5 million. [Euronews]

The attack, which was claimed by a group called Ragnar Locker, took place in August. TAP told clients on September 22 that hackers had stolen their personal data and published it on the dark web. The Portuguese prosecutor's office has opened an investigation. [RTVE] [U.S.News/Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Probe into leak of secret NATO documents

An investigation into a cyberattack against Portugal's Armed Forces General Staff was opened by the public prosecutor's office on September 13 after hundreds of classified documents sent by NATO to Portugal were extracted and then put up for sale on the dark web.

Bots were reportedly programmed to detect confidential documents and remove them in several

stages. Sources cited by Portuguese news outlet Diario de Noticias claim that a preliminary investigation has found that security rules for classified information had been broken and that non-secure connections had been used to receive and forward documents [Diario de Noticias]. Neither the US embassy in Lisbon nor the Portuguese authorities have been willing to comment on the claims.

According to Diario de Noticias, sources who are following the case described the leak as “extremely serious” and said the cyberattack was “prolonged in time and undetectable”.

The Portuguese government was reportedly informed of the cyberattack by the US intelligence services through the American embassy in Lisbon, in a direct message to Prime Minister Antonio Costa. [Lusa]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Minister quits after pregnant woman’s death amid health service crisis

Portugal’s health minister has resigned amid outrage over the death of a pregnant woman who did not receive treatment in Lisbon’s main hospital because of a lack of space. The case, which follows similar incidents in the summer, came after months of crisis in the country’s health service.

The patient, who had been admitted with breathing problems, suffered a heart attack while being transferred to another hospital due to a lack of capacity in the neonatal service of the Santa Maria hospital. The latter said that the patient had been stabilised and that such transfers were a “frequent procedure.” [The Guardian]

According to the President of the National Association of Public Health Doctors, Portugal’s health system has been afflicted with structural problems for decades, including low wages, outdated equipment and inefficient bureaucracy.

Portugal has an excess mortality rate of 23.9 percent, four times the European Union average, and child mortality is at its highest since 2018. [The Guardian]

On September 9, Manuel Pizarro was appointed as health minister after Marta Temido resigned from the position. [RTP]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Aid package for families to soften pain of inflation

Portuguese President Marcelo de Sousa on September 5 signed into law a government decree introducing special measures to help families cope with inflation, which has reached a 30-year high. Prime Minister Antonio Costa said the EUR 2.4 billion package was "exclusively dedicated to families". [Euronews]

Among the measures are a payment of EUR 125 to each citizen with an income of below EUR 2,700 a month as well as EUR 50 for each dependent child aged under 24. Senior citizens' pensions will be increased by 50 percent.

An increase in carbon taxes will be suspended for longer, and the country's fuel tax will be reduced until the end of the year. [Lusa]

Portugal's national minimum wage is EUR 822 a month, one of the lowest in the European Union. [Euronews] The country's annual inflation rate reached 8.9 percent in August. [Instituto Nacional de Estatística]

(msa/pk)

Spain: Catalan separatists hold rally to renew independence movement

Nearly 150,000 Catalan separatists gathered in Barcelona at an annual march on September 11 in support of the Catalan independence movement.

Five years have passed since a failed attempt for Catalan independence from Spain in 2017. Since then, there has been conflict among separatists on how to move forward.

Earlier this year, the Spanish government and regional government of Catalonia opened dialogue aiming to improve relations after a spyware scandal in May involving Catalan leaders. [Europe Monthly July 2022] [El Pais]

The Catalan National Assembly (ANC), a civil group that organised the rally, is opposed to the discussions between the Spanish national and Catalan regional officials.

Catalonia's regional president, Pere Aragones, has said that he won't renounce his promise to press for an

independence referendum, but has defended the talks with the Spanish government as crucial to aiding fellow Catalan separatists in the legal aftermath of the 2017 breakaway attempt.

A spokesperson for Aragones' party, the Republican Left of Catalonia, said: "Let's not mistake who our real opponent is: the Spanish state." [Associated Press]

The government admitted in May that the phones of 18 Catalan leaders had been hacked by the country's CNI intelligence agency.

Separatists' rights were violated: UN committee

Meanwhile, an investigation by an independent United Nations committee has found that Catalan separatist leaders' rights were violated by the Spanish government after it suspended them from public duties before they were convicted over the 2017 failed independence bid by the region. [abc]

Oriol Junqueras, the Catalonian Vice-President at the time, as well as eight other individuals received jail sentences after being charged with "rebellion". This charge was later reduced to "sedition" by a court ruling in 2019.

Four of them raised complaints with the UN Human Rights Committee over their suspension before their convictions were announced. The UN committee found this decision, taken by the Spanish constitutional court, was "not based on reasonable and objective grounds provided for by the law."

Helene Tigroudja, a member of the UN committee, said: "The committee took an important step in affirming that the safeguards against the restrictions of political rights must be applied more rigorously if these restrictions occur prior to, rather than after, a conviction." [Reuters]

All nine separatist leaders were pardoned by leftist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez in 2021.

Pro-Catalan groups welcomed the UN committee's findings. Carles Puigdemont, a former president of the north-eastern Catalonia region, said in a Twitter post that the committee's report was a "slap in the face" for Madrid.

He added: "An EU member state is violating political rights, and this is a real threat to democracy in Europe." [Euronews]

Puigdemont was the head of Catalonia's regional government during a 2017 plebiscite on independence

that according to Spanish courts was illegal.

(km-cg/pk)

Spain: PM starts campaign for municipal elections

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has launched his Socialist party's campaign for municipal elections in May 2023 by promoting the government's latest social welfare package, which is designed to help reduce Spaniards' rising energy bills. [Euractiv] [Euractiv]

At a recent citizen's forum, Sanchez also pledged to improve worker conditions, saying: "We place ourselves on the side of the working middle class, which is 95 percent of our society, and defend the general interest against particular and minority interests, however powerful they may be." [Euractiv]

The May municipal elections will be a test for Sanchez's left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, which maintains a minority coalition government with leftist party Unidas Podemos, ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2023.

Polls have shown that the conservative People's Party, the country's main opposition grouping, is on course to win a clear majority in the parliamentary ballot.

As he attempts to tackle rising power prices, Sanchez has accused energy companies in Spain of undermining his efforts. He has also called for unity amid Russia's war against Ukraine, saying: "Unity is fundamental in the face of an aggressor such as [Vladimir] Putin." Spain has sent military aid to the beleaguered Eastern European nation after it was invaded by Russia in February.

(cg/pk)

Spain: Sex club owners protest at prostitution bill

Members of the sex work industry gathered in Madrid on September 12 to protest against a bill that would penalize sex club owners, pimps and prostitution customers with up to four years in jail.

The proposed law, which still needs to be passed by parliament, is supported by the governing Spanish Socialist Workers' party (PSOE) and is part of a

progressive push to protect women's rights. The drive is controversial and has split the women's rights movement, Reuters reported.

Many owners of sex work businesses reject government figures which indicate that 90 percent of sex work in Spain is forced.

"We ask the socialist party to withdraw the bill, that implies an actual abolition of prostitution and condemns us to work underground," Susana Pastor, the head of the Platform against Abolition organisation and owner of an apartment used for sex work, was cited as saying by the Associated Press.

(km/pk)

Spain: Parliament approves tougher law on sexual consent

The Spanish parliament has voted in new rules on sexual consent, dubbed the "only yes means yes" law, in a move campaigners hope will give more protection to women.

Spain's Equality Minister Irene Montero said: "Our country is finally enshrining in law that consent must be the central element of our sexual relationships." She added: "Women will no longer have to show that there was violence or intimidation in order for [a case] to be recognised as sexual aggression." [Euronews] [Guardian]

Pressure to change the definition of consent in Spain mounted after five men who took turns to have sex with a 14-year-old girl in 2016 were convicted of sexual abuse, rather than rape. A court said the girl, who was unconscious after drinking, did not fight back and the men were not violent. [Euronews]

In total, 205 members of parliament voted in favour of the new law, while 141 opposed it and three abstained. Opposition parties that voted against the bill – including the populist Vox and centre-right Popular Party – said that it lacked legal clarity and aimed "not to protect women but to attack men."

Under the new measures, more support will be given to victims of sexual crimes, and women will have better protection against physical and online harassment.

(cg/pk)

Spain moves to curb energy prices while taxing the rich

The Spanish government has announced a range of measures to curb high energy prices as inflation runs rampant, including the reduction of VAT on gas from 21 percent down to just 5 percent. The measure will be in force until the start of 2023.

The Socialist-led government has also proposed a temporary tax on the wealthiest 1 percent of Spain's population beginning in 2023 to combat inflation and help pay for its welfare state.

At the same time, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said that energy restrictions on private households and businesses were out of the question. Speaking to Spanish radio station Cadena Ser, he said: "As we enter autumn and winter, it seems reasonable to try to lower heating bills."

The government has also announced that it will extend a cap on gas prices to support heavy industry and power plants. A deal with the EU allows Iberian nations to subsidise gas to generate power. [Reuters]

Year-on-year inflation in Spain surpassed 10 percent in June and has remained high, though the government expects it to fall below 8 percent by the end of the year. Spanish Economy Minister Nadia Calvino said: "There is a lot of uncertainty due to the war" in Ukraine. [Euronews]

Meanwhile, Spanish trade unions are requesting a rise in the minimum wage so that it reaches 60 percent of national average pay, a move that is opposed by employer associations. [Euractiv]

Despite rising prices, Sanchez said that Spain was in a "much more comfortable and much more secure" situation than other European countries which are highly dependent on Russian gas. [Euractiv]

Spanish electricity prices reached records in August, hitting EUR 307.80 per megawatt hour, a 19.3 percent increase over July. The past three months have seen continuous price hikes. Spanish consumer's association FACUA said it was the "most expensive August in history." [Euractiv]

The government has already made moves to implement radical changes, including limiting the use of air conditioning.

Tax on millionnaires?

As an additional move to combat inflation, the government has proposed a temporary tax on the wealthiest 1 percent of the population.

The new tax, the level of which has not yet been announced, would last for two years, beginning in 2023, and come on top of a windfall tax on banks and energy companies that was unveiled in July. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

In a speech on September 23, Sanchez said: "We are proposing a redistribution of the effort, among those who have the most, to fund the welfare state, which is everybody's."

The proposal is being supported by the left-wing populist Unidas Podemos party, a junior partner in the governing coalition, which is pushing for the tax to become permanent.

But the conservative opposition People's Party has expressed concern. Its leader, Alberto Feijoo, said that Spain should try to "attract wealth and investors instead of kicking them out." [Associated Press] [Bloomberg]

The European Commission has asked Spain to return to fiscal stability and strengthen its revenues. [Reuters]

(cg-km/pk)

Spain: Gov't offers free train tickets, aims to freeze food costs amid high inflation

The Spanish government has unveiled new measures including free train tickets to help ease the impact of inflation. But a proposal that aims to freeze the prices of some food items has been rejected by a string of supermarket chains.

The government is seeking an agreement with retailers to fix the price of a range of food products until January 2023. Spain's annual inflation reached 10.8 percent in July, the highest in 38 years, and has remained high. [El Mundo] [Reuters 1]

Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz and Consumer Minister Alberto Garzon on September 12 met with large supermarket chains including Mercadona, which leads the country with a 25 percent market share, to seek an agreement.

The government proposal has caused controversy, with some retailers saying that they already have

discounts in place to combat inflation. Other businesses see the move as price regulation. But Diaz and Garzon consider the move "legal and based on the competition principle." [Reuters 2] [El Pais]

Meanwhile, the Spanish government on September 1 began handing out free train tickets for journeys of under 300 kilometres in another effort to combat inflation.

The initiative will cost the government EUR 221 million and is part of a EUR 9.5 billion package announced in June to help with the rising cost of living. [Reuters 3] [Euronews]

The free tickets, which will be available until December 31, also aim to reduce Spanish dependence on Russian oil. In addition, the initiative is expected to have long-term environmental benefits, helping to fight climate change. [New York Times]

Spain's minister for transportation, Raquel Sanchez, said on Twitter: "The new passes are useful to help [...] the middle and working classes."

(km/pk)

Spain: Gov't plans to spend EUR 1.89 bn on energy-efficient housing

The Spanish government has approved a EUR 1.89 billion renovation plan to make housing in the country more energy efficient.

The goal of the project, partly funded by the European Union, is to increase the number of housing renovations per year from 30,000 homes to 300,000 by 2030. [La Vanguardia]

Spain's Housing Minister Raquel Sanchez said at a news conference that the government will finance the project with aid from the EU that is intended to help member states overcome the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. [Reuters]

The renovations aim to improve the energy efficiency and structural quality of buildings, and to strengthen the construction industry to help the Spanish economy.

The funds will be divided, with EUR 1.39 billion to finance housing renovation in Spain this year. The remaining EUR 500 million will be allocated in 2023 to

offer affordable rental housing in the energy-efficient buildings.

(km/pk)

Spain: Delivery firm fined for allegedly violating labour laws

The Socialist-led government Spanish government has fined delivery company Glovo EUR 79 million, saying that it violated labour laws.

The fine was announced on September 21 by Spanish Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz and comes after trade unions called for an investigation into the Delivery Hero-owned company. [Forbes]

Glovo, which operates in 25 countries, was found to have violated a 2021 Spanish workers' rights law that required all gig-workers to be given official labour contracts. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

The Spanish labour ministry reported that Glovo had refused such contracts to over 10,000 employees. The company was reported to have treated the workers as self-employed rather than as staff.

"We are talking about workers who are actually not self-employed, and so the full weight of the law will fall on the company," Diaz said.

Glovo has said that it plans to appeal against the decision, claiming that the case dates to before the 2021 labour law was implemented. [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Spain: Domestic cleaners and carers to have labour benefits

Spain passed a law on September 6 that will grant domestic cleaners and carers the right to job protection and unemployment benefits.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said that the measure, which will take effect in October, would "put an end to an unacceptable injustice" while Spanish Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz said the law would benefit over 370,000 people. [Associated Press]

The bill was supported and campaigned for by domestic workers and unions who argued that many

cleaners and carers often work up to 60 hours a week without labour protection, and can be dismissed without a justifying cause. [Euronews]

Diaz said that the law follows recommendations from the European Union and the International Labour Organization on establishing rights for private household workers.

(km/pk)

Spain: Fuel leak from cargo ship causes environmental concerns

A cargo ship heading to the Netherlands suffered damage and began leaking fuel into the bay of Gibraltar after a collision with a gas tanker.

Oil booms were put in place to try to contain the leak. Both the Gibraltar Port authorities and Spanish Maritime Rescue service worked to collect any fuel that escaped this barrier. [Euronews 1]

The spill has raised environmental concerns in both Spain and Gibraltar amid reports of oil-covered birds in the area. The government of Gibraltar said that it was "taking every possible measure both on land and at sea to minimise the environmental impact of the spill."

By September 2, an oil slick had reached Spanish beaches, according to the mayor of the town of La Linea de la Concepcion in southern Spain. [Associated Press]

The captain of the damaged cargo ship was detained for allegedly not obeying orders from the port authorities after the collision between his vessel and the gas tanker on August 29. [Euronews 2]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Gov’t plans energy-saving drive, electricity price cap for homes

The Austrian government has introduced new measures to tackle the impact of rising power prices and inflation, announcing a cap on electricity bills for households and an energy-saving campaign.

A EUR 4 billion package that will put a cap on electricity bills for homes is expected to come into force from December 1 and will last until mid-2024. [Burgenland]

The price of electricity will be capped at 10 cents per kilowatt hour for all households up to a limit of around 2,900 kWh. For consumption beyond that, the market price will have to be paid. According to experts, around half of Austrian households consume less than 2,500 kWh per year. [Der Standard]

The price cap has been criticised by the head of the Austrian Institute for Economic Research, Gabriel Felbermayr, who said that around half of households will be subsidised and will not have an incentive to save energy. [Die Presse]

Meanwhile, the government has launched a power-saving drive to last until March 2023. Climate Protection Minister Leonore Gewessler said the aim is to “save energy so that there is enough for everyone in the end”. [ORF AT]

The name of the campaign, “Mission 11”, refers to a figure of 11 percent of power use that the Austrian Energy Agency says can be saved. [Die Presse]

“Mission 11” includes energy-saving tips such as lowering heating temperatures by two degrees, disconnecting appliances that are on a standby mode, showering instead of bathing, and using LED light bulbs. Austrians are also being advised to use cold water when they are brushing their teeth. [The Local]

Environmental organisations like Greenpeace and WWF consider the campaign to be a step in the right direction, but say other measures, such as the enforcement of energy efficiency laws, are also needed. [Euractiv]

(vs/pk)

Austria: Protests against inflation

More than 30,000 people protested against inflation in the streets of all nine federal states of Austria on September 17 ahead of an autumn round of wage negotiations between unionists and employers. The demonstrations were organised by the Austrian Trade Union Federation (OGB) under the slogan of "Prices down". [Kurier]

The demonstrators were protesting against what they say is the government's ineffectiveness in tackling a cost-of-living crisis and its repeated ignorance of unions' proposals to fight inflation. [Der Standard]

Protesters demanded higher wages, suspension of VAT on food and fuel, government guarantees of energy supplies, and a freeze on rent increases. [Der Standard] [Peoples Dispatch]

The OGB received support from President Alexander Van der Bellen, who, although he did not attend the protest, expressed his solidarity with demonstrators on Twitter. [ORF AT]

Trade unionists have demanded starting salaries of EUR 2,000 gross a month in all sectors. Jobs in Austria's industry sector largely pay such salaries already, but wages in other sectors such as trade and tourism lag behind.

According to unions, up to a fifth of employees in Austria – around 800,000 people – earn less than EUR 2,000 gross per month. Two thirds of them are women. Around 180,000 employees work in jobs where a collective agreement stipulates a minimum wage of less than EUR 1,700.

Wolfgang Katzian, the head of the Austrian Trade Union Federation, said that he expected difficult negotiations during several rounds of collective bargaining this autumn and in the spring. [Die Presse] [Der Standard]

(vs/pk)

Austria: Six to stand trial on terrorist charges over 2020 Vienna attack

The trial of six defendants accused of assisting a gunman who carried out a deadly terror attack in the Austrian capital two years ago is due to begin on October 16.

