German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
CPG

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 12, December/2022

Brought to you by CPG

Supported by KAS

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the December issue of Europe in Review in which, among other things, we bring you details of two major international summits that showed only modest consensus on some of the world's most pressing problems, including the war in Ukraine and global warming.

At the G20 summit in Bali, Indonesia, most leaders of the world's major economies condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, though an undisclosed number had "other views." At the COP27 summit in Egypt, the international community agreed to create a new fund to support developing countries, but failed to reach a consensus on limiting the use of fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine grinds on. Ukrainian forces in early November re-took Kherson, the only regional capital to be captured by Russia, marking Kiev's greatest success in the nine months since Moscow's invasion. In response, Russia has attacked Ukraine's power grid, leaving much of the country without electricity as the cold of winter sets in.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Beijing sparked criticism at home and abroad, with some highlighting Germany's economic dependence on China and others accusing Scholz of avoiding sensitive issues with Xi. His visit coincided with a European Union push to strengthen ties with ASEAN nations.

In Europe, the economic situation remains dire. The United Kingdom faces its biggest drop in living standards on record as surging prices erode incomes. Protests have erupted in several countries against higher prices as some governments, such as Belgium, witness increases in their budget deficits.

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

Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU

Main Sections

- Top Stories - Editors' Pick
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe
- International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Top Stories - Editors' Pick

War in Europe: Ukraine retakes Kherson as Russia devastates power grid

Ukrainian forces in early November re-took Kherson, the largest city and the only regional capital to be captured by Russia, marking Kiev's greatest success in the nine months since Moscow's invasion.

In response, Russia has lashed out against Ukraine's power grid – causing suffering to civilians who now find themselves regularly without electricity as temperatures drop below freezing.

Buoyed by its liberation of Kherson and eager to recover more territory, Ukraine nevertheless faces the hardest winter in a generation as the war drags on.

Russians pull back

Ukrainian troops rolled into Kherson on November 11 to be greeted by its remaining exhausted, but relieved, residents. The southern city had been emptied of Russian soldiers, who retreated across the Dnieper River to entrench on its eastern bank. Russian commanders claim that their forces were pulled back to "save the lives of Russian servicemen" – a stunning admission given that Moscow has been hesitant to admit to any setbacks in its "special military operation".

Russia's withdrawal was weeks in the making. Ukraine had made efforts to render Russian occupation of the city untenable. [Europe Monthly November 2022] Ukrainian forces attacked Russian ammunition depots and damaged bridges with missiles using Western-supplied HIMARS launchers. An attack in early October shrank Russia's area of control further as Ukraine continued to build up its forces for a long-telegraphed offensive. By November, Russian troops could only be supplied via frequently-bombed pontoon bridges and expensive – and dangerous – helicopter runs.

The Russian withdrawal was announced on state television, taking the form of an unusual and "choreographed" discussion between Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Sergey Surovikin, the commander of Russia's so-called special military operation. According to Surovikin, holding Kherson had become "futile" as Moscow was no longer able to supply its occupying troops. Surovikin proposed a withdrawal of soldiers across the Dnieper, and Shoigu agreed.

Retreat across Dnieper River

Russia had been moving units out of Kherson since Ukraine captured a chunk of the region in October, and by November 10 a significant amount of Moscow's forces had retreated across the river. Russia had also been evacuating civilians to Crimea – an action that Kiev has described as forcible deportation, a war crime. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Independent] [Associated Press] [Politico Europe] [Euronews] [Reuters] [CNN]

Ukraine began advancing in earnest towards Kherson during the night of November 9 and by the next morning had taken Snihurivka, a village that had been heavily contested for months. Outside that village, Ukrainian forces met no practical resistance during their run to the city. By the time they rolled in on November 11, Russian stragglers were either escaping the region across pontoon bridges or on motorboats, or ditching their uniforms to blend in with civilians.

Residents flocked to Kherson's streets and squares to celebrate with the arriving Ukrainian soldiers, many waving Ukrainian flags they had been hiding during the occupation.

Russia claimed that its withdrawal had taken place flawlessly with "not a single piece" of equipment left in Kherson. This is untrue, and there is evidence to suggest that both personnel and equipment were abandoned if they could not be evacuated in time. Early in the evacuation, Kirill Stremousov, the deputy head of the pro-Russian military-civilian local government in Kherson, died when his car was struck by a truck.

However, the scenes were markedly different from Russia's defeat at Kharkiv and Lyman in the east in early September and early October. As *Europe in Review* has reported, the result of those battles was a rout – Russian forces left behind entire stockpiles of military equipment and suffered heavy casualties. This time, Russia appears to have retreated with the vast majority of its heavy equipment and personnel intact and, crucially, ready to be redeployed elsewhere on the

sprawling frontline. [BBC News] [Guardian] [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Euractiv] [POLITICO Europe] [Euronews] [NPR]

The loss of Kherson – a city that President Vladimir Putin mere weeks ago declared to be part of Russia "forever" – is an enormous symbolic blow to Moscow. In terms of military strategy, Ukraine's capture of the city ensures that it can better defend the crucial ports of Mykolaiv and Odessa – where Russia's advance was stopped in March. [Institute for the Study of War] [Economist] [Al Jazeera] [Financial Times] [RFE/RL] [Euractiv] [Reuters]

More mass graves

Whenever Ukraine retakes a city in the war, its joy is inevitably tempered with anger and grief as atrocities are uncovered. Kherson was no different.

The city had been under Russian control since March 2 and bears the scars of the occupation. Ukrainian soldiers entered a city without running water, electricity or cellphone signals. Food had become scarce as Russian soldiers looted essential items and consumer goods in equal measure. Russia had destroyed the city's telephone tower the day before the liberation.

Mass graves were unearthed in the days that followed at Pravdyne, a nearby village. Residents testified to the consistent use of torture by the Russian occupiers. Mines have been left all over the region and will likely continue to kill for years into the future. Kiev has urged citizens to evacuate the city as temperatures drop and Russian strikes prevent the restoration of electricity.

Russian forces have now put the Dnieper river between themselves and the Ukrainian army. With all major bridges taken down, Ukraine will face severe difficulties if it tries to advance further on that front. Still, with the loss of Kherson, Russia has now lost half the territory it held in Ukraine in April. Successive Ukrainian victories at Kharkiv, Lyman and now Kherson have left Russia fighting primarily on the defensive – with one notable exception in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, at Bakhmut. [Guardian] [AP News] [Euronews] [New York Times] [CNN] [Al Jazeera] [Deutsche Welle]

Ukrainian energy grid targeted

In retaliation for Kherson's liberation – and in keeping with a trend of attacking civilian infrastructure with missiles since Ukraine struck the Kerch Strait bridge in

October – Russia has launched a barrage of cruise missiles at Ukraine's energy facilities.

The results have been immensely disruptive, with Ukraine experiencing rolling blackouts and struggling to maintain power supply to its cities and towns. Ukraine has been able to restore supplies quickly, even in Kherson, but this is expensive and often dangerous work as Russia repeats its strikes on the power stations.

On November 21, Russian strikes cut power to 40 percent of the country – causing Ukrainian officials to consider evacuating major cities should their infrastructure be too severely damaged. The lack of power bites much harder as Ukraine is now in the grips of cold weather, leading neighbouring countries to prepare for a fresh wave of refugees. The missile strikes were, and are, often inaccurate and hit civilian residences, apartment blocks, and even a playground – resulting in significant casualties. [Politico Europe] [BBC News] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Euronews] [Wall Street Journal] [New York Times]

Ukrainians have shown resilience in the face of the Kremlin's latest tactics against them. Moscow's strategy of bombing Ukrainian cities appears likely to produce a continued determination among their inhabitants to fight back.

Speaking to the Associated Press, Kiev resident Anastasia Pyrozhenko summed up this attitude by saying: "We are ready to live without light, but not with the Russians".

Meanwhile, the attacks are of questionable military value. Ukraine's troops have access to their own generators and fuel supplies, and are well-equipped for freezing temperatures.

Russia, for its part, is expending valuable cruise missiles – the most advanced of which are difficult for it to replace. Mark Schneider, a senior analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy, argues that Russia is fast burning through its supply of missiles. His view is that the effectiveness of Russian strikes is undermined by the variety of different systems used – stretching from those designed to carry nuclear weapons all the way to anti-ship missiles. [Institute for the Study of War] [Associated Press] [Guardian] [US Naval Institute] [Sky News] [PBS] [Reuters] [Euronews] [National Interest]

Kiev calls for generators

Once again, Ukraine's western allies have stepped in – this time promising shipments of diesel generators in an effort to somewhat mitigate civilian misery. Kiev has cried out for support in the form of generators and air defences as Russia, in the words of NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg, has "weaponized winter".

Generators, as a form of "non-lethal" aid, are already being sent to Ukraine along with crucial replacements for damaged infrastructure, such as transformers. The European Union has been a leader in this regard, establishing a so-called Ukraine Energy Support Fund to help the country's battered power grid through the winter and beyond.

The EU has also provided around EUR 1 billion in humanitarian aid specifically to help Ukrainians keep the lights on and temperatures up in the months ahead. The European Parliament, largely in response to this wave of attacks, has designated Russia a "state sponsor of terrorism". *(See separate story in this issue)*

While humanitarian aid is aimed at the symptoms of Russia's assault, Ukraine is also taking aim at the cause.

Kiev has requested the US-made Patriot missile system to accompany the other anti-missile systems it has received thus far, such as the Norwegian-made NASAMS. The NASAMS has been hailed by its new operators, reportedly shooting down every missile it has targeted. However, the Patriot is a more adaptable platform and is considered the "gold-standard" in anti-missile defence. Unlike NASAMS, which has a fixed medium range, the Patriot is capable of intercepting at short, medium, and long range – more effective against the types of suicide drones Russia has employed.

Patriots remain out of Kiev's reach for now, though there are indications that this may change in the future, with discussions ongoing on the matter between NATO countries. [BBC News] [NPR] [PBS] [AP News] [The Hill] [Deutsche Welle] [New York Times] [Euronews]

Alarm as missile lands in Poland

Fears of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia escalated when a missile crashed down on a Polish farm near the Ukrainian border on November 15, killing two men in a country that is a member of the Western military alliance.

A tense few hours followed as NATO leaders held an impromptu meeting at the G20 summit in Bali. The Polish authorities came to the conclusion that the

missile was most likely a Ukrainian air defence system that had gone off course. Kiev disputed this, while Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova gloated on the Telegram messaging app about the death of the two Poles.

The incident, though not a Russian attack, led to condemnation of Russia's missile strikes in Ukraine and saw Germany offer to move Patriot missile systems to Poland. Warsaw initially welcomed the offer, then changed its mind, telling Germany to give the systems to Ukraine instead, before finally saying it may consider hosting the Patriots on Polish territory after all. [Telegraph] [Associated Press] [Politico Europe] [BBC News] [Euractiv] [RFE/RL] [Reuters]

Grinding offensive

Meanwhile, Russia continues a grinding offensive in Bakhmut in the east.

Covered in zig-zagging trenches filled with mud, craters formed by ceaseless shelling, and ruined farm buildings, the surrounding area is now reminiscent of the battlefields of World War I. Casualties are high on both sides, though in recent weeks Russian personnel have been taking heavy losses trying to break through Ukrainian lines. Much of Bakhmut city has been destroyed, though a small number of its pre-war population of 70,000 continue to live there. The city is used as a field hospital for a constant stream of Ukrainian casualties.

Russia has been attacking Bakhmut since late July, making miniscule gains and facing stern resistance. Russian forces consist of regular army units, Wagner group mercenaries, and what remains of the separatist forces of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Bakhmut's strategic utility, however, is a point of debate among experts.

Dr Jack Watling, a senior fellow in defence studies at the UK's Royal United Services Institute, argued in an article for the *Telegraph* that the Russian offensive is now in search of a "symbolic" victory. If Bakhmut is taken, Ukrainian supply lines in the Donbas will not be seriously impeded, while Russia would still need to attack the fortified cities of Sloviansk, Siversk, Kramatorsk and Avdiivka to wrest control of the eastern Donbas region. [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Institute for the Study of War] [Forbes] [France 24] [RUSI] [Telegraph]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now into its tenth month, has devolved into a brutal and nihilistic struggle. Civilians are no longer just collateral damage – they are

the key targets of Russia's strategy. The misery inflicted on Ukrainian cities matches the misery found in the freezing trenches at Bakhmut – though both are of questionable use to a Russian military that is losing territory month-on-month.

(wb/pk)

Climate summit agrees fund for hardest hit nations, amid lack of progress on fossil fuels

The international community has agreed at a global summit to create a new fund to support developing countries suffering the worst effects of climate change, but no consensus was reached on limiting the use of fossil fuels. [BBC News] [Sky News] [Independent]

The EU, a key backer of the fund, had warned it was ready to abandon negotiations at the COP27 summit in the face of what it saw as a lack of progress and consensus from international partners. [Independent] [The Guardian] [Independent]

The new fund was finally approved on November 20 by 197 countries – every participating member of the summit in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh – after negotiations that went two days beyond schedule. [Independent] [BBC News]

The establishment of the new "loss and damage" fund was a key demand of the G77, an international group of developing nations that face disproportionately severe consequences of climate change. [The Guardian] [Independent]

"I am confident we have turned a corner in how we work together to achieve climate goals," said Pakistan's climate minister, Sherry Rehman, who represented the G77 in the negotiations. [BBC News] [The Guardian]

Cop-out over fossil fuels?

However, no deal was reached on limiting the use of fossil fuels to keep global temperatures from rising beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius – the threshold scientists have identified as necessary to preserve the safety of the planet. [The Guardian] [Sky News]

"Too many parties are not ready to make more progress today in the fight against the climate crisis… This deal is not enough [on cutting emissions]", said European Commission vice president and climate envoy Frans Timmermans. [The Guardian] [Politico]

Meanwhile, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said it was "more than frustrating to see overdue steps on mitigation and the phase-out of fossil energies being stonewalled by a number of large emitters and oil producers." [Al Jazeera]

Saudi Arabia, China and Russia were among the countries that opposed a commitment to stick to the 1.5 degree goal. [Sky News]

'Our planet is still in the emergency room'

During negotiations for the deal, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the scale of loss and damage worldwide as a result of human contributions to the climate crisis is undeniable. [Yahoo News]

"Our planet is still in the emergency room. We need to drastically reduce emissions now – and this is an issue this COP did not address. A fund for loss and damage is essential – but it's not an answer if the climate crisis washes a small island state off the map – or turns an entire African country to desert," Guterres said in closing remarks. [United Nations]

It could take years, however, until the agreed fund is set up, as questions remain over where the money will come from and how much countries will receive. [Reuters] [Sky News]

According to analysts, questions are also being raised regarding COP processes – which rely on consensus – as a result of the compromises which had to be made to agree on the loss and damage fund. [Sky News] [The Guardian]

Observers also note that the language used in the finalised deal could potentially allow natural gas to be classed as a "low-emission" source of energy. Although less polluting than coal, natural gas remains a significant contributor to climate change. [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [The Guardian]

Several other measures to tackle climate change have also been adopted as a result of the COP27 summit, including pledges to speed up the transition to zero-emission vehicles and an initiative aimed at recycling half of solid waste produced in Africa by 2050. [Yahoo News]

Reduction of methane gas emissions was another international priority, with more than 150 countries having signed the Global Methane Pledge to reduce methane emissions by 30 percent by 2030. China, notably, was not a signatory. [Reuters] [Yahoo News]

(ek/pk)

Most G20 leaders condemn Russia; all pledge efforts to limit inflation, ensure food security

Most leaders of the G20 group of major world economies condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a statement concluding a summit on November 16, while all agreed to continue efforts to reduce financial turmoil and address food security challenges.

Leaders meeting on the Indonesian island of Bali said in the statement: "Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine and stressed it is causing immense human suffering and exacerbating existing fragilities in the global economy".

The document referred to previous UN declarations deploring the war in Ukraine but also noted that "other views" of the situation existed and added that "the G20 is not the forum to resolve security issues". [Reuters]

Rebuke for Moscow

The leaders said the use or threat to use nuclear weapons was inadmissible, an implicit rebuke of Moscow, which has employed nuclear sabre-rattling rhetoric throughout the conflict. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Members also promised to take coordinated steps on food security and called for the continuation of the Black Sea grain initiative, an agreement brokered between the United Nations and Moscow that ensures Ukrainian food exports are not blocked by Russian warships. [BBC] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

Members pledged to continue to "calibrate the pace of monetary policy tightening" with their central banks, recognising the need to limit ripple effects across countries.

The leaders also renewed vows to prevent excessive exchange-rate volatility, being mindful that "many currencies have moved significantly" this year, and agreed to limit further fiscal stimulus measures, partially blamed for soaring inflation. [Euronews] [Reuters]

Regarding climate change, leaders renewed their commitment to "pursue efforts to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5C" and make efforts to "phase down" unabated coal use. [Reuters]

The intergovernmental forum in Bali was attended by newly re-elected Chinese President Xi Jinping, who was making his second overseas trip since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Xi conducted a series of bilateral meetings, notably with President Joe Biden and leaders of countries allied to the US, including French President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron asked his Chinese counterpart to convince Putin to end the war in Ukraine, and floated the possibility of visiting China in 2023, Covid-19 restrictions permitting. [The Guardian]

Consternation at missile strike in Poland

A meeting between Xi and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was cancelled, as were some other scheduled talks, when G7 and NATO members on November 16 scrambled to discuss their response to a missile landing in eastern Poland. That incident prompted fears that the conflict in Ukraine had spilled over and that Moscow had targeted a NATO member country.

Later, US and NATO officials said the missile, which killed two Polish men, was probably fired by Ukrainian air defence systems responding to a wave of Russian attacks on Ukraine. (*See our main story about the war*) [BBC]

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not attend the G20 summit. His foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, present in his stead, left Bali a day before the end of the talks – just as Moscow rained scores of missiles down on Ukraine. [ABC]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was invited to speak virtually at the summit, addressing leaders as "the G19" in a snub to Russia. Zelensky told attendees there was "a terrorist state" among them. Lavrov responded by criticising the "politicisation" of the meeting. [Al Jazeera]

In Moscow, however, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov praised Russian diplomats' efforts in negotiating the wording of the final G20 communique, telling journalists that Russia views the declaration as a "balanced document" that recorded the "difference in approaches and the difference in points of view". [TASS]

The Kremlin published a full and accurate translation of the statement on its website, despite the document's strong wording. The G20 statement mentioned demands for Russia's "complete and unconditional withdrawal" from Ukraine, and used terms prohibited to Russian journalists, calling the

conflict a “war” and referring to “aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine”. [Reuters] [TASS] [Europe Monthly April 2022]

Mixed responses

In Western Europe, French right-wing newspaper *l’Opinion* applauded the statement, commenting: “The simple fact that all countries, including Russia, agreed to sign such a document shows that the fight for multilateralism is not lost. This is good news.”

German business news outlet *Handelsblatt* called the summit “a foreign policy success” for Chancellor Olaf Scholz, crediting the German leader for laying the groundwork for the show of unity at the summit.

On the other hand, the United Kingdom’s *The Guardian,* a centre-left daily, called the summit a “modest success” for newly appointed British Prime Minister Sunak, but criticised the joint statement, saying it “did not go beyond non-committal platitudes”.

Civil society groups also lamented the G20’s final declaration for its lack of concrete action, notably on addressing world hunger.

Friederike Roder of the Global Citizen group said: “The G20 is merely repeating old commitments from previous years or noting developments elsewhere, rather than taking on leadership themselves”. She added: “Fifty million people are at the brink of starvation as we speak. There is no time for the G20 to issue calls to action – they are the ones who have to act.” [Reuters]

International charity Oxfam denounced G20 leaders for failing to address rising global poverty. Oxfam’s G20 lead, Joern Kalinski, said: “The world needs concrete action to avert economic disaster for poor people and countries, but all we were left with was recycled assurances, a simmering debt crisis and vaccine and health steps as useful as putting a band aid on a broken leg.” [Al Jazeera]

The members of the G20 represent 60 percent of the world’s population, and account for 80 percent of global GDP and 75 percent of global exports.

(qv/pk)

German Chancellor’s China visits sparks criticism

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in his inaugural visit to Beijing on November 4, a visit that sparked domestic and international criticism. [DW] [Reuters] [AP]

Scholz, joined by a delegation of German business leaders, visited shortly after he backed on October 26 a controversial investment deal by Chinese shipping company COSCO in one of Hamburg's port terminals. He said that he sought a deeper economic relationship with Beijing but expected equal treatment during his trip. [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

"What is clear for us is that we do not believe in ideas of decoupling (with China) but it is also clear that that has something to do with economic ties as equals, with reciprocity, with the issue that access to investment must be provided equally," he said in a statement at the start of talks with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. [France24]

Scholz's coalition partners, government ministries and experts criticised the Hamburg port deal, saying that it will allow China to expand "strategic influence on German and European transport infrastructure" and "Germany's dependence on China." Speaking on background, a senior US State Department official said on November 3 that the US had strongly suggested that China not be permitted to get a controlling stake in the Hamburg port terminal. [DW] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly November 2022][NPR]

Noah Barkin, who researches European-Chinese relations for the think tank Rhodium Group, said that the COSCO-Hamburg deal implies Scholz is not listening to his own government. "The optics are not great," Barkin said. It appeared "that Scholz, shortly before heading to Beijing, is offering the Chinese government a gift," he said.[NPR]

Responsible for peace

During his visit with Xi Jinping, Scholz reportedly talked about human rights concerns regarding the treatment of the Uyghur minority in China as well as Beijing's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and possible reunification with Taiwan. [DW] [Reuters]

On Ukraine, Scholz said he told Xi that China, as "a geopolitical actor and permanent member of the UN Security Council, is responsible for peace in the world," and should "assert its influence on Russia." "Everyone here in China knows that an escalation of the war would have consequences for us all," Mr. Scholz told reporters. [LeMonde]

The German Chancellor was "ticking the boxes" and didn't work on sensitive issues in an "effective way," Former European Parliament political advisor Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy said. [DW]

Xi said that China-Germany relations could not have reached today's level without the extraordinary vision and political courage of generations of Chinese and German leaders. Xi added that political trust is easy to destroy but difficult to rebuild and that it should be nurtured and protected by both sides. [ChinaForeignMinistry]

While Scholz was shaking hands with Xi in the Golden Hall of the Great Hall of the People, US Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken was telling reporters at the end of the two-day G7 foreign ministers meeting in the Western German town of Munster: "We [G7] are clear-eyed about the need to align on China."

