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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 November issue of Europe in Review in which, among other things, we bring you an overview of the conflict in Ukraine, explain why Britain has its third prime minister in just seven weeks, and report on Italy's new hard-right government taking office.

The war in Ukraine grinds on with no end in sight and little effort, at least publicly, to end a conflict that has killed thousands, tested hope and knocked out power supplies.

Moscow has withdrawn from an international deal to allow the export of Ukrainian grain after a drone attack against the Kremlin's Black Sea Fleet that came after weeks of mass Russian strikes on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. Russia's decision to pull out of the agreement will likely push grain prices higher for many people around the world already struggling with steep increases in the cost of food and basic commodities.

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

War in Europe: Russia, Ukraine trade drone strikes amid 'dirty bomb' claims

Russia has unleashed a barrage of missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities, knocking out critical infrastructure, while issuing more nuclear threats and

warning of potential attacks on Western satellites aiding Kiev. Moscow also put forward ominous but unproven accusations that Ukraine is preparing a radioactive “dirty bomb” to use against Russian forces.

At the same time, as the war enters its ninth month, the front line has largely stabilised aside from a small Ukrainian advance near the southern city of Kherson. But amid Russia’s escalated rhetoric, even the near future of the conflict is difficult to predict.

Ukraine hits Kerch Strait bridge, Russia responds with suicide drones

In the early hours of October 8, the Kerch Strait bridge, a vital and symbolic connection between Russia and Crimea, was damaged by an explosion which killed four people. Like most events in the war so far, differing accounts of what happened are common while confirmed facts are rare.

Russia accused Kiev of committing “terrorism”, stating that a truck-borne bomb had been used by Ukrainian special forces. The *New York Times* supported this claim, citing an unnamed senior Ukrainian official as a source.

The BBC, on the other hand, interviewed experts who believe the most likely method of attack was a water-borne suicide drone. The scale of the damage was not catastrophic. The bridge, which carries trains and cars, is confirmed to have lost a lane of traffic. Its rail line was damaged in the explosion, though how much effect this has had on its throughput is unclear.

The bridge is a powerful symbol for both sides. For Ukraine, it is a stark reminder of Russia’s occupation of Crimea and of Moscow’s imperial ambitions. For Russia, the link is a much-vaunted achievement illustrating the “historic mission” of President Vladimir Putin’s government to annex Crimea from Ukraine.

When the bridge opened in 2018, it became Europe’s longest such structure. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February, it has been considered a target by Kiev. Russia invested significant effort in protecting it, installing a ring of anti-air batteries supported by constant patrols of missile-equipped naval vessels. [BBC News] [New York Times] [NPR] [Al Jazeera] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle]

Critical infrastructure damaged

After the attack on the bridge, Russia unleashed a swathe of strikes on Ukraine’s cities, from Mykolaiv on the front line to Lviv far in the west. Civilians have

faced waves of attacks since October 9 which have killed dozens and damaged critical infrastructure. While missiles and suicide drones fell indiscriminately around the cities, the strikes appear to have been targeted at Ukraine's electricity supply.

According to energy provider Ukrenergo, around 30 percent of the country's power stations have been disabled. Rolling blackouts are common in both urban and rural areas as Ukraine aims to conserve its reduced power capacity. [Guardian] [Financial Times] [Euractiv] [CNN] [Wall Street Journal] [Sky News] [RTÉ] [Associated Press]

In this latest wave of attacks, Russia has made heavy use of Iranian-manufactured Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 suicide drones.

Operating under the Russian names Geran-1 and Geran-2, the drones are inexpensive, manufactured with plentiful electronic parts, and are designed to be expended en masse. The drones fly at a speed of around 180 kilometres per hour, have a range of between 2,000 and 2,500 kilometres and can be launched from almost any platform.

Large numbers of these machines were claimed to have been shot down, but enough hit their targets to damage Ukraine's essential services. According to experts, the cost of shooting down a suicide drone often exceeds the cost of the device itself.

Teheran and Moscow both deny any use of Iranian drones in the war, but captured specimens tell a different story. Despite this, Iran has reportedly made trainers available to Russian operators in Crimea. It is unknown exactly how many of these drones Russia has, but their large-scale deployment represents a new and dangerous threat for Ukraine and its cities. [Washington Post] [Guardian] [Eurasian Times] [Telegraph] [Newsweek]

While the strikes have inflicted further pain on an already immiserated Ukrainian population, a recent survey by pollster Gallup seems to suggest Russia faces an uphill battle to erode Ukrainians' will to resist. According to the poll, 70 percent of Ukrainians believe they should fight until their country "wins the war". [Gallup]

Russia accuses Ukraine of preparing 'dirty bomb'

Since Ukraine's successful recent counteroffensive around the eastern city of Kharkiv and the attack on the Kerch Strait bridge, Russia has stepped up its

nuclear threats and invoked the spectre of a “dirty bomb”.

Last month, Russia held its first nuclear exercises since it invaded Ukraine. The drills, which test the readiness of Russia’s strategic nuclear forces, are held annually and are preceded by a formal notification to the United States. Thus far, nothing out of the ordinary has come of the exercises themselves.

Russia has long boasted of its nuclear arsenal, frequently referring to it at different stages during the war in Ukraine. US President Joe Biden said on October 7 that Putin was “not joking when he talks about the use of tactical nuclear weapons or biological or chemical weapons.” Biden warned that the risk of “nuclear Armageddon” was at its highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

However, many experts have a different view. Matthew Fuhrmann, an expert in nuclear diplomacy, argued that “the probability of Russia using nuclear weapons right now is still relatively low”, with the caveat that it is higher than at the start of the invasion. Putin himself has walked back the threats somewhat, saying that Russia “sees no need” to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine. [Guardian] [NPR] [BBC News] [Atlantic] [Financial Times] [CNN] [Reuters] [Euronews] [Associated Press]

Meanwhile, in the closing weeks of October, Russia accused Ukraine of plotting to use a nuclear “dirty bomb” – either against Moscow’s forces or to frame Russia for using nuclear weapons. A dirty bomb is a conventional explosive that contains – and spreads – radioactive material. Russia named specific Ukrainian sites, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will inspect in the near future. The Russian foreign ministry also made such a claim in a tweet, which contained images of recycled smoke detectors from a Slovenian nuclear facility.

Sergei Shoigu, the Russian defence minister, made several calls to Western counterparts to discuss the issue. Shoigu was apparently pushed to do so by Putin, who raised the issue at a public meeting on October 27. The United Kingdom, France and the United States issued a joint statement calling Russia’s claims “transparently false”.

A real threat remains at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which Russia has occupied since the early stages of the war. The facility – Europe’s largest and containing an immense store of nuclear waste – has become an active war zone as both sides trade shells over it. Talks between Russia, Ukraine and the IAEA on

establishing a protective, demilitarised zone around the plant have not been successful so far. [Economist] [Guardian] [Deutsche Welle] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Atlantic] [Politico Europe] [Financial Times] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Black Sea Fleet targeted

On October 29, Ukraine launched a drone attack against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, just days after the fleet returned to its former base at Sevastopol in Crimea. The extent of the damage remains unclear, but several ships appear to have been attacked by waterborne suicide drones. Russia has also claimed airborne drones were involved, while the fleet's flagship, *Admiral Makarov*, is confirmed to have suffered damage.

The Black Sea Fleet, which lost its flagship *Moskva* in April, has been a tempting target for Ukraine. The fleet has been used as a base for Russian cruise missiles which have been deployed against Ukrainian cities. The fleet was forced to move its aircraft from Saki Air Base in Crimea after a Ukrainian strike destroyed a number of planes in September.

Russia said that Black Sea Fleet ships targeted in late October were involved in a Turkish-brokered deal to allow the export of Ukrainian grain, and gave the attacks as a reason for suspending the agreement. Moscow's invasion had disrupted supplies of Ukrainian wheat around the world, leaving millions at risk of starvation. [Moscow Times] [BBC News] [Al Jazeera] [Naval News] [New York Times]

In contrast to September's successful Ukrainian counterattacks, October has seen a slower tempo at the front line.

Russia has continued to assault Ukrainian positions in the eastern Donbas region, particularly at the fortified town of Bakhmut, to little success. Bakhmut has been a goal for Russia since early May as it sits on a major road connection between Ukrainian-controlled towns in the eastern Donetsk Oblast. According to observers, Russia is using a mix of its own troops and mercenaries from the Wagner Group and relies heavily on artillery, rather than air support.

Early in October, Ukrainian forces advanced in Kherson in the south, crossing the Inhulets river, liberating several settlements and pushing some 30 kilometres into occupied territory before being halted by a reinforced Russian defensive line outside the town of Dudchany. Ukraine reportedly made heavy use of

Western artillery and missile systems to protect its advance.

The newly-installed director of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovikin, said in an interview that "difficult decisions" may have to be made in Kherson.

Since early October, there have been no further large-scale operations and both sides appear to have dug in ahead of a long-awaited battle. [Institute for the Study of War] [The Guardian] [Financial Times] [Reuters] [BBC News] [NPR] [New York Times] [Economist] [Times] [Associated Press]

(wb/pk)

Russia suspends participation in grains export deal with Ukraine

Russia suspended its participation in a Turkish- and UN-brokered deal that had allowed Ukraine to resume grain exports after an aerial and sea drone attack on the Crimean port of Sevastopol, a strike which the Kremlin attributed to Ukraine.

Moscow pulled out the deal citing "the terrorist acts committed" by the Ukrainian government on October 29 against the Black Sea Fleet, whose ships "ensured the security of the grain corridor," the Russian defence ministry said. [RBC]

Russia has accused Ukraine of using air and maritime drones to target vessels in the Bay of Sevastopol and suggested one of the drones may have been launched from a civilian vessel chartered to export food from Ukrainian ports. The Ukrainian military used the corridor designated for food transports during the attack, the ministry claimed.

U.S. wheat futures jumped higher on October 31, hitting a two-week high, as Russia's withdrawal from a Black Sea export agreement raised concerns over global supplies. "The grain and oilseed markets rose sharply overnight, led by wheat, as food shortage fears rise again after Russia pulls out of the Black Sea trade agreement," StoneX chief commodities economist Arlan Suderman said in a client note. [MSN]

Russia then said on October 31 that it was "unacceptable" for shipping to pass through a Black Sea security corridor. [Reuters]

"The movement of ships along the security corridor is unacceptable, since the Ukrainian leadership and the command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine use it to conduct military operations against the Russian Federation," the Russian defence ministry said in a statement. [TASS]

The Russian defence ministry also said on October 31 that it would be “impossible” to guarantee the security of any object in the grain corridor as long as the Ukrainian government keeps using it for military purposes. "Under the current circumstances, no object in the above-mentioned area is secure unless the Ukrainian side pledges not to use this route for military purposes," the ministry said in a statement.

The US accused Russia of extortion at the expense of the developing world after Moscow demanded Ukrainian security guarantees for its Crimea fleet in return for preserving a secure corridor to export grain. "What you're describing appears to be either collective punishment or collective extortion," State Department spokesman Ned Price said. "It is not an issue between any two countries on the face of the earth. This is an urgent imperative" for developing countries, he said. [MoscowTimes]

No UN ships involved

The United Nations said on October 31 that no ships involved in a UN-brokered Ukraine grain export deal were transiting a Black Sea maritime humanitarian corridor on the night of Oct. 29, when Russia says its vessels in Crimea were attacked.

UN aid chief Martin Griffiths told the UN Security Council that “no vessel reported an incident over the weekend." He also questioned the reasons given by Moscow for suspending the grain agreement with Ukraine. [Reuters]

"When the vessels are not in the area, the corridor has no special status," he said during a meeting of the UN Security Council, adding that there is no "cover or protection" for "both offensive and defensive military actions." [MSN]

The UN called on all parties to the grain deal to perform it to the full extent, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Rebeca Grynspan said. [TASS]

“We urge all parties to make every effort to resume and extend the Black Sea Grain Initiative and implement both agreements to their fullest," she said. "The United Nations is fully committed and will spare

no efforts to continuing to work with all parties to ensure that we reach this goal."

Russia has pledged to continue dialogue with Turkey and the UN within the Joint Coordination Center

Separately, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu held telephone talks with Turkey's Minister of National Defence Hulusi Akar on 31 October. The counterparts discussed the suspension of Russia's participation in exporting agricultural products from Ukrainian ports within the Black Sea Grain Initiative. [MSN] [DefenseMinistry]

Akar said during the conversation with Shoigu that he expects Moscow to re-evaluate its decision, while stressing that Turkey will continue to work to ensure peace in the region and humanitarian aid at all levels. [MSN]

(gc-mo/gc)

Sunak becomes third British prime minister this year after Truss resigns

The United Kingdom's Former Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak has become Britain's third prime minister this year after Liz Truss resigned under intense political pressure following a steep slump in the Sterling when her initial fiscal policy drove markets into turmoil.

Sunak was made prime minister on October 25 after the other contestants for the Conservative Party leadership, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson and former Defence Minister Penny Mordaunt, dropped out of the race. During the leadership contest, Sunak said that his opponent's fiscal measures would push Britain's economy to the brink of collapse. [Reuters] [BBC] [The Guardian][Fortune]

Global markets reacted positively to his appointment. UK government borrowing costs fell and the Sterling, which had already been recovering since Truss reversed her fiscal plans, traded at about USD 1.13 after hitting a record low in September after Truss announced her fiscal plans. UK government bond yields fell below 3.8 percent, close to levels before the announcement of Truss's fiscal statement. Bond prices rose sharply. [BBC] [The Guardian] [Reuters]

The new prime minister has reshuffled his cabinet, bringing together different factions of the Conservative Party. He reappointed James Cleverly as foreign

secretary, Jeremy Hunt is keeping his job as chancellor, and Ben Wallace has also kept his job as defence secretary. [SkyNews]

His decision to reappoint Suella Braverman as interior minister has sparked controversy since she had been forced to resign under Truss only six days prior. Her resignation came the day before Truss followed her out of the door. [BBC] [Reuters] [The Guardian] [SkyNews]

Sunak was previously finance minister under Johnson. He lost the leadership race against Truss after Johnson's resignation. Sunak is a former hedge fund manager and multimillionaire. He is one of the wealthiest politicians in Westminster and Britain's first prime minister of colour. [BBC] [Reuters][The Guardian] [Reuters]

Truss's Resignation

Truss resigned as leader of the Conservative Party on October 20, making her the shortest serving prime minister in British history. "I cannot deliver the mandate on which I was elected by the Conservative Party," she said in her resignation statement. [BBC]

Truss's decision followed a backlash from markets and her own party over unfunded tax cuts worth GBP 45 billion. After her Finance Minister Kwasi Kwarteng announced the so-called "mini budget," borrowing costs and mortgage rates shot up, prompting an intervention by the Bank of England.

Truss performed a U-turn when she sacked Kwarteng and allowed her new Finance Minister Jeremy Hunt to revise almost all her fiscal plans. [BBC] [BBC]

Her position as prime minister was further weakened when Braverman resigned over sharing secret government documents on a private phone. Braverman, who had already before been criticising the government, attacked Truss directly in her resignation. In an explosive letter to the former PM, she expressed "concerns about the direction of this government", including its commitment to reducing immigration. [SkyNews][BBC] [The Guardian] [The Guardian]

Truss had struggled to maintain party discipline when conservative MPs were urged to vote against a proposed ban on fracking, which was in line with Truss's policies but went against the conservatives' own election manifesto. [The Guardian]

Economy Faltering

Sunak faces a difficult situation, with the British economy faltering. The country suffers from high inflation and soaring energy prices. People have held protests for months, demanding higher wages to offset the cost of living increases. [Reuters] [BBC] [Reuters]

Britain's economic outlook has been dropped from "stable" to "negative" due to heightened political unpredictability and high inflation, ratings agency Moody's said in October. It changed its outlook due to "the increased risk to the UK's credit profile from the heightened unpredictability in policymaking amid a volatile domestic political landscape," Moodys said. [MSN]

"The government's initial inability to deliver a credible policy response to address investor concerns around this unfunded stimulus further weakened the UK's policy credibility, which is unlikely to be fully restored by the subsequent decision to reverse most of the tax cuts," Moody's said. [MSN]

Contrary to Truss, Sunak has consulted the Bank of England in the draft of his new fiscal plans. He has also reinstated the ban on fracking previously loosened under Truss. [Reuters] [BBC][BBC]

Early Elections

After Truss' resignation, Labour and other opposition parties have called for early general elections, a demand supported by most Britons.

The Labour Party has led in recent opinion polls with up to 30 points ahead of the conservatives ever since the announcement of the mini-budget. One recent poll showed support for the Labour Party at 52 percent while only 23 percent intended to vote conservative. If a general election took place now, the number of Conservative Party MPs in parliament would be more than halved. [BBC] [BBC] [Reuters]

Sunak described the state of his party as an "existential crisis." Even long-time supporter and financier Guy Hands said the Conservative Party was not fit to run the country. The conservatives' mistakes have "put this country on a path to be the sick man of Europe," Hands said.

The next general elections are only due in two years. [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

Italy: New hard-right government takes office

Italy's first hard-right government since World War II has been installed after a ballot-box win that has delighted nationalists in Europe but worried critics who fear that, despite its assurances, Rome will waver on Russia and pursue an agenda at odds with the EU.

Giorgia Meloni was sworn in as Italy's first female prime minister on October 22, nearly a month after her Brothers of Italy party won a decisive victory in parliamentary elections. [Euronews] [AP] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

Meloni's cabinet, announced on October 21, will consist of 24 ministers including members of junior coalition partners Forza Italia and the League party of Matteo Salvini.

Right-winger Salvini, who has voiced admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, was chosen by Meloni as deputy prime minister and infrastructure minister. But former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who heads the centre-right Forza Italia party, was left out of the cabinet.

Berlusconi remarks cause uproar

In the run-up to the new government taking office, controversy erupted over Berlusconi's remarks about the war in Ukraine. [Reuters][Bloomberg] [AP]

In a new audio recording released by news agency LaPresse on October 19, the former Italian prime minister said that Putin's "special operation" in Ukraine was originally supposed to last just two weeks in order to install a "decent, sensible" government in that country. [La Repubblica]

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. She responded to Berlusconi's comments by saying: "Italy, with its head high, is part of Europe and the [NATO] Atlantic alliance."

She insisted: "Whoever doesn't agree with this cornerstone cannot be part of the government, at the cost of not having a government." [AP]

In an effort to distance itself from Berlusconi's comments, Forza Italia said: "The position of Forza Italia and Silvio Berlusconi with respect to the Ukrainian conflict and Russian responsibilities is known

to all and is in line with the position of Europe and the United States."

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen congratulated Meloni on her appointment as premier in a tweet, saying: "I count on and look forward to constructive cooperation with the new government on the challenges we face together."

Changing the EU?

Meloni's success has triggered fears that Rome may pivot away from Brussels and align itself with nationalist-populist governments in Warsaw and Budapest that have clashed with the EU on rule-of-law issues. 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."

Poland's conservative president, Andrzej Duda, congratulated Meloni on her appointment, saying: "I think there could be a stronger collaboration between Italy and Poland because everything Giorgia Meloni says is close to my vision, my optics, my way of seeing."

Duda voiced hope that Warsaw and Rome could now "together change the EU into what we want it to be", which is "a union of free nations and equal states" that cooperate but "do not interfere in each others' affairs, such as religious, ideological and cultural issues". [Ansa] [NfP]

Right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban reacted to Meloni's appointment by tweeting: "Big day for the European Right!"

French far-right leader Marine Le Pen said: "Throughout Europe, patriots are coming to power and with them, this Europe of nations." [PBS]

(km/pk)

Social media joke about annexing Russia's Kaliningrad goes viral

Russia's move to annex four Ukrainian regions, following referenda widely condemned by the West as a sham, has sparked a flood of sarcastic jokes in the Czech Republic and Poland that have gone viral.

Posts appeared on social media suggesting that the Czechs should annex the Russian Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, which is sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland. [Pravda]

"It's time to divide Kaliningrad so that our Czech brothers can have access to the sea," wrote a Polish Twitter user nicknamed "papiez internetu". The user attached a mock map showing the city of Kaliningrad divided between Poland and the Czech Republic. [TheFirstNews]

Users also set up a joke Twitter account and a website for Kaliningrad – referred to as *Kralovec* in Czech – promoting visits to the area and a petition for a referendum on the "annexation" of the region by the Czech Republic. [Expats]

Another picture shows a "Beer Stream II" pipeline connecting Prague and Kaliningrad, a reference to the Nord Stream pipeline between Russia and Germany and to Czechs' favourite alcoholic tipple.

The US embassy in Prague also got in on the joke, asking the Czech Republic, a landlocked country, on Twitter if it needed an aircraft carrier. [US Embassy Prague]

Kaliningrad was founded in the 13th century by the crusading order of the Teutonic Knights during a Christianisation campaign targeting the pagan Prussians and was named Konigsberg. [iRozhlas] East Prussia was occupied by the Soviet Union after World War II, and the city was renamed Kaliningrad in honour of a Soviet revolutionary. [iRozhlas]

In Poland, meanwhile, a group of NGOs on October 15 organised a mock referendum to "annex" the Russian embassy in Warsaw. The ballot asked whether Poland should turn the embassy into a centre for Polish-Ukrainian cooperation. [France 24] [Notes from Poland]

President Vladimir Putin on September 30 declared four occupied Ukrainian regions to be "forever" part of "historic Russia" after Moscow-installed military authorities and proxies held referenda to vote on joining Russia earlier that month. The referenda were widely condemned by the West as a sham [see Europe Monthly October 2022].

(vs/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Slaughter industry criticises government for harsh animal abuse penalties

The slaughter industry and the professional federation of animal breeders have called on the Constitutional Court to overturn a decree that imposes harsh penalties on people who mistreat animals.