In the November 2, 2020 attack in Vienna, the gunman – a sympathiser of the Islamic State extremist jihadist group – killed four people and wounded 23 before he was himself killed by the police. [Der Standard]

The six defendants face charges of involvement in terrorist crimes and membership of a terrorist organisation. One of them is accused of having arranged two firearms for the gunman through an intermediary. [AP/Washington Post]

So far, a total of 17 days have been scheduled for the trial, but a verdict will not be handed down until February 2023 at the earliest, a court spokeswoman said. [Vienna AT]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: Gas exports banned

Croatia's Economy Minister Davor Filipovic has said that the country plans to ban exports of domestically produced natural gas from one of its largest companies, the oil and gas group INA, and will ask the firm to increase gas production by 10 percent. [Euractiv]

All gas produced in Croatia will be sold to the state-owned energy company HEP, which will distribute it to households and public institutions. [Euractiv]

INA recently faced a corruption scandal in which five people were detained, including one of the firm's executives, amid suspicions they were involved in forming a company accused of receiving cheap supplies then selling them abroad for a handsome profit. [Reuters]

INA's largest shareholder is Hungarian company MOL with a 49.1 percent stake, while the second largest shareholder is the Croatian government with a 44.8 percent stake.

MOL and the government in Zagreb have been in dispute over INA's management and strategy for most of the past decade. [Off-Shore Technology]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: Gov't unveils crisis package to tackle spiralling prices

The Croatian government on September 8 unveiled a EUR 2.8 billion package to help households and businesses in the face of soaring prices and an energy crisis. The measures will be in force until the end of March 2023. [Euractiv]

The package includes caps on electricity prices for companies, public institutions and households as well as limits on natural gas prices for households. Prices for food staples including sunflower oil, milk, sugar, flour, pork and chicken will also be capped. [Euractiv]

Households will pay EUR 59 per megawatt hour of electricity, or EUR 88 if their consumption exceeds 2,500 kilowatts. For public institutions and non-profit organisations, the price will be capped at EUR 62 per MWh. Electricity prices for businesses will be capped at EUR 180/MWh and EUR 230/MWh, depending on consumption. [Dnevnik]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said that the government is also considering introducing a new special tax for companies that make excessive profits. [Seenews]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: President dismisses head of military intelligence

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic has initiated a procedure to dismiss the head of the country's Military Security and Intelligence Agency (VSOA). [Index]

The move was announced by the Office of the President after Croatia's National Security Council found misconduct following a September audit of the agency's operations and accounting.

The president's office said in a statement that Milanovic, in view of the violations uncovered, considers that the head of the agency, Major General

Ivica Kinder, can no longer perform his duties. [Euractiv]

In July, broadcaster Nova TV reported that agency members embezzled at least EUR 400,000 during official assignments in Lebanon, Poland and Lithuania. [Jutarnji] [Oslobodjenje]

Kinder was appointed to head the agency in 2015 and his second term was to last until July 2023. Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at a press conference on September 26 that Kinder's dismissal would take effect the day an agreement was reached on who would replace him. [Government of the Republic of Croatia]

(vs/pk)

Czech opposition party wins municipal elections in most major cities

The populist ANO party, which has been in opposition since last year in the national parliament, won in 17 out of 27 major cities in the Czech Republic's municipal elections on September 23 and 24.

However, in the two largest cities, Prague and Brno, parties that belong to the country's ruling centre-right "Together" – a coalition led by Prime Minister Peter Fiala – scored the best result. [iRozhlas CZ]

Tomio Okamura's right-wing populist SPD party achieved a striking result in the municipal elections, winning 492 seats, up from 161 in the last such ballot four years ago.

The ANO party of Andrej Babis, a billionaire populist and eurosceptic who was ousted as prime minister in October 2021 parliamentary elections, improved its tally to 1,748 seats on municipal councils from 1,684 in 2018. [iRozhlas CZ]

The left-wing Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia won 68 percent fewer seats than four years ago. The centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party gained 59 percent fewer votes.

The ballot saw almost 200,000 candidates running for 60,000 seats on local councils across the country.

At the same time, elections were held for 27 seats in the Senate, the country's upper house of parliament. One third of the seats in the Senate are filled every two years, with members elected for six-year terms. [English Radio CZ]

In the Senate elections, which took place on October 1, the centre-right "Together" coalition dominated. The coalition comprises the Civic Democrats (ODS) party, which won eight seats, the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL), which won seven seats, and the TOP 09 party, which won three seats. [Zpravy Aktualne]

Babis's ANO party won three seats in the Senate. A slew of smaller groupings won one seat each. [Denik N] [CT 24] [Aktuality]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Energy supplies secured until April, says finance minister

The Czech Republic has secured winter gas supplies and sufficient energy until the end of April, the country's finance minister, Zbynek Stanjura, has said. He added that the government was looking for ways to secure affordable energy prices but warned that these would not be as low as in previous years.

According to a report by the finance ministry, a halt of gas supplies by Russia would have a significant macroeconomic impact on the Czech Republic only from the beginning of the 2023-2024 heating season.

In August, the Czech National Bank estimated in a report that if Russian gas supplies were to be permanently cut off, the Czech economy would face the biggest slump in its modern history, a further acceleration of inflation and interest rates at above 10 percent.

The Czech ministry of finance estimated that under this scenario, real GDP would fall by up to 2.9 percent next year and by up to 1.6 percent in 2024. [English Radio CZ] [English Radio CZ] [Dennik N] [Czech National Bank report] [iRozhlas] [Czech Ministry of Finance]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Gov't to cap electricity and gas prices

The Czech government has decided to cap electricity and gas prices in a measure expected to enter into force from November. [Denik N]

Small consumers – households and sole traders – will pay a maximum of around EUR 0.24 including VAT per kilowatt hour of electricity, while gas will cost a maximum of about EUR 0.12 per kWh. The same prices will be guaranteed for municipalities and public institutions. [Denik N]

The cap on prices will set state coffers back an estimated maximum of around EUR 5.3 billion. To cover these costs, the country will use revenues from all state-owned companies, an upcoming windfall profits tax and revenues from emission allowances. [Hospodarske Noviny]

Tomio Okamura, the leader of the right-wing, populist Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) opposition party said that the government measures were too little and too late. Former industry and trade minister Karel Havlicek from the populist ANO opposition party also expressed disappointment with the government's measures. Both consider the price caps to be too high. [Denik N]

(vs/pk)

Hungary: Public institutions ordered to cut gas use by a quarter

Government officials announced on September 8 that Hungarian public institutions will have to cut gas use by 25 percent and that, in winter, temperatures in such buildings should be no higher than 18 degrees Celsius.

The measures, which are being introduced despite Hungary's friendly ties with Moscow, come as countries across Europe scramble to find replacements for Russian energy supplies.

The new power-saving rules will not apply to Hungarian hospitals and residential care institutions. It is still to be determined whether public schools will have to follow such measures. [Euractiv]

The prime minister's chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, also called on Hungarian consumers to use electricity and gas sparingly, and said authorities would control firewood prices to help households stock up for winter. [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty]

Meanwhile, Peter Boros, head of a Hungarian union of civil servants and public service workers, warned that keeping temperatures at no more than 18 degrees would pose "a health risk for those performing sedentary work and intellectual work". [hvg.hu]

Russian energy supplies have been cut back to a host of European countries which have imposed sanctions on Moscow over its war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto, whose country has been criticised for its friendly ties with the Kremlin, announced in the summer that Russian state energy giant Gazprom would deliver more gas to Hungary in September and October. [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty]

(msa/pk)

Polish popstar's blasphemy conviction violated right to free speech, says European court

The blasphemy conviction of a Polish pop star for suggesting that the Bible was written under the influence of alcohol and narcotics violated her right to freedom of expression, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled.

Pop singer Dorota Rabczewska, whose stage name is Doda, told a journalist in an interview that she believed in a "higher power" but that she had more faith in science than in "incredible stories" written by "someone wasted from drinking wine and smoking weed".

A Polish court convicted her for offending people's religious feelings, adding that her statement was deliberately insulting and showed contempt for believers.

The singer took her case to the European Court of Human Rights, which on September 15 ruled that while her words might have been shocking to some, they did not amount to hate speech, and that the Polish courts had failed to consider the context of her statement.

The European court said that the pop star had been responding to a question about her private life and that her answer was phrased in a way designed to attract a young audience. The court ruled that her right to freedom of expression prevailed over the right of others to have their religious feelings protected. It awarded her EUR 10,000 in damages. [ECHR, Rabczewska v. Poland]

(aml/pk)

Poland: Head of state TV dismissed, paving way for possible return to government

The head of state broadcaster TVP – who has been described by critics as the chief propagandist of Poland's ruling party – has been suddenly dismissed, leading to speculation that the move paves the way for his possible return to government. [Polsat News] [TVN24]

Observers have commented on the unusual timing of Jacek Kurski's dismissal. With parliamentary elections taking place next year, he had been expected to head a TVP campaign to sway voters in favour of the government.

Radoslaw Fogiel, a spokesperson for Poland's ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, said in a social media post that Kurski would soon have "new tasks." [TVN24] [Notes From Poland] [Polsat News]

Kurski was once a deputy culture minister before being appointed to lead TVP in 2016. [Notes From Poland] [Polsat News]

The public broadcaster has faced accusations of becoming a vituperative mouthpiece for the ruling party under Kurski's direction. TVP regularly slams the government's political opponents, criticises liberals and others seen as hostile to conservative values, and rails against the EU and Germany, accusing them of acting against Polish interests.

Robert Kwiatkowski of the Lewica (The Left) opposition party said the National Media Council – the body that nominates and recalls the heads of Polish public media – did not provide a competitive selection process to appoint Kurski's successor. [Notes From Poland] [TVN24]

The media council – of which Kwiatkowski is himself a member – voted to appoint former TVP board member Mateusz Matyszkowicz to head the broadcaster as Kurski's successor. [Notes From Poland] [Polsat News] [TVN24]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Political crisis as ruling coalition breaks up

A major partner has walked away from Slovakia's ruling coalition amid dispute over key policies, leaving the country with an unstable minority government after long-brewing tensions boiled over. [Reuters] [Dennikn] Amid a political crisis, the prospect of snap elections now hangs in the air.

The Slovak government comprised the centre-right Ordinary People's party (OL'aNO), the centre-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the right-wing We Are Family and the centrist For the People (ZL). These parties had formed a centre-right coalition after 2020 elections in which OL'aNO outpaced its main rival, the populist SMER-SD party.

On September 5, after an ultimatum issued earlier this year, Economy Minister and SaS leader Richard Sulik pulled his party out of the ruling coalition and resigned from his government position alongside the education, justice and foreign ministers, all of whom are members of the SaS. [AP] [Reuters] [Spectator] [Pravda] [TASR]

Sulik had threatened to walk away from the coalition if OL'aNO chief and Finance Minister Igor Matovic was not removed from his position by Prime Minister Eduard Heger by the end of August.

Heger stood by his fellow party member and refused to sack Matovic, who is considered to be the most unpopular Slovak politician of all time, boasting an 88 percent disapproval rating. [Euractiv]

Matovic was prime minister until he was forced to resign after procuring the Russian-made Sputnik Covid vaccine against the wishes of his coalition partners. He handed over the reins to Heger, who hails from the same party.

Anti-corruption credentials questioned

The SaS and OL'aNO party bosses had clashed at the start of May in the wake of a scandal which saw members of OL'aNO failing to vote in favour of lifting the parliamentary immunity of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, who had been charged with various crimes. The OL'aNO members in question were promptly expelled for failing to follow their party's voting lines.

Following that episode, Sulik publicly questioned the viability of the coalition and its ability to deliver on its pledges to fight corruption. Tensions came to a head in July after Matovic successfully passed an anti-inflation and family assistance bill, which the SaS was against, with the help of a far-right party. That move prompted Sulik to call for Matovic to be removed.

What remains of the coalition must now attempt to govern the country while no longer commanding a parliamentary majority. On September 14, Heger's government failed to open a new session of parliament, a move that needs to be approved by 76 MPs. Heger mustered only 71 [Euronews]

Snap elections?

If parliament cannot be opened within three months, then snap elections are automatically called.

Sulik, however, announced that his party wouldn't block legislation on the ratification of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, or energy bills. [Euractiv]

Opposition parties are manoeuvring to take advantage of the crisis, with the populist SMER-SD spearheading a referendum on whether the government should resign and whether the constitution should be changed to allow a popular vote to shorten parliament's term.

President Caputova confirmed on September 12 that the vote will take place in November or December after the opposition gathered some 380,000 signatures and presented them to the government. [Slovak Spectator]

(cg/pk)

Slovakia: Extremism has grown stronger, says interior ministry

Right-wing extremism – in the form of both opinions and acts – has grown stronger in Slovakia in recent years, according to a report published by the interior ministry. [The Slovak Spectator]

The Monitoring Report on the State of Extremism in the Slovak Republic, covering 2020 and 2021, said that ultra-nationalists have spread intolerance directed especially against the government, the legislature, and Slovakia's membership of the EU and NATO. [Teraz]

In 2020, there was a marked increase in the spread of conspiracy and disinformation narratives through the internet and social networks, according to the report.

In 2021, up to half of extremist crimes investigated by the police were committed via e-mail or online, said the report. Conspiracy theories mainly concerned the causes of the coronavirus pandemic, the ways in which the Covid virus is spread, as well as the possibility of using it as a biological weapon. [Teraz]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia mulls nationalising main electricity producer: finance minister

Slovak finance minister Igor Matovic has said that his country may seek to buy out shareholders in major electricity producer Slovenske Elektrarne amid a Europe-wide energy crisis, but only as a “last resort”. [Pravda]

Slovenske Elektrarne is owned by Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky’s EPH and Italian energy giant Enel, which together own two-thirds of the shares. The rest belongs to the Slovak economy ministry. [Euractiv]

Slovenske Elektrarne operates Slovakia’s two nuclear power plants – Jaslovske Bohunice and Mochovce. A test operation of the third unit in Mochovce started at the beginning of September and the unit is expected to be put into full operation in early 2023. [Pravda]

Matovic said on September 11 that acquiring a full stake would allow the government to have control over pricing policies, which would guarantee fair prices. He did not say how much it would cost the government to buy out the shares. He added that nationalisation of Slovenske Elektrarne would be a “solution of the last resort”. [Reuters]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: Universities warn they will close unless more funds agreed

Slovak universities have warned that they will send students home to study unless the government vows to increase funding for such academic institutions amid spiralling energy bills. [HN Online]

According to the Slovak Rectors’ Conference, which is one of several bodies representing higher education in the country, the basic operation of public universities has been endangered by budget cuts this year and last, and by a projected funding decline in 2023 of EUR 72 million in total.

The rectors have said that universities are on the verge of collapse. They warned that unless the government meets a series of demands by November 17, they will close their institutions and students will have to study from home. [Slovak Rector’s Conference]

The rectors want the government to reverse the negative trend in university funding and to restore this to at least the 2020 level. They also want cash help to cope with spiralling energy bills. [Teraz]

At a ceremony marking the start of the new academic year at a Slovak university on September 20, Prime Minister Eduard Heger pledged to address the impact of the energy crisis on higher education. [Slovak Rector's Conference]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia still has no ombudsman, prompting fears that rights are at risk

Slovakia's failure to appoint a new ombudsman after the former holder of the post left in March has prompted fears that citizens' rights are at risk. [Dennik N]

The ombudsman's office is an independent body that assesses whether Slovak public authorities have violated the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens. [The Slovak Spectator]

Slovak law does not allow an outgoing ombudsman to remain in office until a successor is appointed. The country's parliament has not yet elected a replacement for Maria Patakyova, the former holder of the post, who left when her term expired on March 29. The deadline for submitting nominations has been continuously postponed. [Dennik N]

The ombudsman's office is paralysed for the first time in its history, and its backlog of cases recently exceeded 400, according to The Slovak Spectator newspaper.

(vs/pk)

Slovenia: Parliament passes emergency energy bill ahead of winter

The Slovenian parliament passed emergency measures on September 13 to help the country cope with rising energy prices and inflation. [Dnevnik]

Under the moves, contained in three separate bills, the government will be able to order state-owned companies to secure energy supplies for the winter. Parts of private energy companies would be managed

by the national grid operator in an emergency situation.

If power plants are required to switch fuel sources, for example, from gas to diesel, they will not need new environmental permits.

The government will also introduce rules on the maximum heating temperatures allowed in public buildings, while ensuring that such buildings as well as private households will be covered by gas providers should any energy company fail to provide supplies.

Meanwhile, EUR 1.6 billion has been budgeted to allow Slovenia's largest energy companies, GEN Energija, Geoplin and HSE, to source foreign gas and electricity, should it be required. [Euractiv] The energy bills were passed with no parliamentary opposition. [Delo]

Ljubljana has also made moves to bring down the cost of living, including capping the price of heating oil based on local market prices and the euro/dollar exchange rate. This measure has been bolstered by the lifting of a CO2 levy for heating oil, as well as for diesel, gas and petrol. [Euractiv] [Delo]

In a separate bill, parliament has approved a EUR 41 million package that will provide one-off payments to 100,000 vulnerable people struggling with the rising cost of living. In addition, a EUR 40 million package will help private companies cope with rocketing energy bills.

The first package is to be directed towards pensioners, welfare recipients and disabled people in the form of EUR 200 hand-outs. A total of EUR 27 million has been allocated for 2022, and the rest for the first three months of 2023. [Euractiv]

The second package is intended to cover 30 to 70 percent of private companies' energy bills. Both laws were also adopted by parliament without a single vote against. [Dnevnik]

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Gov't plans EUR 13bn in guarantees for power firms

The Danish government has announced a new policy to support power companies amid Europe's energy crisis, offering some EUR 13.45 billion in guarantees to ensure liquidity for firms that need to meet major collateral requirements.

Speaking at a press conference, Danish Business Minister Simon Kollerup said that the move "will help ensure the stability on the power market." [Reuters]

At the start of September, the Danish parliament adopted a range of measures in response to soaring prices and inflation. The moves include electricity bills being reduced by EUR 0.54 per kilowatt hour for the remainder of the year, with a further decrease planned for next year.

Additional measures include a bill that seeks to set aside some EUR 270 million to fight inflation, and a limit on how much landlords can increase rents for the next two years, with the figure capped at 4 percent. [Politiken]

The Danish government has already passed packages including pension increases to help those struggling the most to cope with high prices.

(cg/pk)

Finland: PM still popular, despite partying scandal

Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin is still popular among voters, recent polls have shown, despite a wave of criticism after videos were posted on social media

that showed her drinking and dancing at a private party during her summer holiday.