Scholz's trip could have a negative impact on a joint European China policy, according to experts. Lithuania and China have sparred after Vilnius opened a representative office in Taiwan. China regards Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy, as its province and treats any public engagement with its government in Taipei as a political rebuke. [VOA]

Europeans alarmed

China's treatment of Lithuania has alarmed Europe at a time when many countries are viewing Beijing with more wariness. The EU is one of Taiwan's largest trading partners, and many countries have turned to Taiwan for its advanced manufacturing capability and renowned semiconductor industry. [VOA]

Scholz "sent a message that continuing trade and investment will be a political priority," said Reinhard Butikofer of the Green Party and part of a European delegation in Taiwan. He "has ignored competent advice on China," Butikofer added. [DW]

The European Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton, said that countries should not be "naive" when dealing with Chinese investments. Samuel Cogolati, member of the Belgian parliament, said it was "unfortunate" that Scholz's visit was not "a united European front." [Euronews]

China has been Germany's most important trading partner for the sixth consecutive year in 2021, according to the German Federal Statistical Office. Nearly 49 percent of Germans want the country to be less economically dependent on China, a survey by news outlet ARD showed. [Tagesschau]

“Germany is simply too hooked on exports to China to take a tougher stance on the country’s appalling human-rights record,” Melvyn B. Krauss, Professor Emeritus of Economics at New York University, wrote on November 5. “One in three German cars is sold in China. In 2019, Volkswagen sold nearly 40 percent of its vehicles in the country, while Mercedes-Benz sold about 700,000 passenger cars there.” [Project Syndicate]

Despite the criticism levelled at Scholz, Germany blocked a possible investment by China in two semiconductor factories last month due to national security concerns. The Foreign Ministry also announced after Scholz’s trip that it was working on a draft for a new “China strategy” that may tighten rules for companies trading with China and place a bigger role on human rights.

Hanoi, Singapore

Following Scholz’s trip to China, the first by a European leader since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, he visited Vietnam and Singapore before going to the G20 meeting in Indonesia. His trip was meant to underline Germany's commitment to other partners in the region after the chancellor's Beijing visit.

Singapore and Vietnam were among the “dynamic” countries in the region where Germany wanted to develop its cooperation, Scholz said in Hanoi. Scholz noted Vietnam's major stores of rare earth minerals, a key raw material for green industries, including in the production of batteries, where China currently dominates the market. [Barrons]

(mb/gc)

European Union wants to strengthen ties with ASEAN

The European Union wants to strengthen its cooperation with ASEAN nations as it tries to deepen trade and investment and promote multilateralism and a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region, according to the President of the European Council.

The EU wants to deepen cooperation between the two blocs to manage ongoing and future crises, council president Charles Michel said during a video message for the ASEAN business and investment summit on November 10. The EU and ASEAN “share a strong and

strategic partnership" and need to cooperate more closely to overcome challenges "in these turbulent times," he said.

The two organisations can expand ties in sectors such as the digital economy, green technologies and supply chain resilience, Michel said, adding that ASEAN has "untapped potential" that makes it attractive for European investment. ASEAN and the EU "share the same view of the Indo-Pacific region… as one for dynamic growth and opportunities," he added.

Underscoring this, the two blocs signed the EU-ASEAN Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement in October. The agreement aims to facilitate sustainable trade and travel between the two regions.

Both organisations are "strong advocates for multilateralism and the rules-based international order," Michel said. Both regions are working to ensure safe trade routes in the Indo-Pacific region.

Economic recovery

ASEAN nations are recovering after the Covid-19 pandemic with growth expected to average 5 percent during the next two years. The recovery is based on widespread vaccination efforts, easing mobility restrictions and the opening of borders to tourism, but the performance in the region varies with bigger and resource-rich economies growing faster than smaller economies or those dependent on oil and food imports. [ERIA]

According to preliminary data, regional inflation was steady at 6.2 percent in October. Faster price increases were recorded in Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam, while Thailand and Indonesia recorded slower rises in prices. Next year, inflation should ease but will remain sustained due to protracted pass-through effects. [FocusEconomics]

ASEAN, a regional organisation consisting of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, held a three-day summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia from November 10 to 13. The members discussed the rivalry between the US and China, the political crisis in Myanmar after the military coup in February 2021, the war in Ukraine, and the region's economic development.

The great challenge at the moment, according to Michel, is Russia's war in Ukraine, and the impact it is having globally. The EU is trying to diversify its energy sources in response to the Kremlin's use of food and

energy “as weapons of mass destabilisation,” Michel said.

The EU “will focus on the regional integration of electricity markets in the ASEAN region” and promote clean energy through cooperation, Michel said. Two examples are: the Green Team Europe Initiative in partnership with ASEAN that commits to climate and environmental protection and the Just Energy Transition Partnerships with Vietnam and Indonesia that support the two countries in the transition from coal to renewable energy. [European Council]

Cambodia condemns war in Ukraine

Cambodian Foreign Minister Kung Phoak condemned the war in Ukraine as ASEAN doesn’t support threats or the use of force against another sovereign country. ASEAN also wants to strengthen its relationship with Ukraine, a first step being Ukraine signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia on November 10. [Aljazeera]

He said that ASEAN won’t “choose sides” and will “remain neutral” amid US-China rivalry and while China remains the largest trading partner for the region, ASEAN doesn’t want to have their “economy dominated entirely by one other economy.”

To achieve this goal, the association upgraded its relation with the US to a comprehensive strategic partnership and strengthened its trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand in meetings on the sidelines of the summit. [CNBC] [AiR, No.64, November/2022, 3]

On December 14, the EU and ASEAN bloc will celebrate the 45th anniversary of their dialogue partnership with the first EU-ASEAN summit in Brussels.

(aml/gc)

United Kingdom: Living standards face steepest drop on record

The United Kingdom faces its biggest drop in living standards on record as surging prices, including for food and energy, erodes incomes across the country. [Office for Budget Responsibility]

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), the government's forecaster, said that household incomes, once rising prices were taken into account, would drop

by 7 percent in the next few years. The UK started recording income levels in 1956.

The OBR added that the squeeze on real incomes, interest rate increases, and a decline in home prices have weighed on consumption and investment, tipping the British economy into a recession that will last for more than a year. OBR also expects the number of people who are unemployed to rise by more than 500,000. [Office for Budget Responsibility]

The UK economy would shrink by 2 percent during the totality of a recession, which started earlier this year and is expected to last more than 12 months, with house prices forecast to drop by 9% by 2024.

British Chancellor Jeremy Hunt said the UK was already in recession and set to shrink further next year. He said that new tax increases and tighter government spending would lead to a "shallower downturn" with fewer jobs lost. [BBC] [Financial Times]

"The UK is the only G10 economy where activity remains below its pre-pandemic level, and our economists expect negative growth in 2023, while underlying inflation is exceptionally strong and shows limited signs of coming down," Michael Cahill, a strategist at Goldman Sachs, said.

Autumn statement

Hunt said in his Autumn Statement that new tax increases and tighter public spending in a budget plan on October 17 were designed to save GBP 55 billion a year in an effort by the government to fix British public finances. The measures were required after the blow dealt to the country's fiscal reputation by former Prime Minister Liz Truss, he said.

The government is trying to tackle rising prices and restore the UK's credibility with international markets.

Truss's economic policies sent the Sterling tumbling in September to its lowest level against the dollar in three decades. While it has rallied back from those steep losses, it is likely to remain one of the major currency underperformers into the new year, according to the latest Goldman Sachs forecasts. [PoundSterlingLive]

Hunt's budget announced "served as the final step of a huge fiscal policy U-turn, which has significantly reduced the risk premium on UK assets," Cahill said. "But we still expect Sterling to underperform in the near term as it absorbs the latest negative supply shock from energy prices." [PoundSterlingLive]

'Enemy of stability'

"High inflation is the enemy of stability," Hunt said. "It means higher mortgage rates, more expensive food and fuel bills, businesses failing and unemployment rising. It erodes savings, causes industrial unrest, and cuts funding for public services." [gov.uk]

Hunt announced plans to freeze income tax allowances and lower the threshold at which people start to pay the highest rate of income tax. He said a windfall tax on oil and gas firms would be increased to 35 percent from its current rate of 25 percent from January 1 to March 2028. He also introduced a temporary 45 percent levy on electricity generators.

Support of GBP 26 billion in cost of living support was announced, including ongoing support for the rising energy costs. [Gov.UK] The mini-budget included a rise of 10.1 percent in working age benefits. The National Living Wage will increase to GB GBP 10.42 an hour, a rise of 9.7 percent. The increase will give full-time workers an increase of GBP 1,600 a year. [Gov.UK]

Rachel Reeves, the Labour shadow chancellor, called Hunt's measures an "invoice for the economic carnage" caused under Truss, saying no similar economies were having to curb spending. [The Guardian] [BBC News] [Reuters]

(chm-jn/gc)

Wave of strikes across Europe over wages and soaring living costs

Protests and strikes have erupted in a string of European countries as workers face the biggest decline in real income in years. The gap between pay rates and the cost of living in the eurozone has widened. Prices jumped an average of 10.7 percent in October year-on-year, while salaries in the second quarter were only 4.1 percent higher than in the same period of 2021. [Bloomberg]

Unrest grows in UK

After what some labelled as a "summer of discontent", the United Kingdom is expected to have widespread walkouts this winter. The disruptions will affect hospitals, emergency services, schools, postal services, telecoms and cash handling. [Reuters] [The Telegraph]

The UK registered double-digit inflation for the first time in decades in July, and hit 11.1 percent in October.

[Office for National Statistics] Britain is the first country among major rich economies to face inflation of above 10 percent. [Reuters]

British health workers are expected to take unprecedented strike action on December 15 and 20. Up to 100,000 nurses are set to walk out, with more than 10,000 ambulance workers participating. [Reuters] Meanwhile, the latest data reveals that a record 7 million patients are on waiting lists for hospital treatment, according to health authorities in England. [The Guardian]

Industrial action in Belgium and Greece

Greek and Belgian workers took industrial action on November 9, causing disruptions in transportation and the shutdown of public services. [AP News]

Thousands took part in demonstrations in Athens and Thessaloniki in northern Greece. [AP News] In the second 24-hour strike this year, workers protested against layoffs and pay cuts. [The Guardian]

Inflation in Greece is among the highest in the euro area, and the country is still recovering from almost a decade of debt crisis. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

In Belgium, a nationwide strike disrupted traffic and businesses. “Prices of electricity, gas, food have gone through the roof over the past year”, said the Christian Democrat trade union ACV. “In contrast, wages are not allowed to increase for years… This has to stop.” [AP news]

Transport disruptions in France and Austria

A transport strike paralyzed Paris on November 10. [RFI] France has had multiple strikes since September, with a general walkout taking place in the capital on October 16.

Workers are pushing for wage hikes amid President Emmanuel Macron’s planned pensions system reform, which would increase the retirement age from 62 to 64 or 65. [Le Monde]

In Austria, a strike in rail services on November 28 halted train traffic across the country. Unionists said they were ready to strike again if an agreement is not reached with the state-owned rail company OBB. [Reuters] [VOA]

Spanish workers demand higher pay

Thousands of Spanish workers marched in Madrid on November 3 to demand higher wages amid rising costs

of living and high inflation.

The rally was organised by some of Spain's major labour unions including the General Union of Workers (UTG) and the Workers' Commissions (CCOO). Demonstrators called for an increase in the minimum wage to above the current EUR 1,000 a month. Spain's inflation rate peaked at 10.8 percent in July, later falling to 7.3 percent in October.

In response to demands by unions, Antonio Garamendi, the leader of Spain's business owners' association (CEOE), said: "We are not saying 'no' to salary rises." But he added: "What we cannot sign off on is that salary rises match inflation." [Associated Press] [Europapress]

The UTG and CCOO have warned that if their call for higher pay is not met, disputes will continue. [El Pais]

Portuguese public sector workers protest

Thousands of Portuguese health workers, teachers and civil servants went on strike to demand salary increases on November 18. The walk-out took place a week before a final vote on the 2023 budget, which includes a wage increase between 2 and 8 percent for civil servants. [Reuters] [Portugal News]

For the private sector, the Portuguese government in October agreed with business associations and the country's second-largest labour union, the UGT, on a 5.1 percent rise. [Reuters]

The efforts by Antonio Costa's socialist cabinet have not stopped the wave of discontent, as consumer prices reached a 10 percent increase year-on-year in October. [Reuters]

Hungarian teachers strike after dismissals for civil disobedience

Hungarian teachers, students and parents protested over educators' pay on November 18, widening an "I want to teach" movement launched in September. [Reuters]

The interior ministry on November 30 announced the dismissal of eight teachers for participating in civil disobedience, and hundreds of teachers went on indefinite strike the day after. [Euractiv]

A government decree in February drastically restricted teachers' walkouts, in a move that the teachers' union labelled an "abuse of law". [Hungary Today]

In Albania, opposition party leads anti-government demo

Anti-government protesters demonstrated outside of the office of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in the country's capital, Tirana, on November 12. Tens of thousands turned out, calling for the leader of the centre-left Socialist Party to resign. [AlJazeera]

The protest, seen as a build-up to May 2023 elections, came on the back of rising costs of living. During the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, an estimated 22 percent of Albania's population lived below the poverty line, according to the World Bank. [WorldBank]

Opposition supporters blame Rama for a spike in young men leaving the country. Migration from Albania has increased since 2020, leaving the country with "ghost towns."

The protest was organised by the leader of the opposition centre-right Democratic Party, Sali Berisha. Addressing the crowd of protesters, Berisha said: "Just as 32 years ago, the world sees us as people [arriving in] small boats."

Albania saw an exodus in 1990 following the fall of communist rule. Meanwhile, there has been a recent spate of Albanian migrants crossing the English Channel into the UK. [ABC] [AP]

(jn-km-msa/pk)

European energy prices stabilise at high levels ahead of uncertain winter

As real electricity prices fluctuated across Europe in November, governments moved to stabilise prices through market intervention, subsidising both households and industry. An uncertain winter in Europe, largely without Russian gas, is around the corner. Prices, mostly driven by natural gas, appear flat at present, albeit at levels unsustainable without government support and over 100 percent higher than a year ago. [CNN]

Long term weather forecasts are for a mild winter, and European countries have not publicly mobilised to ration electricity in advance or prepare for a general blackout in case of unexpected cold weather. [Bloomberg] Gas reserves are above 95 percent across Europe. However, the German government has privately begun preparations to issue emergency cash to banks and limit personal cash withdrawals in case of blackouts that would necessitate cash payments for retail transactions, including for basic groceries. [Reuters] [Reuters]

Even if European energy prices appear to have stabilised for now, war in Ukraine has permanently changed the continent's energy market. European countries will be competing worldwide for natural gas in the future, with significantly higher energy prices likely to continue in the long term. [WSJ]

European subsidies

Following a change in government, the UK has lowered its subsidy guarantee by 20 percent to households in order to reduce budget pressure. [Reuters] France has committed to spending an additional EUR 8.4 billion to defray business energy costs. [Reuters] Italy, meanwhile, committed to spending EUR 30 billion to help both households and industry, in addition to an estimated EUR 75 billion spent to defray energy costs in 2022. Reuters

Germany nationalised Securing Energy for Europe GmbH (SEFE), a former trading and supply unit of Russia's Gazprom, providing an additional EUR 14 billion to ensure its continued solvency and ability to continue to supply gas to customers. [Bloomberg] The company had been operating under trusteeship since April. This is the second German nationalisation in two months.

Gas and crude oil prices fluctuate as winter approaches

Natural gas futures prices at the European price benchmark Dutch Title Transfer Facility (TTF) dropped precipitously from approximately EUR 334 in late August to EUR 99 per megawatt hour by the beginning of November. [Trading Economics] This fluctuation was driven by concerns about Russian gas cut-offs, which raised prices, and announcements that Europe had exceeded gas storage targets, which lowered them. [WSJ]

The EU Copernicus Climate Change Service forecast unseasonably warm weather in Europe this winter, while a 15-20 percent reduction in gas consumption, achieved largely through national enforcement of EU political agreements, reduced price pressures. [WSJ]

Natural gas tankers with no storage tanks to accept their oil are floating off Cadiz in Spain and in the English Channel. Prices are projected to trade between EUR 120 and EUR 180 per megawatt hour on the Dutch TTF over the coming year. Natural gas storage had been partially filled by Russian supplies this year, with flows finally ending in the summer. There will be no such Russian flows projected next year.

Crude prices dropped the equivalent of EUR 10 on a barrel of oil over the course of November following news of slow economic growth in China and impending global recession. [WSJ]

Price caps imposed

December 5 marked the start of both a G7 (Germany, France, Italy, US, UK, Canada, and Japan) and an EU price cap on Russian crude oil, and an EU ban on the import of Russian seaborne crude. [WSJ] Russian crude sold above a price cap of USD 60 (EUR 57) per barrel cannot receive insurance, finance or shipment from a company domiciled in any party to the agreement, essentially forcing Russia to ship oil only in its own vessels.

Russia has augmented its commercial fleet to enable it to largely ship its own oil over the past year. [Reuters] However, the amount of crude which can be transported in these vessels is less than the total amount of Russian current seaborne trade of approximately 3.5 million barrels per day, and almost five million counting refined products such as diesel. [BI] [FW] Estimates vary, but Russian seaborne exports may fall by 200,000 to over 1.5 million barrels per day due to lack of shipping capacity. This means Russia will suffer a decrease in revenue. But the majority of oil will still be shipped to Asian markets.

The price cap will not have an immediate effect in Russia as Russian Urals grade crude is already trading below the cap in European markets. [Bloomberg] No signs of an international oil price surge have appeared, but in February an EU ban on refined oil products from Russia goes into effect which may have more consequences for European energy prices. [Gulf News] [Bloomberg]

Russian East Siberia Pacific Ocean (ESPO) crude oil exported through Kamchatka was trading on December 5 at USD 79 (EUR 75.3) per barrel in Asian markets, significantly above the G7 cap, which Russia claimed it would not abide by. [Reuters]

Germany completes 1st floating LNG terminal

Germany completed construction of the first of six planned floating storage regasification unit (FSRU) terminals at the North Sea port of Wilhelmshaven on November 15. [Reuters] The facility is expected to receive its first liquefied natural gas (LNG) cargoes together with a second facility at Brunsbuettel in January 2023 to compensate for the loss of Russian gas earlier this year.

An additional four terminals at Stade, Lubmin and Wilhelmshaven projected to be operational in 2023 should enable Germany to receive a third of its natural gas needs from LNG ports, or approximately half of what it received from Russia prior to the imposition of sanctions and the halt of Russian supplies following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Lithuania, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the UK, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Croatia and Greece all have existing operational LNG terminals. [GIE] Additional terminals are planned or under construction in Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Albania.

European countries to leave Energy Charter Treaty

Germany announced it planned to withdraw from the 1994 Energy Charter Treaty, following similar decisions in October by France, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovenia. [Politico]

This sets up a clash between European governments and the EU. European governments are attempting to end the ability of companies to sue governments for unilateral contract recission as they attempt to transition away from coal, and in some cases nuclear power, by abrogating the treaty altogether, while the EU has advocated a reform package.

EU considering energy subsidies to compete with US

German economy minister Robert Habeck chastised the US for diverting European clean energy investment to America with higher subsidies for individual companies and faster deployment of capital than the RePower EU plan could offer. [FT] [Reuters]

The European Commission threatened trade retaliation against the US in a letter to the US government over two months after the August passage of the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) of 2022, noting that the substantial combined effect of the US Build Back Better and Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021-22 has been to create an environment that entices European companies to invest in the US instead of the EU, in violation of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. [FT]

Italian solar cell manufacturer Enel, Spanish energy company Iberdrola, and French aerospace components manufacturer Safra have curtailed European investment plans while advancing US investment plans. [WSJ] [FT] European energy prices have risen significantly since the onset of war in

Ukraine, with prices currently around five times that of the US, critically affecting European competitiveness.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and EU Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton have voiced a preference for a European Solidarity Fund to subsidise investment by European companies in the EU. [EC] [Politico] Such a fund would compete with America's IRA instead of engaging in legal conflict at the WTO at a time when EU policy making favours political cooperation with the US against Russia and China.

French President Emmanuel Macron met with US President Joe Biden in Washington, DC, on December 1. At a joint press conference, Biden said that the US would discuss adjusting subsidies and trade preferences to address European concerns. [WSJ]

(rw/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Government approves proposal for new criminal code

Belgium has approved a proposal for a new criminal code that will abolish prison sentences for minor offences, replacing them with community service, as the federal government takes steps to modernise and simplify the current Belgian judicial system.

A judge will have to justify why a jail sentence is more suitable than other available punishments, in case of a serious crime. The new code will apply harsher

sentencing for attacks on healthcare workers and domestic violence, creating a new category of crime for homicide within the family. [BrusselsTimes]

The country's Justice MInister Vincent Van Quickenborne announced on November 6 the federal government's plans to change the criminal code. The new draft, which was more than 1,000 pages in length, will be submitted to the Council of State and then to the Federal Parliament next year for approval. [Euractiv] [LeSoir] [BrusselsTimes]

Other changes to code include prosecution for incitement to suicide and more severe sentencing for assisting in terrorist acts. There will also be stricter punishment for incitement, recruitment, and training for terrorist acts. [BrusselsTimes]

Ecocide, which means causing serious and lasting damage to the environment on a large scale, has now been included after lobbying by Environment Minister Zakia Khattabi, who wants to create a coalition of progressive countries to include the definition within the Rome Statute as a crime against peace and security. [NewsBelgium]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Police unions call on justice minister to resign after deadly attack on officers

Belgian police unions have called for the resignation of Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne after an attack on two police officers in the municipality of Schaarbeek on November 10, which left one of them dead and the other one injured. The unions said that those that commit acts of violence against police have enjoyed "impunity" in Belgium for years. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews]

"People are very angry about what is happening in this country," Carlo Medo of the NSPV union said. "That is why there are calls for the minister's resignation." Medo added that "we want immediate measures that benefit the police officers. Today they feel really let down." [VRTNews]

Von Quickenborne defended his actions, saying that one month after his appointment, he introduced a "zero-tolerance guideline" for all acts of violence against the police. Any act of violence that results in at least one day's incapacity from work will result in prosecution, he said.

Police chiefs throughout the country have been asked to report cases of type 1 violence, but so far none were submitted, Von Quickenborne said. They say that "violence is indeed being dealt with more strictly. So what the union is saying is wrong." [VRTNews]

Van Quickenbone has also been asked to answer parliamentary questions about the fatal stabbing, offering transparency and clarity about the incident. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Parliament approves energy support measures

Belgium's parliament approved a plan to provide financial support to households and businesses in November and December that are struggling to pay their electricity and gas bills. [VRTNews]

Households with gas heating will receive a state subsidy of EUR 135 per month, while EUR 61 per month will be given to each household that uses electricity. The amounts will be deducted automatically from energy bills. Families on higher income will be required to buy back at least some of the grant through a levy that will be added to their tax bill.