Abusers of animals can face up to 10 years in prison in cases of repeated offences. They also can be detained immediately in pre-trial detention. [BrusselsTimes]

The decree gives excessive discretion to judges to determine penalties, the slaughter industry and breeders association said. It also creates a competitive disadvantage for farmers within the European Union, they said. [BrusselsTimes]

Flemish Animals Minister Ben Weyts opposed this view. “The stricter penalties for animal torturers have enormous support: they were unanimously approved in the Flemish Parliament,” he said. “This is a necessary and legitimate decree.” [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Rail network operator Infrabel may need to close 700 kilometres of train lines

Belgium's rail network operator Infrabel may have to close 700 km of train lines if the government fails to provide funding it thinks is necessary to sustain operations. [BrusselsTimes]

Federal Minister of Mobility Georges Gilkinet said there will be no line closures during his time in office and said that “removing lines would mean sending hundreds of trucks back onto our roads on a regular basis, which is not going to happen.” [BrusselsTimes]

French-speaking newspaper La Derniere Heure reported that Infrabel was prepared to remove 20 percent of the 3,600 km of train lines in Belgium. Infrabel's warning will put pressure on the Federal government's budgetary discussions and may secure a larger budget for the rail network operator.

Rail workers held a 24-hour strike in October, which led to three in four trains being cancelled.

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Institutions challenge Flemish government’s new integration policy

Several institutions have challenged the Flemish government’s new integration policy that requires immigrants to pass a Dutch language test and attend a paid civics course. They argue that these policies violate freedom of education, the principle of equality and legal certainty. [BrusselsTimes]

Ligo, an umbrella organisation for basic education, supported by the Christian trade union ACV, the Refugee Council Flanders and the Network Against Poverty, have called for the government to end the compulsory language test. They also want the integration program to remain free of charge. Ligo filed a petition to the Constitutional Court on 7 October. [BrusselsTimes]

The Flemish Education Council and the Social and Economic Council of Flanders have asked for the policy to be adjusted. Immigrants have to pay the Flemish government EUR 360 to receive an integration certificate from the Flemish government. [BrusselsTimes]

Flemish Minister for Integration Bart Somers said that the new policy gives newcomers “more” opportunities. “There used to be thousands of people on the waiting list to take an integration course; today all waiting lists have been eliminated,” he said. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Brussels reiterates call to end death penalties around the world

Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib reiterated the country's call to end capital punishment worldwide on the occasion of the 20th European and World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October. [BrusselsTimes]

Belgium has tried to abolish the death penalty in 55 countries where it is still legal, Lahbib said in a press release. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated that they will be working with NGOs involved in this field to boost the capacity of civil societies to advocate for the elimination of the death penalty, where necessary. Only 18 countries carried out executions in 2021. [BrusselsTimes]

Belgium will take measures to abolish the death penalty, including the adoption of a new resolution by the UN General Assembly and the vote to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

France: Government to spend EUR 12 billion to help companies pay for soaring energy bills

The French government has announced that it will spend EUR 12 billion to assist French businesses cover rising energy costs. [Financial Post]

The assistance will be made to companies with less than 250 employees and will cover a quarter of their bills. About EUR 7 billion of the funding will come from the windfall tax which is imposed on the profits of energy companies when they sell power above EUR 180 per megawatt hour.

France's Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said that French businesses have been left "terrified" by energy prices reaching EUR 1,200 per megawatt.

The assistance comes after the French government announced on October 6 its biggest energy conservation measures since the 1970s oil crisis. Amidst soaring energy prices and in an attempt to avoid power and gas cuts over winter, the French government is pursuing a multi-faceted plan to reduce energy consumption across the country, including asking citizens to lower thermostats, increase car-

pooling and turning off the lights of the Eiffel Tower early.

(jn/gc)

France: Paris leaves controversial energy treaty

France is the latest country to withdraw from the controversial Energy Charter Treaty. Making the announcement after a EU summit in Brussels on October 21, French President Emmanuel Macron said that leaving the treaty "is coherent with our European climate strategy." [AP]

The decision follows Macron's announcement in September that France needed to pursue a "massive acceleration" of renewable energy development, including solar energy and offshore wind farms. [AP]

The treaty disincentives the move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy as it gives fossil fuel companies legal grounds on which to sue signatory governments who enact policies that could undermine their financial returns.

Movement away from the Energy Charter Treaty has been building in recent years, with EU countries agreeing that the treaty needed revision and "modernisation." [EuropeanCommission]

France's decision follows announcements from Spain and the Netherlands that they were each withdrawing from the treaty. Poland's parliament also recently voted to leave the treaty whilst Germany is considering its position.

(jn/gc)

Germany: Authorities investigate reports of illegal Chinese police in Frankfurt

Authorities in Germany are investigating whether China maintains an illegal extraterritorial police station in Frankfurt, a spokesperson said, a week before Chancellor Olaf Scholz heads on an already contested visit to the economic giant, Reuters reported. The Chinese embassy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A spokesperson for the interior ministry in the German state of Hesse said police and internal security services

were checking a report by Spanish activist group Safeguard Defenders, who said China had set up undeclared police offices in 30 countries, including Germany, Reuters reported.

Confirming an earlier report in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper, the spokesperson said they so far had no indications such facilities existed in Frankfurt, Reuters reported.

(gc)

Germany: Gas consumption too high to avoid winter energy crisis, federal network agency says

Germany will likely experience an energy crisis this winter due to the current rate of gas consumption, which was "too much," according to the head of the country's network network regulatory, Klaus Mueller.

The agency's data showed that gas consumption of private households was 10 percent higher in early October compared to the average from the years 2018 to 2021. Industrial consumption was 2 percent below the multi-year average. [ZDF] [EURACTIV] [AP]

German gas storage facilities were filled to 95 percent of capacity as of October 14, according to the network agency's status report. The agency still "emphasises the importance of using gas economically," it said. [ZDF]

Without saving "at least 20 percent" of consumption in private, commercial and industrial sectors, the country might not "be able to avoid a gas emergency in winter," Muller said on October 6. [ZDF] [AP]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Scholz defends German energy support plan after criticism from some EU leaders

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz defended the country's EUR 200 billion energy support plan after other EU leaders criticised the package amid concerns that it will distort competition in Europe. [AP] [Politico Europe] [DW]

French and Italian European Commissioners, Thierry Breton and Paolo Gentiloni, said that the support package would put German companies at an "unfair advantage" and distort competition in the bloc. They want a common approach to policy at the European level to manage the energy crisis. [Politico Europe]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February has led to energy shortages across Europe. EU governments are scrambling to protect consumers and industries from the fallout of higher prices and supply shortages.

Germany has set a price limit for gas consumers and will pay energy companies the difference between what they have to pay on the world market and the price for consumers. Germany introduced the package after it nationalised its biggest gas supplier Uniper with a EUR 29 billion bailout on September 21. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

The energy support package was "justified" and other countries are taking similar measures, Scholz said on October 4. German Finance Minister Christian Lindner said that the package was "proportionate" compared to the "size and vulnerability" of the German economy. [DW] [ZDF]

The European Commission, which oversees antitrust policies in the EU bloc, said on October 3 that it was in contact with the German government about Berlin's energy plan. [Reuters] [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: RWE ends coal use ahead of schedule

Germany's largest power producer RWE said on October 4 that it would end the use of coal by 2030, eight years earlier than the required phase out date. [DW] [AP] [ZDF]

The German government in July decided to reactivate 16 fossil fuel power plants and extended the running time of another 11 to help avoid energy shortages after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February. [DW]

The increase in demand for coal in the short term will lead to more carbon dioxide emissions, RWE CEO Markus Krebber said. Ending coal use is necessary to comply with Germany's climate protection goals, he said. [DW]

The earlier phase out date for RWE will save around 280 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions. It will also prevent the eviction of residents of several villages and farms that would be required to mine coal. [AP] [ZDF]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Chancellor Scholz orders extension of all three nuclear power plants

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz ordered on October 17 that all three of the country's nuclear power plants extend their production until April 2023, using his constitutional power to end a debate among the governing coalition about the short-term future of nuclear power in Europe's largest economy. [Politico Europe] [EURACTIV] [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The governing coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) have disagreed on how long the nuclear plants should be kept active as the country faces energy shortages due to the war in Ukraine. The FDP wants an indefinite extension of the nuclear plants, while the Greens want operations of the nuclear plants halted by the deadline. [EURACTIV] [Bloomberg] [AP]

On September 27, the government said that an extension of the plants' operations could be possible but it didn't make a final decision. They were scheduled to close at the end of the year, with two on standby in case of energy emergencies. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Bloomberg]

Germany's three nuclear power plants account for 6 percent of the country's electricity production. [Reuters] [Euronews]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Russia's Rosneft sues German government for taking control of oil subsidiary

Russian energy company Rosneft filed on October 13 a lawsuit against the German government in response to Berlin's decision to take control of its subsidiary and place it under the trusteeship of a state regulator in September. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The Rosneft subsidiary, which has three oil refineries, is one of the country's biggest oil processing companies and accounts for 12 percent of demand. Rosneft announced the legal action in September. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Bloomberg]

Placing the subsidiary under state trusteeship was legal and met regulatory conditions defined by the Energy Security Act, the German economy ministry said, citing the “endangerment of energy supply.” [Reuters]

Rosneft said that taking control of the subsidiary was illegal because the company complied with its delivery commitments. It also said it was “ready to discuss possible parameters of a new contract on condition of guarantees for payment for raw materials supplied.” [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [FAZ][Bloomberg]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government reaches compromise on China’s port investment despite protest

The German government reached a compromise in China’s Hamburg port investment deal on October 26, despite protest from coalition parties and government ministries.

The compromise allows Chinese shipping company Cosco to buy a 24.9 percent stake in a Hamburg port terminal. Cosco will be a minority stakeholder and not have decision making power in management or strategy. [DW] [Reuters] [ZDF] [Politico Europe]

Under the original proposal, Cosco would have been able to buy a 35 percent investment and be a major stakeholder of a part of critical infrastructure. [DW]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and ministries led by his party, the biggest coalition partner Social Democrats (SPD), backed the decision, despite criticism from the other two coalition parties of Greens and Liberals (FDP) as well as other government ministries. [Politico Europe]

An investment by Cosco “disproportionately expands China's strategic influence on German and European transport infrastructure as well as Germany's dependence on China,” said a spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry in a note on the cabinet meeting on October 26. [DW] [Reuters]

The German government is “repeating the mistake” of prioritising “short-term economic interests over long-term prosperity and prosperity and stability,” said head of the German Institute for Economic Research, Marcel Fratzscher. [DW]

Chancellor Scholz said that the deal was not about “selling the port” but “merely” a stake in one terminal. According to supporters of the decision, it will allow Hamburg to compete with rival ports also interested in trade with China. [Reuters] [DW] [ZDF]

China’s Cosco already owns stakes in Europe’s largest ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp in the Netherlands and Belgium and has control over the port of Piraeus in Athens, Greece. [Politico Europe] [ZDF]

Germany also plans to approve a takeover by China of the chip production of a company based in Dortmund. German security authorities advised against the takeover deal. [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Thousands protest energy policy

Thousands of people protested German energy policy in six cities on October 22, bringing together different political groups demanding a more social and just distribution of government funds to help against rising prices, living costs and inflation in the country. [DW] [Reuters]

The protests were organised by trade unions and environmental groups. According to Greenpeace, one of the organisers of the protests, around 24,000 people joined demonstrations in the German cities of Berlin, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Hannover and Dresden. [DW] [Reuters]

“The demonstrations show that many people will not let themselves be divided in this crisis and want a social and ecological transition,” the organisers said in a joint statement after the protests. [DW]

Smaller, more regular protests have taken place predominantly in east Germany, often organised by right-wing party AfD or other right-wing organisations. They protest the energy and Russia policy of the German government. [ZDF] [Tagesschau] [Spiegel]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Border poll needs clear majority, Irish deputy prime minister says

Irish Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said that building trust must precede a successful Irish reunification.

A border poll should secure "as large a majority as possible" and not only "fifty percent plus one," Varadkar said in a speech at Ireland's Future Conference on October 1. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

The event was organised by the civic pro-unity group Ireland's Future. It was attended by politicians representing ten different parties and other prominent figures. Pro-UK politicians did not attend. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

Ireland's Future had previously published research estimating the cost of Irish reunification at EUR 4 billion a year due to tax differences but said it would still be affordable. [The Irish Times]

(jv/gc)

Ireland: First satellite to be launched in the next few months

Ireland will launch its first satellite into orbit in the next few months.

A team of students and academics at the University College Dublin developed the satellite called Eirsat-1. The European Space Agency will launch the satellite from its base in French Guiana in South America, either at the end of this year or in early 2023. It will serve educational purposes.

After authorisation from cabinet, Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar went on to register the satellite with the UN, which is mandatory for all launches under the ESA program. [The Irish Times] [RTÉ]

(jv/gc)

Netherlands: Parliament member Khadija Arib resigns amid controversy

Dutch member of parliament Khadija Arib has resigned after being accused of alleged unacceptable behaviour while she was the chair of the House of Representatives from 2016 to 2021. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

She announced her decision on October 1 after the current Chair of the house, Vera Bergkamp, commissioned an independent investigation into her behaviour. Several opposition party leaders asked for clarifications from Bergkamp for “a clear explanation of what happened, in the interest of the reputation” of the representative body. [NLTimes]

The investigation was unconstitutional as the board “ordered the state attorney to check on a sitting member of parliament outside the purview of the House,” Arib said. It was “a dubious way of dealing with elected representatives,” she said, adding that the current leadership was guilty of abuse of power by politicising the investigation. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Former deputy Piet Adema named new minister of agriculture, succeeding Henk Staghouwer

Former ChristenUnie party chairman Piet Adema has been named as the new agriculture minister, succeeding Henk Staghouwer, who resigned after failing to provide uncontested restrictions on nitrogen emissions for farmers. [NOS]

As agriculture minister Adema's main role will be to draw up plans for the future of the farming industry, which is facing severe cutbacks to meet legally binding targets on nitrogen compound emissions. The government’s effort to curb nitrogen emissions has fallen too much on the agricultural sector. [NOS]

“Farming has a future in this country,” Adema said. “Things will have to be done differently and most livestock holders, arable farmers, gardeners and fishermen know that and want it too. But they need clarity, reassurance and security for the future.” [NOS] [DutchNews]

Members of parliament criticised Staghouwer for failing to spell out a clear vision for the future of the industry. Allegedly, he struggled to deal with resistance to his plans within his department. He complained of being sidelined within the cabinet, a feeling which intensified when troubleshooter Johan Remkes was

appointed to lead talks between the government and farmers aimed at resolving their differences over the nitrogen targets. [DutchNews]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Union, Dutch rail company NS reach agreement stop train strikes

Several trade unions reached on October 11 a labour agreement with the Dutch rail company NS after multiple days of train strikes were held in response to what the union said were high workloads for conductors, drivers and other personnel. [NLTimes] [NOS]

A large majority of FNV and CNV union members at the Dutch rail company NS have agreed to the new collective labour agreement. Of the about 5,000 FNV members consulted, 81 percent voted in favour of the collective bargaining agreement, and 18 percent voted against it. One percent abstained from voting. At CNV, 89 percent voted in favour. [NLTimes]

The trade union CNV negotiator Ike Wiersinga said the new agreement needs some improvements. “NS faces major challenges due to staff shortages, work pressure, and high absenteeism,” he said. “The attitude of politicians, which sets the preconditions and the high demands, does not help.” [NLTimes] [NOS]

NS employees stopped working in large parts of the country in August on several occasions. The strikes persisted into September. On September 11, after six days of strikes, NS promised a structural wage increase of an average of 9.25 percent and benefits of two EUR 1,000 payments. The rail company also promised some form of compensation for high inflation. [NLTimes] [NOS]

The high workload is a major sore spot for conductors, drivers, and other personnel. FNV warned its members that the new collective labour agreement would not immediately relieve the workload. But added: “A good collective labour agreement is essential to get the 2,200 vacancies filled and keep them that way.” [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Switzerland: UN says Switzerland has a serious systemic problem with racism

Switzerland has a serious systemic problem with racism against people of African descent, according to a report presented to the UN Human Rights Council, which gave a broad range of examples from police brutality to a children's game. [Euronews]

The UN-appointed working group voiced concerns about the prevalence of racial discrimination and highlighted several incidents following a visit to the country this year. It noted positive measures taken by Switzerland. "The ubiquity and impunity of this misconduct indicates a serious systemic problem exists," it said. [Euronews]

(gc)

United Kingdom: Government plans to tighten immigration rules

People crossing the English Channel illegally should lose their right to claim asylum, British Interior Minister Suella Braverman said.

Under a policy introduced by the government of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, people crossing the English Channel would be deported to Rwanda and have their asylum claims dealt with there. The policy was delayed after a legal intervention by the European Court of Human Rights.

In a speech at the conservative party conference on October 5, Bravermain committed to making the Rwanda policy "work." Braverman also said she would work more closely with France to deal with the issue of illegal immigrants crossing the channel. The charity Care4Calais described Braverman's plans as "barbaric" as most people arriving in the UK are "genuine refugees." [Reuters] [BBC]

The British government is trying to manage the rising numbers of asylum seekers crossing the Channel. More than 30,000 people have made the crossing in small boats so far this year, already surpassing last year's record. Government officials have warned the total could reach 60,000 by the end of 2022. [Reuters]

"We have to stop the boats crossing the Channel. This has gone on for far too long," Braverman said.

(jv/gc)

United Kingdom: Britain might experience gas shortages this winter, regulator says

The UK might experience gas and electricity shortages this winter, its energy regulator has said.

In a letter to the power company SSE, the Office for Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) said the UK faces a "significant risk" of shortages due to high demand for gas on the European market following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the event of gas supply shortages, the regulator and Britain's National Grid could be forced to curb natural gas supplies of gas to gas-fired power stations to make sure enough remains available to households. [Reuters]

"This winter is likely to be more challenging than previous ones due to the Russian disruption of gas supplies to Europe," Ofgem said. This could lead to power cuts lasting up to three hours a day, British energy company National Grid has warned. The company might use its digital alert service to advise people on the efficient use of energy.

The government is against energy rationing.

"I'm not in favour of condescending government assuming people are stupid. Voters know what they need to do and don't need me to tell them to do that," Former Minister for Business Jacob Rees-Mogg said when asked about a scrapped campaign to save energy. [The Guardian]

(jv/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: President Lukashenko imposes ban on price increase

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko imposed on October 6 a ban on price increases, responding to what he sees as "insufficient control and lack of action to fair pricing in all market segments." [Belta]

"From 6 October any increase in prices is prohibited. Forbidden! From today. Not from tomorrow, but from today," Lukashenko said "So that they do not inflate prices over the day. Therefore, from today, price increases are prohibited. God forbid someone decides to raise prices or do some indexation retroactively."

Lukashenko ordered the chairman of the state control committee to monitor the implementation and to respond immediately to any transgressions. The prosecutor and the State Control Committee will determine what to do with anyone who violates the president's instructions, he said. [Belta][Belta]

Lukashenko warned against any closures and attempts to leave the market. "You will be held responsible for any store or facility closing or leaving the market," the Belarusian leader said.

(mo/gc)

Belarus: President Lukashenko sign decree to improve security standards across the country

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko signed on October 6 multiple decrees that were justified to improve the country's state security system but ultimately increase the power of the country's executive branch of government. [Belta]

Decree no. 356 amends previous presidential decrees, requiring state security agencies to exclusively report to the president. Decree no. 355 stipulates the reorganisation of educational institutes encompassing the training of security officers in Belarus. [Belta]

The presidential decrees should be implemented by January 1, 2023. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Ministry of Interior launched counterterrorism exercises

The Belarusian Ministry of Interior launched counterterrorism exercises on October 11 in the Gomel oblast due to the deteriorating military and political situation there, the ministry's press service said. [Belta]

Subversive actions against the state were planned, some of which involve acts of terrorism, the minstry said, adding that while responding to this threat, the special exercise should enable security units to deal with the threats and prevent sabotage. They were also trained in reconnaissance and ensuring the Belarusian citizens' public security. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Security Council does not plan any mobilisation calls, state secretary said

Belarus's State Secretary of the Security Council, Alexander Volfovich, said on October 13 that the country does not plan to mobilise its military. Responding to the recent military recruiting events, Volfovich said that these practices are done on a regular basis and reflect the annual autumn conscription campaign. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Mass immigration into Estonia not expected by authorities

The Police and Border Guard Board said on October 5 that there was no threat of mass immigration into Estonia. [ERR]

While an influx of several hundred Ukrainian refugees was reported, the actual number of refugees seeking refuge in Estonia had decreased. Meelis Saarepuu, the head of the southern border guard office, said that there were sufficient border patrols, which could be deployed when required. [ERR]

The border patrol was still gathering information as to why the influx of refugees decreased. Reports were spreading that the queues at the Russian side of the

border were dispersed, with many refugees taken away elsewhere. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Ministry of defence calls for increase in defence spending to 3% of GDP

Estonia's Minister of Defence Hanno Pevkur said on October 12 that Estonia should increase its military spending to 3 percent of gross domestic product in light of the changing security situation. [ERR]

Pevkur added that "on NATO's eastern flank, defence spending is increasing both as a percentage and in absolute terms." He also said that EUR 1.3 billion is needed to acquire equipment, storage, ammunition and pefor rsonnel costs. [ERR][ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Finance minister proposes conservative fiscal policy

Estonia's Finance Minister Annely Akkerman proposed on October 19 an activities-based state budget, signalling a more conservative fiscal policy. [ERR]

Akkerman said that Estonia needs a system with a clear budget, adding that the Estonian fiscal deficit is estimated at 2.6 percent of GDP, being close to EU limits of 3 percent. While rising energy prices and Estonia's plans to increase military spending would further heighten the state deficit, a more conservative fiscal policy could alleviate those concerns. [ERR]

Akkerman replaced Keit Pentus Rosimannus as finance minister on October 18 when Rosimannus announced her resignation from politics. Akkerman was subsequently appointed by president Alar Karis. [ERR] [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Environment ministry merges two state agencies dealing with environmental protection

The Estonian environment ministry said on October 18 that it would merge two state bodies dealing with environmental protection to reduce costs and remove duplication of competencies. [ERR]

The merger of the Environmental Investment Center and the Estonian Private Forest Center was originally scheduled for 2021, but was delayed to 2022. While the former had a wider profile, the latter was issue-specific, covering forestry. Environment minister Madis Kallas said that these organisations would mutually reinforce each other in terms of environmental protection and combating climate change, linking environment, rural life and forestry. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: National conservative party Isamaa in favour of Estonia's own LNG storage vessel

Members of the national conservative party Isamaa, a member of the governmental coalition, said on October 11 that Estonia should obtain its own LNG storage vessel to ensure its energy supplies. [ERR]

In a statement, they said that Estonia's private sector has generated LNG capacities. An LNG vessel could alleviate the potential LNG energy shortages.