The prime minister made a tearful public apology on August 24 in which she said she needed "joy, light and fun amidst the dark clouds." She added that she had "learned her lesson." [Guardian] Many critics said that it was irresponsible for a person in her position to take part in such activities.

Mikko Karna, a member of parliament from the liberal Centre Party – a coalition partner of Marin's governing Social Democrats – demanded in a Tweet that Marin take a drug test, adding: "The people are entitled to expect this from their prime minister." [Guardian]

Marin then took a test to prove that she had not been under the influence of illegal substances at the time the video was taken. The drug test yielded a negative result.

Marin's popularity as a leader has been unmatched by any prime minister since 2011, with a current approval rating of 58 percent, up from 48 percent during the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking to the Maaseudun Tulevaisuus newspaper, political science professor Kimmo Gronlund said: "It cannot be seen that Marin has suffered from this commotion. The uproar over the prime minister's partying has not affected Marin's personal popularity."

In a show of international support for Finland's young premier, former US Secretary of State and ex-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton told Marin in a tweet to "keep dancing". [IndiaTimes] [Euronews] [Politico]

Marin became the world's youngest prime minister in 2019, when she was just 34, following the victory of a coalition led by her centre-left Social Democrat party in parliamentary elections that year, and the subsequent planned retirement of Social Democrat leader and Prime Minister Antti Rinne a few months later.

Finland recently took centre stage in global politics after it applied, alongside Sweden, to join NATO amid a growing threat from Russia. [AlJazeera] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(cg/pk)

Finland: Loans worth EUR 10bn to help firms amid energy crunch

The Finnish government on September 4 announced a loan and guarantee programme to ensure that energy companies facing high power prices and rising inflation can continue to operate during the winter.

The initiative, which is planned to be implemented until the end 2023, will provide EUR 10 billion in liquid loans to at-risk energy companies. [yle] [HelsinginSanomat] [aamulehti] [HelsinkiTimes]

Speaking at a press briefing, Finance Minister Annika Saarikko said that the move was a "last resort," adding that "the loan terms are exceptionally strict." The money will have to be paid back within two years. [HelsinkiTimes]

Many Finnish companies have already announced they aim to switch to night-time production during the winter in order to keep costs down. [Euractiv]

Helsinki is hoping to receive financial support for the initiative from the European Commission. Prime Minister Sanna Marin said that Finland "cannot manage this on its own." [Euractiv]

Additional measures were announced on September 1 as part of the Finnish budget for 2023. VAT on electricity bills is to be cut from 24 percent to 10 percent from December until April. Low-income and at-risk families are to receive financial support worth "hundreds of euros," according to the prime minister. [Euractiv]

The country's 2023 budget is expected to overrun by EUR 8.1 billion due to the inclusion of such aid packages.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Journalists on trial accused of revealing defence secrets

Three Finnish journalists are on trial and facing prison time for allegedly revealing national defence secrets in a 2017 article.

A report they wrote for the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat took a look at the activities of the country's defence forces, specifically the Finnish Intelligence Research Centre, a military intelligence unit. The story focused on operations conducted by the centre and its location. [AP]

Two reporters, Tuomo Pietilaina and Laura Halmi, and the then manager of the newspaper, Kalle Silfverberg, stand accused of leaking classified information. All three have denied any wrongdoing. [AlJazeera] [YLE]

An officer of the defence forces learned that Halmi had classified information, and reported it to counterintelligence units of the army in 2017, leading to a police investigation. [aamulehti] [aamulehti]

(cg/pk)

Norway refuses to condemn potential use of nuclear weapons

Norway has refused in a vote at the UN to condemn any potential use of nuclear weapons – a first for the Nordic nation, which has long maintained a policy of opposing the employment and proliferation of such arms.

A similar vote in 2015, saw Norway reaffirm its anti-nuclear weapons stance at the United Nations.

Norway's nuclear weapons policy, also known as the Hurdal platform, commits the country to stepping up efforts to promote nuclear disarmament, taking "steps to focus attention on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, and [working] with countries both in and outside NATO to achieve a world without nuclear weapons."

Amid heightened international tensions caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, foreign ministry spokesperson Eivind Vad said that Norway's decision on how to vote at the UN on August 22 was taken to reflect NATO's stance regarding nuclear weapons.

Vad added that Norway had tried to persuade other NATO countries to support Oslo's position but those efforts failed, meaning that Norway would have been "the only country to break with our NATO partners."

Critics voiced their disappointment at the way Norway voted. Henriette Westhrin, a member of the Norwegian People's Aid humanitarian organisation, called the move a "breach of promise by the government" and said it was "very dangerous." [Aftenposten]

NATO's nuclear weapons policy describes the possession of such arms as a core component of the alliance's "overall capabilities for deterrence and defence, alongside conventional and missile defence forces." The policy says that the Western military

alliance “is committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation” but adds that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, [NATO] will remain a nuclear alliance.” [NATO]

(cg)

Norway to extend coal mining on Svalbard until 2025

Norway will extend coal extraction on the Svalbard Arctic archipelago until 2025, Industry Minister Jan Christian Vestre has said, announcing a move that will help European steel production stay on track amid an energy crisis.

Norway's state-owned coal mine on the archipelago was due to close in 2023 along with a nearby coal-fired power plant due to environmental concerns. [Reuters] The mine is primarily used to supply coal to European metallurgic industries.

Vestre said that “Norway will take its share of responsibility to secure supply of raw materials” amid a shortage of energy supplies in Europe caused by Russia’s war in Ukraine. [BarentsObserver] [Bloomberg]

Svalbard is a collection of islands in the Arctic Ocean and is part of Norway, although Russia exercises resource rights there under an arrangement that has existed since the 1920s.

(cg/pk)

Norway: LGBTQ solidarity march after deadly shootings

Hundreds marched through Oslo’s central nightlife district on September 10 in solidarity with the LGBTQ community after the deaths of two people in a shooting outside a gay bar in the summer led to an annual pride parade being cancelled. [AP]

Several other people were injured in the June 25 shooting, which sent shockwaves through Norway’s LGBTQ community. Police are treating the killings as a likely hate crime. Many politicians participated in September’s march, including Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store. [AP]

A total of four suspects have been arrested in connection with the shooting. The first, Zaniar Matapour, a 43-year-old Norwegian citizen of Iranian origin, was detained at the scene on suspicion of murder and terrorism.

On September 25, two more suspects were detained – a man in his 40s with Somali citizenship and a Norwegian national in his 30s, both known to the authorities. [Reuters] They are facing preliminary charges of "complicity in an act of terrorism". [Euronews]

(mp/pk)

Sweden: Right-wing bloc defeats governing coalition, as far-right surges

Sweden's right-wing opposition unseated the governing coalition in close-fought September 11 general elections, ending eight years of Social Democrat rule by partnering with the far-right Sweden Democrats, who have become the second largest party in the country.

The Social Democrats, led by incumbent Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, won the backing of 30.3 percent of the electorate to acquire 108 seats in parliament, gaining votes from the previous 2018 election and maintaining their position as Sweden's largest party. [Riksdagen] [Politico] [CNBC]

However, the Social Democrats and their allies – the Greens, the Centre Party and the Left Party – together obtained only 173 seats and were narrowly defeated by a four-party right-wing opposition bloc, which obtained 176 seats. [Reuters] [Euronews]

Swedish parties rarely obtain a majority in the 349-seat parliament, and must form coalitions to govern, typically led by the centre-left Social Democrats or the conservative Moderate party.

Ulf Kristersson, Andersson's main rival and the leader of the conservative Moderate party, was tasked on September 19 with forming a government after Andersson recognised defeat and resigned. [The Guardian]

The Moderates finished in third place with 68 seats and are expected to rely on support from the Christian Democrat and Liberal parties and, for the first time in history, the Sweden Democrats. [Riksdagen] [BBC]

From pariah to key player

First entering the Swedish parliament as a pariah in 2010 with 20 seats, the Sweden Democrats have achieved their best result yet and are now the second largest party in the country, with 73 seats and 20.6 percent of the vote. The far-right, anti-immigration party with self-admitted white supremacist and fascist origins would be the largest force behind a new governing coalition. [Le Monde] [Riksdagen]

Jimmie Akesson, who has led the party since 2005, celebrated the election results, writing on Facebook on September 14: "It is time to start rebuilding security, welfare, and cohesion. It's time to put Sweden first." [DW]

However, the other three groupings in the right-wing bloc said they would not be willing to give the far-right Sweden Democrats any ministerial positions, even though they would rely on the latter party for votes in parliament, in exchange for policy concessions. [CNBC] [The Guardian]

This could be a problem for Kristersson in forming what could be an unstable governing coalition. Another issue is a feud between the Liberal Party and the Sweden Democrats. [Le Monde]

'Neo-Nazi' roots

Magdalena Andersson, who became Sweden's first female prime minister in November 2021, leading a single-party minority administration, told the Guardian on the campaign trail in early September that the Sweden Democrats have "deep roots in the Swedish neo-Nazis and other racist organisations in Sweden."

Andersson's claims are not denied by the Sweden Democrats, who recently published a study delving into the origins of the party. It revealed that several of the party's founding members in the 1980s were linked to neo-Nazi and fascist movements. [AP]

Party leader Akesson told AP that those founding members had left the Sweden Democrats long ago. "So the Sweden Democrats today is something different from what was founded about 30 years ago."

The Sweden Democrats' success comes amid skyrocketing energy prices, a spike in gang violence and integration issues related to a growing immigrant population, with some polls indicating that, for the first time, crime was the top priority for Swedish voters. [Bloomberg]

Akesson's party has enjoyed a gradual rise after he worked to soften its image. In 2006, a year after he took charge, he replaced the party's torch symbol with a flower, and in 2012 he adopted a zero-tolerance policy against racism and extremism. [AP]

Regardless of their potential role in government, the Sweden Democrats will exert influence as the largest party in the coalition to which they belong, and have already pushed the Swedish political discourse to the right – the centre-left government and centre-right opposition both adopted harder stances on immigration and crime in the run-up to the election. [Europe Monthly September 2022] [AP] [Time]

Forming a new government could be a lengthy process amid efforts to establish a common programme between coalition partners. After the previous parliamentary elections in 2018, the Social Democrats needed four months to assemble a majority. [Euronews] [The Guardian]

The Sweden Democrats' role in an upcoming government will be closely watched, including by the party's European counterparts, as Stockholm finalises its entry into NATO and prepares to take on the rotating presidency of the EU on January 1. [The Washington Post]

(qv/pk)

Sweden: Election authority, news sites hit by cyber-attacks as voters go to polls

The Swedish Election Authority and domestic news outlets were hit by an extensive Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) cyber-attack on September 11 as the country held national elections.

A DDoS attack involves storming a site with fake requests from several sources at once, until it becomes unreachable.

Numerous Swedish newspaper websites, including those of Dagens Nyheter, Sydsvenskan and Expressen, were knocked out for at least an hour. [DagensNyheter]

Meanwhile, the Election Authority experienced technical problems. Anna Nyqvist, head of the authority's secretariat, said that the attacks did not affect the vote count. [DagensNyheter] [TheLocal]

The Swedish Psychological Defence Agency had earlier warned about potential external interference in the country's election. Mikael Ostlund, a spokesperson for the agency, said that Swedish authorities were on "high alert". [The Guardian] Investigations into the source of the cyberattacks are ongoing. [DagensNyheter]

(fs/pk)

Sweden: Ringhals 4 nuclear reactor will not be reactivated before 2023

Sweden's Ringhals 4 nuclear reactor will not return to operation before January 31 after an accident during annual maintenance. The shutdown could impact the country's energy security at a time when power prices are rocketing across Europe and nations are racing to secure reserves for winter amid gas supply cuts by Russia.

The safety of the reactor in western Sweden has not been compromised by the accident, state-controlled Ringhals said. [Reuters] Sweden has a total of six nuclear reactors left after a policy of decommissioning. Ringhals 3 and 4 contribute 13 to 15 percent of the country's annual electricity production. [Xinhua]

Meanwhile, Swedish electricity transmission system operator Svenska Kraftnat has warned that it may have to temporarily close sections of the grid in the south of the country, which is partly dependent on imports of electricity. [Reuters]

(fs/pk)

Sweden: Central bank decides on steepest rate hike since 1993

Sweden's central bank raised interest rates by one percentage point to 1.75 percent on September 20 after inflation in the country reached 9 percent the previous month, the highest in 30 years.

The rate hike – the biggest since 1993 – was larger than expected and the bank's governor, Stefan Ingves, apologised at a press conference for not having acted sooner to rein in rising prices. [TheLocal]

"By raising rates now and by continuing to hike rates we reduce the risk that inflation is going to park itself at a high level," he said. [Reuters]

Robert Bergqvist, a senior economist at Sweden's SEB Bank, said the rate hike was "not a happy step but a completely necessary one." [TheLocal]

Torbjorn Hallo, chief economist for the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, criticised the central bank's move as "bizarre". He said that the country's high inflation was driven by Russian gas cuts and the decommissioning of Swedish nuclear power plants, and added that increasing interest rates would not have the desired effect. [TheLocal]

(fs/pk)

Scandinavian airline plans to buy electric aircraft from Swedish firm

Scandinavian airline SAS has announced an agreement that will allow it to buy electric aircraft for its fleet. The planes are expected to be operative by 2028.

The plan provides for the purchase of an undisclosed number of 30-seat ES-30 electric planes with a 200-kilometre range from Swedish start-up Heart Aerospace. [Reuters]

The aircraft will be used for short routes in Scandinavia. However, by installing a hybrid system, combining electricity and fuel, and by reducing the number of passengers, the range of the planes could be extended up to 800 kilometres. [TheLocal]

"This has the potential to be a significant step on SAS's sustainability journey, enabling zero-emission flights on routes within Scandinavia," said Anko van der Werff, CEO of SAS. [TheLocal]

(fs/pk)

Sweden is Europe's top country for investment in green start-ups

Sweden has become the top European country for investment into "impact" start-ups. The term refers to companies which seek a financial return while pursuing a positive impact on the environment, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Investment in such businesses in Sweden increased from EUR 1.3 billion in 2020 to EUR 3.6 billion in 2021. [TheLocal]

The conditions that have made Stockholm an “impact hub” lie, according to Stockholm mayor Anna Konig Jerlmyr, in a culture oriented towards sustainability.

David Liu, general manager of Norrsken House Stockholm, a non-profit foundation which helps entrepreneurs, said the Swedish capital was “one of the few places in the world that combines a modern lifestyle with a real closeness and awareness of nature.” [TheLocal] In the Global Innovation Index for 2021, Stockholm was named as Europe’s most innovative city.

The capital in September hosted Impact Week, an event promoting sustainable business growth. Sweden aims to become a model for investment into impact start-ups “with the purpose to inspire other cities and governments”, said Jerlmyr. [TheLocal]

Sweden is already a hub for start-ups as a whole, and has produced companies including household names such as music streamer Spotify Technology. Video game developer Mojang, which produced top-selling title Minecraft, also hails from Sweden. [TheBusinessTimes]

(fs/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Europe secures energy stocks to protect households from shortages

European governments have largely secured sufficient energy supplies to provide heating to their populations this winter, but they may struggle to protect small and medium-sized businesses and industrial output from the negative impact of higher fuel prices.

German natural gas facilities achieved 90 percent storage levels in September, despite Russian gas supply cuts, and should reach 95 percent by November – levels that indicate households should have sufficient heat even if rationing occurs. Italy has secured enough energy supplies from North Africa to compensate for the loss of Russian gas this winter. [DW] [Bloomberg] [SP Global]

French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne said that her country was "ready" for the winter, provided consumers made efforts to reduce their energy consumption. France pledged EUR 16 billion to support household and small business energy relief in 2023 and to provide EUR 200 pay-outs to 12 million families this year. It will also limit electricity price increases for households and small businesses to 15 percent in 2023. [Bloomberg] [Barrons]

"Whatever happens, we're ready for this winter. We anticipated this situation in advance," Borne told parliament during a debate about the war in Ukraine. She claimed that prices would have risen 120 percent without government intervention. [Barrons]

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said his country had taken action to secure sufficient energy supplies over the winter, adding that it had lined up sufficient cargoes of liquefied natural gas. Several power plants were ready to switch to oil from gas, and coal-fired capacity had been ramped up, he said.

Gloomy industrial forecast

Despite the improvement in energy supplies, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published a gloomy economic forecast for 2023 on September 26 – suggesting that Europe faces a very difficult economic climate if the energy crisis worsens, with winter temperatures likely to be a decisive factor.

With energy prices showing no sign of improving, industries and businesses are bracing for a difficult year. Companies are shutting plants and laying off workers, rather than paying exorbitant costs that make operations unprofitable. Economists expect joblessness to increase from 6.6 percent in August as the region's economy falls into a recession around the end of the year. [MSN]

Factories from Germany and the UK to Spain, France and Slovakia have reduced operations or completely shut them down. Slovalco, a Slovak auto parts producer owned by Norsk Hydro, is shutting down rather than pay prices that have risen from EUR 45 per megawatt hour to EUR 1,000 in some locations. Other companies affected by higher prices include BASF, ArcelorMittal, Aluminium Dunkerque and CF Industries. [WSJ][Bloomberg] [Bloomberg] [NYT]

European metals trade association Eurometaux said that 50 percent of European zinc and aluminium production has been shut down. European chemical imports have doubled as it is cheaper to purchase abroad than manufacture domestically at current gas prices needed to operate factories. [Bloomberg] [Eurometaux]

New pipelines

With Europe pushing ahead with its efforts to decouple its energy supplies from Russia completely, the continent's leaders are rushing to open new pipelines and secure energy supplies from the Middle East and North Africa. Two major gas pipeline projects were completed and became operational in Europe in September, one in the north and one in the south.

Construction was completed on the Baltic Pipe from Norway to Poland via Danish waters and commissioned on September 27. It provides natural gas from the North Sea with a capacity of 10 billion cubic metres a year, equivalent to around a fifth of the capacity of the NordStream II pipeline from Russia to Germany. [Euronews]

A pipeline from Slovakia to Poland commissioned in late August is scheduled to begin operation in October. This will link Northern Europe with natural gas imported via pipelines from Central Asia and North Africa through Southern Europe, creating a European-wide natural gas network not centred on Russian supply. [EC]

The first LNG shipment to Germany is scheduled to arrive at a floating storage regasification unit (FSRU) in Brunsbuttel, Germany, in December. FSRU deliveries will continue until permanent onshore LNG terminals can be completed.