Households with oil-fired heating will receive a "heating oil cheque" of EUR 300. In order to receive it, they will have to apply to the relevant authority before the end of March 2023. The duration of the assistance can be changed to match the level of financial support required. Similar legislative initiatives were taken during the coronavirus pandemic. [VRTNews]

The measures also aim to help entrepreneurs and employers to suspend the payment of their social security and other non-wage labour costs to prevent cash flow issues. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Flemish residents will receive compensation for property depreciation due to planned power line

Flemish Prime Minister Jan Jambon said that residents will be given "fair compensation" if their properties experience a decrease in value due to a high-voltage

power line that will be built to bring electricity from offshore wind farms to the mainland. [VRTNews]

High-voltage cables and pylons will be constructed across West Flanders to ensure that energy produced by offshore wind farms will be connected to the country's electricity grid. The project has not started due to building delays and other pending permit approvals. [VRTNews]

The Flemish government will select one of five routes that are currently being considered for the power line, Jambon said. This will be done in such a way as to limit the number of people that suffer adversely from the project to "an absolute minimum," he said. [VRTNews]

"A federal committee has been set up to look into compensation levels," Chris Peeters, the Chief Executive Officer of Elia, the country's electricity grid operator, said. The committee includes real estate agents and academics.

People will receive compensation for the depreciation in the value of their homes based on the proximity to the power line. There will also be a purchase scheme for people who prefer to move. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium will have largest budget deficit in Eurozone, EC says

Belgium will have the largest budget deficit in the Eurozone during the next two years and will be the only member of the Eurozone with debt above 100 percent of gross domestic product, according to the European Commission. [Euractiv][BrusselsTimes]

Brussels may have to manage a further debt increase in 2023 and 2024, according to the European Commission. The deficit is set to hit more than EUR 17 billion in 2023 and more than EUR 20 billion in 2024. [Euractiv]

A return to a more balanced budget remains far off since the Belgian government believes that the current crisis requires more spending. The country's domestic debt has increased as it tries to cope with rising energy costs and the automatic wage indexation mechanism, which adjusts wages and pensions based on fluctuations in the prices of consumer goods. [Euractiv]

The European Commissioner for Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, said that the automatic wage indexation

mechanism was bad for competition, but added that the system should not be changed given the multiple challenges the country faces. The European Union encourages member states to limit as much as possible extraordinary aid spending on energy measures, he said. [L'Echo] [Euractiv]

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo defended the measures taken to tackle the crises, even though it generated "a heavy bill for the government." In October, De Croo expressed concern about Belgium's deficit but warned that "not leaving anyone behind means a heavy bill for the government." [premier.be] [Euractiv]

(gt/gc)

France: Senate rejects corporate windfall tax

The French Senate, dominated by the right opposition, rejected on November 19 legislative amendments by left and centre parties to tax windfall profits of large corporations. [le monde]

Right-leaning Senators rejected an amendment from the Left by 181 votes to 97 and another amendment by Centrists by 181 votes to 152. The Left revived the Senate debate about a windfall tax after a decision of the country's Constitutional Council against obtaining a referendum on the "taxation of superprofits." [le monde]

Communist Senator Eric Bocquet denounced a government that "refuses to go for superprofits." This is a "bad message sent to the French," Centrist group Senator Bernard Delcros said.

Public Accounts Minister Gabriel Attal justified his vote against a windfall tax by highlighting that it would also "overtax the enterprises that had nothing to do with the current situation." The Senate had already rejected the idea of a tax on superprofits or windfall profits after another offensive by the left and centrists. le figaro]

(gm/gc)

France: Bill aims to streamline rules for nuclear reactors

France plans to streamline rules to reduce administrative hurdles for new nuclear reactors after several power plants went offline for repairs and the country looks for alternative energy supplies to replace Russian oil imports. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

The new rules would make it easier to get permits for nuclear reactors and will help French President Emmanuel Macron keep his campaign promise from February to build new-generation reactors. The proposal comes on top of an additional, parallel bill – currently debated in parliament – which aims to develop renewable energies further. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

Environmental groups have criticised the nuclear decision.

It is a "political manoeuvre that aims to sabotage public debate," the pro-environment NGO Greenpeace France said in a statement. Green Parliament Member Marie Pochon said that "a large-scale debate over the French future energy strategy is necessary before we start counting the number of nuclear plants we need." [EURACTIV]

The bill will not "in any shape or form limit France's pledges towards CO2 emission reductions and nuclear safety," said government spokesperson Olivier Veran on November 2.

France was originally obligated to reduce its dependence on nuclear power by half by 2035 but Macron wants to extend the lifetime of French reactors to help meet energy supplies. [Reuters] [France24] [EURACTIV]

Macron has previously said investment into nuclear energy is "priority number one of French industry." But Paris seems to be falling behind its competitors in the US and South Korea as other EU countries look to the two for nuclear power. [EURACTIV]

Poland, for example, already gave a nod to the US and South Korea to build the country's first two nuclear reactors, with the government soon to provide details on the construction partner and location for the country's third and final power plant to be built before 2040. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

France: Far-right National Rally elects new president

The far-right National Rally has elected a new president to succeed Marine Le Pen as president of France's biggest opposition party after an election on November 5. [France24]

Jordan Bardella is the first party president not from the Le Pen family since the party's foundation by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972. The Paris-born politician was the odds-on favourite to take over the party after Le Pen decided to step back from the role after 11 years at the helm. [Euronews] [France24]

"I am a continuity candidate, with the aim of building on the incredible legacy that Marine is handing over," Bardella said after his election. [France24]

Le Pen is now focussing on leading the party's lawmakers in the National Assembly, the lower house of the French parliament. She is also expected to be a candidate in the 2017 presidential elections for the fourth time. [Euronews] [France24] [Politico Europe]

Bardella, who has been acting as interim president for Le Pen's presidential campaign since September 2021, won the party election by 85 percent of votes. His single opponent was Louis Aliot, mayor of the southwestern city of Perpignan. [Politico Europe] [Euronews]

(mb/gc)

France: New unemployment law will be implemented in February

France's parliament agreed on November 21 to a new unemployment law that will change the length of time that a person receives unemployment benefits as the country tries to cut its joblessness rate to 5 percent.

Benefits will depend on France's current unemployment rate and when many jobs are available, in an effort to apply more strict rules to the country's generous welfare system. The new rules will be applied from February 1 to all the newly unemployed and its effects will show from the beginning of August 2023. [le parisien]

Conditions to access unemployment benefits will stay the same: a person must have worked at least six months in a two year period to be eligible. Compensation will stay the same at about 57 percent of the person's last salary. [le monde] [france info]

France's Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire acknowledged that more change is needed to reach the unemployment target. The country has an "an incomprehensible situation" in which companies are facing labour shortages in construction, hotels and restaurants, and then "the rules that do not change," he said.

"The final objective is full employment," he said. "There is also work to be done on training and qualifications, on apprenticeships and vocational high schools, and all these measures must lead us to full employment," he said. [le parisien]

(gm/gc)

France: National Assembly discusses tougher anti-squatting law

The French National Assembly has discussed on November 28 an anti-squatting law to triple fines to EUR 45,000 and three years in prison. The Horizons, a centre-right party, and the Renaissance party, founded by President Emmanuel Macron, proposed the increase in penalties for squatters, who risk one year in prison and a EUR 15,000 fine if convicted. [franceinfo]

Left parties and some associations, such as the Abbe Pierre Foundation that want to provide decent housing for underprivileged people, have opposed the law. Manuel Domergue from the Abbe Pierre Foundation said that the "text will allow expulsions in 48 hours, without a judge, of the squatters that occupy vacant housings." [franceinfo] [Le Figaro]

(gm/gc)

French territory Martinique sees rise in armed violence

Violent acts with firearms have increased in the French territory of Martinique during the last years. [LeParisien]

A French delegate prefect will arrive on the island in December to support Jean-Christophe Bouvier, the prefect of the island, to improve security.

"I will have the support of a prefect who will come for five months to work on issues of security and cooperation between communities, the state and the internal security forces," he said, after meeting in Paris

with Interior and Overseas Minister Gerald Darmanin. [LeParisien]

Since the beginning of this year, there have been 25 homicides on the island. In November this year, around 20 armed men committed a shooting during a concert, eight people were hurt. [le parisien] [le monde]

(gm/gc)

Germany: Berlin blocks Chinese semiconductor investment

The German government blocked a possible investment by China in two semiconductor factories last month due to national security concerns that Beijing may gain access to sensitive technology. [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Berlin blocked the planned purchase of chip manufacturer Elmos by the Swedish company Silex, a subsidiary of the Chinese chip company Sai Micro Electronics. The other company is, according to several reports, the semiconductor company ERS Electronic. [CNN] [Reuters]

Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in a statement that the government has to "look closely" at company takeovers "when it comes to important infrastructure or when there is a danger that technology flows to buyers from non-EU countries." [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

It's "important to us to protect the technological and economic sovereignty of Germany and Europe," Habeck said. Under the investment deal, Dortmund based chip factory Elmos would have given up its own production and used contract manufacturers instead. [Politico Europe] [AP] [Zeit]

The sale was controversial both among Western partners and within Germany's ruling coalition.

Opponents fear that the deal would make Germany even more dependent on China [see AiR No. 44, November/2022, 1], which is already Germany's largest trading partner. However, it should be noted that France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, which opposed the sale, have already signed similar deals with Cosco or other Chinese companies that are considerably larger than the Hamburg port deal. [Politico] [AiR, No.46, November/2022, 3]

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said that countries "should provide a fair, open and non-discriminatory market environment for the normal operation of Chinese enterprises." They should "refrain from politicising normal economic and trade cooperation, not to mention protectionism on the grounds of national security," he added. [Reuters] [AP]

Diversifying trade

The German Foreign Ministry also announced after Chancellor Olaf Scholz's trip to China in November that it was working on a draft for a new "China strategy" that will be decided on in early 2023. The draft may tighten rules for companies trading with China and place a bigger role on human rights. [Reuters] [FAZ] [Tagesschau]

Germany should not be dependent on one country for trade, Scholz said. "The mistake of dependence as with Russia will not happen again," he said on November 22. [DW] [Reuters]

Scholz said on November 25 that he was "surprised" by how dependent some German companies were on trade with China and that they "completely ignored the risks." German industry wants more political support and incentives for diversifying their trade options. [Reuters]

Stopping trade with China is "completely impossible for the German economy," Habeck said, adding that investments in critical infrastructure "must be examined closely."

In response to the draft of Germany's new plans the Chinese Foreign Ministry said to be "objective" and "rational" and not to "politicise economic relations." [FAZ][Reuters]

(mb-aml/gc)

Germany: Government to introduce law to make companies contribute to plastic clean-ups

The German government plans to introduce a law to make companies that produce single-use plastic contribute financially through a fund to clean-ups in public spaces.

According to the draft law, companies are supposed to start paying into the fund starting 2025. The fund is

expected to collect around EUR 450 million. [DW] [AP] [Euronews]

The law will help “reduce the burden” of clean-up costs on cities and municipalities, said German Environment Minister Steffi Lemke. [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany to leave European Energy Charter Treaty

The German government on November 11 agreed that the country would leave the Energy Charter Treaty, following other European countries like France, Spain and the Netherlands. [Politico Europe] [DW] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) made the decision in order to comply with climate policy goals. “We are consistently aligning our trade policy with climate protection,” said Franziska Brantner, a parliamentary state secretary in the Economy and Climate Ministry. [Politico Europe] [DW]

The treaty was criticised for hindering developments in climate policy because it allows fossil fuel companies to sue signatory governments for measures that would undermine their profits. [DW] [EURACTIV] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

In February 2021, German company RWE based their legal action against the Dutch government on the Energy Charter Treaty, arguing that the government didn’t allow enough time and resources for a transition away from coal. [DW]

Parliamentary group leader of the Greens, Katharina Droge, said the decision was a “milestone” and that the treaty “is an obstacle” to the energy transition and costs the state billions. “No other international trade or investment agreement in the world has triggered more investor lawsuits than the Energy Charter Treaty,” she said. [DW] [Tagesschau]

Anna Cavazzini, member of the European Parliament and the German Green party, said the Energy Charter Treaty is “toxic” and “slows down the energy transition.” Germany’s decision to leave the treaty is “immensely important,” she said. [Politico Europe]

The European Commission planned on reforming the Energy Charter Treaty. In an ambassador’s meeting on

November 18, Germany, France, Spain and the Netherlands abstained from a vote on modernising the treaty, preventing the Commission from gaining the necessary mandate to lead discussions on behalf of all EU member states. [EURACTIV] [Euronews]

German parliament approves nuclear plants' life extension

The German parliament on November 11 approved the extension of three nuclear power plants' operations until April 15, 2023. Chancellor Olaf Scholz ordered the extension until April 2023 in October to end disagreement in the coalition and to counter energy shortages. [Europe Monthly November 2022] [DW] [DW] [ZDF] [AP]

The liberal FDP and biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) wanted an extension to at least 2024, but the Green party only agreed to the compromise if the extension was temporary. [DW] [ZDF]

The revised legal framework now "clearly states that the shutdown will take place on April 15," said Environment Minister Steffi Lemke. [DW]

Steffen Bilger of the CDU said that the extension until April was "too little" and a "short term look" on energy security. [ZDF] [AP]

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

Government nationalises SEFE

Germany nationalised energy company SEFE (Securing Energy for Europe), the German arm of Russia's Gazprom, after receiving permission from the European Commission, the government said on November 14.

The nationalisation will cost around EUR 225 million and is necessary to secure the country's energy supply, according to the German Economy Ministry. SEFE already received government loans of EUR 11.8 billion. [Politico Europe] [DW] [Reuters] [AP]

Commission Executive Vice President Margrethe Vestager said the nationalisation process is "welcome" and allows "Germany to search for new gas suppliers while ensuring security of supply". [Politico Europe]

The German government said it was looking into nationalising the company in September, after finishing the nationalisation process for biggest gas

supplier Uniper and three oil refineries. SEFE has been under state trusteeship since April. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Politico Europe]

Germany is also reportedly in talks to reach a bail-out deal with gas trader VNG. [Reuters]

LNG terminal opened

The country's first LNG terminal opened on November 15 at the North Sea port in Wilhelmshaven, after construction started in May. [EURACTIV] [Zeit] [AP]

The first specially equipped ship, a "floating storage and regasification unit" is expected to dock in mid-December and LNG shipments will arrive starting in January. [Zeit] [AP]

Environmental groups are concerned about pollution, as companies will discharge biocides into the North Sea with their LNG terminal vessels. Sascha Muller-Kraenner, CEO of the group Environmental Action Germany, thinks that "a creeping chemical accident looms in Wilhelmshaven and at the other LNG sites." [EURACTIV]

Christian Meyer, member of the Green party and Environment Minister in the federal state of Lower Saxony, said that there will be "no environmental rebate" and "intensive monitoring."

The German government aims to replace 50 to 60 percent of Russian gas imports with LNG in 2023. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Parliament approves immigration reform

Germany's parliament approved on November 30 immigration reform that will make it easier for workers from countries outside of the EU to find jobs as Europe's largest economy faces a shortage of skilled workers and a slowing economy. [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [DW] [Tagesschau]

The new immigration policy will allow for a so-called "opportunity card" that is based on a points system that will weigh criteria, such as language skills, work experience and education, connections in Germany and age. Together with a one-year residence permit, it will allow people from non-EU countries to come to

Germany without a pre-existing job contract and seek employment. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [DW]

Rainer Dulger, president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, said that Germany needs “people to help us maintain our prosperity in this country.” [Reuters]

Germany requires around 400,000 foreign workers in addition to its domestic workforce, Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger said, citing data from the German Federal Employment Agency from 2021. Shortages of skilled workers are especially prevalent in sectors like hospitality, healthcare and IT. [Politico Europe] [DW] [Politico Europe] [DW]

Labour Minister Hubertus Heil called the immiration reform a “major and important step.” The liberal coalition partner FDP criticised the plan, saying it could increase illegal migration. [Tagesschau] [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

The Parliament still has to formulate a draft law that the Cabinet will vote on early in 2023. [Politico Europe] [DW] [Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government split on penalties for activists

The German government is split on how to punish climate activists as the movement “Last Generation” increases protests across the country.

The biggest conservative opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) wants tougher sanctions for activists who break the law and disrupt public order. Certain forms of protests, like roadblocking, should be punished with imprisonment of at least three months and up to five years, they said. [EURACTIV] [Spiegel]

The governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) have so far dismissed the demand for tougher penalties.

The existing legal instruments are enough “when the lines of peaceful protest are crossed,” said Bijan Djir-Sarai from the FDP and Sonja Eichwede from the SPD. Both are “worried about further radicalisation” of the “Last Generation” movement if tougher penalties are imposed. [Tagesschau] [EURACTIV]

German Justice Minister Marco Buschmann said on November 13 that he will check if tougher penalties "are necessary." His ministry will observe what the judiciary does and will act "if the existing judicial frame is not enough," he said. [Tagesschau] [Zeit]

The climate movement gained attention in October due to their protest, which included throwing food at artwork, glueing themselves to museum exhibits and blocking roads.

A cyclist died after an ambulance could not reach an accident site fast enough on October 31, allegedly due to traffic caused by the activists' street blockade. [AP] [EURACTIV]

The German Chancellor's spokesperson Wolfgang Buechner said that "people's lives must not be endangered" and that protests should be "constructive." Climate change is already "the central concern" of the German government, he said. [AP]

Activist Carla Rochel said the group's aim is not "to be liked" but "for society to be aware" of the "climate catastrophe." [Tagesschau]

Germany may not be able to achieve its climate goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 65 percent compared to 1990 levels by 2030, according to government advisors. [AP]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Parliament reaches deal on welfare reform

The German parliament reached a compromise solution for a welfare reform to take effect in January on November 22 after the conservative opposition originally blocked the plans. [Reuters] [DW] [AP]

The coalition parties of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) approved the original plan to overhaul the national unemployment benefits system in the German parliament's lower house. The biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), a smaller sister party, blocked the reform in the upper house. [DW] [AP]

The plan to overhaul current unemployment benefits will take effect in January 2023. Under the name "citizen's money" it will introduce an increase in unemployment benefits, less strict sanctions like cutting benefits for people rejecting job offers and less

pressure to find jobs in the first six months of unemployment. [DW] [Reuters]

Members of the conservative bloc wanted to change the original bill, as they supported raising unemployment benefits but disagreed with other points of the plan. It was too generous compared to what low-income workers earn, they said. [AP] [Reuters]

Markus Soder, head of the CSU, said on Twitter that the plan sends a "completely wrong signal," is "socially unjust" and "places those who work hard at a disadvantage." [DW]

CDU Labour Minister Nicole Hoffmeister-Kraut in the federal state of Baden-Wuerttemberg said that the German welfare state "can only function if there are duties as well as rights." [Reuters]

According to German Labour Minister Hubertus Heil, the reform is meant to protect people in existential need and provide opportunities for better qualification and training for the job search. [Reuters]

The compromise deal does not include the original six month "period of trust," during which beneficiaries could not have been sanctioned for "lack of cooperation." The original timeframe of two years in which all housing costs would be covered without review was reduced to one year. [Reuters] [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Catholic Church changes employment rule for LGBTQ+

The Association Council of the Association of the Dioceses of Germany (VDD) has changed the church's employment law for their 750,000 employees.

The VDD changed the Church Labour Law so that "all employees, independent of their concrete tasks, their origin, their religion, their age, their disability, their gender or sexual identity and their way of life can be representatives [...] of a church that serves the people." [Die Zeit Online]

In the past, the church could ask their employees to respect the principles of its religious doctrine and fire them if the employees do not respect them. A decision by the Court of Justice of the European Union from 2018 underlined that only if the religious doctrine is

relevant for the respective job is the church allowed to ask its employees to follow it. [Tagesschau]

(gm/gc)

Ireland: Government considers suvivor-led inquiry for sexual abuse case

The Irish government is considering a "survivor-led" inquiry into the handling of child sexual abuse cases in Spiritan schools after allegations from hundreds of victims were made public. [GCN] [RosCommonHerald]

Prime Minister Micheal Martin said the government would give consideration as to whether a public inquiry would be "the most effective way to have a victim-led approach to what went on." He said there was a need to "learn lessons" from previous public inquiries into clerical abuse in Ireland, which took longer than people had expected.

"The level, the scale and nature of sexual abuse carried out in Blackrock, and indeed in other school settings, is absolutely sickening and shocking," Martin said.

About 233 people have made allegations of abuse against 77 Irish Spiritans in ministries throughout Ireland and overseas, said Martin Kelly, the current Provincial of the Spiritans. In Blackrock College, 57 former pupils reported being abused on the school campus, and settlements have been made with 12 individuals. [GCN]

The Spiritans have appointed independent experts to engage in a 'restorative justice program' for sexual abuse survivors who suffered at Spiritan schools in Ireland.

Over 5,000 students today attend schools linked to the Spiritan Congregation, formerly known as the Holy Ghost Fathers, including Blackrock College in Dublin, St Michael's College in Dublin, St Mary's College in Dublin and Rockwell College in Co Tipperary. [TheTablet] [independent.ie]

Ireland's religious congregations are "nothing more than vehicles for corruption and abuse" and they should be "shut down," former government adviser and retired head of Barnardo's charity, Fergus Finlay, said. The religious orders "should never, under any circumstances, be allowed to run any entity – school, hospital, or any other institution – that is funded in whole or in part by the State."

The leader of the religious order, Father Martin Kelly, has issued a new apology to survivors following a call for a full inquiry into the events that took place at both the senior college and junior school. 57 of the 233 students that made allegations of abuse against 77 Irish priests claimed that they were abused on Blackrock College campus. [irishtimes.com]

A long-retired elderly man who has been accused of sexual abuse is still living on the Blackrock College campus, confirmed by the Spiritan congregation. [independent.ie]

According to Liam Lally, the Spiritans' designated safeguarding person, this new allegation has been reported to the gardai - the Irish police - and Tusla and they are waiting to see how to proceed. The man, a groundsman, has lived on the school campus since 1965, but has not worked there for the last 20 years. [thejournal.ie]

(em/gc)

Ireland: Government looks to improve news coverage of climate change

Ireland's media spend less time covering climate change than other European Union outlets, a point that has led the country's government to examine how environmental issues are conveyed to the public.

The National Parliament Committee on Environment and Climate Action will devote three sessions to climate change before the end of the year and present a report on how climate change issues can be better communicated to the public. Ireland coverage "experiences wild peaks and troughs" David Robbins, director of the Centre for Climate and Society at Dublin City University said. [Independent]

While Irish coverage on climate change follows the same patterns as elsewhere, "levels are lower than in the rest of Europe," Robbins said. News media lacks specialist reporters and general reporters with knowledge of climate issues after news outlets cut back staffing, he said. [Independent]

Ireland's approach to climate change is often too focused on the cost of climate action or the conflict it causes between politicians and sectors with different ideologies and interests. Professor Pete Lunn, head of behavioural research at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) said that those who sought to create the conflict should be called out.

“There are powerful groups who have vested interests,” he said. “There's hardly any urban-rural divide on climate change, so there is a real problem of people trying to exploit those kinds of differences for self-interest.” [Independent]

Dublin City University is exploring ideas on how to provide a more targeted climate news service to rural areas, as they are affected disproportionately by this issue. Sinn Fein Senator Lynn Boylan has suggested that banning certain advertisements completely as happened with tobacco products might be an appropriate action.