Isamaa also opted for a price cap of EUR 30 for the EU's carbon quota. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Centre-right party New Unity wins parliamentary elections on October 1

Latvia's Centre-right party New Unity, chaired by incumbent Prime Minister Krisjanis Karins, won the parliamentary elections on October 1 with 19 percent of the vote.

The 14th parliamentary elections had 1,829 candidates participating for the 100 seats, with 59.4 percent of eligible voters casting their ballots at the polls. According to the final results, seven electoral lists were elected to the parliament, having surpassed the 5 percent threshold. [ERR] [LSM] [CVK] [LSM] [ERR]

The Centre-right and environmentalist party Union of Greens and Farmers (12 percent), the social conservative United List (11 percent), the national-conservative National Alliance (9.3 percent), the centrist and Eurosceptic party For Stability! (6.8 percent), the right-wing party Latvia First (6.2 percent) and the social democratic party The Progressives (6.2 percent) were elected to parliament. [ERR] [LSM] [CVK]

Pursuant to the results, New Unity will earn 26 seats in the parliament, followed by the Union of Greens and Farmers with 16, the United List with 15, the National Alliance with 13, Stability with 11, the Progressives with 10 and Latvia First with 9 seats respectively. [ERR]

Pro-Russian party Latvian Russian Union did not get past the 5 percent threshold, having achieved 3.7 percent. Experts said that this result indicated that most of the Russian minority in Latvia did not wish to be associated with Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive war in Ukraine and foreign policy. [LSM] [Euronews]

Two parties, Tautas Varas Speks and the social democratic party Harmony, each of which did not surpass the 5 percent threshold, gained 1.13 percent and 4.81 percent respectively. They challenged on October 19 and October 18 respectively the results due to alleged irregularities during the elections, requesting a recount.

They submitted a complaint to the Constitutional Court after the Central Election Committee denied the accusations. A formal verdict is still pending. [LSM] [BNN]

With neither party having gained the majority, a coalition government must be constituted.

New Unity was in talks with the United List as well as the National Alliances and the Progressives. While a formal agreement is still pending, the United List and the National Alliance made it clear that they did not wish to form a coalition with the Progressives. Experts assume that New Unity will form a coalition with the United List and the National Alliance to ensure a majority in the parliament. [BNN] [FPRI]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: State Control Commission considers emergency management ineffective

The Latvian State Control Commission said on October 13 that the citizens' protection and emergency management of the country is ineffective and decentralised. [LSM]

Member of the State Control Commission Kristine Jaunzeme said that there is no coordinating institution guiding the country and its people through an emergency situation. She exemplified this by referring to the Covid-19 pandemic which had hit Latvia significantly. [LSM]

In order to cope with an emergency situation, the State Control Commission suggested the establishment of a unified centre of crisis management, which is enabled to coordinate actions of state institutions. [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Latvia: Amnesty International accuses Latvian authorities of mistreatment of refugees

Amnesty International on October 13 accused Latvian authorities of mistreating refugees at the Latvian-Belarusian border. [LSM]

Amnesty cited migrants, including children, as witnesses who said that they were arbitrarily arrested, subjected to torture and forced to either remain in detention or "voluntarily" return to their countries of origin. [LSM] [Amnesty International] [Amnesty International]

Latvia denied these accusations, with Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics saying that Amnesty International "has lost any credibility and this report further proves complete degradation of [a] once-respected human rights organisation." [Twitter] [LSM]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Metropolitan Inokentiy to continue leadership of Orthodox Church in Lithuania

Metropolitan Inokentiy will continue his leadership of the Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese after being confirmed by the Moscow Synod. [LRT]

Pursuant to the Orthodox jurisdiction, all hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate to which the Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese is subordinated are required to apply for emeritus status after reaching the age of 75, which was the case for Metropolitan Inokentiy before the Moscow Synod convened. [LRT]

"The Holy Synod has decided to bless Metropolitan Inokentiy of Vilnius and Lithuania to continue to lead the Lithuanian Orthodox Archdiocese," representatives of the Lithuanian Orthodox Church said in a statement.

Metropolitan Inokentiy sparked controversy after he unfrocked four Orthodox priests who demanded detachment from the Moscow Patriarchate due to its endorsement of Russia's war in Ukraine and jurisdiction under the Patriarchate of Constantinople instead. They said that their dismissal was retaliatory and supported by Russian Orthodox clerical authorities. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Transparency International finds deficits in Lithuania's anti-bribery enforcement

Transparency International published on October 14 a report that characterised Lithuania as a country with "little or no enforcement of foreign bribery rules." [LRT]

Ingrida Kalinauskiene, the acting director of Transparency International in Lithuania, said that Lithuania was listed in the lowest category for the first time since 2018 when the first study of such kind was conducted. In the report assessing the enforcement of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, Lithuania received one point, Transparency International Lithuania said. [LRT]

According to the report, Lithuania launched one foreign bribery investigation, involving Latvian officials and a Lithuanian company engaged in the distribution of blood plasma. Although a probe was launched, no tangible evidence hinting towards criminal activities was presented. [LRT]

Lithuania was rated the worst among the three Baltic states, with Estonia scoring six points and Latvia moving up from limited to moderate enforcement. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Protesters express dissatisfaction with government

Approximately 1,000 protesters participated on October 22 in a demonstration organised by the Lithuanian Family Movement to express their dissatisfaction with the government. [LRT]

While the Lithuanian Family Movement previously protested against same-sex partnerships and COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination policies, its members said they were protesting to defend the constitution.

Raimondas Grinevicius, the head of the Lithuanian Family Movement, said that "the constitution has been turned into a worthless piece of paper." [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Prosecutors took measures against pro-Russian organisation and activists

The Lithuanian authorities carried out large-scale searches on October 21 and took legal measures against the International Forum of Good Neighbourhood which was established by former politician and pro-Russian activist Algirdas Paleckis. [LRT]

Members of the organisation are suspected of spying for Russia, and a Lithuanian court received a request from the state prosecution service to dissolve the International Forum of Good Neighbourhood. [LRT]

Some of its members also visited Moscow and met with representatives of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. They later questioned the legitimacy of the Lithuanian government and accused it of damaging Lithuania's economy by detaching it from Russia. Leading member Erika Svencioniene previously met Belarusian president Lukashenko as well, expressing support for his political agenda. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Anti-government protests held in Chisinau

Anti-government protests, organised by the Shor party in the country's capital Chisinau on October 30, demanded that President Maia Sandu and the government resign. Valery Klimenko, a deputy of the City Council and member of the Shor party, Dinu Tsurkanu, head of the Orhei Rayon, and Pavel Verejan, mayor of Orhei, organised the protests. [Crisis24] [RBK Ukraine]

The protesters called for early elections due to what they perceive as the government's mishandling of the inflation crisis and rising gas prices. Although the protests were generally peaceful, there were sporadic clashes with police. The Moldovan police said that 79 people were arrested. [Crisis24]

The Socialist Party, under former pro-Russian president Igor Dodon, held protests against the president and the government on October 29. Organizers of the protests said that they not only demonstrated in Chisinau, but across the country to resist "social genocide" and the "bullying of mayors." [Evropeyskaya Pravda]

Moldova has experienced a series of anti-government protests, with people calling for gas imports from Russia at a reasonable price. Moldova has important trade links with Russia and is vulnerable to energy pressures due to its dependency on Russian oil and gas imports. [Reuters]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Central Election Committee announces results of the local elections

The Moldovan Central Election Committee announced on October 17 the results of the local elections that were held the day before in Salcutsa, Ialpujeni and Branshite. [Moldpres]

Mariya Chomyrtan, the candidate of the liberal and pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity which also represents the government, won the elections in Salcutsa with 27.51 percent. [Moldpres]

Vitalie Burdukh, candidate of the Socialist Party, won with 50.6 percent in Iapujeni followed by Konstantin Savanu of the Party of Action and Solidarity who gained 49.4 percent. [Moldpres]

Vyacheslav Popa of the Democratic Party of Moldova won with 44.7 percent in Branishte, while Daniela

Koltun of the Party of Action and Solidarity won 28 percent of all votes. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Government approves state funding plan for next three years

The Moldovan government approved on October 5 the state funding plan for the next three years. [Moldpres]

The document covering the time frame between 2023 and 2025 determined that in the wake of an economic crisis, resources should be redirected to areas of high priority. It is based on the macro-economic policies that were enacted in 2022 to adopt course corrections of Moldova's national economy. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Prosecutors charged "Shor" party with illegal financing

Moldovan Anti-corruption prosecutors said on October 24 that five persons who were suspected of illegal financing the "Shor" party have been put under preventive detention. [Moldpres]

According to the prosecutors, these persons accepted that an organised criminal group provided funding for the "Shor" party. They also decided to appeal a decision of a court to release Marina Tauber, member of the "Shor" party, under certain judicial conditions. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: State of emergency extended for 60 days

The Moldovan parliament decided on October 6 to extend the state of emergency for 60 days due to the on-going energy crisis and other threats undermining national security. [Moldpres]

Pursuant to the decision, organs of state, regional and local administrations have been instructed by the Commission for Emergency Situations to ensure full implementation. [Moldpres]

The state of emergency was adopted on February 24 when Russia invaded Ukraine. It was successively extended for respectively 60 days on April 25 and August 8. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Energy deficits are looming, according to ministry of infrastructure

Moldovan Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Andrey Spinu said that due to Russian attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure and Gazprom's supply cuts to Moldova, there would soon be an energy deficit. [Reuters] [Moldpres]

Spinu said that the country must save its energy over the next few weeks, given that Gazprom did not say how much gas it would provide in November.

He added that energy saving measures could involve switching off lights and roadside billboards, changing work schedules and using individual generators where possible. No disconnections from electricity networks were considered whatsoever. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Russia: Novak criticises use of sanctions against energy producing countries

Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that " inexpedient" political decisions generated risks and aggravate the world energy crisis. [GovRU]

"The greatest uncertainty is linked with deliberate decisions adopted by politicians to accommodate their ambitions," Novak said on October 12 during Russian Energy Week. "This concerns sanctions against oil and gas producing complexes. Oil sanctions have been introduced against Iran, Venezuela and Russia, which together account for over 20 percent of the world's daily oil consumption." [GovRU][RusEnergyWeek]

Western nations have announced tough sanctions against Russia's energy industry. These include: an EU ban on imports of Russian oil brought in by sea from December, an EU ban of all imports of refined oil products from Russia in February 2023, a US ban of all Russian oil and gas imports and a UK decision to ban Russian oil by the end of 2022. The United States has imposed restrictions on activities with Iran under

various legal authorities since 1979, following the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. [BBC]

Novak warned that predictability in energy markets was difficult when decisions were taken against countries that ensured the stability of the energy market. [GovRU]

Russia's Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller also warned at Russian Energy Week that the EU sanctions against Russian gas would create a situation where Europe would face fuel shortages not only during the winter of 2022, but also in 2023 and 2024.

"European experts note that currently the European balance is short of 800 million cubic metres of gas a day; this is one-third of EU consumption in an abnormally cold weather," he said, adding that the European zone's consumption during the heating season was 60 billion cubic metres of gas, whereas the underground gas storage facilities currently contained only 20 billion cubic metres of gas. [GovRU] [RusEnergyWeek]

(gc)

Russia: Central Bank keeps interest rates at 7.5%, warns of mobilisation's impact on inflation

The Central Bank of Russia held its key interest rate at 7.5 percent, but cautioned that expectations of price rises had grown and that Russia's partial mobilisation could stoke longer term inflation due to a shrinking labour force. [CBR]

The central bank updated its forecast for inflation for the end of 2022 to total 12.0–13.0 percent from 11-13 percent, taking into account the preponed indexation of utility prices among other factors. "The Bank of Russia assesses that the partial mobilisation will serve as a deterrent to consumer demand and inflation over the horizon of coming months," it said. [CBR]

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a "partial mobilisation" for the military campaign in Ukraine. Hundreds of thousands of men have been called up to the army or fled abroad since September 21. [Reuters]

Central Bank Governor Elvira Nabiullinashat that "pro-inflationary effects may appear through changes in the structure of the labour market, a shortage of personnel in certain areas." [Reuters]

"It is still difficult to assess all the economic consequences of the shift in employment structure," Nabiullinashat said.

The central bank forecasts a GDP contraction of 3.0–3.5 percent in 2022. The GDP growth rate will remain negative at 4.0-1.0 percent. The central bank expects that the Russian economy will start growing in the second half of 2023. [CBR]

In 2024–2025, GDP will grow by 1.5–2.5 percent annually, according to the central bank.

(gc)

Russia: Lawmakers move to restrict efforts to promote LGBTQ rights

Russian lawmakers gave preliminary approval to a bill that will impose new restrictions on activities to promote LGBTQ rights in the country. [FoxNews]

A 2013 Russian law banned what authorities deem to be the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" to children. It has been used to stifle debate in any public context and to prevent demonstrations or any public gatherings with pro-LGBTQ content that a child could conceivably see or hear.

According to the Moscow Times, the 2013 ban allows for a fine of up to USD 17,200 or up to 15 days in jail for violations. In December a Russian court fined Meta Platforms USD 177,000, under the 2013 law for failing to delete posts that contained what the court deemed "LGBT propaganda." [Deadline]

The new bill increases restrictions and expands presentation bans to cover all age groups. It outlaws advertising, media and online resources, books, films and theatre productions deemed to contain such propaganda. Violations are punishable by fines, and, if committed by non-residents, could lead to their expulsion from Russia. [FoxNews]

The United Nations said it was "deeply concerned" by the decision to toughen up the 2013 "LGBTQ propaganda" law and urged them to repeal the legislation. Rights campaigners, who condemn the 2013 law, say the new amendments mean, in effect, that any public mention of same-sex couples is being criminalised. [NDVT]

The proposals "broaden a ban on any discussion and sharing of information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender people, and their human rights," UN Human Rights Office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani said in Geneva. The new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, is "deeply concerned" by the move, "which infringes even further on international human rights norms and standards," she said.

(gc)

Russia: Former Russian presidential candidate escapes to Lithuania

Russian blogger, socialite and former presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak escaped to Lithuania on October 25 after the Russian police launched a criminal investigation against two of her business associates. [LRT] [The Washington Post] [Deutsche Welle]

Sobchak's commercial director Kirill Sukhanov as well as former editor of the Russian Tatler magazine Arian Romanovsky were accused by Russian law enforcement of extortion of Sergey Chemezov who, as the head of a state-owned military contracting firm, has close ties to the Russian president Vladimir Putin. [The Washington Post]

According to the investigation, the accused Sukhanov and Romanovsky extorted 11 million rubles from Chemezov for not posting "defamatory information" in the telegram channel "Put out the light". Sukhanov was detained while receiving 800 thousand rubles as the first tranche. The Russian police said Sobchak was behind the scheme, issuing an arrest warrant. [The Washington Post][TASS]

Sobchak denied the accusations, adding that the raid was targeting her editorial office instead. She ran for president in 2018 as a candidate of the Civic Initiative. Although Sobchak's party was labelled as "constructive opposition" and a "fake candidate", she has cultivated a critical opinion of Putin. [The Washington Post][TASS]

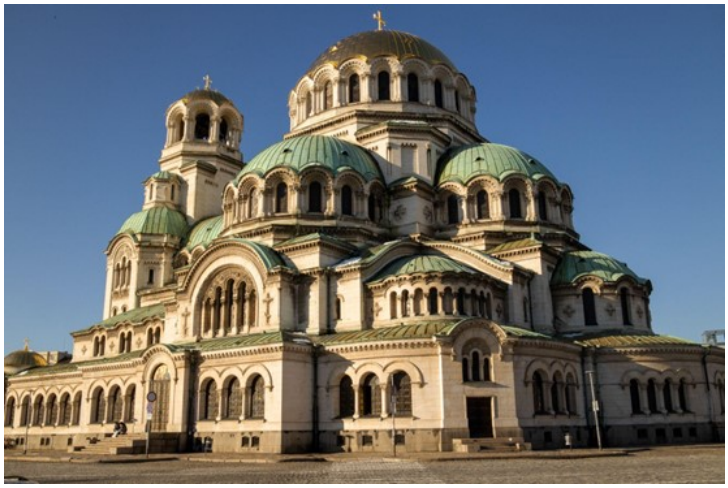
Sobchak, became the third person involved in the case opened on October 26, 2022. In addition to Sobchak, charges were brought against her director Kirill Sukhanov and Arian Romanovsky, who was once the editor of the journal Tatler. [RBC]

Ksenia Sobchak is being held as an accomplice in the case and she faces up to 15 years in prison. On the morning of October 26, a search took place in

Sobchak's house near Moscow in the cottage village of Gorki-8, but the journalist herself was not in the house.

(mo-ad/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe



Albania: Government blocks public access to communist-era documents

Members of the Albanian parliament from the ruling Socialist Party passed a law restricting the ability of former collaborators of the communist-era secret police to run for office but blocked a motion by the opposition Democratic Party that sought to make secret police documents available to the public. [Balkan Insight]

The Democratic Party called this move “a strategy to target” the former president and current leader of the opposition Freedom Party, Ilir Meta, who had previously been accused of allegedly collaborating with the secret police in the 1990s.

Since the allegations against Meta were made public, the ruling Socialist Party - whom Meta used to be a part of - has expressed their intent to change the background check procedure for politicians. They are yet to comment on the motivation behind blocking the declassification of secret police documents. [Euractiv]

(hi/gc)

Albania: Energy price authority sued after mass outcry

A parliament member from Albania's conservative opposition Democratic Party has announced that an alliance of opposition parties has sued the country's Transparency Board, which has been tasked with regulating fuel prices. [Albania Daily News]

Prime Minister Edi Rama created the Transparency Board to control fuel prices amid the country's ongoing energy crisis due to supply disruptions after Russia invaded Ukraine in February. The Board has steadily increased prices, prompting the Democratic Party to label it the "Board of Oligarchs," claiming no other country in the region has seen such high prices for fuel.

Another member of the Democratic Party took to social media to encourage Albanians to protest against the Board and Rama's government, accusing it of exploiting citizens. [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Greece: Trial of former neo-Nazi party resumes

Greece's Court of Appeal resumed the trial of the criminal organisation and former far-right party Golden Dawn after pausing the proceedings for two months. [Proto Thema]

Golden Dawn rose to be Greece's third most popular party over the last decade, but after failing to reach the parliament in 2019, it was ruled to be a criminal organisation after a five-year-long trial concluded in 2020.

The leaders of the organisation - including incumbent European Parliament Member Yiannis Lagos - were convicted for running a criminal organisation and were held responsible for the assassination of anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fissas, murders and hate crimes against refugees and minorities, and the illegal possession of weapons.

The assassinations and attacks were found to have been directly ordered by the organisation's leadership or enabled via "hit squads" that they helped train. It has been labelled "the largest trial of fascists since the Nuremberg Trials". [The Guardian]

The imprisoned leadership of the organisation is now seeking to overturn this decision, despite the trial being prolonged as a result of mass anti-fascism protests in Athens. The witness testimony round began with Magda Fissa, mother of Pavlos Fissas, who has spearheaded the campaign against alleged neo-Nazism in Greece and played a key role in the first trial. [Euronews]

Tensions rose after Konstantinos Plevris, the defence attorney of Lagos, allegedly performed a Nazi salute inside the courtroom during Magda Fissa's testimony, in the presence of the judges. He did so as a response to Fissa questioning the defence's claim that "this is a political trial". [Euronews]

Dimitris Psarras, a left-wing writer and key prosecution witness during the first-degree trial, whose investigations on Golden Dawn helped the court reach a decision, said there is a "very slim chance" that the judgement could change on appeal. He cited the extensive evidence gathered for the first trial, as well as the detailed 12,700-page judgement as the reasons he believes the case will not be overturned. [The Guardian]

An investigation into Plevris is set to begin, under Greece's anti-racism legislation. [Balkan Insight]

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Opposition to submit law banning fascist organisations

North Macedonian Opposition party VMRO DPMNE will submit a law proposing a ban on the creation of associations that have any connection to a fascist regime. [Nova Makedonija]

The move was prompted by mass protests in the North Macedonian city of Ohrid after the opening of a Bulgarian club called "Tsar Boris the Third," named after a collaborator of the Nazis during World War II. Hundreds of citizens protested at the centre of Ohrid, denouncing neo-fascism in the country. [Nova Makedonija]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: New government excludes various pro-Russian politicians

The Serbian government confirmed the appointment of 25 new ministers for the formation of the new government, which notably excluded various pro-Russian voices. The government will still be led by Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, but key former officials were not included. [N1]

Former Interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin and former Technology and Innovation Minister Nenad Popovic - both of whom were considered pro-Russian by local media - were absent from the list. Local media have labelled this a "concession to the West". [Balkan Insight]

Former Energy Minister Zorana Mihaijlovic was also not included in the new government formation, despite her previous efforts to diversify Serbia's energy supply chain and reduce its dependence on Russian gas. Local media said this might be due to President Aleksandar Vucic making concessions to the "conservative parts of [the government], where she is not popular".