Suspected sabotage

As Europe rushed to secure energy supplies, the Nord Stream I and the NordStream II Pipelines suffered catastrophic damage from explosions described by NATO as sabotage. Both dual pipelines of NordStream

I and one of two dual pipelines of NordStream II were ruptured. [VOA]Reuters] [Washington Post]

The damage will take years to repair, if indeed either the European or Russian side wishes to attempt it. The level of damage to the pipelines means that Russia no longer has the capacity to be the leading supplier of natural gas to Europe. Norway has become its largest single supplier, utilising North Sea fields.

Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the West of sabotaging the pipelines, a charge that has been vehemently denied by the United States and its allies. Putin claimed that the "Anglo-Saxons" in the West have turned from sanctions on Russia to "terror attacks," sabotaging the pipelines in what he described as an attempt to "destroy the European energy infrastructure." [NBC]

White House National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson shot back, saying: "We're not going to let Russia's disinformation distract us or the world from its transparently fraudulent attempt to annex sovereign Ukrainian territory." [NBC]

NATO warned that it would retaliate for attacks against the energy infrastructure belonging to any of its 30 member nations. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said on September 30 that he had accepted help from Germany, France and the UK to protect Norwegian pipeline infrastructure.

The Italian government said that it would increase its naval presence in the Mediterranean to defend natural gas pipelines from North Africa against any Russian sabotage. [FT] [FT] [FT]

(rw-gc/pk)

ANALYSIS AND OPINION

War in Ukraine reshapes European energy markets, Eurasian balance of power

Deprived of access to its vital European energy market, Russia will no longer have the means to sustain its economy in the medium term. Diminished by setbacks in its war in Ukraine, Moscow will not be able to exert the same influence it once had over its neighbours, and European policy makers will face a fundamentally different Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

Europe has been the largest market for the energy exports which are the mainstay of the Russian

economy, and this cannot be easily replaced by Asia in a competitive global market. European leaders have announced a cooperative emergency energy plan, signed deals with new global energy partners, extended the operation of coal and nuclear power plants, and started building new energy infrastructure, both renewable and fossil, to enable countries to permanently provision their needs without Russia.

The Russian military is failing on the battlefield. Europe has not acquiesced to Moscow's aggression and instead has supported successful Ukrainian self-defence in collaboration with the US, while NATO is set to expand. Europe will experience a difficult winter, but unless unforeseen circumstances arise, while business may suffer, European populations will not experience insurmountable privation.

Meanwhile, Russia is experiencing catastrophic loss, and will continue to do so, not only on the battlefield, but in terms of its energy market position. Given the primacy of energy in Russian economic affairs, this has significant ramifications for the Russian geoeconomic position.

Loss of markets and market power

European markets are now lost to Russia, forfeit due its adventurism in Ukraine. Asia offers no real alternatives in terms of a replacement market as Russia faces strong competition from global competitors. Russian power to a great extent relies upon its petroleum economy. Deprived of European markets, the Russian petro-state will wither. This will have profound ramifications for the Eurasian balance of power, which has heretofore been dominated by Russia.

While Russian resources remain in place, Moscow's ability to market them has been severely curtailed. Russia does not have the pipeline capacity to divert its entire supply of crude oil and natural gas to other markets. Almost 75 percent of Russian natural gas exports and 50 percent of crude oil exports were to Europe in 2021. [EIA] Russia does not have the capability to replace this market, which means earnings going forward will be significantly diminished. [DW]

Russia was the largest exporter of natural gas in the world and second largest exporter of crude oil behind Saudi Arabia in 2021. [EIA] Moscow will be commercially challenged to displace established Middle Eastern, African, and North American suppliers to China and India to compensate for Russia's loss of European markets. If the Russians cannot accomplish

this displacement, they will be unable to continue to export oil and gas at current volumes in the future.

Critically, Russia is currently unable to even displace the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union for access to Chinese markets. Turkmenistan has been the largest supplier of natural gas to China since 2009 through three pipelines emanating from the Galkynysh gas field, the second largest gas field in the world. The 1,800 km pipelines transit Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before reaching China, and supply up to 50 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year. [BT] [Global Times] Further, capacity is expanding by up to 50 percent in this field alone, and a new line is being added to the system that will encompass not only Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well. [Upstream Online] This new line D will enable exports of up to 65 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year, almost half of current Chinese natural gas consumption.

While Russia is the second largest exporter of natural gas to China, exporting 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year since 2019, it is far behind Turkmenistan, at approximately one fifth Turkmen volume. [Global Times] While the capacity of the Russian pipeline is planned to almost quadruple capacity to 38 billion cubic metres by 2024, this will still not equal Turkmen capacity. Further, Turkmenistan has the capacity to boost production from 65 to 100 billion cubic metres per year. Russian capacity is complementary, not essential, and provides no political leverage for Moscow. Russia is only one of 24 countries which supplied natural gas to China last year. China has significant LNG capacity of its own, multiple options, and is less vulnerable to Russian energy politics than Europe.

India is an additional market for Russian oil and gas, but again, it is not vulnerable to Russian pricing power. India is the third largest consumer of crude oil in the world, almost all of it imported. However, Russia has been supplying only 2 percent of India's oil, which is mostly sourced from the Middle East on long-term contracts. [DW] Indian refiners have reportedly been receiving significant discounts for Russian crude, given that Moscow has few options amid global sanctions. India will not provide Russia with an option to offset crude sales to Europe either.

New Eurasian energy and security dynamic

A new Eurasian energy and security dynamic is becoming apparent. Azerbaijan is one of the greatest beneficiaries of the Russian war in Ukraine. Its oil exports by pipeline through the Trans Anatolian and

Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan pipelines through Turkey to Europe are unaffected by sanctions and command premium prices due to war-induced price increases. Armenia, meanwhile, has heretofore been a Russian client, with Moscow providing arms and diplomatic support to balance an oil-rich Azerbaijan aligned with NATO member Turkey. September has demonstrated change is already underway. The US hosted Armenian and Azerbaijani delegations for a conflict mediation session during United Nations meetings held in New York, as America took on a new role in Central Asia – indicating that Russia is consumed by Ukraine and unable to respond to contingencies or enforce peace between warring parties in the former Soviet Union as it has previously. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Kazakhstan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with Russia, China and India, and earns more from energy and commercial trade with China than Russia. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pointedly stated in June that his country would not violate sanctions against Russia, despite previous Russian military aid being credited with ending large scale protests which threatened his government in January. [RFERL] Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan in September en route to a SCO meeting in Uzbekistan, demonstrating a new Chinese commitment to both former Soviet states. [ABC]

Geoeconomic displacement

Russia exported 142 billion cubic metres of gas in 2021, almost 95 billion of which was sold to Germany alone, meaning Germany purchased almost ten times the volume that China did from Moscow. Russia will not be able to compensate for such a market loss even with expanded export capacity to China in future years. The loss of the European energy market for Russia means the loss of revenue needed for the state to function. Oil and gas comprised 45 percent of Russian government budget revenue in 2021. [DW] This revenue was not significantly reduced this year as price increases allowed record profits despite dwindling sales to Europe, but those sales have largely ended or are ending.

2023 and future years will produce significant economic challenges for Russia. The nation may well be facing the loss of politico-military dominance in the countries of the former Soviet Union. This means geoeconomic displacement in Eurasia. Given the centrality of its geographic position and energy market leadership as one of the top three oil and gas exporters alongside the US and Saudi Arabia, Russia was able to exert a degree of control over the former

Soviet states. A militarily diminished Russia, exposed as lacking the conventional military capabilities it long claimed, now deprived of access to its largest market, and under severe sanctions, will no longer have the means to sustain its economy in the medium term, or exert the same influence over its neighbours it once had.

Europe may expect a changed security dynamic in Eurasia following the war in Ukraine as a result of wholesale changes in Russian energy market fortunes compounding Moscow's military setbacks. Russia may be displaced by China and to a lesser extent Turkey as the leading geopolitical actor in former Soviet republics. A militarily weakened Russia in precipitous economic decline would rearrange the power dynamic in Eurasia. Russian hegemony, which has prevailed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, would end. It could mean the end of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and of a Russian-led regional order, and its replacement by Chinese hegemony, or a less settled dynamic where Russia, China, India and Turkey, all members of the SCO, vie for influence. This would create both new challenges and new opportunities for Europe and NATO.

(rw/pk)

Germany asks France to reconsider opposition to MidCat gas pipeline

As the EU works to reduce its dependence on Russian natural gas, German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz has asked France to reconsider its opposition to plans to link pipelines in the Iberian Peninsula to the rest of Europe.

Referring to the project, known as MidCat, a German government spokesman said: "There is a great consensus on the part of Portugal, Spain and also on the German side that it would be sensible to create such a connection." [Euractiv]

Spain already has pipelines to exporter nations such as Algeria, circumventing the need for such supplies to be transported by ship. Spain also has 30 percent of Europe's regasification capacity, but poor pipeline interconnectivity means it is isolated from the rest of Europe. [Euractiv] [Euractiv]

France, however, has rejected plans for the MidCat pipeline, citing high construction costs – estimated at EUR 3 billion – and an extended construction period. Paris has argued that the project would not be ready in time to help solve a gas crisis caused by reduced

Russian exports. France has also said that the pipeline would run counter to EU climate goals to reduce fossil fuel usage.

French President Macron said at the start of August that the MidCat pipeline "will not solve the European gas problem." But he added that he was open to being convinced. [Euractiv]

Spain's minister for ecological transition, Teresa Ribera, has criticised Paris, saying that France "should think about how to help others". [Euractiv]

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez met with his German counterpart on August 30 in Berlin, where the Spaniard denounced Russian energy "blackmail" and said that Madrid was "prepared to offer solidarity and respond to the call from our dear friends and brotherly nations such as Germany."

Meanwhile, Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa has said a gas pipeline across the Pyrenees would help central and eastern Europe move away from Russian gas.

(cg/pk)

Norwegian oil giant Equinor leaves Russian market

Norwegian state oil and gas company Equinor officially pulled out of the Russian market on September 2, a move that it had announced shortly after the invasion of Ukraine in February and the onset of sanctions against Moscow. The exit marks the end of 30 years of Norwegian cooperation with Russia on energy extraction. [BarentsObserver]

Equinor on February 28 called a continued presence on the Russian market "untenable". The Norwegian company's decision saw it leaving joint ventures and handing control of them to Russian state-owned energy giant Rosneft and other firms. It handed over its final project, in the Kharyaga oilfield, to Russian fossil fuel extractor Zarubezhneft on September 2.

The Norwegian company said in a statement: "Following the exit from Kharyaga, Equinor has no remaining assets or projects in Russia." [Reuters] [Equinor]

Equinor is the first Western energy company to fully complete a withdrawal from resource-rich Russian territories. Many others have promised to pull the

plug, but have not followed through so far. France's Total Energies still maintains a stake in the Kharyaga field, while BP and Shell have yet to give up their investments, despite mounting pressure to do so.

(cg/pk)

Norwegian, German firms plan undersea CO2 pipeline

Norwegian state-owned oil and gas giant Equinor has announced plans to build a pipeline under the North Sea to transport carbon dioxide emissions from Germany. The carbon capture and storage project, a joint venture between Equinor and German company Wintershall Dea, is to be completed before 2032.

The plan would see German carbon emissions transported and stored in underground areas off the Norwegian coast. The emissions would be carried by a 900 km undersea pipeline with an estimated capacity of 20 to 40 million tonnes of CO2 per year – almost 20 percent of Germany's annual industrial emissions.

Equinor and Wintershall Dea said in a joint statement: "The partnership intends to connect Germany, the largest CO2 emitter in Europe, and Norway, holding Europe's largest CO2 storage potential." [Reuters]

Storing carbon dioxide underground is a new concept that is being tested in Europe in a bid to cut emissions and reduce the effects of climate change.

Meanwhile, on August 29 Norwegian carbon dioxide storage company Northern Lights struck a deal with fertiliser producer Yara to store emissions from the latter's Dutch plant as of 2025. Northern Lights plans to annually receive 800,000 tonnes of the gas transported by ship from the Netherlands in the first commercial deal on cross-border CO2 transport and storage in the world.

Northern Lights was founded in conjunction with energy companies Equinor, TotalEnergies and Shell. Shell CEO Ben van Beurden said the initiative was "a major breakthrough" and "a pathfinder project for similar projects in Europe." [Reuters]

However, many environmentalists are critical of this approach, arguing that storing emissions only prolongs the use of fossil fuels.

(cg/pk)

Baltic states face winter season with half-empty natural gas storage

The Incukalns natural gas storage facility, the only one so far in the Baltics, reported on September 5 that its storage levels are about 50 percent full, fuelling concerns whether there would be sufficient gas resources available for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. [LRT] [Interfax] [The Odessa Journal]

The Incukalns gas storage facility is the only source of natural gas for the Baltic states. According to the company running the facility, the high prices for electricity have triggered an increased consumption of natural gas. [LRT]

While the three Baltic states and Finland have a total consumption of 6 billion cubic metres of gas per annum, they also rely on imports of liquefied natural gas, which is imported via the Lithuanian terminal Independence in Klaipeda and make up 3.8 billion cubic metres per annum. These gas flows also partly ensure the storage capacities of the Incukalns gas facility. [LRT]

A joint Finnish-Estonian LNG terminal will also be operational in December. Local authorities estimate that this terminal will increase the import of LNG, ensuring sufficient resources during the winter months. [LRT] [Euractiv]

(mo/gc)

Danish, US defence chiefs negotiate American troop access

Danish Defence Minister Morten Bodskov met with his US counterpart Lloyd Austin in Washington on September 1 to discuss closer military cooperation between the two countries, a request made by Copenhagen in February.

The Americans hope to use Denmark, and specifically its port facilities, as a logistical access point, allowing Washington to increase the flow of military supplies into Europe at a time when a deteriorating security situation has seen large-scale US deployments to Poland and the Baltic states.

Multiple aspects of a deal between Washington and Copenhagen have yet to be agreed, including joint exercises and naval access. Bodskov said: “It is too

early to say anything concrete about the discussions now. We are in the process of negotiating with the Americans. We expect [the talks] to be completed relatively quickly. My feeling is that the discussions are going well." [Politiken]

Bodskov stressed that nuclear weapons would under no circumstances be deployed in Denmark, and that no permanent US bases would be set up in his country.

Washington and Copenhagen signed an agreement on August 22 that saw Denmark pledging to expand port facilities in the western town of Esbjerg, which is strategically located with convenient access to the North Sea. American troops have been using the port to deliver armoured vehicles and helicopters to Europe in recent months, and it is hoped that the expansion work will be completed by the end of 2023.

The Danish defence minister said: "We are improving the access of NATO and allied forces to the Port of Esbjerg, so that they can be distributed around Europe." [Politiken]

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, around 20,000 extra US personnel have been deployed to Europe, alongside air and naval equipment, bolstering American forces in Europe to around 100,000, according to the Department of Defense.

(cg/pk)

Frontex trains in Finland for future border mission

The EU's border and coastguard agency, Frontex, has sent six members of staff to train in the north of Finland in preparation for a potential future mission to monitor the nation's eastern border with Russia.

The training exercise had been planned prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February but comes amid a partial mobilisation announced by the Kremlin on September 21 – a move some believe could see Russian men fleeing their country in order to avoid being called up for military duty.

The Frontex training exercise, which is to be conducted for three months, is intended to help the agency prepare should it be called on to help secure the Finnish border in the event of a crisis. Lieutenant Riku Heinonen of the Finnish border guard told news outlet YLE: "We are testing operating models in case we ever

have to request a quick border security intervention from the European Union." [YLE]

Finland in September severely limited the number of visas available to Russian citizens in order to prevent the exploitation of sanctions loopholes.

(cg/pk)

German NATO troops arrive in Lithuania to strengthen NATO's eastern flank

The first 100 German soldiers of the 41st tank brigade arrived in Lithuania on September 4 to protect NATO's eastern flank in view of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. [NTV] [NATO] [The Defence Post] [DW]

NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said that "the arrival of the first German troops as part of the NATO brigade represents an important step in strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence as critical for our security, and sending a clear message that NATO will defend every inch of Allied territory." [NATO]

According to a statement on Twitter, the German armed forces seek to provide reinforcement of the NATO contingents and engage in training and military drills with Lithuanian soldiers. According to Brigadier General of the German armed forces Christian Nawrat, it is essential to demonstrate flexibility and perseverance while being present in Lithuania. [NTV] [Twitter]

(mo/mb/gc)

Lithuania accuses Belarus of deliberately damaging border fence

The Lithuanian foreign ministry sent a note of protest to the Belarusian embassy in Vilnius on September 6, accusing Belarus of deliberately damaging the border fence. [LRT]

The foreign ministry said in a press release that Belarusian officials were actively involved in damaging the fence to help irregular migrants cross the border into the EU. Such practices would, according to the Lithuanian foreign ministry, constitute a provocation and "flagrant violation of the Lithuanian-Belarusian Treaty on the legal regime of the Lithuanian-Belarusian state border." [LRT]

In order to prevent irregular migrants from crossing the Lithuanian-Belarusian border, the Lithuanian government decided to build a fence. Vilnius and Brussels have recurrently accused the Belarusian government and border patrol of enabling irregular migration. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

EU chief says sanctions on Russia 'here to stay', pledges to cut energy prices

In an annual address to the European Parliament, the head of the EU's executive praised Ukraine's resistance against Russia's invasion, vowing "unshakeable" solidarity with Kiev, and pledged reforms to curb soaring energy prices.

Like many lawmakers who listened to her on September 14 in Strasbourg, European Commission chief Ursula Von der Leyen was dressed in yellow and blue, the colours of the Ukrainian flag. She delivered an hour-long speech heavily focused on the war in Ukraine, hosting First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska as a guest of honour. [Reuters] [The Parliament Magazine]

Von der Leyen told the members of the European Parliament: "I stand here with the conviction that with the necessary courage and necessary solidarity, Putin will fail and Europe will prevail." [Le Monde]

She praised the EU for the speed and unity of its response against Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, and said the economic sanctions the bloc imposed on Moscow were having an impact. "Sanctions are here to stay," she told the assembly, adding: "Russia's industry is in tatters."

She said the lack of semiconductors in the country meant that the Russian military was reduced to "taking chips from dishwashers and refrigerators to fix their military hardware."

"Russia's financial sector is on life support. We have cut off three-quarters of Russia's banking sector from international markets," she added.