(em/gc)

Ireland: GDP growth set to slow next year

Ireland’s gross domestic product growth is forecast to exceed 10 percent in 2022 following the full relaxation of pandemic-related restrictions earlier in the year, according to a report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). [Independent]

Economic growth will slow steeply to 3.8 percent in 2023 and 3.3 percent in 2024, according to the OECD. Exports in multinational-dominated sectors, through moderating, will remain supportive of GDP, the OECD said.

Inflation is starting to impact the economy.

“On the back of higher energy prices and supply chain constraints, pent-up demand lifted inflation to a record high of 9.6 percent in June,” the OECD said. “Recent retail sales and credit card payments data suggest weaker consumer spending in the third quarter, as rising prices hit households’ real incomes, despite sizeable wage growth amidst tight labour market conditions.” [Independent]

Low confidence and high costs will result in firms’ reluctance to invest, and modified domestic demand will thus only grow by 0.9 percent in 2023. [OECD]

Although the global economy is set to slow to 3.1 per capita this year, declining even further in 2023 before recovering slightly in 2024, the OECD has stated that Germany and the UK are facing a mild recession in 2023, with the US and wider European economies falling back significantly - Ireland’s GDP growth has been ahead of these predictions. [Independent]

The European Commission revised up its forecast for Irish GDP this year to 7.9 percent - more than two points ahead of earlier estimates. [Independent]

(em/gc)

Netherlands: Coalition parties agree on asylum seekers law

A faction of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's coalition conservative VVD party in parliament have approved after "tough" negotiations a law, designed by State Secretary Eric van den Burg, that imposes the placement of asylum seekers across municipalities

Van den Burg had planned to present the law to parliament in early October, but it only received approval from the conservative faction in the VVD party more than a month later. The law ensures that municipalities can be forced by the national government to take in asylum seekers, if necessary. [NLTimes]

Rutte joined the talks for about three hours, and mainly spoke to the VVD faction about the influx of asylum seekers. Rutte said it was "a good and penetrating meeting and I mainly listened." He agreed with his party members that the number of asylum seekers entering the Netherlands is "too high," saying, "We will work on that step by step." [NLTimes]

In an attempt to avoid forcing asylum seekers on cities, the government will pay municipalities that house at least 100 asylum seekers a bonus of EUR 2,500 per asylum seeker, which is meant to let them participate in the program voluntarily and maintain the facilities for at least five years. [NLTimes]

The Security Council will discuss with minister Van der Burg how asylum reception will be arranged in 2023. It appears that the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers will take over the organisation of asylum reception from next April. [NLTimes]

The Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) said it is "good that there has been a breakthrough," even though the VNG still worries about the feasibility of Van den Burg's proposals "and the period within which this must be done." VNG is mainly concerned about how late the law got approved and the little time it leaves municipalities to organise the reception. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Justice ministry wants to incentivize witnesses to testify

The Netherlands' Justice and Security Minister Dilan Yesilgoz has proposed making it easier for criminals to testify against their crime leaders in court under a key witness scheme that would remove the witness's prison term if it was less than six years. [NLTimes]

Key witnesses can receive up to a 50 percent reduction in their sentence in exchange for a testimony, but minister Yesilgoz wants to expand these benefits to "smaller fish" who might share useful information if they had the chance to have their full sentence removed if it is less than six years. [NLTimes]

The chairman of the Dutch Police Association suggested better vetting of key witnesses in the future, to avoid defendants who merely lie to get a reduced sentence. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dialogue needed on gender pay gap

The Netherland's Social Affairs and Employment Minister, Karien van Gennip, who is a member of the Christian Democratic Appeal Party (CDA), wrote in a letter to the House of Representatives that more attention should be given to the gender pay gap in the labour force. Dutch women earn on average 13 percent less than their male counterparts. [Euractiv]

"The necessary cultural change is not happening fast enough," van Gennip said. "I want to pay attention to the position of women in the labour market." Foreign Affairs Minister and CDA party leader, Wopke Hoekstra, welcomed the initiative. [Euractiv]

Minister Van Gennip wants to interact with citizens and employers in three phases between 2023 and 2024 to study the main obstacles within gender pay equality, and also work on measures to implement equal opportunities for women. [Rijksoverheid]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch party wants abortion to be European human right

The Dutch party Democrats 66 (D66) coalition wants women across Europe to have the right to safe and accessible abortion. [NLTimes] [Euractiv]

This will only be possible if access to abortion is declared a human right in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, according to D66's members of Parliament Sjoerd Sjoerdsma and Wieke Paulusma. They will submit an initiative memorandum to the House of Representatives. [NLTimes] [Euractiv]

In July, the European Parliament urged member states to include the right to safe, legal, and free abortion services in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. During the same month, the Netherlands removed the five-day waiting period women must undergo before getting an abortion.

At the moment, Malta has a total abortion ban, even in cases where the woman's life is in danger, although amendments to the law are expected. Poland also has extremely restrictive laws. [Euractiv]

(gt/gc)

United Kingdom: Sunak denies reports of alignment with EU in Post-Brexit relationship

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the UK government would not go back on its Brexit deal with the European Union and vowed that any relationship with Europe would not involve the country aligning with the bloc's laws.

"Under my leadership the United Kingdom will not pursue any relationship with Europe that relies on alignment with EU laws," Sunak said at the Confederation of British Industry's annual conference in Birmingham. [Bloomberg] [Agence France Press]

This comes after the Office for Budget Responsibility watchdog assessed that Brexit had had a "significant adverse impact" on UK trade, in comments backed by the Bank of England. There had been speculation that some in the government wanted to move towards a Swiss-style deal, with more freedom of movement and the removal of some trade barriers with the bloc. [The Sunday Times] [BBC News]

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: Government delays vote on housing legislation

The British government has postponed a parliamentary vote on house-building plans after pushback from more than 47 Conservative members of parliament (MPs).

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which aims to strengthen the UK's housing and infrastructure, faced opposition from some Tory MPs, who want to end mandatory house building targets for local authorities. The MPs had warned British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak that he must "stick to his promises" by scrapping the top-down housing targets. [The I paper]

The group has filed a proposed amendment to the bill that would abolish the proposal to build 300,000 homes a year, according to the Telegraph newspaper. Downing Street officials have held talks with the Tory MPs in an attempt to find a compromise. [The Telegraph] [Reuters] [The Telegraph]

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: Government investigates dominance of tech giants

The United Kingdom's competition watchdog has launched an investigation into the dominance of tech companies such as Apple and Google. [Politico] [Reuters]

The UK's Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) decision comes after an earlier survey revealed the extent of the tech giants' control over mobile ecosystems in the UK. A consultation carried out by the CMA revealed substantial support for a fuller investigation into the way that Apple and Google dominate the mobile browser market and cloud gaming. [Competition and Markets Authority]

The CMA noted that "97 percent of all mobile web browsing in the UK in 2021 happens on browsers powered by either Apple's or Google's browser engine, so any restrictions on these engines can have a major impact on users' experiences." The market investigation will consider these concerns and whether new regulation is needed to improve opportunities for competition in the sector.

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: London loses position as biggest European stock market

London is no longer home to Europe's biggest stock market, as the French capital Paris overtook it for the first time since records began in 2003. [Bloomberg] [The Independent] [ITV]

Some say that this is another symbolic sign of Britain's shrinking place in the wake of Brexit, and the continental rivals that will step into position. The French stock market is now worth USD 2.823 trillion, narrowly edging out the UK, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. In 2016, British stocks were collectively worth USD 1.5 trillion more than France. [Bloomberg] [The Independent] [ITV]

The UK's stock market has long been out of favour because of its lacklustre economy. But this year has been worse in the face of an energy crisis, double-digit inflation and the economic turmoil caused by former Prime Minister Liz Truss's controversial tax cut plan.

While many of Britain's blue-chips have been insulated from the UK turmoil by their global business presence, the smaller firms and consumer-oriented ones have been hit hard. [Bloomberg] [The Independent] [ITV]

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: Prime Minister slows trade deals

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has slowed the pace of negotiations for the country's post-Brexit trade deals, Politico reported, citing Britain's allies and people close to the matter. [Politico]

The new strategy is particularly clear in the UK's ongoing trade talks with India, Politico reported, citing people briefed on the negotiations. Sunak is reportedly holding out for an agreement that delivers more for Britain's service sector. [Politico]

British policy is diverging from its trade messaging if there has been a change in policy by Sunak's government.

Foreign Secretary James Cleverly travelled to India in late October for his first official trip to the country to

meet his counterpart and discuss strengthening the UK-India relationship. He met with India's Minister of External Affairs to discuss the 2030 Roadmap, the landmark commitment to boost cooperation between the UK and India over the next decade under a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. [Gov.Uk]

"Our relationship with India is hugely important to me; as the world's largest democracy, India is a natural partner for the UK in the Indo-Pacific," Cleverly said. "It is an economic and tech powerhouse."

Sunak is taking his time when it comes to joining the 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Accession to the bloc and a final deal with India are expected now in 2023, a much longer time frame than set by the previous UK governments.

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: GBP 1.8B paid toward household energy bills in October

The British government paid GBP 1.8 billion to reduce the energy bills of 27 million households in October through the government's Energy Bills Support Scheme to provide assistance amid rising energy costs. [Gov.UK]

Ninety-seven percent of eligible households in England, Scotland and Wales received a GBP 66 discount on their energy bills, according to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The scheme will provide a total saving of GBP 400 on energy bills over six months, with the first set of instalments beginning in October 2022. [Gov.UK]

The Energy Bills Support Scheme is administered by energy suppliers, with customers receiving an automatic rebate off of their bill. The scheme forms one part of a wider government policy to support households during winter.

"As winter starts to set in, this financial support should help millions of people to keep their heating and lights on. It's vital it reaches everyone who needs it," Gillian Cooper, Head of Energy Policy for Citizens Advice, said. [Gov.UK]

(jn/gc)

United Kingdom: Defence ministry awards GBP 1.6B contract for naval ships

The British Ministry of Defence has selected its preferred bidder, Team Resolute, to build three support ships for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary in a GBP 1.6 billion contract. [Gov.UK]

The ships will provide munitions and provisions to the Royal Navy's aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates. The three contracted ships still require approval from the Treasury and Ministerial approval. [Gov.UK]

The contract intends to create 1,200 shipyard jobs within the United Kingdom and a further estimated 800 jobs through the supply chain. The contract includes an investment of £77 million in shipyard infrastructure. [Gov.UK]

Most of the building will occur in Belfast and Appledore, with building also taking place in Cadiz, Spain.

(jn/gc)

United Kingdom: Government provides 401,300 families childcare assistance in September

The British government provided 401,300 families with assisted funding to cover childcare costs in September. The Tax-Free Childcare scheme saw GBP 44.4 million spent on the program, which provides families earning up to GBP 100,00 a year with financial assistance towards childcare. [Gov.UK]

Families receive GBP 2 from the government for every GBP 8 spent on childcare. Families can receive up to GBP 2,000 a year per child. Since September 2021 an additional 85,485 families have used the Tax-Free Childcare scheme. [Gov.UK]

Myrtle Lloyd, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) Director General for Customer Services said, "We know childcare can be expensive, so using Tax-Free childcare can make a huge difference to household finances." [Gov.UK]

(jn/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Estonia: EU will provide EUR 21 million to help pay for military supplies to Ukraine

Estonia will receive an additional EUR 21 million from the European Union to help pay for the weapons the Baltic country has provided to Ukraine in its war against Russia, defence ministry press secretary Thomas Mell said. Estonia already received EUR 135 million from the European Peace Facility (EPF) [RIA] [ERR]

The country's Ministry of Defense Deputy Secretary General Kusti Salm said in mid-November that the military aid Estonia has sent to Ukraine is close to EU 300 million. The EPF contribution covers roughly half of the arms aid for Ukraine.

According to Mell, the Estonian government will use the money to restore its military capacity. [RIA]

(ad/gc)

Georgia: US worries about polarisation of political parties

The US ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Colleen Degnan, said Washington regrets "the continuing polarisation" of the political environment in Georgia and agreed with efforts to bring together political stakeholders to "implement ambitious democratic judicial and anti-corruption reforms." [USEmbassy]

“I would hope that all of Georgia’s political leaders, including the ruling party and the opposition, would come together now and make sure that the work that is being done for candidate status is going to meet European Union standards,” Degnan said. [USEmbassy]

Georgia’s political landscape became more divided after Members of Parliament left the Georgian Dream party and founded a public movement – People’s Power. The movement said that the ruling Georgian Dream party does not have the courage to “resist the Americans” and take a step so important for the country and society.” [GEORGIATODAY] [NEWSGEORGIA] [YAZIDIS]

(ad/gc)

Lithuania: Government should prioritise teaching EU languages in schools

Lithuania should prioritise teaching languages spoken in the European Union in schools rather than Russian as a second language, the country’s President Gitanas Nauseda said.

This would strengthen economic, cultural, and social relations with the EU, according to Nauseda. “Priority should be given to Spanish, French and German,” the president said. They “are very useful for our people when communicating with their colleagues in the West.” [IRT]

Parliament Speaker Viktorija Cmilyte-Nielsen believes that schools should make their own decisions on teaching the Russian language. “I would say that if a school community sees it as a meaningful thing, having Russian as a second, optional language should not be forbidden,” she told LRT RADIO. [IRT]

“I have always considered it an advantage for a person to have the opportunity to learn languages. Whether it’s the languages of our neighbours – Latvian, Belarusian, Polish – or German, French, or Russian,” said Cmilyte-Nielsen. [RUBALTIC]

Latvia has announced plans to stop teaching Russian as a foreign language by the 2026-2027 academic year. [IRT]

(ad/gc)

Ukraine: Kiev looks to reduce EUR 37B deficit in 2023

Ukraine is now searching for fresh revenue sources to sustain its 2023 budget, which includes a record deficit of EUR 36.9 billion. An initial forecast by the World Bank has predicted a 35 percent contraction of Ukraine's GDP as the economy slows steeply due to Russia's invasion and continued attacks against its key infrastructure. [Euronews]

The funding is designed to ensure the most basic services, such as healthcare and education, remain available to citizens as the war continues. It is forecast that the purchase of energy supplies and the repair of damaged power systems will cause a surge in inflation.

Ukrainian Economy Minister Yulia Svyrydenko told reporters that Kiev would continue to need foreign budgetary assistance, but was also taking steps to reduce costs by cutting staff and privatising smaller state-owned enterprises. [Reuters]

The World Bank, the European Union, and the Ukrainian government released a Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment report that estimated Ukraine's reconstruction needs at USD 349 billion as of June 1, 2022. That amount will become even larger as the war drags on. [World Bank]

Ukraine's basic non-military budget financing needs—dominated by essential social services—are well over USD 3 billion a month. Even more is needed to repair roads, bridges, homes, schools, energy infrastructure, and clinics. As winter sets in, urgent support is needed for energy supplies for homes.

Disagreements between member states partially derailed the EUR 9 billion that the EU promised to deliver to Kyiv across 2022, while Hungary has expressed its opposition to next year's EUR 18-billion package. [Reuters] [Ministry of Finance of Ukraine]

(chm/gc)

Ukraine: Kiev wants tech to rebuild post-war economy

Ukrainian officials and entrepreneurs have said that technology will be key in helping the country rebuild after Russia's invasion. [CNBC]

Ukraine had a notable presence at the Web Summit conference in Lisbon in early November, where it

sought support from the global tech community to bolster its fight against Russia. [CNBC]

Ukraine's first lady Olena Zelenska visited the country's stand at the summit, which was significantly larger and better attended than in 2021. On the opening night, Zelenska made an impassioned speech calling on tech entrepreneurs and investors to aid her country.

Some companies are ramping up hiring in Ukraine in a bet that the country's tech industry will emerge stronger after the war ends. Venture capital firms are also raising millions of dollars to back Ukrainian tech entrepreneurs. [CNBC]

(chm/gc)

Ukraine: Businesses pessimistic as war drags on

The National Bank of Ukraine announced that businesses in Ukraine are more pessimistic about the economy as the war with Russia drags on. [National Bank of Ukraine]

A poll of 423 Ukrainian businesses, published on November 1, revealed that the negative impact of the war on the supply of goods, destroyed production facilities and a decline in real household income are hurting the country's economic recovery, while worsening expectations across all sectors. [National Bank of Ukraine]

Companies operating in the industrial, construction and service sectors all reported a more pessimistic economic outlook and negative performance expectations. Although downgrading their economic expectations, trading companies remained close to the neutral level.

Respondents across all of the surveyed sectors continued to report intentions to reduce their workforces.

(chm/gc)

Ukraine plans port expansions along Danube

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has said that the Ukrainian government has plans to expand its ports on the Danube River. [Ukrainian Government]

This involves ports in Izmail, Reni and Ust-Dunayski. Ukraine has managed to increase the cargo turnover of these ports from 30,000 tonnes per month to 1.7 million tonnes during the last six months, or about 280,000 tonnes per month, according to Shmyhal. [Ukrainian Government]

The government wants to expand the capacity of the ports to reduce logistic bottlenecks, Shmyhal said. This would increase the safety of navigating on the Danube, particularly the control and maintenance of declared depths, he said. [Ukrainian Government]

By opening new border crossing points and expanding the water area of the Danube ports, Ukraine will be able to increase exports and strengthen economic stability, according to Shmyhal. [Ukrainian Government]

(chm/gc)

Ukraine: Kiev restores power after Russian strikes

Ukrainian authorities reported that they have gradually restored power through the reconnection of the country's four nuclear plants. However, millions remain without electricity after Russia conducted the most destructive airstrikes so far during the conflict, according to multiple reports. [Reuters]

The International Atomic Energy Agency said three nuclear plants on Ukrainian-held territory had been reconnected to the grid, two days after attacks forced them to shut down for the first time in 40 years.

Ukrainian President Zelensky asked Ukrainians to use energy sparingly through his regular night-time address, following the air strikes. He said that citizens are consuming more electricity than is currently available and that outages will probably last until at least March next year. [Financial Times]

(chm/gc)

Ukraine: Government starts 'Points of Invincibility' project

The Ukrainian government announced that it would start a new scheme to ensure that basic services will continue to be provided if large-scale Russian strikes take place again. The government said that the "Points

of Invincibility" project means that electricity, mobile communications and heat, water and first aid will be provided 24/7 and free of charge. [Ukrainian Gov]

The President's Office stated that the Points will work at all regional and district administrations, as well as at schools and buildings of the State Emergency Service. Information about where to find support in the event of a long-term power outage will be provided in government buildings and key locations.

This comes after Ukraine suffered the most devastating attacks on its cities and infrastructure so far, with more than two thirds of Kiev left without power following the missile strikes in mid-November. [Reuters]

(chm/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bulgaria's EU accession hindered by slow green transition

Bulgaria's accession plans for the European Union are being hindered by its failure to implement its green transition commitments with a lack of political leadership undermining the transition process, according to a report by the Centre of Social Democracy. [Bulgarian News Agency]

Bulgaria's coal phase-out has been complicated by entrenched state capture networks in the energy and mining sectors, according to the centre. These networks want to preserve the status-quo by securing

costly coal subsidies estimated at EUR 1 billion per year, which undermines the process of long-term decarbonisation, it said.

The limited administrative capacity of local authorities and the lack of a common vision for the energy transition at the central government level have prevented the development of transformational local-level initiatives, the centre said. These factors have also hindered projects for non-coal related businesses. [Bulgarian News Agency]

The implementation of Bulgaria's green energy transition is a prerequisite to initiate its EU accession process, which has been a key target of the government over recent months.

Bulgaria's path to becoming a Schengen member may also be jeopardised after the Dutch parliament called on Prime Minister Mark Rutte to veto Bulgarian and Romanian Schengen bids temporarily because of migration issues.

It highlighted the continued prevalence of corruption and organised crime in the two countries. [RadioFreeEurope]

(jk/gc)

Bulgaria: Sofia allows Russian-owned refinery to export oil

Bulgaria's caretaker government and Lukoil Neftochim Bulgaria reached an agreement that it can continue operating and exporting oil products to the European Union until the end of 2024, as long as it pays its taxes in full, despite European Commission warnings this would breach the bloc's sanctions regime. [Euractiv]

Bulgaria said the deal will add EUR 350 million to the government's budget. "Lukoil will transfer all production, revenues and taxes to be paid in Bulgaria, and not, as it was before, in the Netherlands or Switzerland," Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister Hristo Alexiev said. [ABC News]

The European Council on Foreign Relations believes that a new gas interconnector with Greece should have curtailed Bulgarian reliance on Russian gas, yet the economic and political benefits of maintaining this relationship are nevertheless too large for Sofia to withdraw from such agreements. Not only is Lukoil's facility the only refinery in Bulgaria, but half of the production is for export. [ECFR]

Whilst Bulgaria has special exemption to import Russian oil and petroleum products, they are unable to export its refined products to the rest of the EU. Deputy Finance Minister Lyudmila Petkov said that refined products that "originate from Bulgaria and can be exported." [Devdiscourse]

(jk/gc)

Bulgaria: Protests held against military aid to Ukraine

Several protests were held across Bulgaria on November 26 after a decision by its parliament to aid Ukraine in its military conflict with Russia. [Novinite]

The protests were held under the premise "for peace and neutrality" as announced by the organisers on Facebook. The protests were against Bulgarian involvement in providing one of the parties with weapons.

Though Bulgaria does not directly supply weapons to Ukraine, it is estimated that Bulgaria supplied at least EUR 1 billion of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine through other nations. The supply of military and technical assistance to Ukraine was supported by a resolution passed by the National Assembly on November 3. [Euro Maidan Press]

(jk/gc)

Greece: Authorities arrest seven Egyptians suspected of smuggling migrants

Greek authorities detained seven Egyptian nationals on suspicion of smuggling migrants into Europe from Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, Sudan, and the Palestinian Territories on a vessel carrying 483 people. [AP News]

The ship departed from Libya to Italy but lost its steering somewhere south of Crete on November 29.

Passengers on board made an emergency call to the authorities, which prompted a large rescue operation.

A Greek navy frigate, two cargo ships, a tanker and two Italian fishing boats were deployed to assist the boat, which was adrift in winds of over 30 kilometres an hour. An earlier attempt to rescue the migrants while

the boat was still at sea had to be abandoned because of the weather conditions. Rescuers then towed the boat to Crete.

A preliminary investigation, involving Europol, found that each migrant paid around USD3,000 to USD 4,000 to be transported.

Following the incident, the Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi sent a letter to the European Commission stating that Greece "cannot be expected to shoulder an ever-increasing burden" of migrants. He requested that the EC urgently relocate the rescued migrants. [Info Migrants]

(jk/gc)

Kosovar Serbs quit government amid licence plate row

Ten Serb parliamentarians, ten prosecutors and 576 police officers have resigned from their posts in the Kosovo government. [ABC]

The resignations are another chapter of increasing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia over Kosovo-issued licence plates. The Kosovar government policy requires Serbian issued licence plates be removed and replaced with Kosovo issued licence plates when in Kosovo. [AlJazeera]

The implementation of the policy, which was announced in 2021 and following years of Kosovar Albanians being required to remove any Kosovo issued number plates when entering Serbia, has been delayed multiple times due to ongoing opposition from ethnic Serbs.