Serbia has repeatedly faced pressure from the European Union and the West to reduce its ties with Russia and align its policy with theirs. Serbia's failure to do so as of yet may have consequences for its potential EU accession, which many EU officials have already brought into question.

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Right-wing parties form coalition advocating for unification with Kosovo

All of the Serbian parliament's right-wing parties have announced that they will join forces under an issue-based coalition that will advocate for a harsher stance against Kosovo and reunification.

The leader of the right-wing party Dveri, speaking on behalf of the coalition, said it will be limited to the issue of Kosovo and it does not signal a broader block being formed within the parliament. He did not rule out the possibility of further cooperation on other issues in the future. [Balkan Insight]

He also accused the government of taking an accommodating stance on the issue to "not offend its Western partners". [N1]

(hi/gc)

Serbia: Feminist organisations protests tabloid interview of serial rapist

Various civil rights organisations have staged protests in front of the headquarters of pro-regime tabloid "Informer", after it published an interview with a convicted sex offender. NGO spokespersons condemned the interview and said "serial rapists should not get any space in the media." [N1]

Protesters reported receiving threats since the campaign's beginning, particularly via social media and private messaging apps. Feminist NGO "Women's Solidarity" member Jelena Riznic encouraged Serbian women not to be afraid, saying "they will not give up." [N1]

(hi/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan vows new constitution by 2023

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed in October that a new constitution would be in place in 2023, when the country celebrates 100 years since the founding of the republic by Kemal Ataturk, that would guarantee the rights and freedoms of citizens. [Yahoo] [UNI]

Erdogan said that Turkey needed to replace its 40-year-old constitution because it was no longer suitable for the country. Erdogan said his government would propose constitutional amendments that would safeguard the rights of women wanting to wear Islamic-style headscarves and protect family values from what he called the "threat of perverted currents." Turkey has discussed amendments that could curb LGBTQ rights and discourage same-sex relationships. [Yahoo][UNI]

His speech was viewed as a campaign manifesto as the country heads toward parliamentary and presidential elections in June.

"Amid the increasing global uncertainties, our efforts aimed at establishing stability and justice are appreciated by all," Erdogan said. "We work to create a zone of peace and prosperity in our near environ with our entrepreneurial and humanitarian foreign policy, from putting an end to the humanitarian tragedy in Syria to bringing a solution to the Russia-Ukraine crisis." [AA]

The constitution was amended in 2017 after a referendum that gave Erdogan great executive power. Noting that Turkey's constitution was drafted following a military coup in 1980, Erdogan promised a new constitution that would strengthen "the rule of law, pluralism, justice and equality." [Yahoo][UNI]

Erdogan's vision for Turkey includes making the country one of the world's top 10 nations in "politics, economy, technology, military and diplomacy" and reducing energy dependence on foreign nations. He vowed to go ahead with controversial plans to construct a canal cutting through Istanbul.

The government insists the canal will ease marine traffic in the Bosporus Strait but environmental groups fear the project will cause ecological damage. "We want to make a strong start to the new century of the Republic," said Erdogan.

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Protest as right-wing speaker elected to lower house

A right-wing former cabinet minister known for his opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion was elected speaker of Italy's lower house of parliament on October 14, sparking a protest. *[See separate story in this Europe Monthly on Italy's new government]*

Lorenzo Fontana, a member of the right-wing Lega party, is also known for his past praise of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Following Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, he called for EU sanctions against Moscow to be lifted.

Fontana has also called for the repeal of a 1993 anti-fascist measure known as the "Mancino Law" that criminalises the propagation of ideas "based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred." [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

After Fontana's election, some members of the centre-left Democratic Party held a banner in parliament that read: "No to a homophobic and pro-Putin speaker".

Arcigay, the country's largest LGBT rights group, also criticised Fontana's appointment.

He was chosen as speaker amid disagreements on filling positions in the new right-wing coalition government led by Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party, which won Italy's September 25 parliamentary elections.

Former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of centre-right Forza Italia party, has voiced anger over Meloni's refusal to comply with his requests for key cabinet positions. [France24]

Meloni heads a governing coalition that comprises the Brothers of Italy, Forza Italia, and the Lega party headed by Matteo Salvini.

(km/pk)

Italy adopts LGBT rights plan before right-wing gov't takes over

Italy's outgoing government led by Prime Minister Mario Draghi approved a new plan for LGBT rights on October 6, shortly before a new hard-right administration led by Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party took over.

Meloni, who won a decisive victory in September 25 parliamentary elections, has previously said that she does not plan to roll back existing LGBT rights. However, her party vowed during election campaigning to resist "LGBT lobbies" and to support the "traditional family". [Reuters]

The outgoing government's plan, known as the "National LGBTQ+ Strategy 2022-2025", suggests LGBT awareness courses in the workplace, anti-

discrimination training for police and public security officials, and parental leave for same-sex parents among other measures. [Italy Fundamental Rights Report 2022]

In response to the move, Senator Isabella Rauti, equal opportunities spokeswoman for the Brothers of Italy party, said: "I consider it serious that the outgoing government presents a multi-year national strategy on the eve of the birth of a new executive and a new parliament." [Reuters] [La Repubblica]

[For a full rundown of Italy's September parliamentary elections, see our report in the October 2022 Europe Monthly]

(km/pk)

Italy: Fall in number of women elected to parliament

The proportion of women elected as members of Italy's lower and upper houses of parliament in recent national elections has fallen to 31 percent, compared to 35 percent in the previous legislature.

A total of 186 women have won seats in the two houses, compared to 414 men. Following the September 25 vote, Italy fell below the European average for female parliamentarians, which is 32.8 percent. [IlPost]

The country's electoral law, the Rosatellum, has measures to encourage gender equality, but these can be bypassed. [IlPost]

Giorgia Meloni's hard-right Brothers of Italy, which won a decisive victory in the elections, and its rival left-wing Democratic Party are – among the most influential groupings – those that had the lowest proportion of women elected: 27 and 28.6 percent respectively.

Meanwhile, a centrist alliance comprising the Azione and Italia Viva groupings came close to gender parity. Over 46 percent of the parliamentarians it had elected are women. [Ansa]

(fs/pk)

Italy: Marches held to protect abortion rights

Marches were held across Italy on September 28 to protect abortion rights amid fears that these may be undermined by the hard-right, which won parliamentary elections on September 25.

Under current legislation, all women in Italy are able to request an abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and later under certain medical circumstances. Doctors in the country also maintain the right to abstain from performing abortions. [Euronews]

Following the parliamentary elections, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the hard-right Brothers of Italy party, was appointed as the country's new prime minister. [Europe Monthly, October 2022]

Meloni has previously said that she does not plan to make changes to a 1978 law that protects access to abortion. Instead, she said she would protect a woman's right not to abort by pushing for measures like financial support to help women who choose to give birth. But many Italians fear the right to abortion is under threat. [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Italy: New LNG terminal on western coast approved

Gas grid operator Snam has been given approval by a state-appointed commissioner to begin installing a new floating LNG terminal on Italy's western coast. The project is part of a broader plan designed by the former government of Mario Draghi to improve energy security and cut Italy's dependence on Russian gas amid the war in Ukraine.

The Italian government has said that the terminal – which will handle 5 billion cubic metres of liquefied natural gas from the US per year from next spring – must be operational by March 2023. The new facility has also been approved by the Tuscan regional government for the port of Piombino.

The project has faced opposition from local activists who are concerned about the environment and the impact on local employment, especially in the fishing industry.

Francesco Ferrari, the mayor of Piombino and member of the ruling right-wing Brothers of Italy party, confirmed on October 25 that he plans to challenge the approval of the LNG terminal in court. [Reuters 2]

In exchange for allowing the construction of the terminal, the regional Tuscan government has requested compensation for the Piombino community from the national government. It has asked for funding to finance docks for fishing and tourism, and for energy bills to be cut in the area by 50 percent. [Bloomberg] [Reuters 1] [RaiNews] [IlSole24Ore] [SkyTg24]

(km-fs/pk)

Italy warned of climate change fallout for Dolomites

Climate change means that skiing in the Italian Dolomite mountains may be impossible in the near future due to wet snow, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), a UN agency, has warned.

The WMO's 2022 State of Climate Services Report found that temperatures in the Alpine area, particularly in Italy's northern Belluno province, have risen 2 degrees over the past 120 years, a rate twice the world average. [SkyTg24]

The United Nations has raised the alarm about the consequences of disappearing glaciers and the risk of increasingly frequent extreme weather events. [SkyTg24] [Ansa]

The WMO report recommends that nations double the supply of electricity from "clean" sources by 2030 and triple investment in renewables by 2050.

"The energy sector is the source of around three-quarters of global greenhouse gas emissions. Switching to clean forms of energy generation, such as solar, wind and hydropower – and improving energy efficiency – is vital if we are to thrive in the 21st century," said WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas. [SkyTg24]

(fs/pk)

Spain starts parliamentary talks on 2023 budget to counter populism

Spain's Socialist-led government has begun negotiations on the 2023 budget that is set to include strong social spending amid fears that inflation and economic anxiety could fuel populism.

Spain's cabinet on October 4 approved a draft of the budget that included increases in military and social spending as well as an extension of free train tickets through 2023. [Reuters 1]

The draft, which comes ahead of the country's regional and national elections next year, also included infrastructure and green energy investments funded by EU pandemic recovery funds, as well as other measures to counter the effects of high inflation and increased energy costs.

Spain's finance minister, Maria Montero, said: "The public accounts are the main antidote to the economic tensions that this war [in Ukraine] is generating, an antidote to poverty, inequality and, therefore, the hopelessness that is the breeding ground of populism."

Montero delivered the 2023 draft budget to the lower house of parliament on October 6 to begin negotiations. [La Moncloa]

Spain's governing coalition, which is headed by the Spanish Socialist Workers' party (PSOE) and includes the far-left Unidas Podemos, lacks a majority in parliament and the fate of the budget rests partly on backing from regional nationalist groups.

The budget does not contain specific measures to lessen the economic impact of the war in Ukraine, which will be decided on separately by the end of the year and financed by a new "solidarity tax" imposed on the country's wealthiest. [Reuters 2]

On October 18, Spain's government approved a EUR 3 billion plan that specifically aims to combat high gas and electricity prices.

Under the measure, the government will reinforce a mechanism that allows people struggling financially a longer period to settle unpaid energy bills. [Euronews] Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said the plan would benefit 40 percent of Spanish households. [Associated Press] [El Pais]

Spain has also approved a plan to extend a cap on gas price increases for all households and small to medium-sized businesses until the end of 2023. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: Junior partner leaves Catalonia's regional government, sparking crisis in

separatist movement

The centre-right Together for Catalonia party on October 7 announced it was leaving Catalonia's regional government after disputes with the region's senior governing party over the Catalan independence movement.

The move has sparked the biggest crisis in the Spanish region's separatist movement in ten years, according to Reuters.

The regionally-governing left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia, led by Pere Aragones, has supported conducting negotiations with Spain's central government and has been pushing for an agreement on conducting a referendum on the potential independence of the region that would be recognised by Madrid. The central government has rejected the idea. [Reuters 2]

The Together for Catalonia party, a junior coalition partner in the regional government, disapproved of these discussions with Madrid.

Together for Catalonia, led by Laura Borras, also voted to leave the regional government shortly after one of its leading cabinet members had proposed a parliamentary vote of confidence and was later discharged by Aragones. [Reuters]

After announcing her party's exit, Borras said: "From today, we are joining the opposition... we don't want to be in any government that does not advance toward independence." She also said that Aragones "had lost democratic legitimacy". [Associated Press]

Following the move, Aragones said that he did not plan to bring the forward regional elections that are set for 2025. [El Pais]

Since a failed attempt for Catalan independence from Spain in 2017, there has been conflict among separatists on how to move forward. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(km/pk)

Spain: 'Digital nomad' visa planned for foreign workers

The Spanish government is planning to introduce a "digital nomad" visa to allow foreign workers to live and work in the country for up to five years. The visa

scheme was first announced in January and is expected to gain approval by the end of 2022.

Under the current draft, the visa will be available to people from outside the European Economic Area. Applicants must demonstrate financial self-sufficiency and have an address in Spain, among other requirements.

Initially, the visas will be valid for one year but could be extended to five years, depending on the circumstances. Such visa holders will also be subject to lower taxes in Spain, with a 15 percent tax rate for the first four years rather than the standard 24 percent. [Visa Europa]

Final revisions to the proposal are still being made. [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Spain: Firefighters who tackled forest blazes march to demand rights

Spanish part-time firefighters who tackled blazes that damaged over 250,000 hectares of land across the country this year marched in Madrid on October 8 to defend their labour rights. [Copernicus]

In Spain, crews who tackle wildfires are employed seasonally by regional authorities, unlike full-time firefighters.

One of the goals of the march was to persuade officials to recognise injuries related to occupational hazards. Fire crews also called for additional training and improved management. [Reuters 1]

A study published earlier this year in the *Environmental Research: Climate* journal suggests a link between climate change and extreme weather events like summer heat waves that contributed to wildfires. Over 650,000 hectares have been scorched across Europe in 2022. [Europa Press][Wildfire Today][Reuters 2]

(km/pk)

Spain could lose millions of tourists as EU green plan raises travel costs: report

The EU's "Fit for 55" plan, which aims to decrease greenhouse gas emissions in the bloc, could increase

plane ticket prices and potentially have a negative impact on Spain's tourism sector, according to a report from consultancy firm Deloitte. [European Climate Foundation]

The report on the impact of the EU plan for Spain estimated that it could cost the country 11 million international tourists and billions of euros in tourism revenue. [Euronews]

The "Fit for 55" plan, released in 2021, included drafts of EU climate and energy legislation aiming to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030. To achieve this, environmental measures were introduced such as raising taxes on fuel and travel tickets, and focusing on sustainable aviation fuel.

In June Spain's transportation minister, Raquel Sanchez, attended a European Council meeting that established general guidelines for maritime and aviation sectors as well as alternative fuel infrastructure. [La Moncloa]

(km/pk)

Spain to provide financial services for rural areas, in bid to counter depopulation

In an effort to combat rural depopulation, the Spanish government and banks agreed a roadmap plan on October 7 to guarantee access to financial services for people in the countryside.

Villages in Spain with a population of more than 500 will be guaranteed at least one form of financial service like a bank branch or ATM. Banks will be given six months to bring in such measures under this portion of the plan, although the deadline may be extended.

Residents of rural areas that have fewer than 500 inhabitants will be given access to cash through postmen, although it has not been announced when these measures will be introduced. [Reuters]

Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA), one of the banks committed to the project, has signed an agreement with postal company Correos to offer financial services to such rural areas. BBVA director Peio Belausteguigoiti said: "The signing of this collaboration protocol aims to expand the coverage of our financial services through a universal service, such as the postal service." [La Vanguardia] [Correos]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: President re-elected in decisive win

Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen has won a second six-year term in the post after scoring around 56 percent in the first round of elections, avoiding the need for a run-off ballot.

Austria's presidential vote was held on October 9, with the official results released by the interior ministry on October 17. [Die Presse]

Van der Bellen, a former leader of the Greens, stood as an independent. His campaign slogan was: "The safe choice in stormy times". [Kurier] [Der Standard]

Six other contenders took part in the presidential election, with the right-wing Walter Rosenkranz coming second after garnering around 18 percent of the vote. All other candidates scored less than 10 percent. [Euractiv]

"Van der Bellen stands for integrity and stability, which is very appreciated by voters given the multitude of crises that many European countries are currently facing," Julia Partheymueller, a political analyst at the University of Vienna, told Agence France-Presse. [France 24]

The Austrian president has a largely ceremonial role, but also has substantial powers that he can use in

times of political crisis. He has the authority to dismiss the government and the chancellor, and is commander-in-chief of the army. [Euronews]

(vs/pk)

Austria to increase defence spending by over a fifth in 2023

Austria is increasing its defence budget for 2023 by EUR 680 million to EUR 3.32 billion, Chancellor Karl Nehammer, together with defence minister Klaudia Tanner and finance minister Magnus Brunner, announced at a press conference on October 6. [Der Standard]

The armed forces' budget in 2022 was EUR 2.7 billion, which means that spending will increase by over 22 percent next year.

Defence spending of EUR 3.7 billion is planned for 2024, 4.2 billion for 2025 and 4.7 billion for 2026, Tanner said. In 2027, the defence budget is to be increased to 1.5 percent of GDP. [Kleine Zeitung]

"We are not only increasing the budget but have also implemented long overdue transparency measures in the army's procurement processes," said David Stogmuller from the centre-left Greens, one of the parties in Austria's governing coalition.

The opposition has welcomed the defence budget increase, but said that other key issues, such as a new security strategy, have been neglected. [ORF AT]

(vs/pk)

Austria: Trial starts over deadly 2020 terror attack

Six men have gone on trial in Vienna charged with being accomplices of an "Islamic State" supporter who killed four people during a 2020 shooting rampage.

The prosecutor in the case claims that all the defendants have allegiances to the Islamic State. [DW] While none are charged with directly participating in the attack in the Austrian capital, they are accused, among other crimes, of being members of a terrorist organisation.

The defendants, all of them men, are four Austrian citizens, one Kosovar citizen, and one Chechen. Their ages range from 20 to 32. [DW]

One of them is also accused of procuring a gun for the attacker. The attorney for the defendant has admitted that the man procured a firearm, but said that he did not know what it would be used for, according to Deutsche Welle. [France24] [AP] [DW]

A verdict in the trial is likely to be reached no earlier than in February. [AP]

The assailant, Kujtim Fejzulai, was shot dead by police during the attack two years ago, in which he wounded 23 people as well as killing four.

(ef/pk)

Austria: Number of asylum-seekers rises almost 200%, says chancellor

The number of foreigners applying for asylum in Austria has increased by 195 percent compared to 2021, Chancellor Karl Nehammer has said in an interview for Die Welt newspaper.

By August, 56,000 people had applied for asylum in Austria since the beginning of the year. The largest group was made up of refugees from Afghanistan – 12,000, followed by Syrians – 10,000. Around 15,000 asylum applications were also recorded for Indians and Tunisians, Interior Minister Gerhard Karner told reporters on October 10. [Orf AT] [Interior Ministry]

Speaking at a conference in Berlin on October 21 in which the migration situation in the Western Balkans was discussed, Karner said that EU countries should maintain consistent protection of external borders and return policies. [Vindobona]

Intensive patrolling of the Austrian border since May has resulted in the arrest of almost suspected 500 people-smugglers as part of a special operation. [Euractiv] [Interior Ministry]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: Firms protest at 'euro conversion tax'

A Croatian business association has protested against government plans it says will impose extra financial burdens on firms as the country prepares to enter the eurozone.

Entrepreneurs' association UGP is unhappy at plans under which businesses will be charged a EUR 330 fee for officially registering a switch in the denomination of their basic company capital from the domestic kuna currency to the euro. [Euractiv]

The UGP says that businesses are already struggling with high costs, inflation, and the effects of the war in Ukraine and the Covid pandemic. [See News] [N1]

Croatia is preparing to become the 20th member of the eurozone on January 1. EU heads of state and government on June 24 gave the green light for the country to adopt the European single currency. [Europe Monthly July 2022]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: Former PM acquitted of war profiteering

Former Croatian prime minister Ivo Sanader was acquitted by a court in Zagreb on October 12 of profiteering during the country's 1991-1995 war. The prosecution said it would appeal against the verdict. [Dnevnik]

Prosecutors accused Sanader of receiving a bribe of over EUR 475,000 from Austria's Hypo Bank in late 1994 and early 1995 after Croatia obtained a loan for the purchase of embassy buildings. [Total Croatia News]

Sanader was sentenced to ten years in prison for war profiteering in 2012. In a 2018 trial, he was further sentenced to two-and-a-half years in jail after being found guilty of charges including abuse of power. [Index]

The two verdicts were overturned by the Croatian Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, and a new trial was ordered. [Reuters]

Sanader was prime minister from 2003 to 2009. He is currently serving an eight-year sentence for corruption imposed in 2020 for setting up slush funds in order to take money from public companies through a marketing agency for his conservative HDZ party. [Reuters]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Lower house of parliament approves 'Magnitsky Act'

The lower house of the Czech parliament on October 14 approved a so-called Magnitsky Act, which allows the government to impose sanctions on foreign entities violating human rights, supporting terrorism or committing cybercrimes. [Euractiv]

Under the measure, the Czech government would be able to take action against such foreign entities, including by freezing their assets, following a proposal by the foreign ministry. [Seznam Spravy]

"It will make the Czech Republic the first Central European country to have an instrument to sanction serious human rights violations," said the Czech foreign minister, Jan Lipavsky. [Prague Morning]

The government had planned to adopt the Magnitsky Act by the end of next year, but work on it was speeded up due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The measure now needs to be approved by the Czech Senate, the upper house of parliament.

The act is named after Ukrainian-born Russian tax lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in a Moscow prison in 2009 after alleging that he was mistreated. He had been arrested and charged in 2008 after investigating what he claimed was a large-scale tax fraud involving Russian police and court officials. [Expats]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Protestors demand new gov't and gas deal with Russia

Protesters angry at rising costs of living took to the streets of Prague in their thousands on October 28, urging the centre-right Czech government to quit and calling for gas purchases from Moscow, in defiance of EU sanctions. [Reuters/U.S.News] [Radio Prague International]

Demonstrators, many of them from far-right, communist and fringe movements, chanted "Resign!" in the main square of the Czech capital as they voiced their displeasure at high fuel and consumer goods prices.