Von der Leyen said that 1,000 international companies had left Russia since the start of the war, car production had fallen by three-quarters compared to last year, and Russia's national airline Aeroflot was grounding planes for lack of spare parts. [Le Monde]

EU 'should have listened to those who know Putin'

Von der Leyen admitted that the EU "should have listened to those who know Putin." Referring to Russian journalists, dissidents and countries from Central and Eastern Europe, she said: "They told us for years that Putin wouldn't stop". [Business Insider]

Von der Leyen announced the EU would provide EUR 100 million to rebuild schools destroyed during the war and pledged to open the European single market to Ukrainian products. The next day, at a joint press conference with the European Commission chief in Kiev, President Volodymyr Zelensky said his country was eager to join the single market, even before a decision on Ukraine's accession to the EU is finalised. [RFI]

Von der Leyen also addressed the energy crisis in her speech, saying: "Making ends meet is becoming a source of anxiety for millions of businesses and households".

She unveiled measures aiming to lower the costs of energy, such as a cap on revenues for electricity generators like coal, hydropower, nuclear and renewable power plants, a windfall tax on profits made by fossil fuel companies, and proposals to lower electricity consumption during peak hours. [Reuters] [Euronews]

In light of Russia's "deliberate attempt to discard" international law and the post-war order of peace and security, Von der Leyen called for "a rethink of [the EU's] foreign policy agenda", urging the bloc to seek closer relationships with like-minded partners that share the EU's democratic values.

She said the EU was "not complete" without Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine and the Western Balkans, which she called "the future of our union". She backed the idea of establishing a European Political Community, an initiative pushed by French President Emmanuel Macron. [Euronews]

Von der Leyen also called for a simplification of the bloc's fiscal rules, speaking out in favour of more flexibility for the debt reduction process but more accountability for members in following through on their promises.

"We need fiscal rules that allow for strategic investment, while safeguarding fiscal sustainability," she said. "Rules that are fit for the challenges of this decade." The European Commission will present its first reform proposal in October. [Euronews]

Green energy

Finally, Von der Leyen urged the EU to invest in and produce more green energy like hydrogen in order to wean the bloc off its dependence on fossil fuels. She said the EU Commission would introduce a new European Hydrogen Bank aiming to secure some EUR 3 billion investments in the sector.

“Summer 2022 will remain in people's memories,” she added. "We all saw the dry rivers, the burning forests, the impact of the extreme heat."

The Commission president lauded cross-border solidarity in fighting fires, and pledged to double the EU’s firefighting reserves in a year and purchase 10 light aircraft and three helicopters for the bloc’s common firefighting fleet.

(qv/pk)

EU Commission proposes rules to protect media freedom

The EU’s executive has published a proposal for a law which aims to introduce safeguards for editorial independence and media pluralism amid threats to press freedom in Europe.

The European Commission’s proposed European Media Freedom Act is part of the EU executive’s broader Action Plan for European Democracy, announced in December 2020. [European Commission]

The law, if passed, would prohibit governments from interfering with the editorial independence of media service providers, and national authorities would have to ensure that public funds, including state-funded advertising, are allocated according to transparent and objective procedures.

The proposed law also requires governments to set up systems to measure audience ratings on which these allocations might be based, and makes the Commission responsible for monitoring the media market on an annual basis. [Euractiv] [European Commission 1]

According to Politico, the Commission's draft regulation is a response to the growing threat to media freedom across the EU. For example, member states such as Hungary and Poland have tightened control of the media, while journalists in countries such as

Greece, Malta and Slovenia say they work under pressure from their governments. [Politico]

'No public media should be turned into a propaganda channel'

The EU's vice-president for values and transparency, Vera Jourova, said it was "high time to act." She added that "no public media should be turned into a propaganda channel. This is what we are proposing… for the first time ever."

The EU Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, said that media companies play a vital role but are confronted with falling revenues, threats to media freedom and pluralism, the emergence of large online platforms, and a patchwork of different national rules.

He added that the European Media Freedom Act "provides common safeguards at EU level to guarantee a plurality of voices and that our media are able to operate without any interference, be it private or public". [European Commission 2]

The European Parliament must now vote on the proposed regulation in order to make it applicable throughout the EU.

(acn/pk)

Brussels seeks funding freeze for Hungary over democracy concerns

The European Commission has called for some EUR 7.5 billion in EU funds earmarked for Hungary to be frozen over what it sees as Budapest's failure to uphold the rule of law and to ensure the money is not misused. [Euronews] [Reuters]

In an unprecedented move, the EU's executive on September 18 came out in favour of using a so-called conditionality mechanism – which links pay-outs of money by Brussels to the maintenance of democratic standards in the bloc's member states – amid concerns that Budapest has failed to tackle high-level corruption.

The decision is "a clear demonstration of the Commission's resolve to protect the EU budget, and to use all tools at our disposal to ensure this important objective," the EU's Budget Commissioner Johannes Hahn said.

'Electoral autocracy'

Meanwhile, in a non-binding report, members of the European Parliament said the political situation in Hungary has deteriorated to the point that the country has become an "electoral autocracy". MEPs condemned the "deliberate and systematic efforts" of the Hungarian government to undermine European values, and blamed EU institutions for failing to act.

The report, adopted on September 15, pointed to the independence of the Hungarian judiciary, corruption, and the country's electoral system as key worries, while also voicing concern about the rights of minorities. [European Parliament]

For Hungary's funds to be suspended in line with the Commission's call, such a move must be backed by a qualified majority in the Council of the European Union – by at least 55 percent of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU population.

Member states have four weeks to decide whether to adopt the Commission's recommendation, though the timeframe can be set back by two months. [Politico]

The EU executive's call for action comes after Brussels activated the cash-for-rule-of-law mechanism against Budapest in April, the first time it had used powers that it acquired in January 2021. [Europe in Review May 2022]

Room for compromise

At the same time, the Commission has kept the door open to a potential compromise that would allow Budapest to keep its EU funds if it introduces remedial measures. [Politico]

Hungarian Development Minister Tibor Navracsics said his country would deliver on all 17 of the commitments it has made to the EU's executive to prevent a loss of funds. A day after the Commission proposed suspending money for Hungary, the government in Budapest submitted the first of several anti-corruption bills to parliament. [Reuters]

The Hungarian government denies charges that the country has undergone democratic backsliding under nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has clashed repeatedly with Brussels.

Critics, meanwhile, have voiced concern over tenders for EU-funded projects in Hungary involving only one bidder often linked to the governing party. As well raising the issue of corruption, the EU, civil society groups and watchdogs are worried at the level of control that Orban's Fidesz party has acquired over the

courts, the media and NGOs. [Politico] Orban was re-elected for a fourth term in April. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, whose country has also been accused by the European Commission of violating core democratic principles, said Warsaw would resist any move to "illegally" suspend funds for Hungary.

Poland has been one of Hungary's closest allies in the EU, and the countries have backed each other in disputes with Brussels over the rule of law. Ties between the two nations were strained by Budapest's close relations with Moscow amid Russia's war in Ukraine, but Warsaw is now seeking to improve ties with Hungary. (*See separate story in this issue*)

(pk)

ECB raises three key interest rates by 75 basis points

The European Central Bank raised on September 8 three key interest rates by 75 basis points as the European Union's bank tries to bring inflation to its two percent medium-term target. [ECB]

The ECB took the decision, and expects to raise interest rates further, because "inflation remains far too high and is likely to stay above target for an extended period." According to Eurostat's flash estimate, inflation reached 9.1 percent in August. Soaring energy and food prices, demand pressures in some sectors owing to the reopening of the economy, and supply bottlenecks are still driving up inflation. [ECB]

Based on its current assessment, over the next several meetings the ECB expects to raise interest rates further to dampen demand and guard against the risk of a persistent upward shift in inflation expectations. The ECB's Governing Council will regularly re-evaluate its policy path in light of incoming information and the evolving inflation outlook. [ECB]

"Price pressures have continued to strengthen and broaden across the economy and inflation may rise further in the near term," the ECB said. "As the current drivers of inflation fade over time and the normalisation of monetary policy works its way through to the economy and price-setting, inflation will come down."

Inflation, GDP forecast

Looking ahead, the ECB has significantly revised up its inflation projections. It is now expected to average 8.1 percent in 2022, 5.5 percent in 2023 and 2.3 percent in 2024. After a rebound in the first half of 2022, recent data point to a substantial slowdown in euro area economic growth, with the economy expected to stagnate later in the year and in the first quarter of 2023.

"Very high energy prices are reducing the purchasing power of people's incomes and, although supply bottlenecks are easing, they are still constraining economic activity," the ECB said. "In addition, the adverse geopolitical situation, especially Russia's unjustified aggression towards Ukraine, is weighing on the confidence of businesses and consumers."

This outlook is reflected in the latest staff projections for economic growth, which have been revised down markedly for the remainder of the current year and throughout 2023. Staff now expect the economy to grow by 3.1 percent in 2022, 0.9 percent in 2023 and 1.9 percent in 2024.

The lasting vulnerabilities caused by the pandemic still pose a risk to the smooth transmission of monetary policy.

The Governing Council will therefore continue applying flexibility in reinvesting redemptions coming due in the pandemic emergency purchase programme portfolio, with a view to countering risks to the transmission mechanism related to the pandemic.

(gc)

EU Commission takes action against Austria over labour rules

The European Commission triggered infringement proceedings on September 21 against the Austrian government for what it says is Vienna's failure to transpose two EU labour market directives into national law. [Kurier] The case could end up in the European Court of Justice if the Commission is not satisfied with Vienna's response.

The goal of one of the EU directives is to ensure transparent and predictable working conditions in order to strengthen employees' rights to information about their job, such as fundamental aspects of the

employment relationship, place of work and remuneration. [The Local]

The second directive addresses the work-life balance of parents and carers. Among other things, it establishes minimum parental leave, and introduces paternity leave and carers' leave for workers providing personal care or support to a relative. [Euractiv] [European Commission]

The Austrian government now has two months to respond to the European Commission. If the Commission is not satisfied, it can take the next step, called "a reasoned opinion". [European Commission]

(vs/pk)

Council of Europe launches regular dialogue with Belarusian democratic forces

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers will hold regular meetings with representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition forces to foster relations with the country's civil society and opposition in exile. The Committee of Ministers had suspended all relations with Belarusian authorities because of Belarus's support of Russia's war in Ukraine, [Council of Europe]

(al/gc)

Visa ban on Russian citizens in the Baltics, Poland

The Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and the Polish governments announced on September 19 that they would deny entry to Russian citizens with Schengen visas who travel to the European Union for tourism, culture, sports, business or other activities.

Exceptions will be made only for dissidents and those seeking a humanitarian visa, family members, holders of EU residence permits, diplomats and accredited journalists. [Radio Free Europe] [LRT] [VOA]

In a joint statement, the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish governments cited increasing security concerns about an influx of Russians in the wake of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. They previously submitted the proposal to ban Russian citizens with a

Schengen visa at the EU level, yet met resistance from Germany and France who said that a near-complete ban would be counterproductive. [LRV] [Radio Free Europe]

Moreover, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania said on September 21 that they would not offer refuge to those seeking to escape Russian President Vladimi Putin's mobilisation of troops. Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said that "A refusal to fulfil one's civic duty in Russia or a desire to do so does not constitute sufficient grounds for being granted asylum in another country." [Euractiv]

Finland closes border

Following the Baltic countries, Finland closed its border to Russian citizens, beginning on September 30. The Finnish foreign ministry said that while dissidents, family members, students and those with a working visa are not affected, the transit through Finland as well as tourist and related activities should be prohibited. [BBC] [APNews] [ABC]

After Russian President Vladami Putin called for 300,000 reservists to reinforce the army, many Russians sought to escape to adjacent countries. While many were attempting to go to Kazakhstan, Georgia or Armenia, others opted for the Baltic states and Finland instead. [BBC]

Belarusian citizens are, of late, not affected by the ban, although some media outlets said that the ban would also apply to them. According to the Belarusian foreign ministry, it has not received any information from either country's foreign ministry whether Belarusian citizens would be denied entry. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Finland bans entry for Russian tourists, border guards want fence as draft dodgers flee

Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto has announced that his country will no longer issue tourist visas to Russian citizens, and that Russians who already have such visas will not be granted entry, even if they are transiting.

Meanwhile, border guards have called for part of Finland's long frontier with Russia to be fenced after a "partial mobilisation" ordered by President Vladimir Putin on September 21 saw conscription-aged

Russians attempting to flee their country. [yle] [Politico] [yle] [HelsinkiTimes] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Finland was the last point of entry into the European Union open to most Russians and has moved to plug what has been described as an EU sanctions loophole.

Following punitive Western measures introduced after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Russians have been unable to enter the Schengen area – the European passport-free zone – through air and seaports. Yet road travel remained unrestricted, meaning that this option was still available for Russians who wanted to cross into the EU. Finland was the only remaining European Union country with a land border with Russia that had been offering tourist visas. [Euronews/AFP]

Finland, alongside eastern European nations, had long advocated a full tourist visa ban, citing a security risk posed by Russian citizens. Speaking on September 29, Haavisto said that "the entry of Russian citizens for tourism purposes into Finland endangers Finland's international relations." [HelsinkiTimes]

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, speaking at an August 31 ministers' meeting in Prague, said that EU member states could regulate their own issuance of visas, without violating the Schengen agreement. [HelsinkiTimes]

Tourist visas were popular with Russians buying goods in Finland. New businesses had arisen attempting to sell hard-to-find goods to visiting Russians as the Russian economy starts to feel the bite of Western sanctions.

Warning from Kremlin

Helsinki's move comes despite fears of reprisals from the Kremlin, which has warned that any visa bans would trigger a "very negative" response from Moscow. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "All such actions against Russian citizens would require countermeasures and a response – this should be understandable and expected." [yle] [yle] [helsinkitimes]

At the same time, there is support in Finland for some types of visas to allow political refugees to escape from Russia to the EU, especially following the Kremlin's mobilisation order, which has seen many men who are eligible for the draft fleeing the country. Finnish Interior Minister Krista Mikkonen told news outlet YLE that men fleeing mobilisation would not be automatically eligible to claim asylum in Finland,

requiring a case-by-case analysis instead. [HelsinginSanomat] [Aamulehti]

Finnish border guards have announced that they will increase border surveillance to prevent unauthorised crossings, helped by new helicopters that were bought this year, and by the use of artificial intelligence to analyse surveillance footage. [yle]

In a recently published report, border guards recommended the construction of infrastructure to cover up to 20 percent of Finland's 1,300 km frontier with Russia, most of which is demarcated only with border posts. The Finnish border guards are concerned that illegal crossings could rise and are advocating for the southeast section of the frontier to be fenced, citing "recent changes in the security environment." [yle] [Politico]

(cg/pk)

German data retention law is incompatible with EU law, European top court says

Germany's regulations regarding data retention are incompatible with European Union law, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled on September 20.

Internet and phone service providers are not allowed to store their customers' data without cause, the court said. Limited data retention would be possible if strict conditions are met, for example if there is a "severe threat to national security," the ruling said. [DW] [Süddeutsche]

The German Telecommunications Act requires providers to store data for as long as ten weeks and makes it available to law enforcement. Civil rights experts have criticised the act for years, saying that it is "excessive" as it puts everyone under "general suspicion." [Süddeutsche]

German Justice Minister Marco Buschmann wrote on Twitter that the European Court of Justice's decision marked a "good day for civil rights" and that he plans to remove the data retention from German regulations. [DW]

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser wants to exhaust the options given by the court in prosecutions against terrorism, organised crime and sexual violence against children and teenagers. [Süddeutsche]

(mb/gc)

ECHR: Russia wrongfully removed an election observer from polling station

Russian authorities wrongfully removed an election observer from a polling station in the 2011 parliamentary elections, the European Court of Human Rights ruled on September 13.

The observer was banned from a Moscow polling station after videotaping the election process and the counting of votes. The electoral commission which removed him did this on the grounds of his behaviour, however the observer testified that he had filmed serious misconduct in the counting process.

The court held that Russia wrongfully interfered with his function as a "public watchdog" and awarded EUR 2,000 in moral damage. [ECHR, Timur Sharipov v. Russia] [ECHR Case Law]

(al/gc)

EU billions set to boost Slovenia's economic growth

Slovenia is set to receive over EUR 3 billion of funding between 2022-2027 as part of the EU's Cohesion Fund program, intended to provide economic growth and sustainable development.

A total of EUR 806 million will be invested into a transition towards a green economy, a push for a total decarbonisation and the development of renewable alternatives. [Dnevnik] [European Commission]

A further EUR 249 million will be spent on diversification and a move away from coal-based power in Slovenia's Savinjsko-Saleska and Zasavje regions.

Another EUR 727 million will be used for business research and innovation and to encourage a digital transformation, alongside EUR 511 million for sustainable and smart public transportation, as well as upgrading the existing Slovenian rail network.

Finally, EUR 769 million is intended to support the long-term unemployed and to help mitigate the effects of an ageing population.

The EU's so-called cohesion funds are designed to help the bloc's eastern and southern countries to develop and catch up with wealthier members in northern and western Europe.

(cg/pk)

EU urges Spain to renew top judicial council

The European Commission has urged Spain to appoint new members to its National Council for the Judiciary (CGPJ), the country's governing judicial body, which has been functioning for four years with an expired mandate.

The CGPJ consists of 20 members – 12 judges and eight lawyers – who are responsible for nominating judges to the country's Constitutional and Supreme Courts.

Ever since the conservative opposition People's Party (PP) lost power to the now-governing liberal Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in 2018, the three-fifths majority in parliament needed to appoint members to the CGPJ has not been met. The two political parties have been unable to reach an agreement on proposed reforms to the judiciary.

In an EU rule-of-law report released in July, the European Commission urged the renewal of the CGPJ while "taking into account European standards." [European Commission] [Economist] [El Mundo]

In a letter sent to the head of the CGPJ on September 9, European Commission vice-president Vera Jourova said that the "absolute priority is to immediately end the interim situation of the CGPJ by proceeding to its renewal." [Euobserver 1] [Euobserver 2] [El Pais]

(km/pk)

European Commission proposes second EUR 5 billion tranche of macro-financial assistance to Ukraine

The European Commission proposed the disbursement of EUR 5 billion in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine as part of a total EUR 9 billion agreed by the member states. About EUR 1 billion have been already allocated, with another EUR 3 billion expected. [European Commission]

Ukraine's macro-financial assistance will be provided on favourable terms and disbursed in a few instalments, According to the European Commission. The interest costs and administrative fees for the loan will be paid from the EU budget and the payment period for Ukraine would be up to 25 years. [European Commission] [Politico]

The Commission will disburse the assistance to Ukraine once the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union have approved the proposal and the corresponding Memorandum of Understanding and Loan Agreement have been signed with the Ukrainian authorities. [European Commission] [Euractiv]

The envisaged assistance complements the support already put in place by the European Union, such as the suspension of all import duties on Ukrainian exports. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that support for Ukraine was "unwavering" and that Ukraine "must regain the freedom and independence it is so courageously fighting for."