Ethnic Serbs established blockades in August in north Kosovo, when the licence plate change was initially scheduled to occur. NATO's peacekeeping troops increased their patrols, while Serbia's defence minister has placed Serbian troops on alert. [BBC][Euractiv]

Serbia has operated a parallel government system, with the Serbian government issuing licence plates and identity documents to Serbians living in Kosovo. [BalkansGroup]

The policy will now be phased in with gradual stages, with the first being the issuing of written warnings and fines, until the full implementation of the policy by April 21, 2023. [BalkanInsight]

EU Intervention

The European Union warned of “escalation and violence” after emergency talks between Kosovo and Serbia failed to resolve their long-running dispute over car licence plates used by the ethnic Serb minority in Kosovo. “After many hours of discussion … the two parties did not agree to a solution today,” EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in a statement to the media.

Whilst Kosovo police were due to issue fines for those who had not removed Serbian number plates on 22 November, Kosovo’s Prime Minister delayed the issuing of fines for an additional forty–eight hours in order to “work with the US and EU” to find a solution. [The Guardian]

Borrell said an EU proposal could have avoided increased tensions but while Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic accepted the proposal, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti did not. Borrell said he would inform the EU member states of the two countries' “lack of respect for their international legal obligations” and warned that, given their commitment to joining the bloc, they should act accordingly.

“The Serbian side was completely constructive, and we were accepting the texts that were changed 10 times, but the Albanian side did not want to accept anything, not for a second, they would always add something that was clearly not possible,” Vucic told reporters after the meeting. [Independent] [Reuters]

However, Vucic has also stated that there will be “hell on the ground” if Pristina attempts to require Kosovar number plates to be used in Kosovo [The Guardian]. The statement comes as Serbia has increased its military presence along the Kosovo-Serbia border [Al-Jazeera]. Any act of violence over number-plates could breach the fundamental international law principle of proportionality. [ICJ]

NATO Calls for De-Escalation

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in a tweet that the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo was "vigilant” and that “now is the time for responsibility & pragmatic solutions. Escalation must be avoided.” He spoke to Borrell about the developments.

KFOR Commander Angelo Michele Ristuccia appealed to all parties to avoid any actions that could exacerbate the situation. A KFOR spokesperson said the major general had met with Kosovo's Interior Minister Xhelal

Svecla and stressed the importance of avoiding escalation.

Ristuccia was in close contact with all the main interlocutors, including the commander of the EU Mission EULEX, representatives of the provisional Pristina institutions and security organisations in Pristina, as well as the Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Army, according to the statement. [TelegraphRS]

(jn-ln/gc)

North Macedonia: Government bans organisations with facism links

The parliament of North Macedonia voted in favour of adopting a new law that prevents organisations, cultural clubs, and political parties from employing names or symbols linked to fascism and that are against specific religions or ethnic groups. [Euronews]

The law change, which passed with 67 votes in the 120-member parliament, comes in response to a rise in Bulgarian associations named after World War II collaborators. This was passed with the support of both the opposition and ruling parties. [Balkan Insight] [Washington Post]

One such association was named after King Boris III – a controversial figure who oversaw Bulgaria's alliance with Axis powers during World War II. Such clubs have sparked protests over the past month, which brought the issue to parliament. [StarTribune]

Bulgaria's Foreign Ministry expressed "strong concern" over this amendment for restricting the right of association of ethnic Bulgarians in North Macedonia. The Bulgarian government has been concerned about what it perceives as "anti-Bulgarian ideology" from 2019, which has consequently led to their refusal to endorse the European Union's negotiation framework for North Macedonia. [Balkan Insight]

(jk/gc)

North Macedonia: IMF approves EUR 530M loan

The International Monetary Fund has agreed to provide North Macedonia with a 24-month EUR 530 million loan under the Precautionary and Liquidity Line

program that is intended to help countries manage balance of payment deficits for nations that display sound fiscal policies.

IMF chair Bo Li stated that North Macedonia's "macroeconomic situation deteriorated substantially due to the pandemic and the commodity price shock." IMF official Bergljot Barbku added that the situation worsened "following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and sharply rising energy and food prices". [IMF]

While the first tranche of EUR 110 million will be immediately disbursed, and a subsequent EUR 155 million next year, to support Skopje's budget deficit, the remainder of the loan will be employed as a backstop to prevent crises and as a reserve for the country. [SeeNews]

(jk/gc)

Turkey: Parliament approves law for Alevi citizens' places of worship

The Turkish Parliament has approved legislation that contained important amendments for funding Alevi houses of worship, which are known as cemevis. The General Assembly approved the bill that allows provincial directorates to construct, maintain and repair sites, including historical and cultural properties, as well as cemevis. [Daily Sabah]

The Alevi houses of worship will be entitled to receive discounted or free access to water, provided by municipalities and their subsidiaries. The power expenses of cemevis will be subsidised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, according to the new law.

Currently, cemevis are subsidised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and regarded as foundations rather than houses of worship even though the Alevi faith is the second largest religious community in Turkey with approximately 20 million followers.

Yilmaz Tunc, Justice and Development Party Group Deputy Chairperson pointed out that this is the first law that grants official state funding to cemevis.

Alevi associations across Turkey organised a press conference to condemn the approval of the omnibus bill, the Secretary General of Alevi-Bektashi Federation, Mustafa Aslan stated that the bill does not give legal status to Alevi community and does not acknowledge the religious entity of Alevi faith. [Sözcü]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Prosecutor calls for political ban on Istanbul's mayor

Prosecutors have called for Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, to be convicted on charges of insulting members of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council. The demand was made during the third hearing of a trial that critics allege is an attempt to remove a key opponent of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from the political scene.

Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, a member of the opposition Republican People's Party, faces up to four years in prison if found guilty of the charge and could also be barred from holding office. He is accused of insulting members of the electoral council when he described cancelling legitimate elections as "foolishness" on 4 November 2019.

The mayor denies the charges and insists that his words were a response to Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu calling him "a fool" and accusing Imamoglu of criticising Turkey during a visit to the European Parliament.

He has stated that the charges against him are designed to prevent him from running in the 2023 presidential election. He is considered a possible rival to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [Euronews]

A court hearing scheduled for November 11 was delayed until December 14. Prosecutors have repeatedly requested that Imamoglu be imprisoned. [Middle East Eye]

Imamoglu was elected to lead Turkey's largest city in March 2019. His win was a blow to Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, which had controlled Istanbul for a quarter-century. The party pushed to void the municipal election results in the city of 16 million, alleging irregularities.

(chm/gc)

Turkey: Ankara pledges to cut emissions by 41% by 2030

Turkey has pledged to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 41 percent in 2030 in a new climate plan submitted

to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. [Bloomberg]

Speaking at the COP27 Summit in Egypt, Turkey's Environment Minister Murat Kurum announced the new emission plan and said that Turkey's greenhouse gas emissions will peak in 2038. Ankara aims to achieve net-zero emissions by 2053. [Reuters]

A group of environmental NGOs, including Europe Beyond Coal, said the latest commitment by Turkey did not amount to an actual reduction from its current trajectory but was an increase of more than 30 percent in emissions during the next decade. [Europe Beyond Coal]

Turkey's submission, also known as a nationally determined contribution (NDC), does not meet the target of halving emissions by 2030 and eliminating them by mid-century in order to keep global warming below 2 degrees celsius by the end of the century.

The country's new climate plan does not commit to halt new coal projects, or to phase out existing coal-fired power plants.

(chm/gc)

Turkey: Black Sea gas field will start production next year

Turkey's Black Sea gas field is on track to start production next year with work being sped up to connect it to national infrastructure, President Tayyip Erdogan said. [Reuters] [TRT World]

Erdogan said drilling at nine of the ten wells in the first phase of the seabed Sakarya gas field was complete. Turkey is in the process of establishing an energy base on the seabed in the Black Sea.

(chm/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan shakes up statistics agency

Turkey's official statistics agency is reportedly undergoing a significant reshuffle under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bloomberg reported. The move has fueled concerns about the accuracy of inflation data in Turkey as consumers try to manage soaring prices.

Deputy Chairman Fatih Sahin was removed from his post after being in the role for eight months, according to a decree published in the official gazette. A successor hasn't been named.

The Turkish Statistical Institute, known as TurkStat, has seen changes in its management since the start of the year. The chairman and three out of six deputies were replaced after having been in their positions for no more than 18 months. Two department heads in charge of inflation data have also resigned.

Meanwhile, inflation in the country continues to accelerate. Consumer prices rose by an annual 85.5 percent through October, while producer prices increased 158 percent, according to TurkStat. [Bloomberg]

(chm/gc)

Turkey: Former head of Amnesty International has terrorism convictions overturned

Turkey's top court has overturned the terrorism-related convictions of former Amnesty International head and Turkey Honorary Chair Taner Kilic along with three other activists. [Reuters]

The Court of Cassation referred Kilic's case back to a first-instance court on the grounds of an "incomplete investigation". The ruling comes more than five years after the four activists were initially arrested in 2017.

Amnesty International declared that over the course of 12 court hearings, every allegation levelled against the four human rights activists was "repeatedly and comprehensively proven baseless, including in the state's own police report." [Amnesty International]

(chm/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Hard-right PM appoints junior minister once pictured wearing Nazi uniform

Italy's recently installed hard-right premier, Giorgia Meloni, has appointed a junior infrastructure minister who caused an uproar when a newspaper published a picture of him wearing a Nazi uniform in 2005.

Galeazzo Bignami, a member of Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, brushed off the photo as "light-hearted" fun at the time it was first published in 2016. However, on October 31, when he was appointed to his junior ministerial position, he said he felt "profound shame" over the picture and firmly condemned "any form of totalitarianism", calling Nazism "the absolute evil." [The Guardian] [Euronews]

He added that he had "apologised more than once" for the picture, which he said had been taken in a "private context". [Times of Israel]

Bignami's appointment is not the only one for which Meloni's government has been criticised.

Claudio Durigon, newly appointed as undersecretary at the labour ministry, sparked outrage and was forced to resign last summer as an undersecretary in the economy ministry after proposing to rename a park after the brother of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. [The Guardian] [NYT]

Meloni's Brothers of Italy party won a decisive victory in September parliamentary elections, in a rightward shift that has worried many across Europe. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

PM meets Jewish groups, decries antisemitism

The Brothers of Italy has its roots in a post-war neo-fascist movement called the National Alliance, but Meloni has long denied claims of harbouring neo-fascist sympathies. The head of Italy's first hard-right government since World War II had praised Mussolini in her youth, but has since condemned Italy's racist 1938 anti-Jewish laws and said she had "never felt any sympathy for fascism". [Reuters]

Meloni spoke out against racial prejudice after holding a meeting on November 23 with leaders of local and international Jewish groups, including the president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder.

The meeting was seen as an attempt by Meloni to distance herself from allegations of antisemitism.

According to a readout of the meeting, handed out by Meloni's office, the participants agreed on the "need for a strong and more incisive common commitment to combat every form of antisemitism**,** a phenomenon in worrisome growth including on the web and social networks". [abc News]

(qv-aml/pk)

Italy: New right-wing government criticised for anti-rave decree

Italy's new right-wing government has been criticised for infringing on public freedoms after it banned unlicensed rave parties.

The ban was one of the first moves by the government formed by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni after her brothers of Italy party won a decisive victory in September parliamentary elections.

In response to concerns that the anti-rave measure could be used against protests and other public demonstrations, Meloni said: "I would like to reassure all citizens... that we will not deny anyone the right to express dissent." [Reuters]

Under a decree introduced on October 31, organisers of unauthorised public or private gatherings of more than 50 people could be fined up to EUR 10,000 and receive a prison sentence of up to six years.

The measure was introduced after a rave took place in the Italian city of Modena the previous weekend. The gathering was shut down by police.

The decree still needs to be approved by parliament to come into effect. [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Italy: Former PM Berlusconi acquitted in bribery case

An Italian court acquitted former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi on November 17 of charges that he had bribed a witness in a case of alleged underage prostitution.

Berlusconi, now a senator, is a member of the centre-right Forza Italia party, which recently joined the country's new government led by prime minister Giorgia Meloni and her hard-right Brothers of Italy grouping. [Euronews]

Berlusconi was accused of paying Italian singer Mariano Apicella EUR 157,000 to lie in a previous case involving alleged underage prostitution. In a 2013 trial, he had been accused of paying to have sex with a 17-year-old Moroccan nightclub dancer, but was later acquitted.

During his third period as prime minister beginning in 2008, a scandal erupted over Berlusconi's "Bunga Bunga" parties, contributing to the end of his term as premier in 2011.

Meanwhile, Berlusconi is awaiting a verdict in a pending case in which he is accused of bribing 24 witnesses of his parties. The former prime minister has denied the charges. The case is expected to conclude in January. [Reuters] [Corriere]

(km/pk)

Italy: Facial recognition technology banned except in crime fighting

Italy has banned the use of facial recognition technology that uses biometric data, along with "smart glasses", until at least the end of 2023 or until a specific law is passed to regulate the issue.

The only exception to the ban is when facial recognition systems are used in criminal and judicial investigations. [La Stampa]

The decision, taken on November 14, was a response to two municipalities' plans to experiment with such technology. In the southern city of Lecce, authorities had said they would begin using facial recognition technology, while in the central city of Arezzo, local authorities were planning to equip police with "smart glasses" that recognise licence plates.

In a statement, Italy's Data Protection Agency, said: "The moratorium arises from the need to regulate eligibility requirements, conditions, and guarantees relating to facial recognition, in compliance with the principle of proportionality." [Reuters]

According to the agency, municipalities which want to use such technology must now achieve an "urban security pact" with the central government. [IET]

(km/pk)

Italy: Victims' group condemns 'unsatisfactory' Church report on sex abuse

The first ever report by Italy's Catholic Church into sexual abuse claims has been criticised as "unsatisfactory and shameful" by victims' associations, which are demanding a more comprehensive external inquiry.

The report, released on November 17 – the eve of the Italian national day of prayer for victims and survivors of abuse – only covers cases reported over two years.

It said 89 people had reported claims against 68 alleged abusers in 2020 and 2021. Seventy-three allegations involve minors, 12 of which concern children under the age of 10.

The allegations were collected from 30 of 90 "listening centres" established by the Church in 2019. It emerged that the alleged abusers are not only priests but also lay people involved with the Church. [Euronews]

A second investigation is underway into allegations of abuse dating back to 2000, although it is unclear when the results will be published.

A bishop answering journalists' questions about the report told a press conference there were 613 alleged abuse cases from Italy dating back to 2000 on file at the Vatican. [AP]

Francesco Zanardi, the head of Italy's main survivors' group, Rete l'Abuso, told Reuters the report was "absolutely unsatisfactory and shameful". He added it was "disappointing" that the second investigation was not probing cases from before 2000.

"The timeframe of the report is a joke," Zanardi said, noting that the study excluded data from magistrates or survivors' groups. [The Guardian]

Rete l'Abuso estimates there are about one million abuse victims of the Catholic Church in Italy. [DW]

Victims' groups have long pushed for an independent inquiry going back to the past century to be commissioned by the Italian government, similar to those conducted in the United States, France, Germany and many other countries, but the head of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, has consistently rejected that idea. [Le Monde]

Archbishop Lorenzo Ghizzoni defended the report during its presentation at a press conference, saying: "It is just a start".

He added that he expected more victims to come forward as the reporting system improves and becomes less intimidating, amid plans to locate new "listening centres" staffed mainly by female lay people outside Church buildings. [Reuters]

(qv/pk)

Italy approves plan to protect Russian-owned refinery from closure

The Italian government approved a trusteeship plan on December 1 to prevent the shutdown of a Russian-owned oil refinery in Sicily after thousands of workers on November 18 protested against a potential closure.

The future of the Lukoil-owned ISAB facility, which refines a fifth of Italy's crude, was under threat due to a European embargo on seaborne Russian oil that came into effect on December 5.

The government plan allows the refinery to be placed in the hands of trustees "in the event of serious and imminent danger" to energy supplies. It enables the facility to continue operating for one year, with a possible 12-month extension. [Reuters 2]

The refinery, which provides work for over 3,000 people, has only been able to process Russian oil

during the war in Ukraine because banks have refused to extend credit to buy non-Russian oil.

Workers had demanded the privatisation of the refinery or for Italian export credit agency SACE to act as guarantor for future purchases of non-Russian oil. [Associated Press]

Italy's economic development minister, Adolfo Urso, said the government was also considering requesting an EU waiver from sanctions on Russian oil to prevent the refinery's closure. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Italy: Government increases borrowing to combat energy crisis

In a budget update presented on November 22, Italy's government announced it wants to allocate EUR 21 billion in next year's spending plan to mitigate the effects of soaring energy prices on businesses and households.

To do this, the government plans to raise the 2023 budget deficit from a previously projected 3.4 percent to 4.5 percent of GDP.

Right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who took office in October, promised during her election campaign to help families and businesses cope with high power prices. [Associated Press] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Meloni also plans to collect additional funds by cutting part of an almost EUR 9 billion poverty relief scheme earmarked for the 2023 budget. [Euronews]

Once the budget is approved by the cabinet, parliament will have until December 31 to pass it.

Italy's public debt is one of the highest in the eurozone, while inflation in the country reached 11.8 percent in October. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Italy: Government to oppose challenge against LNG terminal

The Italian government will oppose a legal challenge by the Tuscan city of Piombino against plans to set up a

liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in its port, the country's environment and energy security minister, Gilberto Pichetto Fratin, has said. [PortsEurope]

Gas grid operator Snam was given approval in October to begin installing a new floating LNG terminal in the port on Italy's western coast. The project was part of a broader plan by the former government of Mario Draghi to improve energy security and cut Italy's dependence on Russian gas amid the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Piombino argues that the floating LNG terminal would be unfit for safe operation in its port without first dredging the seabed for "hundreds of thousands of cubic metres." Advisors to the city have said that this process would take years and the terminal would not be operational by March 2023 as planned. [Reuters]

The legal challenge against the project is being led by Piombino mayor Francesco Ferrari, who is a member of the country's ruling right-wing Brothers of Italy party.

Ferrari said: "We are aware of the energy emergency and of the national interest nature of the new gas supply measures, but this cannot be separated from guarantees on the safety of the Piombino community. We have faith in the judiciary and are convinced that we will soon resolve the matter." [L'indipendente]

(km/pk)

Portugal on track to achieve carbon neutrality by 2045, says PM

The Portuguese prime minister has said his country is on track to bring its target of becoming carbon neutral forward from 2050 to 2045, while the environment minister has said Portugal plans to become a major exporter of "green" hydrogen. [Lusa]

Premier Antonio Costa made his announcement on his first day at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) that took place in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, between November 6 and 18.

Costa said his country has a "sustained policy of investment" in public transport and a strategy for hydrogen that will help Portuguese industry, which is still dependent on natural gas. [Lusa]

He added that Portugal had been the first country to set a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 at an

international climate change conference in Marrakech in 2016. [Republica Portuguesa]

Speaking about the energy crisis besetting Europe, Costa said that moving towards renewable sources makes countries less dependent on third parties and on "the volatility of the international markets". [Lusa]

According to the prime minister, electricity prices in Portugal are lower than the EU average because 60 percent of the nation's power comes from renewables. [Republica Portuguesa]

Meanwhile, environment minister Duarte Cordeiro said on November 10 that Portugal plans to become a major exporter of "green" hydrogen, with the help of a plan by 70 private investors to spend EUR 10 billion on the hydrogen industry.

Cordeiro did not specify when the investment project would be carried out or when exports of hydrogen produced using renewable electricity would be launched.

He added that the production of hydrogen and other renewables at competitive prices would be possible thanks to Portugal's focus on low-cost wind and solar power. [Reuters]

Cordeiro also said that an agreement on a Green Energy Corridor reached between Portugal, Spain and France in October to bolster energy interconnections "opens the door to more opportunities of exporting via pipeline". [República Portuguesa]

The Green Energy Corridor foresees future interconnections between Portugal and Spain and a maritime pipeline between Barcelona and Marseille. [Lusa]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Climate activists occupy schools, urge economy minister to quit

Young climate activists occupied several schools and universities in Lisbon in November, demanding that Portugal should end the use of fossil fuels by 2030 and calling for the resignation of the economy minister, a former oil company executive. [Portugal Resident]

The protests were organised by the Lisbon Student Climate Strike group in support of the international End Fossil: Occupy! campaign. [Lusa]

In parallel to the occupation of a number of schools, dozens of activists stormed a building where economy minister Antonio Costa Silva was giving a speech on November 12. [Reuters]

Costa Silva agreed to meet with protesters on November 14. Afterwards, some glued themselves to the entrance of the economy ministry and were arrested. [Lusa]

There were also arrests at the Faculty of Arts at Lisbon University, where police were summoned to force demonstrators out. [Portugal Resident]

Costa Silva said he would not resign. He added that he had long fought for decarbonisation and that he had publicly supported renewable energy. [Portugal Resident]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: PM says 'golden visa' scheme for rich foreigners will end

Prime Minister Antonio Costa has said Portugal will scrap a "golden visa" programme that grants residency to foreigners from non-EU states who invest heavily in the country. [Politico]

The scheme "probably has already fulfilled the role it had to fulfil and, at this moment, is no longer justified to keep it", Costa said. [Reuters]

The programme has attracted investors mainly from China, Brazil and South Africa, with most of their money going into real estate in Portugal. So-called golden visas have been criticised for increasing housing and rental prices in the country. [Reuters]

The European Commission has voiced concern about such programmes, saying they raise "inherent security, money laundering, tax evasion and corruption risks". [European Commission]

Costa said Portugal wanted to remain attractive to foreigners, and pointed to the country's so-called "digital nomads visa". Under this measure, enacted on October 31, foreigners with a high income from remote work are allowed to live in Portugal for a year. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal urged to step up anti-bribery efforts

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has urged Portugal to boost its efforts to clamp down on bribery of foreign public officials. [Lusa]

The latest report of a OECD working group evaluates Portugal's implementation of an anti-bribery convention, and says detection of corruption "remains low".

According to the OECD's findings, Portuguese authorities have "prematurely closed" foreign bribery cases "without investigating relevant allegations thoroughly and proactively". [OECD]

An OECD Anti-Corruption Convention entered into force more than 20 years ago. Since then, Portugal has not recorded a single foreign bribery conviction, according to the OECD. [OECD]

While the working group acknowledges recent reforms, it says Portuguese authorities have not addressed "longstanding concerns" regarding Portugal's legal framework.

Sanctions for "foreign bribery" in Portugal "do not appear to be effective, proportionate or dissuasive", according to the OECD report. [OECD]

(msa/pk)

Spain: Row over ruling coalition's plan to change sedition law

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has been accused of pandering to Catalan secessionists for political gain after Spain's ruling coalition announced plans to change sedition laws.

Sanchez's left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and its junior coalition partner Unidas Podemos have proposed replacing the law on sedition with a crime of aggravated public disorder that would reduce the maximum prison sentence from 15 to eight years. [Euronews]

The proposal, unveiled on November 11, comes before a key vote in the lower house of parliament on the 2023 budget in which Sanchez's PSOE is counting on the support of the left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) party.