The rally, held on Czech Independence Day, was organised by the nationalist Czech Republic First! grouping, which wants the country to leave NATO and to adopt a stance of military neutrality. [PragueMorning] [CT24]

One of the organisers, Ladislav Vrabel, said: "This is a new national revival and its goal is for the Czech Republic to be independent."

Former Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek spoke at the event, telling crowds: "I fear that we are only at the beginning of a great crisis. We can all legitimately fear that there will be no gas. I am afraid that thanks to the hazardous energy policy of the [Czech] government and Brussels, hundreds of Czech companies will go bankrupt and sooner or later hundreds of thousands of people will appear on the pavement." [Domaci]

The centre-right government in Prague has been supportive of Kiev's fight against Russia, sending military supplies such as tanks and artillery to the Ukrainian armed forces.

Prime Minister Petr Fiala responded to the protests by saying: "We intensively support the justified fight of the Ukrainian people against Russian aggression." He said he had no intention of stepping down, but added that he respected protestors' right to demonstrate.

(cg/pk)

Hungary: Thousands march in support of teachers as anti-government rallies held

Thousands of Hungarians took to the streets of Budapest on October 23 in support of teachers who are demanding higher wages, in the latest of a string of anti-government demonstrations. [Reuters]

About 80,000 people turned out for the most recent protest in the Hungarian capital, according to the organisers. [hvg.hu]

Hungarian teachers called for civil disobedience and started a campaign under the slogan "I want to teach" at the beginning of September. The dismissal of several teachers for taking part in protests sparked a series of anti-government rallies.

The demonstrations brought together people angry at a shortage of teachers and low wages for educators, at surging inflation, and at what many claim are moves by the authorities to limit the right to strike. [RFE/RL]

Teachers in Hungary are paid less than in any other EU member country in the OECD. [RFI] The Hungarian government has said it will raise their wages once the European Commission releases EU funding that is being withheld because of rule-of-law concerns. [Reuters]

Budapest high school teacher Katalin Torley told news agency AFP that a planned rise which would bring teachers' wages to 80 percent of the average graduate salary by 2025 "will not be enough" to quell the protests, and pointed to "serious structural problems" in the education system. [AFP/RFI]

(msa/pk)

Slovakia will not grant humanitarian visas to Russians fleeing mobilisation

Slovakia will not issue humanitarian visas to Russian citizens who are fleeing the "partial mobilisation" of reservists in their home country or persecution by the regime of President Vladimir Putin. [Sme]

However, a spokesperson for the ministry of foreign affairs in Bratislava said: "Humanitarian visas are not defined precisely. Visas can be granted in the humanitarian interest, and currently Slovakia assesses each case separately." [The Slovak Spectator]

The Slovak authorities only approve tourist visas for Russians visiting relatives living in Slovakia or studying at Slovak universities. Meanwhile, Russian athletes can obtain visas in order to participate in competitions.

EU member states are divided on the visa issue. Slovakia's policy follows the approach adopted by Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Germany, on the other hand, disagrees with an EU-wide ban on visas for Russians. [Euronews]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: Finance minister under fire for comparing journalists to Nazi propagandists

International press freedom campaigners have condemned "unacceptable" comments by former prime minister and current finance minister Igor Matovic in which he compared Slovak journalists to

Nazi propagandists and personally insulted individual reporters. [IPI]

“These comments clearly overstepped the bounds of legitimate criticism and represented unacceptable attacks on independent journalism,” said a joint statement issued by groups including Reporters Without Borders, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, the International Press Institute and the European Federation of Journalists.

The statement added that Matovic had undermined the Slovak government’s “broader efforts to strengthen press freedom”.

In a speech in the Slovak parliament at the end of September, Matovic accused unspecified media of corruption and “spreading lies”, and compared their work to Nazi propaganda. [Slovak Spectator]

“Hitler also had exactly such journalists, who had formulas and precise ways of manipulating the public,” said Matovic during his address. [Joj]

His comments were also criticised by MPs from his own conservative and populist OLANO party. [DennikN] The editors-in-chief of a number of Slovak media outlets also issued a statement condemning his remarks. [Pravda]

In June, Matovic declared that journalists had “made [him] a 21st century Jew”. He was responding to a question about whether he should resign in light of a poll showing that he was one of the country’s least trusted politicians.

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: Bail for drink-driver who killed five sparks outrage

Public outrage erupted in Slovakia after a court decided that a drink-driver who killed five students in a car accident could be released on bail. The decision deepened a widespread lack of trust in the country’s justice system.

The driver, who was at the time general secretary of the Slovak Deaflympics Committee, severely exceeded the speed limit and crashed into a crowd of pedestrians waiting at one of the busiest bus stops in the capital, Bratislava, on October 2. [Slovak Spectator]

News outlets reported that he acted aggressively towards officers at the scene before he was detained and charged with “general endangerment.” [Sme]

Even though the driver had 16 past traffic violations to his name, a district court on October 6 decided that he should be released on bail.

Amid anger at the decision, a petition was launched and signed by about 30,000 people demanding a life sentence for the driver. [Dnes24] Politicians outdid each other with increasingly draconian proposals to prevent drink-driving. [Sme]

A regional court on October 14 acceded to a prosecutor’s request and ordered the suspect to be remanded in pre-trial detention. [Aktuality]

Slovak courts and prosecutors repeatedly highlighted that being released on bail pending a hearing does not mean that a suspect will be acquitted or that he will not face trial. [Sme] [Aktuality]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: Protests after two shot dead outside LGBT bar

A radicalised 19-year-old student killed two people and injured one outside one of the Slovak’s capital’s few LGBT bars on October 12, in a shooting that sparked outrage and protests.

Thousands gathered in the centre of Bratislava two days later to express solidarity with the LGBT community and to say “no” to hate speech.

Slovak media reported that the suspect posted several messages on Twitter with the hashtags "hate crime" and “gay bar” and shared a manifesto against LGBT and Jewish communities before the murders. [Reuters]

Social media posts by the shooter indicated that he had been preparing the attacks for some time. After the killings, he wrote on Twitter: “I have no remorse, isn't that ridiculous?” [Dennik N]

The perpetrator later died after what the police suspect was suicide. [Slovak Spectator]

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova on social media accused unspecified politicians of publicly spreading “hate”. Investigators and prosecutors on October 24

reclassified the shooting from a hate crime to a terrorist attack. [Sme]

Meanwhile, deputies in the Slovak parliament voted against a bill on registered partnerships for same-sex couples, preventing the measure from moving on to a second reading. [Dennik N]

(vs/pk)

Slovenia: Right-winger faces independent in presidential run-off

A right-wing candidate endorsed by Slovenia's formerly ruling nationalists will face off against an independent in the country's November 13 run-off presidential elections.

The ruling coalition of the liberal Freedom Movement (GS), centre-left Social Democrats (SD) and the left-wing Left party fared poorly in the first round of voting on October 23, with their candidates eliminated.

The joint GS-SD candidate only managed a third-place finish, garnering 15.4 percent of the vote. The ballot took place following the end of incumbent President Borut Pahor's second term. [Euronews] [Politico] [Reuters]

The run-will see independent contender Natasa Pirc Musar face off against right-wing candidate Anze Logar, who is endorsed by the nationalist, populist and anti-immigration Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), which was ousted in April parliamentary elections. [AP] [Vecer]

Musar and Logar received 26.9 and 33.9 percent of the vote respectively in the first round. [Slovenia State Election Commission] Voter turnout was low at only 51 percent. [Dnevnik]

In April, a coalition led by the liberal Freedom Movement took the country by storm, defeating long-time Prime Minister Janez Jansa's SDS with promises of realigning Slovenia with Brussels and respecting the rule of law at a time when populism is deeply entrenched in nations like Hungary, Serbia and Poland.

Since coming to power, the coalition has reversed some of the previous government's decisions, for instance drawing up a new migration policy that emphasises human rights.

A presidential victory for right-winger Logar would point to dwindling support for the ruling coalition, which is dealing with high costs of living and the effects of the war in Ukraine. [Delo]

Logar is a member of Jansa's Slovenian Democratic Party and served as foreign minister under the previous government. While not running as a direct SDS candidate, Logar has received support from the party. However, he has sought to distance himself from more controversial aspects of its right-wing policies.

If Logar becomes Slovenia's first conversative president, his win would provide a fillip for Jansa's party. [Euractiv]

His rival, independent candidate Musar, is a lawyer who has taken part in high-profile legal cases, including representing Melania Trump – wife of the former American President, Donald Trump – and members of the Social Democrats, as well as being involved in human rights cases and LGBT advocacy.

Musar enjoys the endorsement of two former left-wing presidents. Should she win, she would become Slovenia's first female president. [Euractiv] [AP] [Dnevnik]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Irregular migration rises

Irregular migration to Slovenia has risen 115 percent in the first nine months of 2022 compared to the same period last year, while the number of applications for asylum has tripled, according to officials.

Slovenian police intercepted over 15,000 irregular migrants between January and September. Of these, 5,452 requested asylum applications, of which only 157 were approved, an increase of 12 people. The majority of such applications are usually cancelled due to migrants leaving the country before their claims can be processed.

Afghan citizens remain the highest proportion of those migrating through Slovenia, following the Taliban takeover in 2021. [Euractiv]

Slovenia's government, which came to power in April, has made moves to reverse policies implemented by the formerly ruling populists, pledging to remove

border fences and to bring in a rights-based migration policy.

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Early elections in aftermath of mink scandal

Denmark's centre-left prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, called a snap parliamentary election for November 1 after her government faced a loss of support in the aftermath of a scandal over her handling of a 2020 mink cull.

The election, in which a new far-right party was expected to perform strongly, took place amid rising costs of living and security concerns after blasts damaged the Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea, with two of the explosions in Denmark's exclusive economic zone.

At a time of international tensions, Frederiksen said she wanted to create a broad political alliance encompassing parties on both sides of the political centre.

The centre-left Social Liberal party, which had been offering parliamentary support to Frederiksen's minority government, had threatened her with a vote of no-confidence unless she called early elections. [Euractiv] [Politico]

At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Frederiksen ordered a mass cull of Denmark's mink population to prevent the spread of a new strain of the virus, leading to 15-17 million animals being destroyed. [Politico]

The decision caused a political storm. A report published by an inquiry in June found that the prime minister had acted without legal grounds and called her actions "highly reprehensible".

Meanwhile, support for Frederiksen's Social Democratic party dwindled as the government faced other crises in recent months.

A long-standing debate over plans to outsource asylum seeker reception centres to Rwanda drew heavy criticism from parties supporting Frederiksen amid human rights concerns.

In spite of this, Frederiksen hoped her Social Democrats would maintain a leading role in a new administration, saying before the vote: "We want a broad government with parties on both sides of the political centre." This included parties from the centre-right opposition, from whom the prime minister sought support during the pandemic and after the outbreak of war in Ukraine to pass legislation. [Euronews] [Reuters]

Speaking to Euronews, Rune Stubager, a professor of political science at Denmark's Aarhus University, said that he was sceptical about Frederiksen's coalition aspirations, adding: "Apart from the Social Liberals, and the Moderates, there aren't any other parties who want to be a part of it."

He added: "Certainly, the two biggest parties that would be needed to form such a broad coalition government, the Liberals and Conservatives … are very strong in saying 'no'."

An opposition bloc of parties was tipped to perform well in the elections, with recent polls putting them at 49-50 percent of the vote. This so-called "blue bloc" consists of the centre-right Liberal Party and the Conservatives, plus three right-wing groupings including the anti-immigration Denmark Democrats, who were founded only in June.

The far-right Denmark Democrats, headed by former migration minister Inger Stojberg, were on track to perform strongly in the election. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Former spymaster charged with revealing state secrets

The former head of the Danish foreign intelligence agency has been charged with leaking classified information, the state prosecutor has said.

An investigation by the Danish domestic intelligence agency concluded that Lars Findsen supplied sensitive information to multiple people, including two journalists, over a period of around 16 months. Findsen has denied any wrongdoing.

Hearings will proceed behind closed doors. State prosecutor Jakob Berger Nielsen has indicated that Findsen could face a prison term of up to four years. Some of the charges the former spy chief faces fall under a part of the penal code which includes treason. [Reuters] However, the exact nature of the charges is unknown, due to their sensitive nature.

In a statement, Nielsen said: "It is, of course, serious when secrets or other confidential information, which is essential for the intelligence services' work to protect Denmark's security, is passed on to outsiders." [Euronews]

The charges are the latest development in a chain of security scandals that have rocked Denmark's intelligence establishment. Findsen and other senior members of Danish intelligence agencies were suspended in August 2020 and subsequently arrested in December 2021, following a probe by the ministry of defence. [Euronews]

In 2021, a European media investigation reported that Denmark's foreign intelligence service had colluded with the US National Security Agency to wiretap senior European leaders from Germany, France, Norway and Sweden – including then German Chancellor Angela Merkel – in what became a major scandal for the Danish government.

Findsen was released from custody in February. A career intelligence officer, he has held many high-level postings in the Danish intelligence community, heading Denmark's domestic agency from 2002-2007, before leading its foreign counterpart from 2015.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Gov't to spend EUR 6m on fencing part of border with Russia

Finland has announced that EUR 6 million will be allocated for building a fence on part of its long border with Russia in an experimental move.

Calls to build fencing were amplified after Moscow announced a "partial mobilisation" in September following setbacks in its war in Ukraine. Finnish border guards voiced fears that illegal crossings could increase as conscription-aged Russians attempted to flee their country.

The Russo-Finnish border is 1,300 km long, much of which is unguarded and unprotected. Border guards have called for a section of 130-260 km considered the most critical to be protected by fencing. The trial section is to be completed by spring. [HelsinginSanomat] [Aamulehti]

Prime Minister Sanna Marin said in a parliamentary debate: "If the border authority thinks that it needs this fence to manage the border in the future, I think it is a proposal that should be taken seriously." [yle]

Finland has recently taken steps to stop issuing tourist visas to Russian citizens as the country moved to plug what has been described as an EU sanctions loophole. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(cg/pk)

Finland: New nuclear reactor hits snag days after reaching full capacity

Finland's newest nuclear power plant reactor has suffered a malfunction just days after it reached full operational capacity, following years of delays and cost overruns.

The Olkiluoto 3 reactor, which is intended to reduce the country's energy dependence on Russia, reached a 1,600-megawatt threshold on September 30 for the first time, producing about 16 percent of Finland's electricity.

On October 18, an inspection revealed damage to a water pump in the reactor that will result in a further delay. The pumps in question are responsible for cooling steam generators but nuclear operator Teollisuuden Voima oyj (TVO) said that the damage detected "has no impact on nuclear safety." [Reuters]

The plant as a whole is expected to power 30 percent of Finland. Before the latest problems, the new reactor was scheduled to begin operation by December.

The Olkiluoto site in western Finland is the third largest nuclear complex in the world, according to TVO. It is also the newest operational reactor in Europe. [aamulehti]

Construction of the facility started in 2005. Production was originally expected to begin in 2009 but faulty components and legal disputes postponed energy production. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

Meanwhile, Helsinki is set to receive EUR 113 million under the Repower EU scheme as part of an agreement reached on October 4 by European finance ministers. The funds are intended to speed up the development of new energy sources, cut dependency on Russian energy and encourage non-fossil fuel development.

Repower EU, a major undertaking by the European Commission, aims to transform the European energy landscape through around EUR 210 billion of funds by 2027 and through the development of green energy technology.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Last public Lenin statue removed

Finland has removed its last monument to Vladimir Lenin, the Communist revolutionary turned leader of the Soviet Union. The city council of Kotka, located close to the Russian border, announced that the statue had been removed and put into storage on October 4, following a council vote in June. [yle] [yle]

The monument, which had been at the centre of a fierce debate in the city, had been presented as a gift from Tallinn, the capital of the then-Soviet Republic of Estonia. Lenin had visited Kotka in 1907, when Finland was a duchy of the Russian Empire. [HelsinginSanomat]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February ended the debate over the statue entirely, and it was decided to remove the bust once and for all. Other parts of Finland took similar measures, including the southern city of Turku in April. [HelsinginSanomat]

Turku mayor Minna Arve told news outlet France24 that such statues represented an "undemocratic and

tragic phase in human history," adding that they were "not in line with the values of the city of Turku."

Helsinki, which had initially aligned itself with the Axis powers during World War II, was forced into making concessions by Moscow in 1944. These included the leasing of naval bases to the USSR, the unbanning of the Communist Party and maintaining a neutral footing in international politics in order to placate Soviet fears of Finland aligning with the West.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Wage deal ends nurses' protests

A wage dispute that escalated into strikes by nurses across Finland has been resolved after the government intervened. Two major nurses' organisations have agreed to plans set out by a national conciliator.

Nurses' monthly salaries will rise from EUR 2,625 to EUR 3,000. They will also see another increase through a general hike in municipal sector wages. However, it is expected that unions will try to negotiate a separate deal on municipal sector pay for nurses. [Aamulehti]

Meanwhile, nurses who care for coronavirus patients will receive a one-time payment of EUR 600. The deal also provides other benefits for nurses, including mandatory lunch breaks. [HelsinginSanomat] [HelsinginSanomat]

Unions conducted large-scale industrial action for months prior to the agreement.

The wage deal will cost Finnish taxpayers EUR 800 million a year over the next few years, according to Finnish news outlet KT. The Finnish finance ministry has yet to release official figures. [HelsinginSanomat]

(cg/pk)

Sweden: New coalition government reliant on far-right takes over

A three-way, centre-right coalition officially took power in Sweden on October 17 following parliamentary elections, forming a new minority government reliant on a far-right grouping that has become the country's second largest party.

The inauguration of the new administration leaves Sweden as the only nation in Northern Europe without a centre-left government. [EuroNews] [BBC]

Following a series of negotiations, the leader of Sweden's centre-right Moderate Party, Ulf Kristersson was appointed prime minister. His government will include the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, both traditionally centre-right groupings.

The three parties do not have a majority in parliament, and to pass legislation will need the support of the far-right Sweden Democrats, who received the second highest vote share in the September 11 elections. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

First entering parliament as a political pariah in 2010 with 20 seats, the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats – who have self-admitted white supremacist origins – achieved their best result yet, with 73 seats and 20.6 percent of the vote, an upward trend. [Le Monde] [Riksdagen] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

The controversial origins of the party are not denied by the Sweden Democrats themselves, who recently published a study delving into their roots. It revealed that several of the party's founding members in the 1980s were linked to neo-Nazi and fascist movements. [AP] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

While the Sweden Democrats have not been given any ministerial positions, Jimmie Akesson, who has led the party since 2005, said that it had secured concessions in return for supporting the new government. [EuroNews]

EuroNews notes that the Sweden Democrats are interested in harsher punishment for repeat offenders and in lowering the number of refugees Sweden accepts each year.

The exclusion of the Sweden Democrats from the government structure was at the behest of the Liberals, who refused to officially partner with the far-right party. [EuroNews]

But many say such a move is not enough. Per Bolund, the leader of Sweden's Green Party, described the incoming government as "authoritarian, conservative and nationalistic". [BBC]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Far-right backed administration abandons 'feminist foreign policy'

Sweden's new foreign minister, Tobias Billstrom, announced on October 18 that his country is scrapping its pioneering "feminist foreign policy". [AFP/The Guardian]

The announcement came just after newly elected Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson presented a government which is dependent on the support of the far-right Sweden Democrats, who received the second highest share of the vote in Sweden's September 11 parliamentary elections.

Adopted in 2014 by a left-wing administration, the concept of a feminist foreign policy was intended to highlight the role of gender equality in Sweden's political agenda, with the aim of promoting women's economic empowerment and political participation.

"Gender equality is a fundamental value in Sweden and also a fundamental value for this government," said Billstrom. However, he added: "That label has not served a good purpose. It has obscured the fact that Swedish foreign policy must be based on what Swedish interests and Swedish values are." [Euractiv] [AFP/The Guardian]

Billstrom said there would be no other major changes in Sweden's foreign agenda, central to which is its bid for NATO membership. [Euractiv]

Feminist foreign policy has contributed to the introduction of new laws in a string of countries. At the same time, however, it has also provoked strong reactions, especially in the Middle East. [AFP/The Guardian]

(fs/pk)

Sweden: Greens unhappy as standalone environment ministry dissolved

Sweden's new centre-right government has dissolved the country's environment ministry in a move Green Party leaders said would have "devastating consequences". [EuroNews]

The change has taken place under a recently elected government which is heavily reliant on the support of the far-right Sweden Democrats, who oppose measures to combat climate change.

Sweden, which relies heavily on hydropower, has long been hailed as an international leader on environmental issues. [Bloomberg] But for the first time since 1987, it will have no specific government ministry that handles environmental concerns. Prior to 1987, the ministry of agriculture and the ministry of energy both had such a role. [EuroNews]

Romina Pourmokhtari, aged 26, will serve as minister for the environment. However, rather than leading her own ministry, she will be under the direction of Ebba Busch, who is both minister for energy and deputy prime minister.

French newspaper Le Monde quoted Busch as saying that "Sweden will honour the Paris Agreement", a global climate pact. Meanwhile, the new centre-right government plans to build more nuclear power stations in Sweden. [EuroNews] [Le Monde]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Far-right party suspends official for 'insensitive' comment about Anne Frank

The far-right Sweden Democrats have suspended a party official after she made insulting comments about Jewish teenage author Anne Frank, famous for her war-time diary written in hiding, who was captured and died in a German Nazi concentration camp.

According to Swedish media reports the official, Rebecka Fallenkvist, published a post on Instagram, later removed, calling Anne Frank "immoral".