She added that "the EU will continue to do its part to make sure this happens." [European Commission]

(acn/gc)

EU Commission chief says 'we should have listened to those who know Putin'

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said in her annual speech on September 14 that "one lesson from this war [in Ukraine] is we should have listened to those who know Putin." [ERR] [LRT]

She added that the EU should have considered the voices of Russian dissidents and investigative journalists, fellow EU members Poland and the Baltic states as well as EU partners in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Belarusian opposition. [ERR]

Representatives of the Baltic states appreciate von der Leyen's acknowledgement. A senior official of the Estonian foreign ministry said that von der Leyen's position now resembled those of Estonia, adding that it is necessary to support Ukraine and maintain proactive sanctioning against Russia. [ERR]

Estonia's prime minister Kaja Kallas also agreed with von der Leyen's comments, adding that "this is the time

for us [the EU members] to show resolve, not appeasement" towards Russia. [Twitter]

(mo/gc)

UN investigators say war crimes were committed in Ukraine

UN-appointed independent human rights investigators said that war crimes have indeed been committed about seven months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [United Nations]

The finding came in the first report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, which was set up in March this year, at the request of Human Rights Council Member States. Much of the Commission's work focused on investigations in the regions of Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and Sumy, where allegations of the most serious rights violations were made against Russian, or Russian-backed forces, early in the war. [United Nations]

"Based on the evidence gathered so far during the Commission's existence, we found out after having carried out the investigations in these four areas just mentioned, we found that war crimes have been committed in Ukraine," Commission chairperson Erik Mose told journalists. Mose said that investigators visited 27 towns and settlements and interviewed more than 150 victims and witnesses. They also inspected "sites of destruction, graves, places of detention and torture", as well as remnants of weapons. [United Nations]

That conclusion is in line with findings published earlier this year by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. It documented unlawful killings - including summary executions of civilians - in more than 30 settlements in Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Sumy regions, by Russian armed forces while they controlled these areas in late February and March. [United Nations]

Brutal executions

Other key findings from the report include the surprisingly "large number of executions" in 16 towns and settlements, where "common elements" of the crimes included "visible signs of executions on bodies, such as hands tied behind backs, gunshot wounds to the head, and slit throats".

The report, delivered to the Human Rights Council, documented how explosive weapons had been used by the Russian Federation forces, "without distinguishing between civilians and combatants in populated areas."

"We were struck by a large number of executions and other violations by Russian forces, and the Commission received consistent accounts of torture and ill-treatment."

Horrific allegations of sexual violence against Ukrainian communities - including children - were also found to be based in fact. The Commission investigated cases of sexual gender-based violence and documented cases in which some Russian Federation soldiers committed such crimes, said Commissioner Jasminka Dzumhur.

Ukrainian forces were also responsible for human rights violations, said Commissioner Pablo de Greiff.

"We have found two instances of ill-treatment of Russian Federation soldiers by Ukrainian soldiers, and we mentioned this in our statement. We have found obviously significantly larger numbers of instances that amount to war crimes on the part of the Russian Federation."

(gc)

Albania signs EU deal for financial assistance over the next seven years

Albania's parliament ratified a deal with the European Union's Instrument for pre-Accession Assistance that will grant it financial aid over the next seven years in its path to EU membership.

EU Ambassador in Albania, Christiane Hohmann, said the ratification continues the union's strong partnership with Albania and that the measures will "improve the everyday lives of Albanians". [Albanian Daily News]

The measures will aim to reform social, economic and political institutions to abide by EU standards and values, according to the EU statement. They will focus on sectors such as education, the environment, democracy and the rule of law. [European Commission]

(hi/gc)

Armenia wants CSTO to support efforts to end conflict with Azerbaijan

Armenia wants the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to help negotiate an end to hostilities with Azerbaijan after fighting erupted in September.

Armenia's Deputy Foreign Minister Vahe Gevorgyan discussed on September 23 the conflict with CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas. Armenia wants CSTO to prevent further escalation of the conflict. [PanArmenien.net]

Vladimir Zainetdinov, spokesman of CSTO, said on September 13 that the CSTO has been working on a solution of the recent skirmishes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Referencing existing agreements between Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, the secretariat of the CSTO said that the disputes should be settled only via political and diplomatic means, without further violence. [Belta][Belta]

Colonel General Anatoly Sidorov, the Chief of the CSTO Joint Staff said on September 15 that the use of CSTO forces in resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was out of the question. In September, fighting erupted between the two countries, with Armenia accusing the Azerbaijan army of conducting cross-border attacks and raids deep within its territory.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also said that Moscow supports the peaceful settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. "I want to state that any conflict between the countries close to us is of serious concern. We call on everyone to exercise restraint, strictly observe the ceasefire and firmly follow the trilateral statements of the leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan," Putin said. [ANA]

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Armenia and Azerbaijan "to take immediate steps to deescalate tensions, exercise maximum restraint and resolve any outstanding issues through dialogue" and implement previous agreements, his spokesman said. [CNBC]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with leaders of both countries to calm the situation. The U.S. has a special envoy in the region, Blinken said, "and my hope is that we can move this from conflict back to the negotiating table and back to trying to build a peace." [CNBC]

207 killed

Yerevan has claimed that 207 Armenian citizens, both military personnel and civilians have been killed and gone missing in the bout of violence in September. Armenia accused Azerbaijan of using large-calibre weapons, artillery, missile systems and drones. It said 3 civilians have been killed and the whereabouts of 2 other civilians are unknown, 293 servicemen have been wounded, 3 civilians and 20 servicemen have been taken captive. [ARKA]

“Having adopted the agenda of establishing peace and opening regional communications, the Republic of Armenia considers the policy of threat and coercion carried out by Azerbaijan unacceptable,” the National Security Council said in a statement carried by the state news agency Armenpress. [MSN]

The Council, which was also attended by the Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, also stressed that the country will protect its “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” with “all available means” at its disposal. “There is evidence of cases of torture, mutilation and, therefore, illegal execution of Armenian servicemen captured or killed by Azeris,” he added. [MSN]

Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry said it was responding to a “large-scale provocation” by Armenia. It said Armenian troops planted mines and fired on Azerbaijani military positions. Azerbaijani authorities announced the death of at least 80 soldiers, while specifying that 282 soldiers were wounded between September 12 and 14. [CNBC]

CSTO is an intergovernmental military alliance created in 1992 and consists of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. [CSTO]

(ad-mo/gc)

Council of Europe calls for de-escalation after hostilities at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan

The Council of Europe has called for a de-escalation of the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, after clashes at the border killed 170 people.

Secretary General of the council, Marija Pejcinovic Buric, called on both countries to act according to their commitment to resolve the conflict peacefully, which they pledged when they entered the Council of Europe in 2001. [Council of Europe 1]

Armenia and Azerbaijan have been fighting for decades over Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountainous enclave recognised as part of Azerbaijan while being home to a large Armenian population. Fighting first erupted toward the end of Soviet rule, and Armenian forces took control of large swathes of territory in and around it in the early 1990s. Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, largely retook those territories over six weeks in 2020. [CNN]

Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Chair of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, Simon Coveney, and the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Tiny Kox, made the following statement:

"The use of military force is totally unacceptable in settling disputes between Council of Europe member states. We therefore call on Azerbaijan and Armenia to pull back from any further steps which might worsen the situation, to respect international agreements and to engage in peace talks without further delay." [Council of Europe 2]

(al/gc)

Austria, Czech Republic introduce checks at Slovak border

Amid a spike in illegal migration, the governments of Austria and the Czech Republic have temporarily introduced border controls at their normally passport-free frontiers with Slovakia. [Pravda] The measures entered into force on September 29 and were due to last 10 days. [TT] [Pravda]

"It is essential to react before the smugglers react," Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner told the O1 radio station. [Euractiv]

By September 30, Czech police had detained more than 300 refugees and 11 people-smugglers at the border with Slovakia, a police spokeswoman said. [Sme]

Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are part of Europe's passport-free Schengen travel area.

(vs/pk)

Estonia: Foreign minister condemns violence between Armenia and Azerbaijan

The Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Reinsalu condemned on September 13 the "intensified conflict" between Armenia and Azerbaijan. [ERR] [Twitter]

Reinsalu said that Estonia along with the EU will continue monitoring the developments in the bilateral dispute between Yerevan and Baku, adding that he urged both conflicting parties to return to peace negotiations. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

EU pledges millions to tackle AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria

The European Commission has said it is donating EUR 715 million to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The contribution, announced at a UN summit in New York on September 22, covers the period 2023-2025.

The Global Fund supports the treatment and screening of infections through donations to local humanitarian organisations, the provision of medical equipment and the training of health workers. In addition to fighting diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS, the fund has also served to fight Covid-19. [European Commission] [Euractiv]

Jutta Urpilainen, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, said: "The EU has been a strong supporter of the Global Fund since it was set up in 2002 and we are massively stepping up in the next years with this historic 30 percent increase in our contribution."

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that the EU's contribution "will be a lifeline for millions more and will help deliver better health for all". [European Commission]

(acn/pk)

Greece protests to NATO Secretary General over Turkish national celebration remarks

NATO congratulated Turkey on 100 years of independence, saying in a Tweet now deleted that the

military group joins them in “celebrating their Victory and Turkish Armed Forces Day.”

Greece protested to NATO’s Secretary General, reiterating that the celebration - commemorating Turkey’s win in the 1922 Greco-Turkish War - is a reminder of the “Burning of Smyrna” and persecution of the Greek population of the now-Turkish city of Izmir. [Kathimerini] [Euronews]

After the tweet’s deletion, Turkish authorities called NATO’s concession “unacceptable” and urged NATO not to give in to the “selfish” behaviour of other members. [Kathimerini]

Amid a series of alleged overflights by both sides, disputes over oil drilling, migrants and the militarisation of Greek islands, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Greece’s “occupation of the islands does not blind” Turkey. Ankara will “do what is necessary” and “may come suddenly one night,” Erdogan said.

It remains unclear if the word “occupation” refers to the militarisation of Greek islands or if it represents a shift in Turkey’s rhetoric, and a challenge to Greece’s sovereignty. [Hurriyet]

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said he would report “recent Turkish threats” to the secretary generals of NATO and the United Nations, as well as the members of the UN Security Council. He previously discussed the issue with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrel and representatives of the United States. [Proto Thema]

(hi/gc)

Open Balkan member states sign deals on food, investments and energy

Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia signed a series of agreements on food, investments, energy and bilateral relations at the Open Balkan summit in Belgrade. Open Balkan is an economic and political zone established by the three countries in 2021, in hopes of promoting cooperation and growth. [Albanian Daily News]

They signed an agreement to establish an open market to combat food insecurity amid the war in Ukraine. The states also signed deals on mining and energy, investments in the audiovisual industry and a cooperation framework relating to civil emergencies. [Albanian Daily News]

Although the leaders of the three members have said that Open Balkan will promote stable growth as they move to join the European Union, there are concerns about how the project could disproportionately affect Albania and North Macedonia, whose economies might struggle to keep up with Serbia's. [Balkan Insight]

Albanian Deputy Prime Minister Belinda Belluku said that her country will supply coal to Serbia and North Macedonia as part of their efforts to combat the ongoing energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine. [Politiko Albania]

Albania produces most of its electricity via hydropower plants, yet it has more than 700 million tons of coal reserves. It plans to export some of its coal to Serbia and North Macedonia, who in turn will use it to produce electricity that they will export back to Albania. [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Baltic PMs meet in Berlin at ceremony held by Friedrich August von Hayek Foundation

The Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, her Latvian counterpart Krisjanis Karins as well as Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte met in Berlin on September 4 to receive an award from the Friedrich August von Hayek Foundation for their contribution to a free economy and democracy. [Twitter] [Twitter] [ERR] [The Baltic Times]

The award is given to those who create, strengthen and foster a liberal economy and social order in Europe and elsewhere in the world. [ERR]

Kallas said that she felt honoured to receive the award, adding that establishing a free and open society has been an arduous task and that Estonia, along with Latvia and Lithuania, consistently paid attention to the advice of international partners. She added that in view of Russia's war in Ukraine and the security concerns of the Baltic states, their partners now need to pay attention to the Baltic states' suggestions. [ERR]

The Baltic leaders also discussed the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine, adding that the West should not give in to Russian propaganda and that "Russia's aggression against Ukraine and Moscow's energy blackmail against the West were the real reasons for the rising energy prices." [The Baltic Times]

(mo/mb/gc)

Greece to pay off EUR 2.7 billion of Eurozone loans earlier than expected

Greece is set to repay a sum of EUR 2.7 billion to Eurozone countries earlier than the previously-set 2023 deadline.

This would be the first time Greece has repaid its Eurozone bailout debt ahead of schedule. Athens has an estimated cash buffer of about EUR 39 billion, which reportedly can cover its borrowing needs until 2025. [Reuters]

Earlier this year, Greece completed paying the International Monetary for a EUR 28 billion facility from 2014 - two years ahead of schedule. The state aims to "smooth out the maturity profile of debt" and minimise its future borrowing needs. [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Hungarian PM says EU 'shot itself in the foot' with sanctions on Russia

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said in an address to parliament on September 26 that European Union sanctions on Moscow have "backfired" by driving up energy prices.

Orban, whose right-wing government has been criticised for its close ties to Moscow amid Russia's war against Ukraine, claimed that Europe had "shot itself in the foot" and that European citizens had become poorer, while Russia had "not fallen to its knees".

Orban also announced his government would hold a "national consultation" to ask Hungarians about the EU sanctions – a mechanism he has used before to find support among voters for tough policies on migration. [Reuters] [Euroefe/Euractiv]

(msa/pk)

Hungarian foreign minister meets Russian counterpart despite EU 'understanding' not to do so

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on September 22 in New York, just hours after a European Commission spokesperson said EU member states had an "understanding" that for now "it doesn't make much sense" to hold talks with Russian officials.

The meeting took place during the United Nations General Assembly. Szijjarto said in a Facebook post that "peace requires negotiation, negotiation requires dialogue". [Euronews]

Hungary, an EU member, has been criticised for its friendly ties with the Kremlin at a time when Russia is waging a bloody war in Ukraine.

Szijjarto and Lavrov discussed gas shipments and the construction of a nuclear plant being built in Hungary by Russia's Rosatom.

The Hungarian foreign minister said national interests dictated that his country should maintain "reliable and predictable cooperation" with Russia and with Gazprom. [Reuters] Szijjarto announced in the summer that Russian state energy giant Gazprom would provide more gas to Hungary in September and October.

Shortly before Szijjarto and Lavrov met, EU Commission spokesperson Peter Stano told reporters: "There is an understanding among the EU member states that at this particular stage meeting Lavrov for example in New York would not make much sense because it would not bring the necessary results." [Euronews]

(msa/pk)

Lithuania: Foreign ministry critical of the European Commission's praise of Gorbachev

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said on September 1 that the European Commission should have considered the Baltic states' history when praising the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who died on August 31. [The Baltic Times]

Landsbergis added that while Gorbachev played a crucial role in concluding the Cold War and reunifying Germany, he is remembered in Lithuania for cracking down on peaceful protesters who were demanding independence from the Soviet Union. [The Baltic Times]

Fourteen civilians were killed, with several hundreds injured when Soviet troops stormed the TV tower and a radio and television building in Vilnius on January 13, 1991. Lithuanians hold Gorbachev, as the leader of the Soviet Union, accountable for these actions. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

North Macedonia presents priorities for upcoming OSCE chairmanship

North Macedonian Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani announced his country's priorities and agenda for its upcoming chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

He said the war in Ukraine should be the OSCE's "highest priority" but said that there are other challenges to be addressed in Europe. He also discussed combating corruption, human rights abuses, climate change and food security. [OSCE]

Osmani also said his country views the chairmanship "as an obligation, but also a privilege to show [its] real image to the world". [MIA]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: President urges EU to offer aid amid energy crisis

North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski said the European Union should offer aid to Western Balkans nations and EU candidate states to manage the ongoing energy crisis, much as it did with COVID-19 vaccinations. He made his comments after meeting Slovak President Zuzana Caputova. [MIA]

The Western Balkans need access to relevant EU mechanisms "as soon as possible" and that the potential "economic and social crisis can cause a multi-year political crisis and generate additional instability," Pendarovski said. [Nova]

Italian President Sergio Mattarella reaffirmed Italy's support in a meeting with Pendarovski for North Macedonia's request, saying that including the Western Balkans in EU energy mechanisms would ensure what is best for their "common future." [MKD]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia; Referendum request for controversial EU accession deal rejected amid political tensions

Members of the North Macedonian opposition party VMRO DPMNE submitted a request for a referendum on the controversial "French Deal", which would constitutionally recognise the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia and their common history, subsequently letting the country begin EU accession talks.

The deal caused strong reactions by the opposition, who organised various protests over the summer and called it "unpatriotic". [Nova Makedonija]

Parliament speaker Talat Xhaferi blocked the referendum, saying that it was "contrary to the constitution," as international agreements are automatically part of the country's legal code and cannot be altered. VMRO DPMNE accused Xhaferi of breaking the constitution, saying that he has no ability to interpret it himself. [Balkan Insight]

VMRO DPMNE President Hristijan Mickoski accused the government of "running away from facing the people."

Levica - a small anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russia opposition party - has announced that they will submit an alternative referendum question that is "impossible to legally reject." They said it will focus on the decision's consequences for North Macedonians, rather than its legal basis. [Balkan Insight]

Former president Zoran Zaev said that "over 75 percent" of North Macedonians do not support the referendum, and the remaining 25 percent are members of VMRO DPMNE. He reiterated that everyone in the country supports "friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation". [Vecer] [Nova Makedonija]

In order for the constitution to be changed, the parliament needs a two-thirds majority - a task that will be hard to achieve without VMRO DPMNE's support.