Opponents of Sanchez have argued that the prime minister is putting his party before his country since the reform is set to benefit leaders of the Catalan Independence movement.

Last year, Sanchez pardoned all nine Catalan separatist leaders who were sentenced in 2019 for sedition after a failed attempt to break away the northeastern region of Catalonia from Spain in 2017. [Associated Press] [Reuters 1]

The leader of the right-wing opposition People's Party, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, said on Twitter: "I feel I'm right in saying that Sanchez always puts his political interests above Spain's."

The regional president of Catalonia, Pere Aragones, who is from the ERC party, voiced support for the reform, saying that it would make it harder to "persecute the independence movement unfairly and arbitrarily". [Reuters 2]

(km/pk)

Spain: New law on sexual consent causes uproar over unintended results

A new law on sexual consent has caused uproar after, in an unintended outcome, lawyers used it to reduce sentences for people convicted of sex crimes.

The "only yes means yes" law took effect in October and aimed to tighten the definition of consent after a 2016 gang rape case in Pamplona.

Five men had initially been found guilty of sexually abusing, but not raping, an unconscious 18-year-old woman because she could not prove that she had not consented. [Europe Monthly August 2022] Spain's Supreme Court later overruled that verdict following widespread protests and handed the five men a jail term of 15 years for rape.

When a law is introduced in Spain, it can be applied retroactively to people already convicted of a crime covered by the new legislation if this is to their benefit.

After the new rules came into force, lawyers in at least eight cases have been able to reduce the punishments for people convicted of sex crimes because in some cases the recent law sets lower minimum sentences.

Spain's equality minister, Irene Montero, who championed the legal changes, has faced criticism over

the results.

Montero, however, has defended the new rules, saying that “machismo may make some [male] judges apply the law incorrectly”. [BBC]

The conservative opposition People’s Party urged Montero to step down and called for a review of the recent law in the Spanish senate. [Associated Press] [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Spain unveils bill to fight human trafficking

The Spanish government proposed a new bill on November 28 to tackle human trafficking and protect those at risk.

Under the measure, called the Comprehensive Law to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, people who have been confirmed as potential victims by a court would be granted free legal assistance. They would also be able to seek financial aid or housing help.

A new national police surveillance office dedicated to victims of trafficking would also be created. [La Moncloa]

The proposal is being led by Spain’s Justice Minister Pilar Llop, who said at a press conference in Madrid: “There is nothing more important than the protection of the most vulnerable people.” She added: “This is an ethical and democratic commitment of the first order.”

According to Llop, the proposal is likely to be modified before it is voted on in parliament. [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Spain approves mortgage support for vulnerable households

Spain’s cabinet approved a mortgage relief plan for more than a million vulnerable households on November 22 after the government reached an agreement with banks.

The relief plan, which aims to help offset increases in the cost of living, will reduce mortgage rates for five years for households that have an annual income of

less than EUR 25,200 and dedicate 50 percent of their income to mortgage payments. [El Pais]

The plan will also benefit households that make less than EUR 29,400 a year and are at risk of vulnerability. These households will be offered a freeze of mortgage repayments for 12 months, and loan extensions if their mortgage payments swallow up more than 30 percent of their income and such payments have increased by at least 20 percent. [Lamoncloa]

The measure will also make it easier and cheaper for households to switch from variable to fixed-rate mortgage contracts.

According to Spain's Economy Minister Nadia Calvino, banks have until the end of December to sign up for the plan.

The measure remains subject to negotiations but is planned to take effect at the beginning of 2023. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: Mass protest in Madrid demands better healthcare

At least 200,000 people took to the streets in Madrid on November 13 demanding improvements to the capital region's healthcare system, which they claimed is under-financed, badly managed and at risk from local government privatisation plans.

Called to protest by labour unions, left-wing political parties and neighbourhood associations, Spanish healthcare workers and supporters demanded more primary healthcare staff and voiced anger at public healthcare cuts amid increasing privatisation in the sector. [Anadolu Agency].

The demonstrations were part of a larger movement of strikes in Madrid. Partial walkouts began on November 7 against plans to build what critics say will be understaffed local clinics. Meanwhile, unions representing 5,000 family doctors and paediatricians on November 21 began what they said would be a strike of indefinite duration.

Doctors are demanding higher wages and a decrease in patient load, accusing the regional government led by centre-right politician Isabel Diaz Ayuso of under-financing and mismanaging the public health system. [Le Monde] [Al Jazeera]

The left-wing national government supports the protests, claiming that Ayuso is responsible for "disastrous management" of public healthcare.

Cabinet minister Felix Bolanos said: "Madrid is the region that invests the least in health per inhabitant". He added that the capital region has the fewest doctors and nurses per inhabitant in Spain. [DW]

Ayuso denied there were staff shortages and accused "irresponsible" left-wing parties of staging the protests in an attempt to gain power in municipal and regional elections next year "through confusion, agitation and dirty tricks". [The Guardian]

(qv/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Plan to toughen ban on Nazi symbols

Austria is planning to tighten a law that bans the use of Nazi symbols. The move comes after some opponents of Covid-19 restrictions presented themselves as victims by wearing yellow stars similar to those Jews were required to display during the Holocaust. Protesters wore stars marked with words such as "unvaccinated" instead of the word "Jew". [Reuters] [Kurier]

Austrian Justice Minister Alma Zadic told a press conference on November 15 that "any trivialisation of National Socialist genocide and [of] any Nazi crimes against humanity... must be punished and cannot be tolerated."

After World War II, Austria – where Adolf Hitler was born – passed a law banning the Nazi Party and the dissemination of Nazi propaganda, including symbols linked to Hitler's Third Reich. [Euronews]

Toughening this law would require a two-thirds majority in parliament, and the ruling coalition would need the support of at least one opposition party to pass such an amendment.

(vs/pk)

Austria: Climate activists occupy university lecture halls

Student climate activists in Austria have occupied university lecture halls to voice dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the climate crisis, and with its stance on the country's education system and on social injustice. [Euractiv]

On the first day of the protests, which started on November 16 in Vienna, Salzburg and Innsbruck, a lecture hall in the capital was occupied by an estimated 150 to 200 people. In Salzburg around 25 people protested and in Innsbruck around 40.

"We identify three crises, all of which result from fossil dependence. This is our dependence on oil. From this we finance the war of aggression on Ukraine. We have massive inflation – and of course our climate crisis," said a spokeswoman for the Salzburg protest. [ORF Salzburg]

Activists are demanding an end to the use of fossil fuels, more money for universities, and a tax on wealth and excess profits. [ORF]

The far-right populist opposition Freedom Party of Austria (FPO) has criticised the protests, held under the slogan "The Earth is Burning", because they prevent others from studying and has called for students to be removed from lecture halls. [Euractiv]

(vs/pk)

Austria: Government wants to end fossil-fuel heating

Heating systems using oil, coal, and gas would be banned in new buildings in Austria from 2023 under a

plan agreed by the government as the country strives to wean itself off dependency on Russian fuel.

Already approved construction projects would be exempt from the rule, which the authorities want to impose as they encourage a switch to climate-friendly heating methods. [Der Standard]

The government has also set a target of scrapping the use of private oil and coal heating by 2035, and replacing all gas heating by 2040. [Euractiv]

“Real independence, real security, will only come about once we free ourselves from dependence on Russian gas,” said Austria’s energy minister, Leonore Gewessler.

The government has launched a funding initiative worth EUR 2 billion in total until 2026 to support those who choose to change to more climate friendly methods of heating. The subsidy for switching from gas heating will be EUR 9,500, and EUR 7,500 for switching from oil heating.

The new law would need the approval of two-thirds of the Austrian parliament as it would amend the country’s constitution. [ORF AT]

(vs/pk)

Croatia: Employers call for halt to planned new windfall tax

The Croatian Employers’ Association (HUP) is calling on the government to abandon plans for a new windfall tax on companies, even though Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic has said the measure will go ahead. [Jutarnji List]

According to HUP chief Irena Weber, the new tax would hinder investment and wage growth, aggravating the effects of a looming recession.

Domestic news outlets have reported that the levy could be imposed on all companies that see an increase in profits of over 20 percent. [Euractiv]

The HUP is calling on the government to sit down with businesses to agree on measures to mitigate the impact of a feared economic crisis.

(vs/pk)

Croatia plans to increase pay for Sunday work

Croatia's labour minister, Marin Piletic, has announced plans under which employees in all sectors of the economy will from the start of next year have to be paid 50 percent more than their normal wage for working on Sundays. [Euractiv]

The labour ministry said that the main aim of the new rules is to provide "a decent wage for the work that a worker performs on Sunday, which according to traditions and customs in the Republic of Croatia is a day for family and private life." [Glasistre]

The number of working Sundays will be limited to three a month and a maximum of 16 a year.

A bill including the new rules, part of an amendment to Croatia's labour law, was submitted to parliament on December 1. [Croatian Government]

Sunday wages for employees in Croatia are currently 30-37 percent higher than normal pay.

(vs/pk)

Populist Ex-PM to run for Czech presidency

Former prime minister Andrej Babis, the leader of the populist opposition ANO party, has confirmed that he will run for the Czech presidency in a January 2023 election. [Bloomberg]

"When I see how the government is not working, how it is not helping people, how it is not acting, I decided to go for it," Babis told Czech broadcaster TV NOVA.

"According to the polls, I don't have much of a chance, but I am a fighter, so I think I will do my best to convince people that I will be a good candidate for president," Babis added. [Denik N]

Babis, a billionaire Eurosceptic, was ousted as prime minister in October 2021 parliamentary elections won by the centre-right Together alliance led by Petr Fiala, the current premier. [EiR Monthly December 2021]

That result was seen by many as a victory for moderate opposition forces over the populist illiberalism of Babis, whose term as prime minister was marked by a string of scandals. He was accused of an EU subsidy fraud, while a European Commission audit found that

he had breached conflict of interest rules over subsidies from Brussels involving his former business empire. He also faced criticism during the parliamentary election campaign of mishandling the coronavirus pandemic. [Reuters] [AP]

His biggest rivals in the battle for the presidency will be retired general Petr Pavel and former university rector and economist Danuse Nerudova. [Prague Morning]

According to a poll conducted by the Median agency in October, Pavel would win the first round of the presidential election with 22.5 percent of the vote, Babis would be a close second with 22 percent and Neruda would be third with 15 percent. [E15]

But polls by the Stem/Mark, Ipsos and Median agencies found that Babis's rivals would score significantly higher than him in the second round. [E15]

The current Czech president, Milos Zeman, is not running because under Czech law a candidate cannot stand for a third term in office. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Zeman had long publicly supported Moscow. After war broke out, his opinion changed radically – he described President Vladimir Putin as a "madman" and expressed full support for Ukraine. [Euronews]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Quarter of a million homeless or facing housing crisis

A study commissioned by the ministry of labour and social affairs has found that at least 270,000 people in the Czech Republic are living on the streets or in hostels, shelters or extremely overcrowded apartments. [iRozhlas]

Organisations that help the homeless warn that the number of Czechs seeking accommodation in shelters is likely to increase due to financial hardship linked to the energy crisis.

"We have about 60 new homeless people a month. People who did not come in the past are coming now because they lived in hostels or shared or rented housing, and now they no longer have the financial means to pay for such housing," said Daniel Svoboda, the head of the Prague branch of homeless shelter charity Nadeje (Hope). [Radio Prague International]

The ministry of labour and social affairs is preparing a new law on housing to help people in need. However, the Czech government is not expected to discuss the measure until the second half of 2023. [iRozhlas]

(vs/pk)

Hungary: Gov't used Covid data for political campaign, says rights group

A human rights group has accused the Hungarian government of misusing citizens' personal data during campaigning for parliamentary elections earlier this year.

A report by the Human Rights Watch group released on December 1 claims the government "tilted an already uneven playing field" in favour of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's ruling Fidesz party. [Human Rights Watch]

Human Rights Watch said data including details from vaccine sign-ups and tax benefits applications was used to spread Fidesz campaign messages before the elections in April. [Politico]

"Using people's personal data collected so they could access public services to bombard them with political campaign messages is a betrayal of trust and an abuse of power," said a senior technology researcher at Human Rights Watch. [Human Rights Watch]

The rights group called on the EU to examine whether such alleged exploitation of personal data is consistent with European laws, and urged the European Commission, the bloc's executive, to take action against Hungary for what it said was a failure to ensure the independence of the national body that oversees data protection. [RFE/RL]

Orban's right-wing Fidesz party won a fourth consecutive term in power in April 3 parliamentary elections. Critics said that Orban had a significant advantage because of government domination of the media.

The Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), which supervised the vote, said the ballot was "marred by the pervasive overlapping of government and ruling coalition messaging that blurred the line between state and party, as well as by media bias and opaque campaign funding." [Europe Monthly May 2022]

(msa/pk)

Hungary: New energy ministry set up

An economist who says he is a “vocal supporter” of increasing the role of wind power in Hungary has been appointed to head a new, standalone energy ministry as the government seeks to tackle rocketing power prices.

The new ministry, to be helmed by Csaba Lantos, “will be tasked with a unified leadership on energy policy,” the prime minister’s chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, said on November 14. [About Hungary] [Reuters]

Soaring power prices are among the biggest challenges facing right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Hungary is heavily reliant on Russian gas and declared an “energy emergency” in July amid the prospect of shortages. [AP]

The new energy minister will not supervise the expansion of Hungary’s Paks nuclear plant, 100 km south of the capital. Russian state-owned company Rosatom is to build two extra reactors at the site under a deal struck with Budapest in August. [Europe In Review September 2022] [About Hungary] The project will be overseen by Hungary’s foreign ministry.

Orban has maintained a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, despite Moscow’s war in Ukraine.

(msa/pk)

Hungary: Public facilities closing amid soaring power costs

Dozens of Hungarian cities are closing public facilities due to an increase in gas bills amid an energy crunch. The most affected venues are sports, leisure and cultural centres including swimming pools, libraries, museums and theatres. [Euronews]

The deputy mayor of Szeged in the south, one of the cities that have had to cut expenses, told Euronews that it was paying seven times more for gas, and that the government had done nothing to help.

Local councils across the country face similar problems, with many reporting fivefold to tenfold increases in energy prices.

Szeged's deputy mayor, Tamas Kovacs, said some municipalities have been "partially dysfunctional" since September, trying to perform at least their mandatory public duties, but being forced to reduce public transport or to close facilities. [Euronews]

Budapest's Hotel Hungaria, the largest in the country, has announced that it is closing until March, saying it is uneconomical to stay open. [TeleSur]

While Hungarians enjoy the cheapest gas in the EU and have electricity prices that are among the lowest in the bloc, they are also on average poorer than people in Western Europe. [Euronews]

The Hungarian government has sought to strengthen ties with Russia in order to secure energy supplies. [Euractiv] Still, Prime Minister Viktor Orban's friendly relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin have not spared his country the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Budapest is heavily dependent on Russian energy. Moscow supplies Hungary with 65 percent of its oil and 85 percent of its gas. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

(msa/pk)

Slovakia: Lawyers hail precedent-setting verdict for same-sex couple

An Argentinian man who married a Slovak partner of the same sex abroad has the right to be granted permanent residence in Slovakia, a court has ruled in what lawyers have hailed as a ground-breaking verdict.

Slovak law does not recognise same-sex marriages or partnerships.

The ruling came in a case launched by a Slovak-Argentinian couple who were married in Argentina and later decided to live in Slovakia. But the Argentinian man was refused permanent residence by the Slovak immigration authority on the grounds that the marriage was in violation of Slovak family law. [Sme] [Slovak Spectator]

"The court confirmed that what took place was unjustified discrimination based on sexual orientation and a violation of the right to private and family life as well as freedom of residence," said Peter Kubina, an attorney representing the couple. [Sme]

“This will be a useful precedent for other cases in the future – not only those related to permanent residence, but also to other aspects of LGBTI+ people’s lives”, added Kubina after the ruling by the regional court in Zilina, northern Slovakia. [Aktuality]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: Doctors protest at shortcomings in public healthcare

Doctors and public health workers protested in front of the Slovak government offices in Bratislava on November 17 complaining about shortages of medical staff, which they said were causing unnecessary deaths among patients.

Demonstrators said overstretched medical workers were exhausted, and urged the government to improve conditions in the Slovak healthcare system. [Slovak Spectator] [Dennik N]

The protest was called by the Medical Trade Union Association (LOZ), which accuses the government of inaction in connection with recent mass resignations of doctors. [Pravda]

At the beginning of October, more than 2,100 doctors from 31 hospitals submitted resignations, most taking effect on December 1. [Sme] [Teraz]

Peter Visolajsky, head of the LOZ, accused the government of “gambling with the lives and health of Slovak citizens.”

(vs/pk)

Slovak e-store criticised for comments on LGBT+ people, pandemic

Danish company Lego, whose toys are known across the world, has stopped advertising its products on a well-known Slovak e-store after its owner posted a string of controversial statements about the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the LGBT+ community. [TV Noviny]

Some of the comments posted on the website of the Dracik toy store denied the effectiveness of coronavirus vaccinations, questioned Slovakia’s defence agreement with the US, and suggested that

ideas supported by LGBT+ people create “tension in society”. [Dennik N] [Sme]

The website was also criticised by the Albi company, which sells family board games. “We disagree with those statements and distance ourselves from them. Our corporate values include tolerance and equality,” said Ivana Sulganova from Albi's marketing department.

Meanwhile, Czech police have launched an investigation into comments posted on the Czech website of the Dracik store. [TV Noviny]

(vs/pk)

Nearly one in three Slovaks have suffered or witnessed ageism, study finds

Almost a third of Slovaks have experienced or witnessed age discrimination, according to a survey. [Slovak Spectator] [Sme]

Among the 29 percent of respondents who had direct or indirect experience of such treatment, 56 percent reported discrimination on the labour market, and 28 percent in health and social services. [IVO] [Sme]

According to the study, conducted in August by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), people become more sensitive to ageism-related issues as they grow older. The survey asked 1,212 people aged 18 and over about their experiences. [IVO]

(vs/pk)

Slovenia: Independent female candidate wins presidency

Independent candidate Natasa Pirc Musar is set to become Slovenia’s first female president following her victory in a November 13 election.

She beat conservative contender Anze Logar in a runoff ballot, taking 54 percent of the vote, after an inconclusive first round on October 23. [Reuters] [Politico] [Euronews]

Musar is a prominent lawyer who has represented Melania Trump – the wife of former US President Donald Trump – and her family in legal cases. Musar

has also been a staunch advocate of LGBT rights and has taken on human rights cases.

Musar ran a campaign based on a left-liberal platform and enjoyed the support of two former left-leaning presidents, as well as endorsements from two of the country's three ruling coalition parties.

Liberal Prime Minister Robert Golob and his Freedom Movement party, and centre-left Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and her Social Democrats, had voiced support for Musar.

Under Slovenian law, the only real power the president has is to nominate prime ministers and members of the constitutional court, but the position is still seen as one of considerable power. [AP]

Musar has vowed to remain politically independent and hopes to encourage dialogue in Slovenia, which saw a right-wing government replaced by a liberal one in parliamentary elections earlier this year. She said in a statement: "My first task will be to open a dialogue among all Slovenians."

The president-elect has also vowed to speak out about human rights issues, saying during her campaign: "All my life I've advocated the same values: democracy, human rights, tolerance. It's time to stop dealing with the past. Many things have to be done in the future." [Euractiv]

Musar has also said that she wants to increase cooperation among Balkan states. She has voiced support for the current Slovenian government's approach of backing EU membership across the region.

Regarding the EU, which Slovenia joined in 2004, she said: "I'm definitely a strong believer in the European Union. I do believe that rule of law and human rights are something that most Europeans still believe in." [AP]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Referendum delivers boost to liberal gov't

A referendum on three separate issues has delivered what is seen as a popular vote of confidence in the liberal coalition government that came to power in Slovenia earlier this year.

The centre-right opposition SDS party initiated the referendum in a bid to destabilise Prime Minister Robert Golob's position and to prevent the adoption of laws drafted by his government. [Delo]

The first question posed to voters was on a law to prevent staff changes at the state-owned RTV Slovenia broadcaster. The law aims to depoliticise the outlet following the previous SDS-led government's moves to replace staff in order to bring RTV under its control. Such efforts had prompted international organisations to warn that press freedoms had deteriorated in Slovakia. [Euronews]

In the referendum, 62 percent of voters approved of the current government's law. [Delo]

The result was a blow to former SDS Prime Minister Janez Jansa's party but he downplayed it and criticised RTV, saying: "With a 99% media monopoly, what can they [RTV] mislead [people] with next time?"

Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon praised the referendum result, saying: "It is time the opposition accepts what people are saying." [Euractiv]

The second referendum question concerned an amendment to rules on long-term care for pensioners, measures which had initially been implemented by the SDS but which the new government wants to change, deeming them unfeasible in their current form.

The third referendum question was about the creation of three new government ministries, a move proposed by Golob's ruling Freedom Movement party but challenged by the SDS. [InsideSlovenia]

In total, 62.2 percent voted in favour of the governing party's changes to long-term care, while 56.6 voted in favour of its plans to set up more government ministries. [Volitve]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia allows gay marriage, in a first for Central and Eastern Europe

Slovenia has changed its laws so that same-sex couples can marry and adopt children, becoming the first former communist country in Central and Eastern Europe to take such a step. [DW]

The move came half a year after the liberal-leaning Freedom Movement party swept to power in April

elections, replacing a conservative right-wing government.

In July, Slovenia's constitutional court ruled that laws allowing only couples of different sexes to marry and adopt were incompatible with the country's constitution, which bans any form of unequal treatment.

The constitutional court gave parliament six months to change the laws on marriage. [Dnevnik] [Euronews]

On October 4, a legal amendment in line with the constitutional court's finding was passed in parliament with 48 votes for and 29 against. However, following its failure to pass the upper chamber due to a suspensive veto, parliament had to approve the same amendment a second time, backing it by 51 votes to 24 on October 18. [Euronews]

Shortly after, however, the "Coalition for Children" citizens' group garnered enough signatures to have the question of the constitutional court's decision brought up again in parliament. The group argued that such an important decision shouldn't be left up to the court and should instead be the topic of a referendum.

The leader of the group said that the constitutional court finding "inappropriately interferes with the traditional understanding of marriage and the family."

The constitutional court responded by ruling that a referendum on the amendment passed by parliament was inadmissible as the constitution forbids referenda on human rights and fundamental freedoms. [Delo]

The amendment approved by lawmakers was officially signed into law on October 28. [Slovenian Government]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Foreign, interior ministers survive no-confidence votes

Both Slovenia's foreign and interior minister have withstood an attempt by the main right-leaning opposition party, the SDS, to have them removed from their posts.

Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon had a vote of no confidence initiated against her in September after she dismissed the Slovenian ambassador to the United States. Ambassador Tone Kajzer was summoned to

Ljubljana and removed from his position after he leaked diplomatic cables to the SDS leader, Janez Jansa, in what foreign ministry officials said was a violation of the law.