The Sweden Democrats' media director, Oskar Cavalli-Bjorkman, said that Fallenkvist's behaviour was "insensitive and inappropriate" and that an investigation would be opened. [The Guardian]

Fallenkvist, meanwhile, claimed that she had been misinterpreted. [AP/ABCNews] Her post provoked angry reactions from the Jewish community, with the Israeli ambassador to Sweden, Ziv Nevo Kulman, tweeting: "I strongly condemn this despicable insult, disrespectful of the memory of Anne Frank." [The Guardian]

The Sweden Democrats are a far-right party, founded in 1980, which formerly included neo-Nazi groups. In Sweden's September 11 general election, the party emerged as the country's second-biggest grouping and

the largest force behind a new governing coalition. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(fs/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Europe hopes for winter without gas rationing

With European gas storage levels climbing toward 95 percent, households may be able to avoid rationing this winter if the weather behaves as predicted: long-term forecasts indicate drier and warmer months than normal for the northern, central and north-eastern parts of the continent. [Accuweather] [CNN]

Daily gas price levels reached below zero at the Dutch Title Transfer Facility (TTF) on October 24, indicating that the amount of liquified natural gas being offloaded was temporarily exceeding available storage as demand dropped during an unseasonably mild period. [Bloomberg]

Natural gas futures remained priced at over 125 percent of 2021 levels. However, the current price of approximately EUR 100 per megawatt hour represents a 70 percent decline between August and October. [CNN]

European wholesale gas prices briefly rose earlier in the month to EUR 175 per megawatt hour when a bomb scare in Norway raised concerns about the

security of gas infrastructure. Norway is playing a new role for the continent as an alternative supplier of gas in the wake of Russian cutoffs. [WSJ] The Nordic state now accounts for 27 percent of natural gas supplies for continental Europe, up from 23 percent in 2021. [NGI]

The rapid decline of natural gas prices over the month indicates that in the run-up to winter, prices have achieved a steady state. Storage is full and LNG is regularly being shipped to Europe. While damage to European industry may be significant, households will have sufficient supplies under current conditions.

Risks remain

However, market risk remains high, as demonstrated by the one-day price spike of almost 50 percent caused by the Norwegian incident. Damage to critical energy infrastructure, maritime shipping disruption, or unexpected cold weather could still result in price surges and significant hardship in Europe. Russia could also unilaterally end the reduced gas shipments currently sent through Ukraine and Turkey to Europe, which could lead to blackouts, energy rationing, and significantly higher energy prices.

Russia resumed gas deliveries to Italy the first week of October. [WSJ] The Italian gas recipient company, ENI, agreed to provide a EUR 20 million monetary guarantee required by Austria when Russian shipper Gazprom stated it would only pay in roubles, temporarily interrupting shipment through the only Russian gas pipeline supplying Italy.

A leak in the Russian Druzhba oil pipeline in Poland in mid-October led to a brief rise in Brent oil prices, which fell again when no service interruption resulted. [Bloomberg] Otherwise, oil prices remained steady throughout the month, even as new sanctions on Russian fuel were imposed by the EU in the form of a price cap on seaborne crude. [Reuters]

However, global demand, not sanctions on Russia, was the driver behind oil prices over the last month. OPEC + announced a two million barrel per day production cut in early October to maintain higher prices in the face of weakening international demand – demonstrating that Russian supply was not a central factor in oil prices for Europe, unlike gas. [Intercept]

Meanwhile, Hungary and Serbia agreed to build a new pipeline to bring Russian oil to Serbia under EU exemptions to sanction policies. [RFERL]

Industrial cutbacks

The German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, noted that permanently higher energy prices will inevitably lead to reductions in industrial output. [WSJ] Leading German-headquartered global chemicals company BASF SE announced cost cuts of EUR 500 million as its energy costs rose EUR 2.2 billion in the first nine months of 2022 compared to the same period in 2021.

In France, nuclear reactor repairs fell behind schedule, and the lack of nuclear-generated electricity continued to exacerbate power prices. [WSJ] In total, 26 of 56 French reactors remain offline heading into winter, making the country dependent on imported electricity instead of being able to support Europe with energy exports as in previous years. Additionally, a strike by French refinery workers led to an increase in the country's energy prices in October. [France24] Although largely resolved, the strike led to a 70 percent spike in diesel prices across the country.

Help for homes and firms

Germany announced the formation of a EUR 200 billion fund to help businesses and households defray soaring energy prices, as well as both retroactive subsidies and a price cap starting in December for both homes and companies. [Reuters] [Reuters] The German government is also considering windfall profit taxes on domestic utility firms.

France announced the formation of a EUR 12 billion facility to support small and medium-sized businesses. [Bloomberg]

Britain began household energy subsidies in October as part of combined household and business support plans initially estimated to cost approximately EUR 150 billion. But the final amount may be unbounded as the move caps the prices that homes pay while the government assumes the price difference. [UK Government] [UKandEU]

Italy led a request by southern European countries for an EU price cap on natural gas as clothing firms and other light industries suffered under local energy prices up to 500 percent higher than last year.

The EU ended a Brussels summit on October 20 without agreement on price caps, but subsequent statements by European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen indicate that some form of caps are imminent. [Reuters] [Reuters]

(rw/pk)

NATO steps up patrols in North Sea, Baltic after pipeline blasts

NATO has doubled its presence in the Baltic and North Sea, the alliance's chief said, while Italy and Norway have strengthened surveillance of underwater energy and telecommunications cables after the suspected sabotage of two gas pipelines. [Reuters] [The National News]

The heightened NATO patrols, involving naval and air units, were announced after blasts on September 26 damaged the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines connecting Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea. Four leaks were reported – two in Denmark's exclusive economic zone, and two in Sweden's. [CNBC]

NATO said in a statement that "all currently available information indicates that this is the result of deliberate, reckless, and irresponsible acts of sabotage."

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters that hybrid attacks could trigger Article 5 of the alliance's mutual defence pact, under which an attack on one member is treated as an attack against all. [Reuters] [The National News]

Denmark and Sweden also said the Nord Stream leaks were caused by sabotage.

Western countries pointed the finger at Russia. The Kremlin, however, rejected the allegations, labelling them "stupid" and "absurd," and instead accused the US and its allies of attacking the pipelines. [RFERL] [CNBC]

Sweden, meanwhile, said in early October that it would not disclose the results of its probe into the explosions to Moscow.

Then, according to German magazine Der Spiegel, Stockholm made it known that it would not share the findings of its investigation with other countries either. The security reasons behind the decision are unclear, news outlet The Local reported.

(fs-mr/pk)

Hungary to help build pipeline carrying Russian oil to Serbia

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic have agreed on the construction of a pipeline to supply Serbia with oil from the Russian Urals via the Druzhba pipeline, according to officials. [Al Jazeera]

Hungarian government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said on October 10 that Belgrade's current oil supply, largely via the JANAF oil pipeline that runs through Croatia, will soon not be viable due to sanctions adopted by the EU against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

Shipments via Croatia fall under EU restrictions that were adopted in early October and come into force in December. But the Druzhba pipeline, also referred to as the "Friendship" pipeline, is exempt from the ban. [Financial Times]

Both Serbia and Hungary are highly reliant on Russian fuels, and Vucic and Orban had previously expressed their interest in connecting their countries' energy systems. [Financial Times]

Hungary has criticised EU sanctions against Russia, with Orban saying they had "backfired" by driving up energy prices across Europe. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(msa/pk)

Poland partners with US to build first nuclear power plant

Poland has chosen to partner with the United States to build its first nuclear power plant, in a move aimed at increasing energy independence and reducing carbon emissions. [Reuters] [Independent]

The decision comes as Warsaw seeks to secure energy sources that are not reliant on Russia as Moscow wages a war in Ukraine. [DW News]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said that the project would use "reliable, safe technology." [DW News]

American nuclear company Westinghouse was selected to build the plant, after winning the contract over South Korean and French firms. [Reuters] [Independent] [DW News]

Partnering with the US highlights Poland's tightening cooperation with Washington on security issues amid

high tensions between Russia and the West. [Independent] [Reuters]

US Vice President Kamala Harris said that her country's involvement in the project is "advantageous for us all." She added: "We can address the climate crisis, strengthen European energy security, and deepen the US-Poland strategic relationship." [Reuters]

A senior US official said that the partnership shows Russian President Vladimir Putin the "strength" of a "US-Poland alliance." [Reuters]

Warsaw plans to supply between 25 to 36 percent of the country's energy with up to six nuclear reactors by 2040 – aiming to have the first operational by 2033 – in a step toward greener energy. [DW News] [Reuters] [Independent]

Poland is one of the EU's biggest polluters, with a large portion of its power grid relying on coal. [Independent] [DW News]

(ek/pk)

Baltic states support German-led initiative to launch European air defence program

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania agreed on October 13 to an initiative put forward by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to build an integrated air defence system that would operate under NATO command across Europe. [ERR] [LRT] [Spiegel]

Scholz called for the initiative because of the changing security situation in Europe after Russia invaded Ukraine. He said that a common European air defence system would be more effective and more affordable in comparison to each respective country's own security provisions. The Lithuanian defence ministry said that the initiative would carry out joint acquisitions, develop capabilities of ground-based air defence systems and improve interoperability. [Spiegel] [LRT]

Deputy Head of NATO, Mircea Geoana, welcomed the initiative, adding that the proposal could improve NATO's protective capabilities. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Baltic states seek tribunal to hold Russia accountable for war crimes

The Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian foreign ministers called in a joint statement on October 17 for the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate Russian war crimes. [ERR] [Euractiv] [Al Arabiya]

Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu said that the establishment of an international tribunal should be an EU priority, adding that along with his Latvian and Lithuanian counterparts, he would send a similar letter to Josep Borrell, the EU High representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Belarusian President Lukashenko admits to participating in Russia's war in Ukraine

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said at a press conference on October 4 that Belarus has actively participated in "Russia's special military operation" in Ukraine. [Belta]

Lukashenko said that the country's "participation is limited to preventing the spread of the conflict into Belarus's territory." He added that Belarusian authorities would also prevent potential strikes from Poland and the Baltic states to protect Russian deployments. [Belta]

According to Lukashenko, Belarus would also provide medical aid wherever necessary and provide means of subsistence to refugees who escaped from Ukraine. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus: Combat units in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania are training to topple government, Belarus official claims

Chairman of the Belarus's State Security Council, Ivan Tertel, said on October 6 that combat units training in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania could be used to topple the Belarusian government. [Belta]

Tertel said that representatives of the self-exiled Belarusian political opposition are members of the

combat units, adding that there are various combat units prepared to conduct terrorist operations in Belarus. He provided no proof for his accusations.

Tertel added that the State Security Council is in close policy coordination with the Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko to prevent terrorist acts from happening. [Belta][Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus, Russia establish joint regional group of forces

Belarus and Russia agreed on October 10 that they would deploy a joint regional group of forces to protect Belarusian and Russian borders and territorial integrity. [Belta] [Deutsche Welle]

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said that due to the security situation on Belarus's and Russia's western borders, he agreed with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that the forces would be deployed due to higher threat levels. [Belta] [Al Jazeera]

Lukashenko added that he would expect more than 1,000 Russian personnel of the armed forces to aid the joint regional group of forces. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarusia's Lukashenko warns of "possible Ukrainian strikes"

Belarusian Aleksandr President Lukashenko warned on October 10 of "possible strikes on Belarus" by Ukraine during a meeting with representatives of the ministry of defence. [Belta] [Reuters]

Lukashenko said that he was warned through unofficial channels that Ukraine could target Belarusian territory. He added that the West could then open a "second front," utilising the Belarusian government-in-exile as a political force to induce regime change framed as a "colour revolution." [Belta] [Euractiv]

(mo/gc)

Croatian president opposes training Ukrainian troops

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic has said that he would block any plans to provide military training for Ukrainian soldiers in his country. [Telegram]

"I do not support this idea because I do not want Croatia to be involved in this war more than is necessary," Milanovic told reporters in Zagreb on October 18. "As commander in chief, I will not approve this." [Aljazeera]

Milanovic has also been sceptical about EU sanctions against Russia, saying earlier this year that they "do not really work." [Euractiv]

(vs/pk)

Estonia: Parliament designates Russia a terrorist state

The Estonian parliament designated on October 18 Russia as a "terrorist regime" and state sponsor of terrorism in view of the annexation of Ukrainian territories and airstrikes on the Ukrainian people. [ERR] [Twitter]

Eighty-eight members out of 101 voted in favour, adding that Estonia would not recognise any territorial changes following the "sham referenda" in Ukraine and instead seek to investigate the violations committed by Russian authorities. [ERR]

The parliament called on the EU and NATO to increase their military support and humanitarian aid for Ukraine as well as financial means for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. It condemned Russia's use of mercenary firms and militias and called for investigations to identify war crimes and crimes against humanity and to hold perpetrators accountable. [ERR]

Previously, Estonian governmental officials and diplomats were labelling Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, including prime minister Kaja Kallas, foreign minister Urmas Reinsalu and Estonia's ambassador to Ukraine, Kaimo Kuusk. [ERR] [Twitter] [Twitter] [Twitter]

(mo/gc)

Estonia: Confiscated drones to be handed over to Ukrainian army

Estonian security services confiscated on October 5 several drones and handed them over to the Ukrainian army. [ERR] [Twitter]

The drones were acquired via crowdfunding by a man who wanted to donate them for the Russian armed forces deployed in Ukraine. He was sentenced to four months in prison after he had been found guilty of having attempted to transfer the drones at the Koidula border checkpoint. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Finland rules out NATO entry without Sweden

Finland has rejected a Turkish suggestion that it could be admitted to NATO without its neighbour Sweden. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has indicated that both Nordic states, which need Ankara's approval to enter the Western military alliance, could join at different times.

New NATO members need to be approved by all 30 countries that are part of the alliance. Turkey, which is a member and has NATO's second-largest military, has put forward a string of security demands including the extradition of individuals Ankara considers to be terrorists.

Erdogan said on October 6 that "relations with Finland are quite different in nature than those between Sweden and Turkey," adding: "Finland is not a country where terrorists are roaming freely." [HelsinginSanomat]

The same could not be said for Sweden, according to the Turkish leader, who claimed that "terrorist organizations are demonstrating on the streets" there. [AP]

Sweden has long hosted exiled political opponents of Turkey's ruling right-wing AK Party, as well as Kurdish politicians who openly criticise Erdogan. Meanwhile, criticism of Erdogan in the Swedish media has enraged the Turkish leader.

However, in a step that had been sought by Ankara, Sweden has agreed to lift a weapons embargo that it imposed on Turkey in 2019. [HelsinginSanomat]

Responding to suggestions that Helsinki could be admitted to NATO without Stockholm, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said: “From our point of view, it would be important to join at the same time, because we form a common security political environment in northern Europe. Together, we would strengthen the entire NATO. The fact that we walk hand in hand is important.” [HelsinginSanomat] [yle]

Finland and Sweden applied for membership in the Atlantic alliance simultaneously on May 18 and have vowed to move in step with one another.

A three-way, centre-right coalition took power in Sweden on October 17 following parliamentary elections, forming a new minority government reliant on a far-right grouping *[see separate story in this issue]*.

Erdogan on October 20 said he would meet Sweden's new prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, in order to discuss Stockholm's NATO bid. Kristersson has pledged to fight against terrorism. [Reuters]

Apart from Turkey, the two Nordic NATO hopefuls have to sway Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has put his country at odds with much of the alliance over his continued ties to Russia amid the war in Ukraine.

Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom, speaking after a meeting with his Finnish counterpart on October 21, said he believed the ratification process in Hungary would “soon be concluded”. [Reuters]

(cg/pk)

Finland holds major air force drills amid war in Ukraine

Finnish fighter jets could be seen taking off from rural highways and practising manoeuvres across the country, as the nation held major annual air force drills from October 3 to 8.

The “Ruska 22” exercises involved some 50 aircraft and up to 3,700 air force personnel and units of the Swedish air force. Designed to train and test Finland’s air defences, fighter planes could be seen conducting low-level flights and reaching supersonic speeds, as well as dispersing to mobile air bases, in some cases involving the use of sections of road as makeshift runways. [HelsinginSanomat] [Lentoposti]

Finland's air force is undergoing a dramatic shift, as it seeks to retire its ageing fleet of American-made F-18 Hornets and replace them with the vaunted F-35 – an American warplane that represents the cutting edge of Western fighter development and which is fielded by many NATO air forces.

Sixty-four F-35s are expected to be delivered to Finland by 2030, at a total project cost of EUR 10 billion, after a decision made in December 2021 by Helsinki. [Aamulehti] [F-35 – Lockheed Martin]

Over the summer, Finland held large-scale army exercises involving refresher training for reservists. A total of 28,000 Finns took part, an increase of almost 10,000 over previous years. The ministry of defence has been mulling raising the upper age limit for reservists. [Aamulehti] [Aamulehti][HelsinginSanomat]

The Finnish defence forces have a cadre of 900,000 reservists that can be mobilised in wartime to bolster the nation's corps of 21,000 professional soldiers. [Finnish Defence Forces]

Finland is expected to join NATO in the coming months amid increasingly hostile rhetoric emanating from Moscow and moves including the announcement of a so-called partial mobilisation in Russia.

(cg/pk)

Hungarian PM says Donald Trump is 'hope for peace' in Ukraine war

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said that the United States must come to an agreement with Russia if the war in Ukraine is to end, and that Donald Trump should represent America in peace talks.

"Hope for peace is named Donald Trump", said Orban, a right-winger, at an event in Berlin on October 11. [Politico]

Orban, whose country is a member of both NATO and the EU, criticised the role of the US in the Ukraine conflict, claiming that Washington was perpetuating the war by providing Kiev with "endless resources". He also blamed US President Joe Biden for going "too far" by calling Russia's Vladimir Putin a "war criminal". [Politico] [Washington Post]

Since the beginning of the war, Orban has been criticised for being too friendly towards the Kremlin, notably when opposing EU sanctions against Moscow

and signing deals with Russian state-owned energy companies.

Hungarian President Katalin Novak has, however, recently condemned Russian bombardment of Ukrainian cities. [Washington Post]

(msa/pk)

Lithuania, Germany agreed on conditions for troop deployment in the Baltics

Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said on October 11 that Lithuania and Germany agreed on the conditions for deploying a brigade of troops in the Baltic nation. [LRT] [Euronews]

Lithuania has provided the necessary infrastructure to host the brigade, Landsbergis added. German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht said that the brigade assigned would be deployed in Germany but could be sent to Lithuania within 10 days whenever requested. [LRT] [Euronews]

The brigade is designed to defend Lithuania against Russian aggression, according to a communique signed by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda in June. [LRT]

While Lithuanian Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas said that such a time frame would be sufficient, Landsbergis had expected a permanent deployment. [LRT] [Euronews] [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

US troops will be deployed in Lithuania until 2026, defence minister said

Lithuania's Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas said on October 14 that a US Heavy Battalion would be deployed in the country until 2026. [LRT] [Twitter]

Anusauskas met with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at a meeting of the Bucharest Nine to discuss on-going security issues, including US deployments in Lithuania. He said that the US appreciated the conditions for the on-going operations of the battalion. [LRT] [France24]

Anusauskas added that a permanent US deployment would not only underline US security commitments to

the Baltic states, but would also “send a strong message to Russia.” [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Government taking steps to stop Moldovan citizens from fighting in Ukraine

Vice Prime Minister and Minister of European Integration Nicu Popescu said on October 4 that authorities would do whatever they could to prevent Moldovan citizens from fighting in Ukraine. [Moldpres]

While his ministry does not collect information about recruitment of Moldovans to fight in Ukraine, Popescu said that it would be “absolutely illegal” to do so. Popescu added that people with Moldovan-Russian dual citizenship who currently reside in Russia could be recruited to fight in the war. [Moldpres]

The Moldovan embassy in Russia is currently handling a larger number of travel applications of Moldovan citizens seeking to leave Russia. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Poland, Baltic states back bid by Ukraine to join NATO, Germany, Slovenia hesitant

Poland and the Baltic states have been quick to offer unconditional support for a bid by Ukraine to join NATO, but Germany and Slovenia have voiced reservations, worried at the risk of a direct war between Russia and the West.

Kiev said on September 30 it was submitting a request to become a member of the Western military alliance, and asked for an “accelerated accession.”

Germany’s foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, voiced concern, saying: “We continue to support Ukraine's right to defend itself by supplying heavy weaponry, and we are doing everything we can to ensure that other countries, that NATO, doesn't get drawn into this war." [DW]

Slovenia’s foreign minister, Tanja Fajon, was also hesitant, saying: “If NATO were to take a decision to admit Ukraine as a member, it could be a clear

declaration of the start of war." She added that Slovenia was committed to dialogue. [Euractiv]

The liberal coalition government in Ljubljana has so far been vocal in its support for Kiev amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi stopped short of supporting Ukraine's request but, speaking to Politico, said she was in favour of a "security guarantee" for Kiev.

Meanwhile, Lithuania's Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas said on October 3 that his country would unconditionally support Ukraine's ambitions to join NATO in view of Russia's ongoing aggression and violations of Ukraine's territorial integrity. [The Baltic Times]

Anusauskas added that the Western military bloc must do more to reassure the Ukrainian people. [The Baltic Times]

Kiev applied for accelerated NATO membership after Russia annexed four Ukrainian territories – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson – following referendums which are not recognised by most countries. [The Guardian]

(cg-mo/pk)

European Central Bank raises key interest rates for the third time this year

The European Central Bank decided on October 27 to raise the three key ECB interest rates by 75 basis points for the third time this year to help reduce inflationary pressure in Europe.

The ECB's Governing Council took today's decision, and expects to raise interest rates further, to ensure the timely return of inflation to its 2 percent medium-term inflation target, the ECB said in a statement. "The Governing Council will base the future policy rate path on the evolving outlook for inflation and the economy, following its meeting-by-meeting approach."

Inflation remains far too high and will stay above the target for an extended period, according to the ECB. In September, euro area inflation reached 9.9 percent.