(hi/gc)

Polish opposition leader urges Berlin to increase support for Ukraine, invoking guilt over WWII

Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk has called on Germany to ramp up its support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion, referencing what he said were German feelings of guilt over World War Two. [Notes From Poland] [TVN24]

The former European Council president and ex-prime minister was speaking at a media awards event in Potsdam, Germany. The ceremony – which German Chancellor Olaf Scholz also attended – was held to honour the "heroic courage and indomitable will" of the Ukrainian people in their defence against Russia's "brutal invasion." [Notes From Poland]

"If the feeling of guilt and responsibility for World War Two is to oblige the Germans to something, it is primarily to unequivocally and fully engage on the side of Ukraine in the fight against the aggressor," said Tusk. [Notes From Poland] [TVN24]

Critics say Germany has been hesitant to provide Kiev with weapons and ammunition since Moscow began its invasion of Ukraine in February. Poland, meanwhile, has been one of the largest providers of weapons to Ukraine – second only to the United States. [Notes From Poland]

"There is absolutely no reason for countries like Germany, France and Italy to support Ukraine less than the US, Poland and the Baltic states do," said Tusk. [Politico]

However, Scholz said that Berlin is sending weapons and military equipment and would continue to do so "reliably and for as long as necessary." The German leader added: "Their fight is a fight that we support." [Politico]

Tusk's reference to World War Two follows Warsaw's recent demands that Berlin pay EUR 1.3 trillion in reparations for the damages inflicted by Nazi Germany's invasion and occupation of Poland.

Tusk had previously said that the issue of reparations was an attempt by his country's ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party to garner support for next year's parliamentary elections, and accused it of running an "anti-German campaign." [The Guardian]

As part of his Potsdam speech, however, Tusk said that Germany should have "an honest approach to compensating losses to the nations that paid the greatest price for the madness of Nazism."

Polish government spokesperson Piotr Muller reacted by saying that Tusk had "pursued a completely

different policy" during his time as prime minister. [Notes From Poland]

The head of Poland's ruling party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, in August accused Tusk and the opposition of working with foreign powers to pressure Warsaw to submit to Germany as part of "German-Russian plans to rule Europe." [Notes From Poland] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

(ek/pk)

Turkey: Erdogan blames Europe for Russia's weaponisation of energy

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters on September 6 that "Europe is actually reaping what it sowed" and called Russia's weaponisation of energy supplies Moscow's way of retaliating against Western sanctions. [Turkish Minute] [Alarabiya]

After European nations imposed sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, Turkey blamed the West's energy problems on the sanctions. In August, Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Sochi and agreed to continue trade and investment in natural gas. [Turkish Minute] [Alarabiya]

With Turkey going against its European neighbours and not imposing any sanctions on Russia, Ankara also agreed to start paying for natural gas in the rouble. [Turkish Minute]

"I think Europe will experience serious problems this winter. We do not have such a problem," Erdogan said.

Turkey will get its gas supply from Russia through the Turk Stream pipeline which runs under the Black Sea. [Alarabiya]

(go/gc)

Belgium: 21 EU prime ministers sign letter urging Belgian PM not to release jailed thwarted Iranian terrorist

Twenty-one former European prime ministers and ministers sent a joint appeal to Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo on September 7 asking his government not to send Assadollah Assadi, who is currently serving a 20-year prison sentence for

terrorism and attempted murder, back to Iran. [Euractiv] [Thenationalnews]

The letter stresses that Assadi must stay in Belgium for the remainder of his sentence for "the sake of the common safety and security of all European nations." It also states that at a minimum,Brussels must make it absolutely clear that the treaty between Belgium and Iran, which states that "each Party may grant pardon, amnesty or commutation of the sentence in accordance with its Constitution or other laws," does not apply to terrorists.

There are concerns that Assadi's sentence would be ignored in Iran. Iranian authorities have publicly said that they do not recognise "the decision to convict Assadi by the Belgium court." [Euractiv] [Thenationalnews]

The letter added that his release would also encourage more Iranian terrorism on EU soil, as it reassures Iranian officials that they can evade responsibility for major international crimes. The Belgian government is being asked to resist Iran's "hostage diplomacy tactics." [Euractiv] [Thenationalnews]

Tehran has "arrested innocent Westerners on spurious charges and has exploited their plight as a bargaining chip to gain concessions from Western countries," the letter said.

(gt/gc)

Erdogan says he wants Turkey to join Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he wanted his country to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), according to broadcaster NTV and other media. [Reuters] [Tagesshau]

"Our relations with these countries will be moved to a much different position with this step," Erdogan said. When asked if he meant membership of the SCO, he said, "Of course, that's the target." [Reuters[Tagesshau]

Erdogan said he wants to discuss membership at the group's meeting in India next year. Up until now Turkey has only been given the guest status and has been marked as a dialogue partner by the SCO. Erdogan called upon Turkey's "historical and cultural" connections to the Asian continent and in case of accession would make the nation the first member

who also is a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

(go/gc)

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation approves Belarus accession bid

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) announced on September 16 that it had unanimously approved Belarus's membership bid and would launch the accession procedure after Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko attended this year's SCO Summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. [AKIpress] [Belta] [Belarus]

Previously, Belarus had held the position of a dialogue partner from 2010 until 2015 and as an observer since 2015 but had no voting rights in decision-making processes during that time frame. [SCO] [Belta]

Senior foreign ministry official Igor Bely said that with the successful membership bid, Belarus would soon have access to projects and agreements to increase its international cooperation across the Eurasian landmass. He added that while Belarus will benefit from the contractual frameworks of the SCO, the other member states, too, will benefit from Belarus' expertise in science, technology and agriculture. [Belta] [Belarus]

The Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov said in a statement that Russia has fully supported Belarus's membership ambitions, adding that "Belarus will make a considerable contribution to achieving the goals set before the organisation." [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus, Russia to implement agreement on funding import-substituting projects

Belarusian First Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Snopkov said on September 6 that a Belarusian-Russian agreement to fund an import substitution project was in its final stages. [Belta]

Belarus and Russia are currently facing difficulties caused by Western sanctions that target bilateral investment projects.

Prime Minister Piotr Parkhomchik said the import-substitution projects are designed to offset investment and import deficits. Belarusian experts estimate that Belarus would receive up to USD 2 billion to implement the import substitution projects. [Interfax] [TASS]

(mo/gc)

Belgium: PM De Croo receives Ukrainian counterpart Shmyhal

Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander De Croo reaffirmed his country's commitment to Ukraine during a meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal in Brussels.

De Croo took the "opportunity to reaffirm Belgium's commitment on the military, humanitarian and diplomatic axes," the Prime Minister's office said in a statement. Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib and Defence Minister Ludivine Dedonder attended the meeting on September 5. [BrusselsTimes][7sur7]

Belgium provided EUR 8 million for first aid, winter equipment and pharmaceutical products, De Croo said. "From the beginning of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, our country has taken its responsibility. We will continue to do so, even if Vladimir Putin decides to make it a war of attrition."

Lahbib said that the perpetrators of war crimes in Ukraine will be punished.

"Belgium was one of the first countries to ask the International Criminal Court to investigate and provide additional resources," Lahbib said. "The decision of the Council of Ministers last week to intervene alongside Ukraine in its filing of a genocide complaint before the International Court of Justice demonstrates the firm commitment of our country."

Dedonder said that Belgium is continuing to support the Ukrainian army by sending military and medical equipment and by training the Ukrainian army.

(gt/gc)

Estonia, Ukraine to strengthen cooperation in the field of digitalisation

Estonia and Ukraine signed on September 5 an agreement to promote information-sharing in the field

of digital transformation. [The Baltic Times]

Estonia's Minister of Entrepreneurship and Information Technology Kristjan Jarvan said that both Estonia and Ukraine learned from one another while cooperating, specifically in terms of cybersecurity. He added that Ukraine's successful protection against cyberattacks demonstrates the importance of exchanging information and experience. [The Baltic Times]

Ukraine's Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov said that Estonia is a role model that Ukraine has been following to transfer various services into the digital space and to learn how to protect them. [The Baltic Times]

Pursuant to the agreement, Estonia and Ukraine will increase cooperation in the field of e-government. Estonian undersecretary for digital transformation Luukas Kristjan Ilves said that Ukraine has made remarkable progress, having built a powerful digital state relying on Estonia's experiences and technologies. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Next aid package for Ukraine is being prepared, defence minister says

Estonia's Minister of Defence Hanno Pevkur said on September 14 that Estonia is preparing the next aid package for Ukraine after he met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kiev. [ERR]

Pevkur said that the Ukrainian armed forces have demonstrated "immense courage" and "it is a sure sign that our collective aid has had a positive impact and that it must continue." He added that as long as Russia has not signalled any intention to withdraw from Ukraine, Estonia along with its partners "have no reason to make concessions." [ERR]

While in Kiev, Pevkur also met with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Pevkur added that he wanted to make sure which kind of aid Ukraine needs in order to recalibrate Estonia's efforts to the changing conditions. [ERR]

He also said that Estonia would "actively convince other member states" to increase their efforts of imposing sanctions on Russia. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonian Prime Minister Kallas discussed security issues with French President Macron

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and French President Emmanuel Macron had a phone call on September 13 to discuss on-going European security issues, including Russia's war in Ukraine. [ERR]

Kallas said during the call that the continuous support for Ukraine has led to recent successes, adding that "Ukraine has used the military aid with great skill, showing they can win this war if we keep supporting them." [ERR]

She also added that while France has been a consistent partner since the war began, she hopes that Macron would further increase French assistance to not only increase the costs for Russia's aggression, but also to investigate war crimes of the Russian armed forces. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

EU opens evacuation hub to help transfer Ukraine patients

The EU has opened a new hub near the south-eastern Polish city of Rzeszow to help transfer patients from war-torn Ukraine to hospitals across Europe. [European Commission]

As Ukraine struggles to provide care due to a lack of intact medical facilities, the Medevac Hub, funded under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, aims to relieve pressure on the health systems of neighbouring countries. [European Commission 1]

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February, the EU established evacuation procedures supported by a new "rescEU" aircraft operated by Norway and funded through the European Civil Protection Mechanism.

Since March 11, over 1,000 Ukrainian patients have been transferred to a total of 18 European countries. [European Commission 2] [European Union]

The EU commissioner for crisis management, Janez Lenarcic, said the number of wounded people in Ukraine was growing daily, and hospitals already short of supplies were struggling to cope.

Lenarcic added: “The destruction of healthcare facilities deprives chronically ill patients of the treatment they need to survive. We cannot abandon these people.” [European Law Monitor]

(acn/pk)

European Union considers taking UK to court to demand adherence to North Ireland protocol

The EU is considering taking the United Kingdom to the European Court of Justice to demand its adherence to the Northern Ireland protocol negotiated between the EU and the UK under Boris Johnson. [Irish Independent] [Irish Examiner] [Reuters]

As a member of Johnson’s cabinet, now British Prime Minister Liz Truss introduced legislation that would undo parts of the Northern Ireland protocol. Officially she did not deviate from the position of the previous administration, but it is currently unclear how willing she is to negotiate. The issue, if unsolved, could lead to a trade war between the UK and the EU. [Reuters] [Irish Independent] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [The Irish Times]

The UK territory of Northern Ireland is currently without a functioning executive since the pro-UK Democratic Unionist Party refuses to enter a power-sharing government with the Irish republican party Sinn Fein to protest the Northern Ireland protocol. [RTÉ] [Irish Examiner] [The Irish Times]

If the situation continues to be unsolved until December, the law requires new elections. This could prevent people in Northern Ireland from receiving timely help with the current cost of living crisis. [The Irish Times] [Irish Examiner] [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Greece: France reaffirms support in case of an armed conflict with Turkey

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna expressed France’s concern over the situation between Greece and Turkey and reaffirmed that the country’s priorities are de-escalation and stable relations. She made her comments during an official visit to Greece.

When asked what France's stance would be in the case of an armed conflict, Colonna said that France will abide by the strategic partnership agreement previously signed with Greece. This would include mutual defence. [Kathimerini]

French President Emmanuel Macron condemned "Turkey's provocations" and expressed his belief that the French-Greek partnership "will not allow any unrest in the East Mediterranean." He made his comments after meeting with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. [Greek Reporter]

(hi/gc)

Greece signs natural gas storage deal with Italy

Greek Energy Minister Kostas Skrekas said that Greece and Italy have signed a memorandum of understanding that would allow Greece to use Italian gas storage facilities to transport gas to Greece. He also said that Greece has become "a regional hub" for natural gas and green energy. [Kathimerini]

This is part of Greece's long efforts to diversify its energy supply chains in the midst of potentially disrupted Russian energy flows. The country has no gas storage facilities of its own and will need to rely on foreign states to cover its needs in the coming winter. [Reuters]

(hi/gc)

Greece and Germany move forward with deal to replace military tanks, aid Ukraine

Greece will receive 40 advanced-technology tanks from Germany after Athens donated the same number of ageing tanks to Ukraine to help it battle Russian forces. Germany has agreed to the provision of tanks to Kiev. [Kathimerini]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had been reported saying he had negotiated the agreement with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Germany also made a similar deal with the Czech Republic earlier this year, and vowed to continue this strategy to aid Ukraine. [CNN]

(hi/gc)

In Serbia, Hungarian president announces alliance of 'family-friendly' heads of state

During her first official visit to Serbia, Hungarian right-wing head of state Katalin Novak on September 9 announced the creation of a "circle of family-friendly presidents". The initiative was unveiled at a joint press conference with Novak's Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vucic.

Novak said there is not a single country in Europe "where enough children are born", and added that "building, investing and prospering" only makes sense if there is "someone to whom we can leave the wealth we created".

Novak said she aims to bring together presidents "who understand the importance of standing up for families". Vucic is the first head of state asked to join the new initiative.

Speaking about Serbia's prospects of joining the European Union, Novak promised that Hungary would support the country's earliest possible accession. [Hungary Today]

(msa/pk)

Italy probes suspected tax evasion by French supermarket giants

Italian authorities are investigating subsidiaries of French supermarket chains Auchan and Carrefour that are suspected of evading up to EUR 1.8 billion in taxes between 2014 and 2019 by using false invoices. [IlMessaggero]

Several Carrefour Italy managers have been placed under house arrest. Carrefour has pledged to cooperate with Italian authorities and has announced its own internal review. [RetailDetail]

Up to EUR 50 million has been confiscated from the Italian subsidiaries of the two French retail giants. [Ansa]

(cg/pk)

Latvia and Denmark held bilateral talks about security cooperation and the war in Ukraine

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics met on September 8 with his Danish counterpart Jeppe Kofod and members of the Danish parliament during their working visit to Latvia. [The Baltic Times]

The officials discussed the prospects of Latvian-Danish relations, regional cooperation and European security issues. Rinkevics said that he appreciates Denmark's contributions to NATO, which has had a positive impact on the security situation in the Baltics. [The Baltic Times]

Rinkevics and Kofod condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine, adding that military, economic and political support for Ukraine should continue, and that Russia should be held accountable for the crimes committed during the war in Ukraine. [The Baltic Times]

The Danish foreign minister also seized the opportunity to visit the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and the Adazi military base, where some Danish soldiers are deployed. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Foreign ministry orders Russian embassy to use name of official street address

The Russian Embassy in Riga is required to use the official name of the street where it is located, Press Secretary of the Latvian foreign ministry, Diana Elgite, said on September 7. In response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Latvian authorities renamed the section of Antonias Street where the Russian embassy is located to "Street of Independence of Ukraine." [LSM][LSM]

(mo/gc)

Lithuanian citizen detained in Russia without warrant

The Lithuanian State Security Department said on September 14 that a Lithuanian citizen was detained in

Russia without a warrant and was subjected to physical and psychological abuse. [LRT]

The man was arrested at the Lithuanian-Russian border and spent more than two weeks in Russian detention. [LRT]

The man said that he was handcuffed and blindfolded as well as aggressively interrogated. He added that during the interrogation, the police officers displayed firearms, knives and electric shock devices. [LRT]

Upon release, the man was charged RUB 2,000 (approximately EUR 32) and banned from entering Russia during the next five years. The Russian police did not inform the Lithuanian authorities as to the circumstances of detention. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Belarusian journalist and dissident arrives in Lithuania after 18-months prison sentence in Belarus

Aleh Hruzdzilovich, Belarusian correspondent of Radio Free Europe, arrived in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius on September 21 after he was released from a Belarusian prison. [LRT]

Hruzdzilovich was incarcerated in a prison in the Mahilyou region after Belarusian authorities accused him of having participated in demonstrations against the Belarusian president. He provided coverage as an accredited journalist. [LRT]

Radio Free Europe President Jamie Fly condemned Belarus, saying that Hruzdzilovich's prison sentence was "illegitimate." While Fly was relieved about Hruzdzilovich's release, he added that two other Belarusian journalists of Radio Free Europe, consultant and blogger Ihar Losik as well as freelance correspondent Andrey Kuznechyk, are still under arrest.

(mo/gc)

Moldovan President Sandu met with UK Minister for Intergovernmental Relations

Moldovan President Maia Sandu met on September 18 with UK Minister for Intergovernmental Relations

Nadhim Zahawi. [Moldpres]

Sandu and Zahawi discussed regional security issues as well as Moldova's challenges in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine. Sandu said that Moldova's key interests are peace and stability as well as a sustainable and stable economy for its citizens struggling to cope with the energy crisis. [Moldpres]

Both assessed the prospects of cooperation in the spheres of energy, efforts to combat propaganda and disinformation campaigns as well as the reformation of the judicial branch in Moldova. [Moldpres]

President Sandu also visited the UK to attend the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II., expressing her condolences on behalf of the Moldovan people. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Poland looks to make up with Hungary after falling out over war in Ukraine

Poland is looking to mend relations with Hungary after the two countries fell out over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has said. [Euractiv] [Bloomberg] [TVP World]

"I intend to try to work out a formula that… would allow us and Hungary to return to cooperation within the V4 framework as well as joint endeavours in those areas where we are brought together by shared values and interests," said Morawiecki in an interview with pro-government news publication Sieci, referring to the Visegrad Group (V4), a regional cooperation platform that brings together Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland] [Bloomberg]

Hungary has been one of Poland's closest allies in the EU, where both countries have supported each other in disputes with Brussels over the rule of law. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland] Top EU politicians have accused Poland and Hungary of eroding key democratic values.