The SDS, meanwhile, said it was unhappy at the use of internal diplomatic channels to advertise an address where diplomatic staff could send their votes for presidential candidate Natasa Musar, who was endorsed by two of the country's three ruling coalition parties and who went on to win the presidency of Slovenia in a November 13 election.

An MP for the SDS criticised the "selective collection of signatures for a single presidential candidate, which has led to inequality before the law." [Euractiv]

On November 11, only 22 members of the opposition voted in favour of Fajon's removal, from a total of 90 MPs. Fajon called the attempt to oust her "nothing but an attack that the opposition has mounted to create a populist political campaign." [Euractiv]

The SDS, supported by the centre-right NSi, initiated a similar no-confidence proceeding against the interior minister, Tatjana Bobnar, following a rise in the number of illegal immigrants entering the country. After being elected earlier this year, Slovenia's liberal government removed fencing on the border with Croatia and relaxed migration policies. [Euractiv]

SDS MP Branko Grims said that "the drastic increase in asylum applications indicates abuse of the asylum system in Slovenia."

Bobnar said that border fencing "does not prevent migration, it only makes it more dangerous," and cited data which she said showed that the coronavirus pandemic had skewed migration statistics. [Dnevnik]

Bobnar held onto her position after only 24 MPs voted for her removal on November 13. [Dnevnik]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Heating prices capped, pensions to rise, amid cost-of-living crisis

Heating prices in districts across Slovenia will be capped under an emergency package as Ljubljana seeks to ease a cost-of-living crisis. Meanwhile, old-age pensions are set to be increased earlier than planned.

The caps will save Slovenians between EUR 122 and EUR 180 in monthly heating costs after Infrastructure Minister Bojan Kumer promised that the government would intervene in order to bring prices down to a "tolerable level". Kumer added: "The prices on the markets are very high... which means prices are 400 percent higher than in the same month last year." [Delo]

Heating prices are to be capped at EUR 73 per megawatt hour, including for households, nurseries, schools and medical centres.

But the capital, Ljubljana, will not see an easing of prices as, according to Kumer, the city does not rely on natural gas for its heating and will not see the same increase in costs.

Pensions, meanwhile, will be increased 4.5 percent in 2023 in a move expected to cost the government EUR 300 million. [Euractiv] Luka Mesec, the minister of labour, family and social affairs, said: "Since we have increased salaries in the public sector by 4.5 percent, we will also increase pensions by 4.5 percent."

Mesec also announced that the national minimum wage would be increased to over EUR 850 a month during the course of 2023, adding: "This is an essential measure to help all minimum wage earners, all those who work hard but earn little. Their incomes will increase significantly next year." He added that negotiations would first have to be completed with employers and trade unions. [Delo]

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Talks held to form broad coalition government after snap election

Negotiations to form a new broad coalition government are underway in Denmark after early elections on November 1, with the centre-left Social Democrats aiming to return to power after pulling far ahead of other parties to secure their best result since 2001.

Social Democrat leader Mette Frederiksen, who is now acting premier, called the parliamentary elections following a series of scandals that had eroded support for her minority government. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The Social Democrats won 27.5 percent of the vote, giving them 50 seats in the 179-seat Danish parliament – 40 short of the 90 needed for a majority.

However, the Social Democrats have formed a "red bloc" alliance with the centrist Social Liberals, the left-wing Red-Green Alliance and the centre-left Green Left party. Together these have 87 seats.

With three additional seats supplied by the centre-left Faroese Social Democratic Party and Greenland's centre-left Siumut party, the Social Democrats would have a 90-seat majority. [Euronews] [Reuters] [AP]

Frederiksen announced during her campaign that she intended to create an even broader coalition and form a centrist government bridging the ideological divide in Danish politics. [Politico] [Berlingske]

The now acting prime minister drew heavy criticism in the months leading up to the elections over her role in a 2020 mink culling scandal, for which she received a formal parliamentary reprimand, and over plans to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda. [AP]

Among other parties that did well in the elections is the newcomer centre-liberal Moderates grouping, led by former prime minister Lars Rasmussen. The Moderates are now the third largest party in Denmark after winning 16 parliamentary seats. [Euronews]

The biggest loser was the main opposition grouping, the centre-right Venstre party, which lost 20 seats.

Meanwhile, the new far-right Danish Democrats party, headed by former immigration minister Inger Stojberg, performed the best on the right, netting 14 seats and outperforming the nationalist former frontrunner, the Danish People's Party. The latter lost 11 seats, and held on to only five. Stojberg's party has ruled out joining Frederiksen's coalition.

Voter turnout in the November 1 election was 83.7 percent.

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Gov't censors parts of NATO spending report critical of Copenhagen

A recently published NATO report has criticised Denmark's levels of defence spending, which at current growth rates will not hit a target of 2 percent of GDP until 2033. Large parts of the report have for the first time been censored by the Danish government, a move that some observers say was unnecessary.

Members of the Western defence alliance agreed at a 2014 meeting in Wales in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea that they would boost defence spending to two percent of their gross domestic products by 2024. [Carnegie Europe] Denmark, meanwhile, is set to spend only 1.39 percent of its GDP on defence in 2023.

In a report entitled *Defence Planning Capability Review*, the alliance has urged Copenhagen to speed up military investment to improve NATO as well as domestic defence capabilities. The review is conducted every two years and measures the performance of individual members' defence expenditures.

The report is drawn up by NATO and then made available to the public by the alliance's respective member countries. Large parts of this year's review dealing with Denmark have been obscured and blanked out, with the defence ministry in Copenhagen saying that, amid Russia's war in Ukraine, this was because of the "current security-political situation."

Mads Korsager, a defence correspondent for broadcaster DR, said he failed to see why so many details in the report had been censored by the Danish government, adding: “I think that much of the information contained in that report is something that Russia basically already knows.”

Denmark has previously been criticised in such reports, which have pointed out the nation’s lack of armoured formations. [Dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Hacker attack blamed for shutdown in rail services

Danish state railway company DSB has blamed a hacker attack for causing trains on the island of Zealand to grind to a halt, a stoppage which caused knock-on delays across the country.

DSB initially blamed security system failures for the disruptions on October 28. Services resumed in the late afternoon of that day. [Dr.dk] However, on November 3, the company said hackers were behind the incident.

The root cause of the problems has been traced to a rail app which provides drivers with key information such as speed and traffic warnings but which cannot function without an internet connection. [Politiken] [Dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Danish women may face jail over links to Islamic State

Three Danish citizens who left the country to join the so-called Islamic State have been charged with travelling to a conflict area without permission.

The three women, who are all in their 30s, were evacuated to Denmark along with their children from a Syrian refugee camp in 2021. They have remained in Danish custody ever since.

The Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, where the women travelled to, were classified as “conflict areas” by the Danish government. [Dr.dk]

Danish prosecutors are now attempting to have the women charged with promoting terror organisations, which could see them face prison terms of up to four years.

State attorney Jakob Berger Nielsen said in a statement: “It is our opinion that the women have been an important part of IS in relation to family and practical support for the terrorist organisation.” [Politiken]

Meanwhile, other women who joined IS in 2014 have been refused the right to return to Denmark. Three have been stripped of their Danish citizenship and have been left in Syrian refugee camps alongside their children. Heavy criticism has been levelled against Copenhagen over those cases amid reports of abhorrent conditions in such camps. [Dr.dk]

As these women now possess no citizenship, the Danish government is not obliged to help them, but has offered to evacuate some of their children. Lawyers for the children have filed legal proceedings against the Danish foreign ministry. [Dr.dk]

(cg/pk)

Finland: Gov’t designates critical infrastructure amid fears of outages

Finland’s ministry of labour and economic affairs has compiled a list of installations across the country that are to be designated as critical infrastructure amid worries of potential widespread electricity outages.

Hospitals, emergency services, heating and water treatment facilities are among sites that have been deemed vital to the functioning of Finnish society. Should the country’s energy grid fail or face shortages, this critical infrastructure is to be prioritised and should receive any remaining electricity supplies.

However, the labour and economic affairs ministry told public service providers and entities affected by the designation to make their own preparations. “Being defined as a critical electricity user does not mean that the electricity supply of the operator in question cannot be interrupted in some situations, and operators defined as critical electricity users are also responsible for their own preparations,” the ministry said. [Aamulehti]

European countries fear the consequences of diminishing power supplies during the winter as a

result of sanctions on Russian energy, and have sought to prepare strategic reserves. Helsinki is far less reliant on Moscow's gas than many of its European counterparts but fears it could face other potential threats from Russia as the Nordic nation is set to join NATO in the coming months.

Recent cyber-attacks on Finnish institutions have been attributed to Russian-affiliated hacker groups. Meanwhile, other Scandinavian countries have seen a rise in unauthorised drone flights over or near critical infrastructure. [Euractiv]

(cg/pk)

Finland: 'Exit tax' plan causes tensions

Partners in Finland's ruling coalition have butted heads over a proposed "exit tax" system that is supported by Prime Minister Sanna Marin but criticised by Finance Minister Annika Saarikko.

Marin wants a capital gains tax imposed on non-Finnish residents with financial assets who leave the country. This would apply to tax residents who have spent at least four of the last 10 years in the country. [Euractiv]

Marin, who leads the centre-left Social Democratic party, is supported on the issue by her left-leaning coalition partner, the Left Alliance, which pointed out that many other European countries have already implemented a similar policy. The new system could net Finnish tax agencies some EUR 70 million a year. Marin said the current system is "one example of the loophole we have in taxation."

But Saarikko has opposed the tax, as has the opposition conservative National Coalition Party. The party's chairman said that he would ditch such a system if his grouping is successful in parliamentary elections scheduled for April.

Meanwhile, local start-up businesses are fearful of losing potential sources of investment, as wealthy individuals may have an incentive to move their assets elsewhere.

Marin hopes to have the tax passed after coalition negotiations. She said: "Each government party… is either committed to government cooperation or not." [Aamulehti]

(cg/pk)

Finland: Parliament votes to ease abortion law

Finland's strict abortion laws are to be softened after parliament passed reforms that are expected to come into force by 2023.

Under legislation passed in the 1970s, women have needed approval from two doctors before an abortion can be carried out. Now only one doctor will be required to approve the procedure. Furthermore, women will be able to terminate pregnancies up to the 12th week without giving a reason.

Finland is considered by many, including its own citizens, to have the strictest abortion laws among Scandinavian nations. [AP]

A vote in the 200-seat parliament on October 26 saw 125 in favour and 45 against the reforms, which were initially brought before deputies as part of a citizens' initiative that started in 2020.

Saara-Sofia Siren, a member of parliament from the centre-right National Coalition party, told Finnish newscaster YLE: "The reform of the Abortion Act is a much-needed update to clearly outdated legislation". She added: "The reform is about the fundamental right of women to decide about themselves, their bodies, and their lives." [Euronews]

(cg/pk)

Finland: PM criticised over delay in law on indigenous rights

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin has apologised over delays in a law that aims to increase the rights of Europe's only recognised indigenous people, the Sami. [Euronews] [Euronews]

The Sami Parliament Act, a piece of legislation that has on multiple occasions failed to pass the Finnish parliament, seeks to enshrine the right of self-determination for the Sami and to set a framework for Sami-Finnish relations.

Marin has been criticised by Sami politicians for not using her executive powers to force the measure through parliament. Finland's liberal-agrarian Centre Party, which is part of the governing coalition, is blocking the passage of the proposed law.

Finland has a complicated and at best, strained relationship with the Sami, who predominantly inhabit the northern Lapland region of the country. In June, Helsinki was reprimanded by a UN human rights committee for violating an international rights convention in relation to the Sami. [Euronews] [Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The UN committee's rebuke came after a 2015 Finnish Supreme Administrative Court case saw people who identified themselves as Sámi added to an electoral roll entitling them to vote in elections to the 21-seat indigenous parliament.

That move angered many among the Sami and led to a worsening of relations with Helsinki. The Sami want to be able to decide for themselves who can or cannot be considered Sami.

Many Sami fear that allowing non-Sami people the right to vote on indigenous affairs could lead to a weakening of their already at-risk culture and way of life.

Finland's Centre Party is blocking the legislation on Sami self-determination, claiming that it is protecting the rights of some 100 people who have self-identified as Sami.

(cg/pk)

Norway raises climate emissions targets, oilfield plan delayed

Norway aims to cut emissions which impact the environment by at least 55 percent by 2030, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store announced on November 3.

The new target replaces a goal of reducing such emissions between 50 and 55 percent by 2030, and would bring Norway back down to levels reported in 1990 [Reuters] [Euronews]. Greenhouse gas emissions in Norway dropped by 0.7 percent in 2021.

The change in policy brings the country in line with the European Union's climate goals, although Norway is not a member of the bloc. [Reuters] [Dagens Naeringsliv].

Oslo's announcement came ahead of November's international Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Store and his climate minister, Espen Barthe Eide, said the government would promote renewable energy while anticipating a longer-term decline in demand for fossil fuels.

However, Norway will continue to support its oil and gas industries. The country is playing a new role as an alternative supplier of gas to Europe in the wake of Russian cutoffs amid the war in Ukraine. The Nordic state now accounts for 27 percent of natural gas supplies for continental Europe, up from 23 percent in 2021. [Euronews] [NRK] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Oilfield project delayed as costs soar

Meanwhile, Norwegian energy firm Equinor and its partners have delayed a decision on what would be the world's most northern oilfield in production, as costs continue to skyrocket and supply chains dwindle.

In a win for environmental activists, an investment decision on the Wisting offshore oilfield in the Arctic has been pushed back to the end of 2026. [Reuters]

"We see a cost increase due to increased global inflation and cost growth in the supply industry nationally and internationally," Equinor said in a statement.

The International Energy Agency, an intergovernmental organisation, has said that no new oil and gas fields should be launched in order to stay on track for a climate target set under the Paris Agreement, which saw almost all the world's nations back a common plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions. [Euronews]

In addition to Norway's commitment to reducing its own emissions, the government in Oslo said that it would provide additional aid to developing countries to help combat climate change. [Dagens Naeringsliv]

(ef-mp/pk)

Norway: PM vows to address voters' financial concerns amid drop in support

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store has promised to address voters' financial concerns following a meeting with his ruling Labour Party's leadership held after recent polling showed public support for the grouping is faltering.

Backing for the Labour Party has, according to Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, been below 20 percent in recent months, with one poll showing support as low as 16.9 percent.

The Labour Party garnered 26.3 percent of the vote in September 2021 parliamentary elections. [NRK] [Dagens Naeringsliv]

The meeting Store held with senior party members on November 14 was pre-planned, but took on new urgency in light of the poll figures. [NRK]

Peggy Hessen Folsvik, leader of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, voiced concern over the level of support for the party, which she said should put all its efforts into assuaging Norwegians' money worries. The confederation is the largest organisation of labour unions in the country and is directly affiliated with Store's Labour Party. [NRK]

Store leads a minority, centre-left government that includes the Centre Party.

(ef/pk)

Sweden approves constitutional change allowing tougher terrorism law, in move sought by Ankara

Sweden's parliament voted on November 16 to amend the country's constitution to allow stricter anti-terrorism laws, a move demanded by Turkey before it ratifies Stockholm's bid to join NATO.

Turkey has been blocking efforts by Sweden and Finland to join the Western military alliance, citing security concerns related to the Kurdistan Workers' Party and other Kurdish militant groups.

Sweden and Finland abandoned their long-standing policies of military non-alignment and applied to join NATO in the summer after Russia invaded Ukraine in February. Entry to the military alliance requires the approval of all 30 of its members. Turkey and Hungary are the only two countries yet to ratify Sweden and Finland's accession bids. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

The new amendment gives the Swedish parliament constitutional authority to pass tougher laws on terrorism, including the power to limit freedom of association for organisations judged to be engaging in or supporting terrorism. [Euronews] [Sveriges Radio]

The change to the constitution, which was backed by 278 MPs in Sweden's 349-seat parliament, will come into effect on January 1.

The November 16 vote by lawmakers finalised a process that has been in the works since an earlier vote on April 6. Swedish law requires amendments to the constitution to be approved by two separate sessions of parliament, with a national election in between those sessions.

Sweden's centre-right coalition government took power in October following national elections in September, succeeding a centre-left minority government. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(ef-chm/pk)

Sweden: New gov't boosts defence, police spending in first budget

In the first budget of a new minority government reliant on the far-right, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has proposed a spending hike of about EUR 3.7 billion, including boosted outlays on defence and social programs, while vowing to cut fuel taxes and the country's refugee intake. [Reuters] [Dagens Nyheter]

Finance Minister Elisabeth Svantesson said the budget – unveiled on November 8 as Sweden bids for NATO membership – allocates the equivalent of EUR 401 million to defence, with an additional EUR 83.9 million for civil defence.

Areas where the government has chosen to make cuts include foreign aid. Kristersson's centre-right administration also plans to curtail the number of refugees allowed into Sweden, a move it says will free up EUR 37 million. [Goteborgs-Posten]

Kristersson is reliant on the support of the far-right populist Sweden Democrats, whose priorities include fewer refugees and a stronger stance on criminal justice.

The Sweden Democrats are the only party in parliament who oppose combating climate change. [Europe in Review November 2022] The new government's plans include ending a tax bonus for electric cars.

Kristersson won the Sweden Democrats' support for the budget by promising to maintain unemployment

benefits and to increase funding for the police. [Reuters] [Goteborgs-Posten]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Polls shows falling support for new government

Multiple polls released in November found that support for the opposition has surged by around 10 percentage points while backing for parties in Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's new, centre-right coalition government has dropped.

Kristersson's government, which was formed in October after a general election the month before, comprises three groupings – his own Moderate Party, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats – and one unofficial partner, the far-right Sweden Democrats. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Observers attributed the latest poll results mainly to the minority government's handling of the budget and to its partnership with the Sweden Democrats, on whom the ruling parties are reliant for a majority in parliament. [Le Monde]

One survey, conducted by Swedish statistics and polling firm SCB, showed support for opposition parties at 52 percent. It found backing for the governing parties, including the Sweden Democrats, was at 46.1 percent in total. [Dagens Nyheter]

A poll conducted by *Svenska Dagbladet* newspaper reported similar results, with opposition parties on 52.1 percent and the governing coalition on 46.2 percent.

Another survey, conducted jointly by the *Dagens Nyheter* daily and pollster Ipsos, showed the opposition Social Democrats with 34 percent support, their best result since 2014. [Dagens Nyheter] [Le Monde]

The November poll findings are the first since the formation of a new government. In the country's September parliamentary election, Kristersson's coalition, plus the Sweden Democrats, garnered 49.59 percent of the vote in total. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats, who were ousted after eight years in power, received 30.3 percent. Other opposition groupings – the Left, the Centre, and the Green Parties – received 11.79 percent in total.

(ef/pk)

Sweden halts Nuvaxovid vaccine for under-30s

Sweden has decided to stop administering the Nuvaxovid Covid-19 vaccine to anyone under 30, with health officials saying it poses an increased risk of heart problems for people in that age range. [Goteborgs-Posten] [Euractiv]

The decision was taken even though the European Union has given its approval to the use of the Nuvaxovid vaccine for those below 30. [Dagens Nyheter]

Swedish Vaccine Programme Unit head Soren Andersson described the risk of Nuvaxovid as "very low" and said those under 30 who had already received the vaccine had no cause for alarm. [Goteborgs-Posten] [Euractiv]

This is not the first time that Sweden has paused the distribution of vaccines. It has blocked the use of AstraZeneca shots since 2021, while earlier this year the Swedish Public Health Agency recommended the Moderna vaccine should not be administered to people born after 1991. [Euractiv]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Greta Thunberg joins fight against mine plans

Climate activist Greta Thunberg has joined the indigenous Sami people in opposing the construction of an iron ore mine in the Arctic region of Sweden.

Thunberg has donated around EUR 184,000 via her foundation to Sami activists fighting the mining plans. The funds, according to Thunberg, have come from her book sales. [Svenska Dagbladet] [SvT]

Opponents of the mine in the northern Kallak region have warned that it will harm the environment, violate human rights and endanger the traditional reindeer herding practices of the Sami people. [Europe Monthly April 2022] [The Guardian]

The Swedish government approved plans for the mine in March, granting permission for London-based Beowulf Mining to begin work. The company had long been seeking approval for the project. However, the plans have stalled since then as Beowulf is required to

complete an environmental impact assessment, with input from the Sami.

Indigenous climate activists have been battling the Swedish government over the mine since 2013. [The Guardian] [Svenska Dagbladet] [SvT]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Cyberattack shuts down unemployment benefits system

The unemployment benefits system in Sweden was shut down following a cyber-attack, with payments on hold and recipients unable to access their benefit information online.

The attack hit IT company Softronic, which provides services for the online Sveriges a-kassor benefits system. The attack was detected on the evening of December 1, leading to the complete shutdown of the Sveriges a-kassor system the next day.

The incident was described as a malware cyber-attack, but officials from both Sveriges a-kassor and Softronic did not elaborate on who was behind it. [Dagens Nyheter] [Svenska Dagbladet]

Jonas Ahlgren, a spokesman for Sveriges a-kassor, said that the attack had been reported to Sweden's Data Protection Authority as it could have potentially exposed the data of those in the system.

Sveriges a-kassor doles out payments every Thursday. The payments scheduled for December 8 were expected not to be disbursed on time due to the attack. [Dagens Nyheter] [Svenska Dagbladet]

(ef/pk)

Swedish government looks to expand nuclear power

Sweden's energy minister, Ebba Busch, is looking to other companies to build a nuclear power plant after soon-to-be-nationalised German energy giant Uniper said it would not construct any new nuclear power stations.

Uniper's announcement came after its Swedish subsidiary Barseback Kraft announced plans for a new "clean-energy park" – potentially including a nuclear

power station – in the Barseback region of southwestern Sweden, near the city of Malmo. [Dagens Nyheter] [Goteborgs-Posten] [Euractiv]

However, Uniper spokesperson George Oppermann said: “Neither in Sweden nor elsewhere does Uniper have any plans to build a new nuclear power plant – that’s a fact.” [Euractiv]

Uniper has a stake in the three active nuclear power stations in Sweden.

Germany is set to nationalise Uniper amid concerns over the country’s energy situation heading into the winter, with Russia cutting oil and gas supplies to the European Union. Uniper announced record losses of EUR 40 billion in the first nine months of this year. [DW] [Reuters]

The coalition government in Germany has previously announced plans to phase out nuclear power in the country. However, plans to fully stop nuclear power were put on pause during the war in Ukraine, with Germany’s remaining nuclear power stations set to remain open until the spring of 2023. [DW]

Meanwhile, Busch is searching for candidates to build nuclear power stations in Sweden. The recently installed government that she is a member of campaigned on expanding nuclear energy in the country. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Potential candidates for the expansion include Vattenfall, a Swedish state-owned energy company, and Fortum, a Finnish firm which is a stakeholder in the three existing nuclear power stations in Sweden. [Dagens Nyheter] [Goteborgs-Posten]

The largest of the three, Oskarshamn 3, briefly shut down on November 9 due to a turbine problem, which was resolved by the following day. The plant, a major source of energy for southern Sweden, has one operating reactor. [AP News] [Bloomberg] The cause of the problem was not disclosed. [AP News]

The Swedish government recently proposed allocating EUR 36 billion to nuclear power projects in the country, while the reactivation of a decommissioned reactor in a nuclear power station near Goteborg is due to start in January. [Euractiv] [AP News]

(ef/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Finland and Sweden backtrack on hosting NATO nuclear weapons

Top politicians in Finland and Sweden have said their countries will not host NATO nuclear weapons, reversing positions earlier voiced by the prime ministers of the two Nordic nations, which are waiting to join the Western military alliance.