"In recent months, soaring energy and food prices, supply bottlenecks and the post-pandemic recovery in demand have led to a broadening of price pressures

and an increase in inflation," the ECB said. "The Governing Council's monetary policy is aimed at reducing support for demand and guarding against the risk of a persistent upward shift in inflation expectations."

(gc)

EU blocks billions in cohesion funds for Poland amid rule-of-law dispute

The European Commission is blocking EUR 75 billion from its cohesion funds for Poland over a long-running rule-of-law dispute between Brussels and Warsaw. [Euractiv] [Business Insider] [Financial Times]

The development money – which was to be paid out over a period of seven years from 2021 to 2027 – is to be withheld until Warsaw reverses sweeping changes to its legal system. Brussels says the changes undermine the political independence of the Polish judiciary and erode rule-of-law principles. [Business Insider] [Euractiv] [Euronews] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Poland receives more money from the EU's cohesion fund – which supports poorer member states – than any other nation in the bloc. [Financial Times] [European Commission]

The main point of contention is a controversial disciplinary chamber for judges, which Poland replaced with a "chamber of professional responsibility" in July. [Business Insider] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Brussels had said that the new chamber does not go far enough to ensure the independence of the judiciary. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

The commission is already preventing Poland from accessing EUR 35.4 billion from its post-pandemic recovery funds for the same reason. [Financial Times] [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki downplayed the threat of losing the cohesion funds, saying that he does not think the flow of money is "at risk". [Euronews]

"The first funds are already flowing in. Maybe these are not large funds…most likely in the next few months, most likely the first advanced payments will be released," Morawiecki said. [Euronews]

However, the advance payments accessible to Poland only account for less than two percent of the total amount, Polish newspaper Rzeczpospolita reported.

Brussels said that Warsaw will need to fulfil "enabling conditions" in order for the money to be released. "The commission and Poland will continue working together to overcome the remaining issues," said a spokesperson for the European Commission. [Euractiv] [Financial Times]

(ek/pk)

EU prosecutor opens probe into COVID vaccine purchases

The European Public Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation into COVID vaccine purchases, a move that refocuses attention on Ursula von der Leyen's role in negotiating the EU's largest vaccine contract.

The prosecutor's office, an independent EU body that probes financial crime, said the matter was of "high public interest" in a statement announcing the inquiry on October 14, but did not specify who was being investigated or what vaccine contracts were under scrutiny. [Politico]

However, the investigation has drawn renewed attention to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's handling of the EU's third and largest vaccine procurement contract, signed in May 2021 with American pharmaceutical company Pfizer.

The agreement saw the bloc agree to purchase 900 million doses of the vaccine, with an optional 900 million more. [NYT] [Politico]

The European Court of Auditors found in a report in September that von der Leyen was personally involved in arranging a preliminary deal with Pfizer, exchanging text messages with the pharmaceutical company's CEO Albert Bourla and neglecting the usual negotiating teams. [Politico]

EU ombudsman Emily O'Reilly found in January that the Commission had committed "maladministration" in refusing to disclose the text messages following a freedom of information request. [Euractiv]

The details of the bloc's largest vaccine purchase deal remain unknown to the public, with the only available versions of the agreement being heavily redacted and missing important aspects of the contract like prices

and liability. Leaked documents suggest the contract would be worth around EUR 35 billion if completely fulfilled. [Euractiv] [Politico] [FT]

Kathleen van Brempt, chair of the European Parliament's special committee on COVID, in a tweet questioned why the Commission "deviate[d] from normal procedure", adding: "We need to know why the biggest contract is the least transparent. We need to understand why the EU is obliged to buy 1.8 billion Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, regardless of the needs, regardless of whether new and better players have entered the market."

(qv/pk)

EU adopts plan to increase voice of young people in decision-making

The European Commission and the EU's foreign policy chief on October 4 adopted a Youth Action Plan, the first initiative of its kind, aiming to increase the voice of young people in decision-making worldwide. [European Commission]

Among its goals, the Youth Action Plan aims to address inequalities, and equip young people with vital skills and tools, for example by strengthening education systems. In addition, opportunities for global networking will be created for young people. [Bundeskanzleramt]

Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, said: "It is our responsibility to ensure that youth have the tools and opportunities needed to fully develop and participate in everyday life." He added: "We must invest in their present and future." [EU neighbours east]

The European Commission said the EU was committed to "increasing the voice and leadership of young people worldwide", in particular young women and girls, "at all levels of governance, from domestic politics to multilateral forums, and within EU policy-making processes."

(acn/pk)

European court challenges Switzerland over alleged failure to provide vegan diet to prisoners

The European court of human rights has challenged Switzerland over its alleged failure to provide adequate vegan diets to a prisoner and a patient at the psychiatric ward of a hospital. [TheGuardian]

The Council of Europe court has asked Switzerland to respond to two complaints that Swiss state institutions had failed to provide a totally vegan diet to two individuals while they were in prison and in a hospital psychiatric unit respectively. The case centres on an unnamed Swiss animal rights activist who was arrested in November 2018 over a series of break-ins and damages to slaughterhouses, butchers' shops and restaurants across western Switzerland. [TheGuardian]

(gc)

EU approves EUR 800 million electricity consumption subsidy plan for Greece

The European Commission approved a plan to support non-household electricity consumers in Greece with EUR 800 million. The plan targets businesses and companies, who have experienced an increase in costs due to the Russian war in Ukraine. [AMNA]

European Commission Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager said the plan will help Greece support "affected sectors and companies, in particular, smaller ones." The commission called the measure "necessary, appropriate and proportionate to remedy a serious disturbance in the economy of a Member State." [European Commission]

This comes after it was announced that shops in the Greek city of Thessaloniki would close two hours earlier than normal during the upcoming winter to curb consumption, whereas the government is considering emergency measures "analogous to the extent of the [energy] crisis". [iEfimerida]

(hi/gc)

Hungarian MEPs protest at 'smear' campaign against Budapest

Members of Hungary's governing Fidesz party have complained in a letter to European Parliament President Roberta Metsola about what they branded an "unprecedented smear campaign" against their country.

Tamas Deutsch, head of the Fidesz European Parliament delegation, and Kinga Gal, the chairwoman of the delegation, said the parliament's social media platforms had published content that "grossly attacks" Hungary. They urged Metsola to hold those responsible to account. [Hungary Today]

The social media content was based on a recent European Parliament report that was critical of Hungary and whose findings Fidesz MEPs claim were biased.

In their letter, sent on October 4, Deutsch and Gal complained of a decade-long "political vendetta" waged by "the left-wing majority" in the European Parliament against the right-wing Hungarian government. They added that it was "unacceptable" for the parliament's administration to engage in a "massive disinformation campaign" against an EU member state.

In a non-binding report adopted on September 15, members of the European Parliament said the political situation in Hungary had deteriorated to the point that the country had 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.

In an unprecedented move the same month, the European Commission 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. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(msa/pk)

Serbia's Vucic does not rule out EU plan on Kosovo recognition if it means quicker accession

Serbia may not rule out the European Union's plan to recognise Kosovo if it means Belgrade can get quicker accession into the EU, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said.

The Serbian constitution makes it nearly impossible for Belgrade to formally recognise Kosovo, Vucic said. Serbia cannot "throw [the deal] out of the window" because it comes from two major European powers, France and Germany, he said, adding that Serbia's official position is that "we have to talk." [Euronews]

The plan proposed by France and Germany would allow Serbia to join the EU in exchange for recognising

Kosovo and allowing it to enter various international organisations. [Euractiv]

When it comes to the upcoming procedure of Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe, or a possible United Nations membership, Vucic said Serbia cannot be "further humiliated" by being forced to recognise Kosovo, but "by not reacting, it would give a silent signal that it agrees."

He did however say that he believes international law has been repeatedly violated in regard to Kosovo, and while his administration is in power there will be "no will to accept Kosovo's independence and membership to the UN." [N1]

(hi/gc)

Leaders of Austria, Hungary, Serbia meet in Budapest for joint action to curb migration

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban attended a trilateral summit on October 3 aimed at taking joint action to control what they claim is an increase in the number of migrants arriving in the EU through Serbia.

At the meeting in Budapest, the leaders agreed to increase police cooperation along their borders and support Serbia in deporting migrants to their home countries. [Euronews]

Nations along the so-called Balkan route started to toughen border controls in September. [Euronews] A spike in crossings via this route has been attributed by the EU's border agency, Frontex, to repeated attempts to cross by migrants already present in the Western Balkans. [Frontex]

Hungary's Orban suggested setting up centres outside the EU to process asylum-seekers' requests – an approach that would undermine the laws of some European countries. In Germany, for instance, foreigners are entitled to have their request for political asylum checked while they are in the country. That right is enshrined in the German constitution. [Euronews]

(msa/pk)

Belarusian president Lukashenko attends CIS summit

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko attended a summit on October 14 of the Commonwealth of Independent States held in Astana, Kazakhstan [Belta] [SB.by]

Lukashenko said that the West has engaged in hybrid warfare against the Commonwealth of Independent States, with Ukraine being the pretext of Western revenge against the states of the former Soviet Union. He added that "everyone will be put to the test" to repel Western influence. [Belta]

He also said that the post-Soviet space has been marked by unresolved interethnic and territorial disputes, the resolution of which requires joint commitments and a determined response against external players that seek to obstruct the resolution process through instigating confrontations. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

New European Political Community holds first summit in Prague

A slew of political leaders affirmed their unity amid the war in Ukraine, underlined their support for Kiev and pledged to strengthen cooperation on energy issues when the European Political Community, a new platform, held its first meeting in Prague on October 6. [Euronews] [European Parliament]

"We have very clearly displayed the unity of 44 European leaders in condemning Russian aggression and expressing support for Ukraine," said French President Emmanuel Macron after the summit of the new group, which intends to serve as a platform for political and strategic discussions about the future of Europe. [Euractiv]

In addition to the heads of state or government of the 27 EU member states, the Prague gathering was attended by the leaders of 17 European countries outside the EU. [European Council]

The European Political Community, a project proposed by Macron in May and then endorsed by the EU, aims to promote better political dialogue and cooperation on issues of continent-wide concern such as security, transport, energy and climate.

Among the non-EU nations invited to the summit were nine countries with aspirations to join the bloc: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and six western Balkan states. [CNBC] [The Guardian]

The meeting took place a day ahead of an informal European Council meeting in Prague on October 7, where leaders exchanged views on rising energy prices and the economic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

(vs/pk)

EU to spend more on fighting forest fires

The European Commission plans to invest EUR 170 million next year in boosting its capacity to fight forest fires. The fleet of aircraft used by the EU civil protection system, named "rescEU", will be increased to 22 planes and four helicopters, the Commission said in a statement on October 5. [European Commission]

Janez Lenarcic, the EU Commissioner for crisis management, said that "the last summers have clearly shown that more firefighting assets are needed at EU level."

He added that "by building up our fleet of aerial means and ground forces, the EU will be able to ensure a prompt, flexible response, including in situations where fires are burning in multiple member states at the same time". [European Commission 2]

The decision to strengthen the rescEU fleet stems from the increasing intensity and frequency of forest fires in the EU. [Europe Monthly September 2022] The European Emergency Response Coordination Unit received 11 requests for help in dealing with forest fires this summer.

The European civil protection mechanism deployed 33 aircraft and eight helicopters across Europe during the summer, with additional support from 350 firefighters on the ground. [Voice of Brussels]

(acn/pk)

EAEU prime ministers met in Yerevan

A meeting of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) met in Yerevan,

the Armenian capital, on October 20-21. [Belta] [News.am] [CGTN]

A senior representative from Belarus said during the meeting that the heads of governments discussed financing options for industrial projects to induce cooperation, anti-dumping measures and obstacles to the internal market of the EAEU. [Belta]

The Eurasian Economic Commission informed the Intergovernmental Council about the preparation of treaties pertaining to a common market for oil and gas, the implementation of industrial cooperation as well as the management of the Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal. [Belta]

The Intergovernmental Council also discussed mutual trade among EAEU members, import substitution projects, import customs duties and the development of electronic trade. [Belta] [News.am]

(mo/gc)

Germany, Italy will move into a recession in 2023, IMF forecasts

The German and Italian economies will move into a recession in 2023, though the Euro zone will avoid a recession, the IMF said in October in its "Countering the Cost-of-Living Crisis" report. [IMF]

The Euro-zone will post economic growth of 0.5 percent, though it is worse than previously forecasted. "Weak 2023 growth across Europe reflects spillover effects from the war in Ukraine, with especially sharp downward revisions for economies most exposed to the Russian gas supply cuts," the IMF said.,

Germany, Europe's largest economy, is heavily dependent on Russian gas. Moscow stopped supplies in suspected retaliation for Western sanctions because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Italy is also highly reliant on gas imports from Russia, accounting for 46 percent of its gas supply.

"Global economic activity is experiencing a broad-based and sharper-than-expected slowdown, with inflation higher than seen in several decades," the IMF said. "The cost-of-living crisis, tightening financial conditions in most regions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the lingering Covid-19 pandemic all weigh heavily on the outlook."

Global growth is forecast to slow from 6.0 percent in 2021 to 3.2 percent in 2022 and 2.7 percent in 2023.[RAO Global]

(mr/gc)

North Macedonian, Bulgarian diplomats exchange verbal spat during EU Joint Parliamentary Committee

North Macedonian and Bulgarian delegations verbally sparred during a European Union Joint Parliamentary Committee that was meant to discuss cooperation between Skopje and Brussels.

Bulgarian members of the European Parliament reiterated their opinion that North Macedonian is a language and ethnic identity of Bulgarian origin. They accused North Macedonia of a hostile attitude towards its Bulgarian population and called again for Skopje to amend its constitution and recognise the Bulgarian minority. [Nova Makedonija]

The European Parliament and the North Macedonian guest delegation condemned the remarks. “You can never tell me or my fellow citizens that we speak the wrong language,” North Macedonian Member of Parliament, Sonja Mirakovska, said, adding that North Macedonian was their identity. [Nova Makedonija]

Bulgaria has objected to North Macedonia entering the EU unless they alter their constitution. It has maintained an active role in deciding on the country’s eligibility.

(hi/gc)

North Macedonia: Opposition party blocks laws related to Open Balkans Initiative

North Macedonian opposition party VMRO DPMNE has blocked various laws related to the Open Balkans Initiative that would create an economic zone between North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania and allow workers to move freely between the three countries. Serbia and Albania have already approved the agreement.

VMRO DPMNE Chairman Hristijan Mickoski said his party requires more information about the “purpose of the initiative” and its benefits for North Macedonia,

before discussing it further. The initiative will create a single identification system that will allow people to seek employment or open businesses in all three states. [Balkan Insight] [Euractiv]

(hi/gc)

Visegrad group leaders discuss war in Ukraine, energy, inflation

Leaders from the Visegrad Group (V4), a regional cooperation platform that brings together Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, discussed energy security, inflation and the war in Ukraine during a meeting in Bratislava on October 11. [RTVS]

At a press conference, Czech President Milos Zeman voiced appreciation for the help given by all V4 countries to Ukrainian refugees. He also called for the enlargement of the Visegrad Group to include Slovenia. [Euractiv]

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova expressed support for Western sanctions against Russia, but also pointed to the inconsistent attitude of the V4 countries towards military aid for Kiev. Unlike Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, Hungary does not provide military aid to Ukraine.

Amid Russia's continuing onslaught against Ukraine, Polish President Andrzej Duda told reporters that it was important to punish "war criminals." In the context of energy security, he stressed the importance of pipeline interconnections.

Hungarian President Katalin Novak, meanwhile, drew attention to the continuing problem of illegal migration to Europe from the south. [Pravda]

The gathering in Bratislava was the first meeting of leaders from the Visegrad Group since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February.

(vs/pk)

Russia: Government plans to build energy infrastructure to boost exports to Asia

Russia plans to build new infrastructure to supply mineral resources to the markets where they are in demand, including China, India and Pakistan, Deputy

Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on 13 October. [GovRU]

Russia's long-term plans include the development of LNG facilities, oil and gas refineries, a network of petrol and LNG filling stations, modernisation of refineries and expansion of port infrastructure to expand the geography of oil and petroleum product supplies. Russia plans to supply 22 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas to China through the Power of Siberia pipeline in 2023 and increase that to 38 bcm by 2027, Novak said.

Russia also wants to increase its LNG production. [GovRU]

Russia is producing 30 million tonnes of LNG from the Sakhalin-2 and Yamal-LNG projects and plans to produce up to 64 million tonnes a year in the next few years. After 2030, Russia expects this figure to reach 100 million tonnes a year. After 2030, Russia will be able to deliver up to 100 billion cubic metres of gas eastward, Novak said.

European politicians are punishing their own people with their short-sighted decisions to reject the reliable supply of Russian energy resources, despite the demand for them, Novak said, adding that Asia-Pacific countries, India and Pakistan, are interested in increasing their purchases of gas. [GovRU]

(gc)

Germany, Japan to enhance defence cooperation between air forces

Germany and Japan agreed to enhance defence cooperation in their air forces during a meeting between German air force chief Ingo Gerhartz and his Japanese counterpart Shunji Izutsu in Tokyo on September 29.

The air forces of Germany and Japan organised a joint formation flight for the first time on September 28, including three Eurofighters and F-2s, respectively.

The willingness for increased cooperation comes amid China's growing assertiveness in the Indo Pacific region. The two countries had already worked together during an Australian-led multilateral drill at the beginning of September. [AiR, No.40, October/2022, 1]

(aml/gc)

Nordic countries seek strong engagement with Bangladesh

Denmark, Norway and Sweden are seeking partnerships with Bangladesh in areas such as climate protection, green transition, technology transfer, healthy oceans, gender equality and trade and investment.

In a virtual meeting on September 29, the ambassadors of the three Nordic countries reiterated their intent to continue to deepen their 50-year-old friendship with Bangladesh.

The main topic was how Bangladesh could profit from the three European countries' know-how to increase its competitiveness. The diplomats also discussed the possibility of replicating Nordic-style carbon-neutral villages in Bangladesh to provide an example of a green transition.

Danish officials emphasised the importance of a free and fair ballot, as well as freedom of expression, in elections scheduled in Bangladesh for December 2023. [AiR, No.40, October/2022, 1]

(aml/pk)

Armenia seeks to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan by the end of the year

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said he wants to sign a peace treaty with Azerbaijan by the end of the year. [RIA]

"I would like it to be signed before the end of this year. How realistic is this? I would answer this question as follows. I and the government will make every possible effort to make this real," he said at the government meeting. [Business-gazeta][RIA]

Armenia has initiated a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe to receive a report on the situation on the border. Prime Minister Pashinyan also confirmed that he will meet with Russian President Putin and Azerbaijani President Aliyev in Sochi on October 31.

Recently Pashinyan said "We will try to complete the delimitation of borders before its conclusion. This is possible if the borders as of 1991 are taken as a basis," [CALIBER.RU]

The citizens of Armenia are not happy with the decision made by Pashinyan. “The time will come when over the great highest of Masis, Sipan and Nemrut, the words will be heard all over the world that the owner here is Armenian, Armenia is here!” [Twitter]

(ad/gc)

Belarus, Russia to coordinate over any NATO nuclear sharing in Poland

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said on October 7 that his country and Russia would discuss how to respond to any deployment of atomic weapons in Poland under a NATO nuclear sharing programme. [Belta]

Lukashenko said that he would closely coordinate with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin after Polish President Andrzej Duda said on October 5 that Poland would “not mind joining the NATO nuclear sharing programme.” [Belta]

But a White House official told state broadcaster Polish Radio that the US was not planning to station nuclear weapons in countries that, like Poland, joined NATO after 1997. [TheNews.pl]

(mo/gc)

Belarusian, Russian accreditation agencies signed cooperation agreement

The Belarusian ministry of education announced on October 5 that it had agreed to cooperate with the Russian Federal Accreditation Agency. [Belta]

The agreement aims to stimulate international exchanges between Belarusian and Russian scientific communities and to deepen relations in education and research. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Belarus accuses Poland of pushing refugees back into Belarusian territory

The Belarusian State Border Committee accused on October 25 the Polish border police of pushing

refugees back to Belarus. [State Border Committee of Belarus] [Belta]

The Belarusian State Border Committee said that information about refugee movements are recorded on a daily basis and that it obtained information about refugees apprehended in Poland and subsequently sent back to Belarus.

It added that Polish authorities would not provide any information about accommodation facilities, the actual number of refugees having entered Polish territory via Belarus, and their status in legal procedures. These accusations could not be verified independently. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

Czech politicians' public appearances coordinated by Russian agent, says counterintelligence

A Russian agent used ties to Czech journalists and politicians to push narratives aligned with Moscow's foreign policy interests, the Czech counterintelligence service has said.

As well as promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda, the agent used his connections to coordinate public appearances by Czech politicians, according to the annual report of the Security Information Service (BIS) published on October 17. [English Radio Prague] The report did not say when the suspected agent had been active.

Last year, BIS and police investigators said they had uncovered one of the largest operations by the Russian secret services in the Czech Republic – an attack on an ammunition depot in the eastern village of Vrbetice in 2014. [Hlidaci Pes]

The Czech authorities subsequently expelled 18 people they suspected of being Russian agents hiding under diplomatic cover at Moscow's embassy in Prague. [Denik N] The move saw tensions between Prague and Moscow escalate to their highest level in three decades.

According to BIS chief Michal Koudelka, Russian intelligence officers are still in the Czech Republic, but under a different type of cover. "They have had to change their form and methods of work, to adapt to a situation that fundamentally limits their activities," he said.