However, cooperation between Warsaw and Budapest became strained due to the latter's continued close relations with Moscow following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Morawiecki saying in July that "the paths of Poland and Hungary have diverged." [Notes From Poland] [Bloomberg]

Poland, meanwhile, has been one of Moscow's toughest critics and has advocated continued support for Ukraine. [Euractiv] [Bloomberg]

Warsaw's new desire to make amends with Budapest comes as the European Commission continues to withhold billions in post-pandemic recovery funds until key changes to Poland's judiciary are reversed. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

The head of Poland's ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, accused the EU in August of trying to force Poland to submit to "German-Russian plans to rule Europe," further souring relations between Warsaw and Brussels. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

(ek/pk)

Russia warns Moldova over Russian troops deployed in Transnistria

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned Moldova on September 1 that any move endangering the Russian deployed in Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway region that illegitimately sought secession from Moldova, could trigger a military confrontation. [Deutsche Welle] [TRT]

Lavrov said that "any action that would threaten the security of our troops would be considered under international law as an attack on Russia." [Deutsche Welle]

He also accused Moldovan President Maia Sandu of obstructing the talks to find a final peace settlement in the conflict with Transnistria. Lavrov added that instead of resolving the conflict diplomatically, Sandu would seek to resort to non-diplomatic means.

His statement coincided with Transnistrian separatist leader Vadim Krasnoselsky's submission of a letter to the Moldovan president, in which he requested talks over a political solution. [Deutsche Welle]

Through the bureau of reintegration headed by Oleg Serebrian, Moldova condemned Lavrov's comments, saying that Chisinau has always sought a diplomatic solution of the territorial dispute. Daniel Voda, spokesperson of the Moldovan foreign ministry added that any suggestion of a different approach, other than diplomacy, is unfounded.

President Sandu also said that the Moldovan people, including the Russian-speaking community, should not be manipulated by statements made by the Russian government. [Deutsche Welle] [Twitter] [Yahoo]

(mo/gc)

Serbia allowed to use Hungarian gas storage facilities under favourable terms

Hungary has allowed Serbia to use its natural gas storage facilities "on favourable terms," Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said after an official meeting with Hungarian President Katlin Novak.

Trade between the two countries has increased so much it is "almost incomparable to other countries," Vucic said. He personally thanked Novak and Prime Minister Viktor Orban. [N1]

Like many European countries, Serbia is trying to diversify its energy supply chain amid higher energy costs.

At the press conference, Novak urged the European Union to take quicker steps for Serbia's accession, saying that the "EU needs Serbia." She also affirmed that Serbia should maintain its right not to impose sanctions on Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, saying that it is a matter of national sovereignty that the EU must respect. [Euronews]

(hi/gc)

Slovenia in favour of Croatia joining Schengen area

Slovenia's interior minister has said her country is in favour of neighbouring Croatia becoming part of Europe's border-free Schengen zone. [TotalSloveniaNews] [TotalCroatiaNews]

In order for a nation to join the Schengen area, a unanimous decision is needed by the European Union, of which both Slovenia and Croatia are members. A border dispute between the two countries had been an obstacle for previous Slovene governments. However, Slovenia's foreign policy has shifted under its new government.

Croatia joined the EU in 2013 and is the bloc's newest member state. It recently announced that it will be

joining the Eurozone at the start of 2023. The Adriatic country now also seeks to join the passport-free Schengen area.

Croatian Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic said that mutual cooperation and easier cross-border travel were in the interests of both his country and Slovenia. [Euractiv]

After talks with Bozinovic on August 29, Slovenian Interior Minister Tatjana Bobnar said: "Of course, we expect our Croatian counterparts to conduct full checks on the external border and fulfil all other tasks as provided by the Schengen legal order."

If Croatia joins the Schengen area, there would no longer be a physical border between it and its north-western neighbour Slovenia, which is part of the Schengen zone. Instead, the external Schengen border would be extended to Croatia's borders with Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro.

Slovenia recently elected a new centre-left government that has announced plans including the removal of border fences, a new migration policy and a closer alignment with western Europe.

(cg/pk)

Albania halts diplomatic ties with Iran over cyberattack

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced that Tirana cut all diplomatic relations with Iran after "an investigation brought incontestable proof" that Tehran was responsible for a cyberattack against Albanian government services earlier this year.

Albania was quick to accuse a "foreign government" of being responsible for the attack. Local media did not name Iran as a suspect until a terrorist threat was received prior to the Free Iran World Summit in the Albanian city of Durres. [Balkan Insight]

Albania's government announced a ban on publishing any information or documents resulting from cyberattacks after a series of emails and public documents were made public after the attack against police servers. Journalists and media watchdogs have condemned the ban, saying it "violates media freedom." [Balkan Insight]

Albania and Iran have had strained relations since 2013 due to Albania hosting as many as 3,000 Iranian

dissidents and members of the People's Mujahedin of Iran - an opposition group to the Iranian regime which was expected to have a strong presence at the Free Iran World Summit.

Rama said that all Iranian diplomats in Albania were declared personae non grata and had 24 hours to leave the country. It was later revealed that the investigation that linked Iran to the attack involved consultation with up to 18 other countries. [Albanian Daily News]

Following the announcement, Albania experienced a second cyberattack - this time targeted at police servers - for which they also blamed Iran. In response to the cyber attacks, the United States imposed sanctions on Iran's ministry of intelligence and security and vowed to "hold Iran accountable for actions that threaten the security of a US ally" and fellow NATO member. [CNN] [France24]

"Iran's cyber attack against Albania disregards norms of responsible peacetime State behaviour in cyberspace, which includes a norm on refraining from damaging critical infrastructure that provides services to the public," said Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson. "We will not tolerate Iran's increasingly aggressive cyber activities targeting the United States or our allies and partners." [USTreasury]

Similar cyberattacks recently took place in Albania's neighbouring Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro, but none of them have been linked to Iran as of yet.

(hi/gc)

Danish Islamic State fighter sentenced to 14 years

A Lebanese-born Dane who left Denmark to fight for the so-called Islamic State in 2013 has been given a 14-year jail sentence by a Copenhagen court for treason after returning from Syria.

Jacob El Ali, 33, is the first Danish citizen to be convicted for joining the terror group. He pleaded guilty but claimed that he was mentally unstable.

El Ali had headed to Syria after watching footage from the war-torn country. He said that he wanted to fight Bashir Al-Assad, the Syrian dictator. After his arrival, he began to train and carry out operations with a small

Jihadi group, before eventually joining Islamic State forces. Pictures showed El Ali posing with headless corpses and showing off his Islamic State uniform. He insists, however, that he did not take part in executions.

In 2017, El Ali managed to help his wife and daughter escape territory controlled by Islamic militants and flee to Turkey. But unable to travel further himself, he offered himself up to Danish authorities through his lawyer. He was eventually arrested in 2019.

His lawyer, Mette Grith-Stage, said in a statement: "I agree that [the case] is insanely serious and that my client must be severely punished [...] but the court must assess the circumstances surrounding what my client has done." [NyhederTV2]

El Ali's defence lawyers had sought to reduce his sentence to reflect the fact that he had turned himself in, while prosecutors wanted a jail term of 16 years. [dr.dk]

The Islamic State rose to prominence in 2014, after a quick succession of battlefield victories in Iraq and Syria left the group in control of large swathes of those countries' territories. It also gained infamy for perpetrating terrorist attacks in Europe, including the 2015 Bataclan massacre in Paris that killed over 90 people, and for brutal filmed executions of non-Muslims and opponents.

(cg/pk)

Germany: Berlin tries to secure energy deals in Middle East despite human rights concerns

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited the Middle Eastern countries of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar from September 24 to 25 as he seeks energy deals to secure Germany's supply independently of Russian natural gas imports. [EURACTIV] [ZDF] [DW]

Scholz and UAE president Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan signed a contract for LNG deliveries to Germany, with the first shipment in December and more deliveries in the following years. In Saudi Arabia, Scholz met with crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and agreed on a closer cooperation on fossil fuels, hydrogen and renewable energy. [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

German officials wanted Scholz to address human rights concerns during his visits. Respecting human rights worldwide is “equally important” as achieving energy security, said Renata Alt, chairwoman of the German parliament's human rights committee. [Politico Europe]

Scholz said he addressed the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia and the treatment of migrant workers ahead of the football World Cup later this year in Qatar. He had discussed “all the questions around civil and human rights” and “nothing was left unsaid”. [AP] [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Greece and UAE discuss energy infrastructure cooperation

Greece and the United Arab Emirates reaffirmed their strategic partnership in areas such as energy and infrastructure, during an official visit of the leader of the UAE Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Greece.

They discussed bilateral relations between the two states, investment opportunities and ongoing energy projects, such as Greece’s import and storage facilities for natural gas. [Euronews]

Greek Prime Minister Kiriakos Mitsotakis reiterated the significance of the UAE as Athen’s strategic partner and commented on the unstable situation in the East Mediterranean. [To Vima]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Iran agrees to release the crew of captured Greek tankers

Iran is set to release the crew of the two Greek tankers it seized in May in the Persian Gulf, the Greek Seafarers’ Union said in a statement.

The crew members are set to return to Greece, although it remains unclear if the ships themselves will be returned, the union said. Iran’s foreign ministry refused to confirm the statement. [Kathimerini] [Euronews]

The ships were seized in response to the confiscation of an Iranian oil tanker’s cargo in Greek territory by US

authorities earlier this year. The move strained relations between Greece and Iran, which have failed to reach a settlement until now. [Reuters]

(hi/gc)

Ireland: Dublin reiterates political and financial support for Palestinians

Ireland has pledged EUR 2 million in aid for Palestine while condemning Israel's policy towards the Palestinian people.

Israel was "an occupying power on Palestinian lands," Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said on September 18 after a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Foreign Minister Riyad Al Maliki in Dublin. He said that the Irish government is "absolutely not anti-Israel." [The Irish Times]

After the meeting, Coveney announced a further EUR 2 million in aid for Palestine that would be administered by the UN Relief and Works Agency, which provides essential services to Palestinian refugees in different Middle Eastern countries. In 2022, Ireland has contributed EUR 8 million to Palestinian aid in total. [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Turkish and Israeli leaders meet in New York for the first time since 2008

Israeli Prime Minister Jair Lapid and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York after the resumption of full diplomatic relations between Turkey and Israel.

This marked the first meeting between the Turkish president and an Israeli Prime Minister in nearly 15 years, Lapid wrote on Twitter. [Reuters]

Lapid wrote after the meeting that "relations between Israel and Turkey are key to regional stability and bring tangible benefits to both countries," and that they talked about how they "can advance relations between the two countries after years of crisis." Other topics discussed were the fight against terrorism in Israel and closer cooperation between the two countries in the fields of economy and energy. [DW] [Reuters]

Turkey and Israel fell out in 2010 after ten Turkish citizens were killed when the Israeli navy stormed a Gaza solidarity ship. Since the Gaza crisis in 2018 the two countries have had no ambassadors in each other's countries. This year there was a gradual rapprochement with both nations reinstating ambassadors in each other's countries. [DW]

(go/gc)

US, Turkey hold talks in Washington

The US and Turkey held a third meeting of the US-Turkey Strategic Mechanism Dialogue on September 15, 2022, in Washington. U.S Department of State]

US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Turkish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sedat Onal chaired the meeting. US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland also participated in the Dialogue.

They reviewed the extensive, security, economic, cultural, and people-to-people ties that underpin the bilateral relationship between the United States and Turkey. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to promote peace and stability and to further deepen and strengthen the enduring US- Turkey defence partnership.

They welcomed the recent growth in their bilateral trade relations and reconfirmed their mutual determination to advance their economic cooperation in every possible field.

They also stressed that the US and Turkey stand together in support of global public health as well as food and energy security. The delegations also reaffirmed their mutual efforts to work to promote energy supply, access, efficiency, and independence.

(go/gc)

Russia and China reaffirm solidarity during Shanghai Cooperation summit

Russia and China reaffirmed their solidarity on the side-lines of the 22nd annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Samarkand, Uzbekistan from September 16-18.

In a bilateral meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that Beijing will cooperate with Russia to "extend strong mutual support on issues concerning each other's core interests, and deepen practical cooperation in trade, agriculture, connectivity and other areas." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

Putin said that both countries strive for a "just, democratic and multipolar world order based on international rules and the central rule of the United Nations, not on certain rules that someone has invented and is attempting to impose on others without even explaining what it is all about."

He then thanked China for its "balanced position" concerning the Ukraine crisis. Xi however, did not mention the war during the meeting. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3][Kremlin, Russia]

As a result of the meeting between Putin and Xi, Russia and China announced on September 19 that they would deepen their military cooperation with a focus on joint drills as well as senior level exchanges. The agreement was discussed and prepared by Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council and a close Putin ally, and China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi in Nanping. [Reuters]

(aml/gc)

EU allocates EUR 1.8 million aid for flood victims in Pakistan

The European Union has allocated EUR 1.8 million in humanitarian assistance to help flood victims in Pakistan. The aid is designed to assist families in the hardest-hit areas, including districts in Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab and Khyber, where unprecedented monsoon rain and flooding have killed nearly 1,400 people and displaced around 33 million – around a third of the country's population. [European Council] [New York Times]

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the beginning of September called for extensive international help to assist Pakistan. [DW] [AiR, No.37, September/22, 2]

(aml/pk)

Russia-Pakistan leaders meet on sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit

Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shebaz Sharif on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on 15 September as both sides deepen bilateral ties despite a change of government in Islamabad.

Russian state-owned news agency *RIA* reported Putin telling Sharif that gas supplies to Pakistan were possible, and that part of the necessary infrastructure was already in place. Furthermore, it was agreed to convene the next meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) in Islamabad at an earlier date. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3]

(aml/gc)

France, Philippines in talks for possible submarine deal

The French Ambassador to the Philippines and the Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. discussed a possible deal under which France will support the Philippine Navy with its high-performance submarines. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3]

Philippine Navy personnel have already been sent to France for related training purposes. While the country has one of the world's longest coastlines and ongoing territorial disputes, it lags behind its Southeast Asian neighbours in equipment, the French submarine would be the countries first. The French ambassador affirmed that Paris is ready to support the Philippines.

(aml/gc)

Belarusian banks turn to Chinese alternative to the SWIFT system

First Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus, Nikolai Snopkov, said on September 6 that Belarusian banks would soon connect to the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System operated by the People's Republic of China. [Belta]

Snopkov said that the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System is seen as an alternative to SWIFT, from which Belarus has been cut off. While Belarusbank is the first

institution to be connected, others will soon follow, he added. [Belta]

Belarusian banks have been cut off from SWIFT due to Western sanctions enacted in March over Belarus' involvement in the war in Ukraine. [Interfax] [Russia Briefing] [European Commission]

(mo/gc)

Belarus, China seek to deepen cooperation in transportation and logistics

Belarus and China agreed on September 16 to deepen cooperation in the transportation and logistics sectors. [Belta]

China recognises Belarus' potential as a land-linking actor across the Eurasian landmass, aiding Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. According to the agreement, Belarusian-Chinese projects aim to expand the container train networks for shipping between Europe and China as well as the transboundary automobile and railway corridors. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Moldova, Japan to increase cooperation in the field of climate change

Moldovan Minister of Environment Iuliana Cantaragiu and Japan's ambassador to Moldova Yoshihiro Katayama signed a memorandum of understanding on September 6 to fund projects on developing a healthy and sustainable environment. [Moldpres] [TRM]

According to the document, Moldova and Japan will increase their cooperation in the fields of combating climate change, transferring technologies and environmental protection. [IPN] [Japan]

Cantaragiu said that both Moldova and Japan would develop forestry, waste management as well as management of water resources. The Japanese ambassador added that the memorandum of understanding will deepen bilateral cooperation, ensure the modernisation of education, technologies and production of sustainable energies. [Moldpres] [TRM]

(mo/gc)

Norway, Indonesia announce new plans to reduce impact of deforestation

Norway and Indonesia are initiating a new partnership to reduce the carbon footprint of deforestation in Indonesia, which is home to a third of the world's rainforest.

Between 2015 and 2018, 1 million hectares of Indonesian rainforest were burned to provide room for the cultivation of crops such as palm oil.

Under the new agreement, Norway is to supply financial aid for verified emission reductions. In September 2021, Indonesia ended a similar deal with Norway after Oslo had not paid an agreed EUR 57 million for reductions covering the period between 2016 and 2017.

The two countries' environment ministers have announced that the amount for this period will be paid once the new agreement is finalised. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3]

(aml/pk)

Poland buys South Korean FA-50 light attack aircraft

Poland is to buy 48 South Korean-manufactured FA-50 light attack aircraft from Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI).

Two contracts, estimated to be worth EUR 3 billion each, provide for the delivery of 12 aircraft by 2023, and the remaining 36 between 2025 and 2028, as well as training and logistics support.

Polish President Andrzej Duda said that the move is part of an effort to make his country completely independent from Soviet-built planes such as MiG-29s and Su-22s. Warsaw is spending billions to beef up its military capabilities in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February.

Poland has already bought 32 F-35A Lightning II jets, 180 K2 tanks, and 212 howitzers from South Korea this year. A deal for the joint development and acquisition of K239 Chunmoo multi-barrelled missile launchers is being deliberated. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3]

(aml/pk)

France sends most recent nuclear shipment to Japan

Two ships loaded with a cargo of reprocessed nuclear fuel left France for Japan on 17 September. The current shipment was delayed for two weeks due to broken loading equipment and is expected to arrive in Japan in November to be used in a power plant. The shipment of MOX, a highly radioactive material composed of reprocessed uranium (92 percent) and plutonium (8 percent), between France and Japan has been heavily criticised by environmental organisations such as Greenpeace since September 2021, citing risks of nuclear proliferation. [AiR, No.38, September/2022, 3]

(aml/gc)

Italian nun killed in Mozambique after attack by Islamist militants: Church officials

An Italian nun was killed in an attack by Islamist militants on a Catholic mission in Mozambique on September 6, Church officials have said. Two priests managed to escape after the attack in the northern town of Chipene.

Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, the archbishop of Bologna, said the 83-year-old missionary, Sister Maria De Coppi, had died "in a land which, after years of stability, is again plagued by violence, caused by Islamist groups that for some years now have sowed terror and death in vast areas of the north of the country."

The mission for which Coppi worked was attacked by "rebels" who set fire to the site, according to the Facebook page of the Concordia-Pordenone Missionary Centre. [Rainews] De Coppi had been working as a missionary in the southern African country for 60 years.

Father Alex Zanotelli, who was in contact with the mission following the attack, said: "There is a massive return of jihadism. There is a great popular anger there – people are unable even to turn on the gas of the stove for daily food." [Lastampa]

Mozambique is facing an Islamic Jihad insurgency in its northern provinces, with the extremist groups Ansar

al-Sunna and the so-called Islamic State active in these areas.

(cg/pk)

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