The BIS also warned against China. “Despite the attention of Czech society, which is currently focused primarily on relations with Russia, China represents a growing complex intelligence threat,” the counterintelligence agency wrote in its report. [CT 24]

(vs/pk)

Estonian PM meets with Finnish President to discuss energy security

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas met with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto on October 4 to discuss energy security and cooperation. [The Baltic Times]

Kallas said the two countries should work together to ensure energy security and support efforts that will hold Russia accountable for its involvement in the war in Ukraine. She added that Estonia appreciated that Finland followed suit to ban Russian tourists and join NATO. [The Baltic Times]

Kallas also said that the LNG floating terminal jointly constructed by Estonia and Finland is a significant contribution to ensuring energy supplies. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Russia accuses Estonian foreign minister of terrorism

The Russian foreign ministry’s spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused on October 12 Estonia’s Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu of instigating terrorist acts against Russia and requested that the Russian prosecutor initiate legal proceedings against him. [The Baltic Times]

In response to Russian airstrikes against Ukraine, Reinsalu said that Ukraine’s defensive capabilities must be strengthened immediately. He added that “we must not prolong the creation of an international tribunal so that the organisers of Russia’s war of aggression do not go unpunished.” [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Refugees at the Russian-Estonian border taken away, Estonian ministry of interior said

Estonia's Interior Minister Lauri Laanemets said on October 5 that refugees, primarily from Ukraine, who were waiting at the Estonian-Russian border were taken away by Russian trucks, with their fates unknown to Estonian authorities of the Police and Border Guard Board. [ERR] [Deutsche Welle]

Laanemets added that the police were using drones to detect where the refugees had been taken. According to the ministry of the interior, the refugees had been waiting for several days to cross into Estonia, as Russian authorities delayed the procedure. [ERR] [Deutsche Welle]

He said that illegal border crossings must be prevented to help Estonian authorities determine who is to cross the border. [ERR]

(mo/gc)

Greece set to deepen energy cooperation with Azerbaijan

Greek Energy Minister Kostas Skrekas met with his Azeri counterpart, Parviz Shahbazov, in Baku where they discussed ongoing efforts to deepen the two countries' energy cooperation. [Kathimerini]

Among the projects discussed was the recently created Greek-Bulgarian gas interconnector pipeline which supplies the Balkan peninsula with Azeri gas.

Skrekas also mentioned the Transadriatic pipeline through which Azerbaijan supplies 20 percent of Greece's needed natural gas. In his statement, he said Azerbaijan is an "important credible partner" to Greece, amid the effort to diversify its energy supply chain and become less dependent on Russian gas. [Caucasus Watch]

(hi/gc)

Gas pipeline connecting Greece and Bulgaria opens

The Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria pipeline started commercial operations on October 1 as the two

countries try to reduce their dependence on Russian natural gas. The pipeline will pump 1 billion cubic metres of Azeri gas to Bulgaria via Greece. [Reuters]

There are plans to expand its capacity to 5 billion cubic metres per year, as well as connect it to Serbia, North Macedonia and Romania, and potentially Moldova and Ukraine.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that although initially "none of us [leaders] believed in the importance of this project" he is now hopeful that the interconnector will help lower energy prices in the region by 2023. [N1]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the pipeline is "a game-changer" and that it means "freedom from dependency on Russian gas". [Kathimerini]

(hi/gc)

Greece's Mitsotakis pledges to raise the issue of the Parthenon Marbles with UK

Greece wants the United Kingdom to return the Parthenon Marbles to Athens after they were removed from the Acropolis by British Lord Elgin during Ottoman rule. They are in the British Museum.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis had planned to raise the issue during a meeting with Former British Prime Minister Liz Truss before she resigned. Mitsotakis said he believes the climate has changed in Britain regarding the Marbles' relocation, and that they will eventually be given back to Athens.

He pointed to his "good personal relationship" with King Charles, who has previously been supportive of Greek efforts to have them returned. Mitsotakis was scheduled to visit Britain in late November. [AMNA] [The Times]

The campaign to reunite Parthenon Marbles with the rest of the Parthenon has been ongoing since the 1980s and has often been a point of tension between the two countries.

(hi/gc)

Latvia terminates Latvian-Belarusian investment agreement

The Latvian parliament announced on October 6 that it would terminate a Latvian-Belarusian investment agreement due to Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko's endorsement of Russia's war in Ukraine. [The Baltic Times]

The agreement was signed in March 1998 and was designed to protect investments and enable arbitration courts to decide disputes between investors and the target country. [The Baltic Times]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Foreign ministry expels Russian charge d'affaires

The Lithuanian foreign ministry expelled on October 3 Russia's Acting Charge d'Affaires Sergey Ryabokon due to undiplomatic rhetoric that the ministry said disqualified him from performing his duties as a diplomat in the country. [LRT]

The government made the decision because of Ryabokon's public statements downplaying the January 13 events in Lithuania in 1991 and his "cynical distortion of historical events," Deputy Foreign Minister Mantas Adomenas said. The government also pointed to his "active communication with people acting against the national interests of Lithuania, whose association is under investigation," he said. [LRT

The investigation referenced by Adomenas involves activities of the International Forum of Good Neighbourhood established by Algirdas Paleckis, who had been sentenced for espionage for Russia. With Ryabokon expelled, Russia has to appoint a new head of its diplomatic mission in Lithuania. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Lithuania: Foreign ministry does not intend to recognise Chechnya's independence from Russia

Following Ukraine's designation of Russian federal subject Chechnya as a "temporarily occupied state," the Lithuanian parliamentary speaker Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen said on October 19 that Lithuania would not consider granting recognition to Chechnya. [LRT] [The Odessa Journal] [Kyiv Post]

Cmilyte-Nielsen said that while the principle of self-determination should be respected, the recognition of Chechnya as a state is "not on Lithuania's foreign policy agenda." [LRT]

The Ukrainian parliament voted on October 18 in favour of recognising Chechnya as an "independent territory temporarily occupied by the Russian Federation." Chechnya gained de facto independence without international recognition between 1991 and 2000 before it was reintegrated into the Russian Federation in the wake of the Second Chechen War. [The Odessa Journal] [Kyiv Post]

(mo/gc)

Moldova: Romania provides 25.5 million EUR to Moldova to strengthen strategic sectors

Moldova received on October 13 EUR 25.5 million from Romania to strengthen strategic sectors such as education and public utility services. [Moldpres]

The financial aid package is part of an agreement signed by Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita and her Romanian counterpart Nicolae-Ionel Ciuca on February 11. The agreement covers a variety of investment projects, including the provision of access to clean water and improved sewage systems, laboratory equipment for schools, and means of public transport. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Moldova holds talks with Ukrainian representative on Transnistria

Moldovan Vice Prime minister and Minister of Reintegration Oleg Serebryan on October 19 met online with Ukraine's special envoy on Transnistria Yuri Klimenko to discuss the recent developments pertaining to Moldova's dispute with the breakaway region of Transnistria. [Moldpres]

Both officials exchanged information and opinions about the results of previous negotiation outcomes as well as the results of Serebryan's visits to Berlin and Brussels. Serebryan said that it would be impossible this year to organise a conference on the settlement with Transnistria.

He added that he hopes that as soon as the situation has become more stable, the negotiations could return to dialogues in the 5+2 format, involving Moldova and Transnistria as the disputing parties as well as Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE as security guarantors and the EU and the US as observers. [Moldpres]

Klimenko said that he communicated with the OSCE special representative Thomas Mayr-Harting to clarify Ukraine's position in the conflict. Mayr-Harting would also visit Chisinau in the foreseeable future. [Moldpres]

Serebryan added that the conflict resolution process should be coupled with Moldova's European integration ambitions. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Russia, Belarus seek closer integration to repel Western sanctions

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko and Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin said on October 3 that Belarus and Russia would seek closer integration as an effective response against sanctions. [Belta]

Mishustin said that Russia has paid closer emphasis on strengthening "partnership and allied relations with fraternal Belarus" within the framework of the Union State commitments to repelling economic pressures from "unfriendly countries." Both Belarus and Russia would take coordinated measures to "protect the economic security and technological sovereignty." [Belta]

They also signed on October 3 an agreement regulating the principles of indirect taxation through value-added taxes and excise duties as they try to harmonise taxation between the two countries. [Belta]

The agreement specifies categories that are exempt from VAT or at a lower VAT rate. The agreement establishes an integrated system for the administration of indirect taxes, which contains information about the operations of Belarusian and Russian VAT payers.

They will establish a tax committee to monitor compliance with the agreement. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

European Parliament reportedly set to request the suspension of Serbia's EU accession talks

The European Parliament could ask the European Union to suspend its ongoing accession talks with Serbia until Belgrade aligns itself with the EU on sanctioning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

The EU has asked Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia. Belgrade has resisted so far.

During the United Nations General Assembly, Russia and Serbia signed an agreement to coordinate their foreign policy. Serbia defended the agreement, saying it did not concern matters of security and that it did not recognise the annexation referenda in eastern Ukraine. [Euractiv]

Some members of the European Parliament called the move "disappointing." The Social Democrat group of the European Parliament said "the EU cannot continue accession talks with Serbia if Belgrade does not align with EU sanctions against Russia." Serbia remains the only country in the region not to do so. [N1]

A draft European Parliament resolution will ask the EU to "prioritise the alignment of accession countries with the EU's common foreign and security policy and continue negotiations with Serbia only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia." [N1] [Euractiv]

(hi/gc)

Serbian ambassador banned from entering Montenegro

Montenegro has revoked the residence permits of 28 foreign nationals, including Serbian Ambassador Vladimir Bozovic, for allegedly "spreading malign influence." [AP News]

Bozovic had previously been declared persona non grata by the Montenegrin government for meddling in its internal affairs in 2020. Although he has not served as the Serbian ambassador since, Serbia is yet to replace him with another official. [Deutsche Welle]

Bozovic said this is a "scandal of unprecedented proportion" and condemned the move, saying that he was born in Montenegro. Banning him from entering is contrary to European law and the Montenegrin

constitution, he said, adding that he would appeal the decision. [N1]

(hi/gc)

Serbia's Vucic pledges to build oil pipeline with Hungary after spat with Croatia

Serbia will proceed with a plan to build an oil pipeline connecting Serbia and Hungary after Croatia refused to allow the transport of Russian oil through its territory and its pipelines from November 1.

"Croatia has been proven to be an unreliable partner, and we understand its message," Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said. Croatia cites EU sanctions for allowing oil supplies to flow to Serbia through its territory. [N1]

The EU sanctions against Russia also sanctions Serbia, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said. They will worsen the living standards of Serbians, including the Corat minority, and Croatia "requested these sanctions and brags about it," she said.

Croatia's choice was "an open act of hostility," she said. [N1]

In addition to energy cooperation with Hungary, Serbia has recently been involved in projects with Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Azerbaijan, as well as Albania and North Macedonia. Although they appear to be moving away from Russian gas, they are still reliant on Russian oil. There have also been efforts to import oil from Iran and Venezuela.

(hi/gc)

Swedish bank's former CEO tried on fraud charge

The former chief executive of Swedbank went on trial in early October charged with fraud over the way she managed the Swedish bank's anti-money laundering systems in Estonia.

Brigitte Bonnesen is suspected of "intentionally or by aggravated negligence passing on false information to prevent [...] suspicions" about the bank's anti-money laundering operations, according to prosecutor Thomas Langrot. [TheBalticTimes] [Reuters]

Bonnesen was fired in 2019 after Swedish public broadcaster SVT published a report that year alleging that at least EUR 3.9 billion of high-risk transactions had been channelled to the Baltic States, particularly to Estonia. [TheBalticTimes]

Sweden's financial regulator fined Swedbank around EUR 360 million in 2020 after the bank admitted previous shortcomings in efforts to prevent money laundering. [Reuters]

The ex-CEO could face up to six years in prison if convicted. Her lawyer said that she denies the charges. [TheBalticTimes]

(fs/pk)

Putin calls for making Turkey into a major gas hub

Russian President Vladimir Putin called for creating a major gas hub in Turkey with support from Moscow that will ensure supplies to Europe. [GovRu]

"We could move the lost volume of transit through the Nord Stream pipelines along the bottom of the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea region and thus make Turkey the main route for the supply of our fuel, our natural gas to Europe," Putin said at the the Russian Energy Week in October. This could "create a major gas hub for Europe in Turkey, if, of course, our partners are interested in seeing this happen," Putin said. [GovRu]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey is turning into a major gas hub that foreign countries rely on thanks to its balanced policy on the Ukrainian conflict. Erdogan noted that both Turkey and Russia had instructed their respective energy authorities to immediately start technical studies on the plan.

Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez said it was technically possible to implement Putin's idea and proposed

starting negotiations on the technical and economic parts of the project. Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller said the project could involve constructing new pipelines in parallel to the existing TurkStream pipeline.

Russian-Turkish Ties

Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak had a bilateral meeting with Donmez during the Russian Energy Week. Both countries said they were satisfied with the

development of Russia-Turkish relations and their steadily expanding potential.

"Contrary to unprecedented Western pressure on Turkey, the leadership of our countries is displaying due determination and courage and is acting in the interests of our nations," Novak said. In the first seven months of 2022, Russia-Turkish trade soared by almost 80 percent in the same period of 2021, he added. [GovRu]

The ministers pointed to greater cooperation in the gas sphere, the nuclear and conventional power industries. Turkey is becoming a major buyer of Russian gas. When completed, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant will meet up to ten percent of the country's power demand.

(gc)

UK supports Moldova's efforts to combat corruption

The United Kingdom's Minister of State for Europe Leo Docherty said on October 4 that Britain would help the Moldovan government fight corruption to ensure democracy, civil freedoms and development as the country pursues its EU membership. [Moldpres]

Docherty said Moldova is currently facing a range of problems triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moldovan Vice Prime Minister and Minister of European Integration Nicu Popescu appreciated Docherty's visit, saying that they discussed cooperation, market liberalisation and investments. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Albania: Iran is capable, legally justified to attack Mojahedin base in Albania, Iran says

State-run media from Iran said the country is in possession of "radar-evading unmanned aerial vehicles" that can "easily target" the base of the anti-government People's Mojahedin of Iran (MKO) in Tirana. [Sloboden Pecat]

Albania hosts approximately 3,000 Iranian dissidents, many of whom are members of MKO. The two

countries ended their diplomatic ties in September after Albania accused Iran of committing a series of cyberattacks against its government services. [Aljazeera]

The publication also claimed that Iran is legally justified to attack MKO bases abroad, saying that "when a terrorist group blatantly jeopardizes the security of a country [...] that country is entitled to target the base and members of that group." [Albanian Daily News]

(hi/gc)

Belarus, UAE to intensify trade relations

Belarus and the United Arab Emirates announced on October 6 that they would deepen bilateral cooperation and trade relations. Belarus's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik and the UAE Ambassador to Belarus Ibrahim Salim Mohamed Al Musharrakh committed to strengthening the ties between the two nations. [Belta]

(mo/gc)

UN committee says Finland violated rights of children in Syrian camp

The United Nations Child Rights Committee has accused Finland of violating the rights of children born to Finnish women who are being held in Syrian camps.

At least a dozen Finnish children are estimated to be held in the Al-Hol camp in north-east Syria along with their mothers due to suspicions that the women had assisted the so-called Islamic State.

The UN committee said Finland's failure to repatriate children who have been held in life-threatening conditions for years has violated their right to life, as well as their right to be free from inhuman and degrading treatment. [UNRIC]

The UN committee began its investigation after family members of some of the children contacted the organisation. [Euractiv]

A member of the UN committee, Ann Skelton said: "We call on Finland to take immediate and decisive action to preserve the lives of these children, and to bring them home to their families."

Some 60,000 people are kept at Al-Hol, 80 percent of whom are women and children. A UN investigation concluded that children had died in the camp from malnutrition and disease. [AlJazeera]

Finnish foreign ministry employee Jussi Tanner said: "We have no legal or actual means to forcibly pick up anyone from [the camp]. It requires the consent of the children's guardians and the desire to have a conversation. This is a matter completely independent of the will of the Finnish state." [Helsingin Sanomat]

However, he added: "We act immediately if there is an opportunity to pick up children."

(cg/pk)

Lithuania: Foreign minister declared country as "China-free"

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis declared on October 6 that his country was "China-free" after relations deteriorated earlier this year between Vilnius and Beijing over the opening of a Lithuanian trade office in Taiwan. [LRT]

Lithuania's ties with China sharply deteriorated when the Lithuanian government opted to increase cooperation with Taiwan, which is seen by the Chinese government as a breakaway province. [LRT]

(mo/gc)

Palestinians concerned about possible relocation of UK embassy to Jerusalem

Palestinian officials have reacted with concern to the possible relocation of the UK embassy to Jerusalem.

Former British Prime Minister Liz Truss told her Israeli counterpart Yair Lapid on September 22 that she would review a relocation of Britain's embassy to Jerusalem. This move would be a recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which is highly controversial since both Israelis and Palestinians claim the city as their capital.

Palestinian authorities criticised Truss's comment. Husam Zomot, head of the Palestinian mission in London, said such a move would "destroy" British-Palestinian relations. [Reuters] [BBC] [Reuters]

(jv/gc)

Portugal's opposition urges review of accords amid concern at Chinese foreign 'police stations'

The leader of Portugal's opposition Liberal Initiative party has called for accords including an extradition agreement between Lisbon and Hong Kong to be suspended after an NGO claimed in a report that informal Chinese "police stations" have been established in dozens of countries across five continents. [Lusa]

In operations that "violate the international rule of law", such "overseas police service centres" pass on information to the police in China, playing a key role in "persuasion-to-return" operations aimed at Chinese nationals on foreign soil, said the Safeguard Defenders NGO.

"The setting up of overseas police 'service stations' is a worldwide phenomenon, with the majority of such being in western democratic nations, with a particular focus on Europe," the NGO added.

Joao Cotrim Figueiredo, head of Portugal's Liberal Initiative party, said on October 4 that bilateral accords must be examined to see if Lisbon is, "with a total lack of reciprocity and total lack of diplomatic balance", giving powers to China – a state he described as "dictatorial" and one which he said persecutes its own citizens. [Lusa]

Safeguard Defenders said that operations such as the ones it describes in its report "eschew official bilateral police and judicial cooperation and violate the international rule of law".

The NGO added that Chinese "police stations" operate in the Portuguese cities of Porto, Lisbon and Madeira.

The allegations have not been confirmed by any official source in Portugal. Prime Minister Antonio Costa said neither he nor Portugal's secret services had any information about such Chinese centres, adding that the Liberal Initiative should transmit any data it has to the country's attorney general. [Plataforma Media]

(msa/pk)

Qatar summons German ambassador after Interior Minister's comment about human rights

Germany's ambassador to Qatar Claudius Fischbach was summoned by the Gulf state's Foreign Ministry after recent comments made by Interior Minister Nancy Faeser regarding the Gulf state's hosting of the 2022 World Cup. [CNN]

Fischbach had been handed an objection memo, expressing the Gulf nation's disappointment as well as complete rejection and condemnation of remarks made by Faeser, according to a statement from Qatar's Foreign Ministry.

The memo also stressed that Qatar is determined to organise one of the best editions to showcase the region's civilization and heritage to the whole world. [MOFA]

The memo highlighted that the remarks made by the minister ahead of her official visit to Doha next week was against diplomatic norms and conventions, especially in light of the distinguished ties between the State of Qatar and Germany in all fields.

During an interview on Thursday with CNN's German affiliate ARD, Faeser emphasised that the awarding of major sporting events such as the upcoming World Cup should be linked to criteria, "namely, compliance with human rights and principles of sustainability." [CNN]

Advisor to Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Majed bin Mohammed Al Ansari described the remarks made by Faeser as unacceptable and provocative for the Qatari people, stressing that it was unacceptable for politicians to try and score political points locally at the expense of their relations with other countries. [MOFA]

(gc)

Moldova: US imposes sanctions on Moldovan oligarchs Vlad Plahotniuc and Ilan Shor

The US Department of Treasury will impose sanctions on Moldovan business oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and leader of the Moldovan party "Shor," Ilan Shor, due to corruption and interference in elections, US

Ambassador to Moldova Kent Logsdon said on October 26. [Moldpres]

US authorities froze Plahotniuc and Shor's assets and banned them from travelling to the US, Logsdon said. [Moldpres]

(mo/gc)

Japan issues new sanctions against Russia after high level talks with Zelenskyy

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida promised further sanctions against Russia during a talk with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 30 September 2022. The new sanctions on items used to create chemical weapons were approved on the same day by the Japanese Cabinet.

The sanctions came as a reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin's declaration that Russia will annex four Ukrainian regions. Kishida declared the annexation as a violation of international law, strongly condemning unilateral changes in territorial sovereignty.

Other countries such as Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United States, and the European Union have similarly tightened economic sanctions against Russia and declared they would not recognise the referendums which led to the annexation of the Ukrainian regions by Russia. [AiR, No.40, October/2022, 1]

(aml/gc)

Russia, China to jointly strengthen satellite navigation systems

Russia and China have decided to construct satellite ground stations on each other's territory to enhance the interoperability of their global navigation systems, BeiDou in China and GLONASS in Russia, which both rival the US GPS system, according to the Russian space agency Roscosmos.

Three Chinese cities – Changchun in the northeast, Urumqi in the northwest, and Shanghai in the east – will have GLONASS stations installed as a result of agreements China and Russia reached during a regular conference on satellite navigation. [AiR, No.40, October/2022, 1]

(aml/gc)

UK, South Korea summit in Seoul to increase strategic cooperation

British Foreign Minister James Cleverly and his South Korean counterpart Park Jin discussed increased cooperation on issues such as economic security and climate change, at their seventh foreign ministerial strategic dialogue meeting in Seoul on 29 September 2022.

Cleverly also met with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol on the same day and assured Britain's support, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, to ensure a strong response in case of a seventh North Korean nuclear test. Yoon asked for the UK's support in its project to host the 2030 World Expo in Busan. The British Foreign Minister then visited the demilitarised zone on the North–South Korean border. [AiR, No.40, October/2022, 1]

(aml/gc)

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