Swedish premier Ulf Kristersson and his Finnish counterpart Sanna Marin were asked if their countries would allow nuclear weapons on their soil during a press conference on November 1. Marin and Kristersson did not rule out such a possibility. [Finnish Government]

Micael Byden, the supreme commander of Sweden's armed forces, recommended that Kristersson take any action necessary to gain NATO admission, including allowing the alliance to store nuclear weapons in Sweden. Finnish President Sauli Niinisto also refused to rule out the possibility of hosting nuclear weapons, although he called the question premature. [Reuters]

However, on November 7 Niinisto changed his position. He said, cited by broadcaster YLE, that Finland "has no intention of bringing nuclear weapons onto its territory and there are no signs that anyone is offering nuclear arms to Finland." [YLE]

Marin has not made any statements on her position after Niinsto's announcement.

Meanwhile, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom said that it was the position of his Moderate Party, which is part of the country's ruling coalition, to not allow NATO to station nuclear weapons in Sweden. [Reuters]

NATO has not made such a request to either Helsinki or Stockholm. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv]

Sweden and Finland applied to join the military alliance in the summer after Russia invaded Ukraine in February. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

(ef/pk)

Finland close to finalising rocket munitions deal with US

Helsinki is close to finalising a USD 535 million package for American-made rocket munitions, the US State Department indicated on November 2. Finland is seeking to increase its munition stockpiles amid its eastern neighbour Russia's war on Ukraine.

According to a US Department of Defense statement, some 400 rockets, including guided variants, are to be procured by Finland for its multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), such as the American-made M270. [HelsinginSanomat]

The statement stressed the urgency of such a purchase, saying: "The increased national stock is critical to Finland's defence and deterrence due to the deteriorated security situation in Europe." [US DoD]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February prompted Finland, along with Sweden, to launch bids to join NATO in a seismic security shift. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(cg/pk)

Russia, North Korea deny Pyongyang supplies weapons to help Moscow in Ukraine

Russia has denied allegations that North Korea provided Moscow with weapons to fight in Ukraine after the US accused Pyongyang of supplying artillery shells and ammunition.

US National Security spokesperson John Kirby said on November 2 the US had information about a North Korean supply of artillery shells and ammunition to be used in Ukraine by Russia. Pyongyang denied the claims and accused the US for its "obvious lies". [WashingtonPost][AlArabiya][AP]

Kirby said that North Korea may be covertly sending weapons to Russia while making it seem as if supplies were intended for the Middle East or North Africa. Pyongyang is suspected to be replenishing Moscow's stocks with Soviet-era ammunition, after Russia's stocks have been allegedly depleted due to the Russia–Ukraine war. US officials confirmed an intelligence finding about Russia's purchase of millions of rockets and other ammunition from North Korea in September.

Additionally, a North Korean missile that was fired over the de facto maritime border with South Korea in early November was found to be of a similar type to the ones used by Russia in its war against Ukraine, according to South Korea's military on November 9. The SA-5 type missile, developed in the Soviet Union in 1967, was composed of parts with Russian writing on them, although it could not be confirmed if they had been imported or assembled by Pyongyang. [Yonhap News Agency]

North Korea has maintained a close relationship with Russia in recent years, being the only country besides Syria to acknowledge Moscow's declaration of the Ukrainian Donetsk and Luhansk territories as independent. The North Korean regime has even implied sending workers to Russia-occupied territories to help with reconstruction.

In early November, Russia sent its first train loaded with horses over its border with North Korea in two and a half years and should soon be followed by a train with medical supplies, according to Russia's Far Eastern Railway spokespeople. [RailFreight] [AiR, No.46, November/2022, 3]

(aml/gc)

Turkey seeks Ukraine peace talks despite Western actions, Erdogan says

Turkey is committed to seeking a peace dialogue between Russia and Ukraine, Reuters and Turkish media reported, citing President Tayyip Erdogan as saying he accused the US and other Western countries of provoking Moscow. [Reuters]

“The West, and especially the US, is attacking Russia seemingly endlessly,” Erdogan was quoted as saying without elaborating on what he meant.

“We are working on how to create a peace corridor here, like we had the grain corridor. We think the best way for this is a path from dialogue to peace,” Erdogan said, adding Ukraine's view would be important.

NATO member Turkey hosted talks between Ukrainian and Russian delegations earlier this year, and has sought to balance its criticism of the invasion and opposition to the sanctions.

(chm/gc)

Ukrainian embassies tighten security after letter bombs

Ukrainian embassies in six countries have increased security after Kiev’s diplomatic missions received suspicious packages, including a letter bomb.

After such a bomb was sent to the Ukrainian embassy in Madrid, lightly injuring an employee who opened it, the country’s embassies and consulates in Poland, Hungary, Croatia, Italy and the Netherlands received suspicious packages. Some of these reportedly contained animals’ eyes.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said: “We have reason to believe that a well-planned campaign of terror and intimidation of Ukrainian embassies and consulates is taking place.” [ABC]

On November 24, an envelope containing pyrotechnic material was sent to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez but was intercepted before reaching its destination.

Recipients of similar packages included Spain’s defence minister, a weapons manufacturer in the north-eastern city of Zaragoza, the military base of Torrejon de Ardoz on the outskirts of Madrid, and the US and Ukrainian embassies in Madrid.

Spain is investigating the events as possible terrorist acts and has increased security around public buildings and ordered stricter checks for postal services. [BBC] [New York Times]

The secretary for state security, Rafael Perez, said initial assessments suggested that the packages addressed to politicians and institutions in Spain were

sent from within the country. [Associated Press] [El Mundo]

One of them was addressed to the Ukrainian ambassador, Serhii Pohoreltsev. He suggested that Russia may have been involved, saying: "We know that our enemy is a terrorist state and we can expect anything."

The Russian embassy in Madrid said it condemned "any terrorist threat or act, particularly against an embassy." [Politico]

The Spanish defence minister, Margarita Robles, said: "None of these packages or any other violent act will change the clear and firm support that Spain and other NATO and EU countries have for Ukraine."

(km/pk)

EU recommends withholding more than EUR 13bn from Hungary over rule-of-law concerns

The European Commission has recommended that EUR 13.3 billion in EU funds be withheld from Hungary, saying that Budapest has not implemented sufficient reforms to address concerns about corruption, the rule of law and democratic backsliding. [Euronews] [The Guardian] [BBC News] [European Commission]

"While a number of reforms have been undertaken or are underway, Hungary failed to adequately implement central aspects of the necessary 17 remedial measures... by the deadline of November 19, as it had committed to," the European Commission said in a statement. [Euronews] [European Commission]

The Commission wants to block money from two separate EU funds – EUR 7.5 billion from the bloc's cohesion policy for economic development and EUR 5.8 billion from its Covid recovery fund. [Euronews] [The Guardian] [BBC News] [European Commission]

Although the Commission, the EU's executive, has approved Hungary's Covid recovery plan, it says that the money should remain frozen until Budapest "fully and correctly" implements 27 "super milestones," which include 17 measures related to the rule of law and additional measures to protect judicial independence. [Euronews] [The Guardian] [BBC News]

Two-thirds of EU member states representing 65 percent of the bloc's population would need to agree in order to freeze Hungary's funds. [The Guardian] [Euronews]

Budapest argues that it has implemented the necessary measures, with Hungarian government minister Tibor Navracsics – who led negotiations with Brussels – saying that an anti-corruption task force had been established. [BBC News]

Navracsics also said that additional required measures would be put in place and that in 2023 the government in Budapest "will succeed in convincing the Commission…that it is not necessary to suspend the funds." [Euronews]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government has been accused in recent years of increasing government control over the country's courts and media, and of misusing EU funds. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

In April 2022, Brussels activated a "conditionality" mechanism for the first time, allowing it to withhold funds from Hungary in a move aimed at protecting the bloc's budget amid fears of misuse of EU money by Budapest. [Europe Monthly May 2022]

Poland, Hungary's closest ally in the EU, has also had its funds blocked over similar rule-of-law concerns. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

However, the conditionality mechanism was not used against Warsaw, as Brussels did not deem the EU budget to be at significant risk in Poland. Instead, Poland must meet a set of "enabling conditions" to unblock funds. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The European Budget Commissioner, Johannes Hahn, said that the changes made so far in Budapest to address EU concerns "would never have happened" without the use of the mechanism. [Euronews] [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, Orban's chief spokesperson, Zoltan Kovacs, accused the EU of being held hostage by "the left," who he says are "using their monopoly to exert political pressure, to blackmail… to slaughter governments and political forces which don't think in the way that Brussels tells them to think." [The Guardian]

(ek/pk)

European Parliament declares Russia 'state sponsor of terrorism'

European lawmakers have overwhelmingly voted in favour of a resolution that labels Russia a "state sponsor of terrorism", calls for more sanctions and accuses Moscow of violating international law by committing "atrocities" against the Ukrainian civilian population. [Politico]

Hours after the vote on November 23, the European Parliament website was targeted by "a sophisticated cyberattack", European Parliament President Roberta Metsola said in a tweet, adding: "A pro-Kremlin group has claimed responsibility." [Euronews] [Le Monde]

The parliament's spokesman, Jaume Duch, said that the website had suffered a "distributed denial of service" attack – an attack that drives overwhelming quantities of traffic to a website, making it inaccessible to users.

Duch added that the website began functioning again later that evening.

The attack came after members of the European Parliament denounced Moscow's "illegal, unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression" against Ukraine, in a non-binding resolution.

'Destruction and displacement'

The European lawmakers accused the Russian army and its proxies of "brutal and inhumane acts" that have caused "death, suffering, destruction and displacement" and said that Moscow had perpetrated almost 40,000 documented war crimes in Ukraine, including the murder of hundreds of children and "many thousands of civilians". [Euronews]

The resolution also called for a ninth sanctions package against Russia and for the further isolation of Moscow on the international stage by reducing diplomatic ties with the Kremlin to a minimum and stripping Russia of its membership of international organisations and bodies. [Politico]

The European Parliament's resolution is largely symbolic, as there is no legal mechanism in the European Union allowing the designation of an entire country as a sponsor of terrorism. Unlike the United States, the EU cannot add states to its terrorist list, only individuals and organisations.

MEPs have called on member states to develop such a framework and, in the meantime, have asked the European Council to add "Russian-funded armed groups" like the Wagner Group to the EU's terrorist list. Any change to the list would require the unanimity of the 27 EU members. [Euronews]

Parliaments in EU member states Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the lower house of the Czech parliament, have already designated Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism. [DW]

Russian foreign ministry dismissive

Responding to the European Parliament's declaration, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Telegram: "I propose designating the European Parliament as a sponsor of idiocy". [Reuters]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed the vote by MEPs, saying in a tweet that "Russia must be isolated at all levels and held accountable" and urged the United States and other countries to do the same. [Al Jazeera]

Washington has not placed Russia on America's list of state sponsors of terrorism. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in September that adding Russia to the list could undermine humanitarian initiatives and the US's ability to help Kiev at the negotiation table in the future. [Reuters] [The Independent] [DW]

(qv/pk)

Poland files complaint to top EU court over new gas reduction rules

The Polish government has filed a complaint to the Court of Justice of the European Union over new EU rules to cut gas use. [Business Insider] [TVP World] [TVP Info] [Reuters]

Polish deputy justice minister Sebastian Kaleta said the complaint accuses Brussels of "trying, by using the energy crisis, to take over full competences in shaping the energy mix." [Business Insider] [TVP World] [TVP Info] [Reuters]

The new regulations, adopted in August, aim to lower member states' gas usage by 15 percent this winter amid concerns over Russian gas cuts. [Council of the European Union] [TVP World] [Reuters]

While lowering gas consumption is voluntary for EU nations under the rules, a mechanism was put in place to make the reductions compulsory in the event of an emergency supply shortage. [Business Insider] [TVP World] [Reuters]

Warsaw argues that the gas regulations should have been unanimously agreed by the bloc's member states. [Business Insider] [TVP World]

Kaleta said that his government's complaint "argues that the regulation was issued in violation of the [EU] treaties" and that other energy decisions by the bloc in recent years denied Poland a veto right. [Reuters] [Business Insider] [TVP World]

The Council of the European Union agreed on the regulations to reduce gas usage through a process known as reinforced qualified majority voting– under which 72 percent of member states representing 65 percent of the bloc's population must back a proposal. [Business Insider] [Business Insider] [Council of the European Union]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki had said, however, that such a decision must be unanimous. [Reuters]

Hungary – Poland's biggest ally in the EU – also voted against the new rules. [TVP World]

(ek/pk)

Armenia wants CSTO to accelerate diplomatic efforts to end conflict with Azerbaijan

Armenia wants the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Collective Security Council to accelerate diplomatic efforts with Azerbaijan in order to immediately and unconditionally withdraw Azerbaijani troops from the sovereign territory of Armenia. [Interfax]

Armenia wants Baku to pull its troops back to their initial positions as of May 11, 2021, Armenian Prime Minister Nikola Pashinyan said. "This position is important not only to restore the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia, but also to deter Azerbaijan from further aggressive actions against our country," he said. [Interfax]

Pashinyan refused on November 23 to sign a draft declaration of the CSTO Security Council, citing "the

absence of a clear political assessment of the situation." Without a call by CSTO for an unconditional withdrawal, Azerbaijan may see this as a green light for further aggression against Armenia, he said.

On November 21, Azerbaijani armed forces opened fire in the direction of Armenian positions located in the eastern part of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The Armenian Defence Minister said "The Armenian side has no losses. As of 09:00 on November 22, the situation on the front line is relatively stable". [NEWS.AM]

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been going on for 30 years and entails huge material and humanitarian losses for both sides. Russia has played a role in trying to resolve it. [Interfax]

Sochi Talks

On October 31, Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Sochi with Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who said in a final communique that the two countries would refrain from using or threatening to use force. Putin also promised that Russia would contribute to the preparation and signing of a peace treaty. [KREMLIN]

"Based on the availability of developments, it was agreed to continue the search for mutually acceptable solutions. The Russian Federation will transfer this universal cooperation," the document says. [KREMLIN]

(ad/gc)

Austria, Hungary and Serbia sign agreement to combat illegal immigration

Leaders from Austria, Hungary, and Serbia signed agreement on November 16 after a meeting in Belgrade that addressed illegal immigration into the European Union. [EuroNews]

Austria and Hungary pledged to help Serbia to organise the deportation of migrants who are ineligible for asylum in the European Union. A hundred extra security staff equipped with vehicles, thermal vision goggles and drones are being sent to the North Macedonian border as part of the new pact between the three countries. [Anadolu Agency] [AP]

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer said that "the EU's asylum system failed." Nehammer said Austria could have more than 100,000 asylum requests by the end of

the year, compared to around 40,000 people who applied for asylum in 2021. [EuroNews]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said his country has recorded some 250,000 attempts at illegal border crossings this year.

600 Detained

Serbian border security detained 600 migrants after clashes with them in the northern Serbian city of Horgos, which neighbours Hungary. According to the police, a 20-year old man was found shot in the chest. [AP]

The police conducted an operation to combat irregular migrants with the assistance of drones and helicopters. Serbian Interior Minister Bratislav Gasic visited Horgos and stated that the "safety of every citizen of our country and their property will be protected". [the Government of Serbia] [Anadolu Agency]

(lc/gc)

Azerbaijan: Baku is negotiating gas supplies to Western Balkans

Azerbaijan could start exporting natural gas to the Western Balkans after opening talks with the region to provide energy supplies, the country's Deputy Minister of Energy said in an interview with LPG News magazine. [LPG News]

There is a demand for additional gas from our other partners, Deputy Energy Minister Elnur Soltanov said in the interview. "Sometimes even small volumes of additional gas can mean huge diversification for a particular country," he said. [EN.TREND]

The REPower EU plan and the "External EU activity in the energy sector in a changing world" document notes that the expansion of the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor to 20 billion cubic metres (bcm) per year will play an important role in ensuring gas supply in Southeastern Europe and the Western Balkans, according to Soltanov. The document also underlines the need to intensify energy cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU, given the strategic importance of the SGC.

Azerbaijan exported 19 bcm of natural gas, including 8.2 bcm to Europe, in 2021, according to Soltanov. This year supplies to Europe will increase to 12 bcm, he said. [EN.TREND] [LPS News]

(ad/gc)

Georgia: Tbilisi supports UN resolution on war reparations payments for Ukraine

Georgia has supported a resolution which was approved by the UN General Assembly to hold Russia accountable for violations of international law related to the war in Ukraine, including war reparations. [AXIOS]

The General Assembly had previously adopted four resolutions condemning Russia's actions since the war began, including “deploring” Russia's aggression against Ukraine, condemning Russia for creating a “dire” humanitarian situation, suspending Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council, and condemning Russia’s annexation of four Ukrainian territories. [AXIOS][Reuters]

Georgia and 93 other states supported the document. This resolution does not have a binding agreement, but it expresses the attitude of the world towards the current situation in Ukraine. [NEWSGEORGIA]

(ad/gc)

Greece: EU Parliament calls for cancellation of Turkey-Libya MOU

The European Parliament voted to annul a controversial 2019 maritime Memorandum of Understanding between Turkey and Libya after it triggered a backlash from other Mediterranean countries.

Greece, Egypt and Cyprus have pushed back against the MOU for its demarcation of maritime zones. Athens has repeatedly criticised the MOU as being “illegal” under international law, accusing Ankara of using the agreement to drill for oil and gas in zones around Greek and Cypriot islands. [Euractiv]

The European Commission has previously condemned the maritime agreement as “illegal.” This time EU lawmakers called for its annulment with 454 votes in favour, 130 against and 54 abstentions. The vote also included a demand to end foreign intervention in Libya, which requested that Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates do the same. [The National Herald]

The resolution came a day after Egypt and Greece ratified their own maritime agreement that recognises the areas south of Crete and the Eastern Aegean up to the Egyptian coast as exclusively controlled by the two parties. This directly contradicts the Turkey-Libya MoU. [The National]

(jk/gc)

Baltic states, plus Poland, call for EU to limit Russian use of of satellites

The Baltic states, plus Poland, called on the European Union to limit the use of its satellites for Russian propaganda outside Europe.

"We call on the European Commission to ensure, within its competence, that European satellite service providers stop broadcasting Kremlin-controlled propaganda channels via satellites," the cultural ministers of the four countries said in a joint statement. "We also call on all member states to continue to ensure full compliance with the sanction regime". [BALTICTIMES] [RUBALTIC]

Lithuanian Minister of Culture Simonas Kairys said they are working together with other countries to draw attention to the decades-long falsification of history "by the aggressor Russia." Kairys accused Russia of being particularly aggressive in "spreading lies, propaganda and disinformation." [BALTICTIMES]

(ad/gc)

Neighbour states outraged over PM Orban's 'Greater Hungary' scarf

Neighbouring states have criticised Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban after the nationalist leader appeared wearing a football scarf depicting his country's pre-World War I territory, including areas that today belong to Austria, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Serbia and Ukraine. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

Oleg Nikolenko, a spokesperson for Ukraine's foreign ministry, described the "Greater Hungary" map that Orban sported on his scarf during a meeting with a football player on November 20 as "promotion of revisionism ideas". [BBC]

Relations between Ukraine and Hungary have been tense in recent years. Orban has been criticised over

his ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid Moscow's war on Ukraine, while Budapest complains of curbs on the rights of ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine. [Politico]

Romania expressed "firm disapproval" of Orban's "Greater Hungary" map in a rebuke to the Hungarian ambassador in Bucharest. "Any revisionist manifestation [...] is unacceptable, against current realities and common commitments", the Romanian foreign ministry said in a statement. [The Guardian]

In an unusually strong comment, Slovakia's Foreign Minister Rastislav Kacer voiced his "disgust". [Euractiv].

Orban indirectly addressed the controversy by commenting on Facebook: "Soccer is not politics. Do not read things into it that are not there". [Euractiv]

The prime ministers of the Visegrad regional cooperation group – comprising the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary – met in Slovakia on November 24, and Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger gave Orban a new scarf. [Euronews]

(msa/pk)

Council of Europe discusses combating anti-LGBT+ hate crime

The Council of Europe's unit for sexual orientation and gender identity held a roundtable meeting in Dublin on October 27 to discuss the protection of members of the LGBT+ community from hate crimes and marginalisation.

The meeting takes place annually to review measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. The outcomes will be published in a report next year.

The rotating presidency of the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights watchdog, was held by Ireland until November 9, after which Iceland took over. [Council of Europe]

(aml/pk)

French Minister for Europe Affairs visits North Macedonia, Albania

French State Secretary of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Laurence Boone, visited Albania and North Macedonia in November. [French Ministry of Foreign Affairs].

Boone met with North Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski to discuss EU membership negotiations and the stages of the accession negotiation. After said meeting, Boone said that North Macedonia "has its place in the EU and [...] should follow the European path all the way."

Boone called for a deepening of ties between France and North Macedonia. [North Macedonian President's Office].

(jk/gc)

Russia, Ukraine agrees to extend Turkish and UN-brokered grain shipment deal

Russia and Ukraine have agreed to extend a Turkish and UN-brokered grain shipment deal for another 120 days, two days before it expired on November 19.

On November 13, UN and Turkish officials held a meeting with Russian officials to persuade them to extend the agreement. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on November 17 on Twitter the extension of the grain deal and thanked United Nations Secretary-General Guterres, Russian President Putin and Ukrainian President Zelensky for their cooperation in the agreement. [Anadolu Agency] [Europe Monthly November 2022] [The Guardian]

Russia had suspended its participation in the 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 had pulled out of 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. [Europe Monthly November 2022] [TASS]

On November 2, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation announced that they had received written guarantees from Ukrainian officials that Kiev would not use the grain corridor to conduct military operations against the Russian Federation.

“The Russian Federation believes that the guarantees received at the moment seem sufficient and is resuming the implementation of the agreement,” the ministry said. [TASS] [VEDOMOSTI]

The initial agreement was signed on July 22, 2022, to create a safe passage for grain exports to help with a global food crisis that was affecting millions. [United Nations]

(lc-ad/gc)

Russia urges nuclear-five to stop arms race

Russia has called on nuclear powers to stop a global arms race and reduce the number of weapons of mass destruction, while adding that they should never be used. [MID] [RBC]

“We urge other states of the nuclear five to demonstrate in practice their willingness to work on solving this top-priority task and to give up the dangerous attempts to infringe on vital interests of each,” the Russian foreign ministry said.

Countries should avoid being on “the brink of a direct armed conflict and encouraging provocations with weapons of mass destruction, which can lead to catastrophic consequences,” it said. [MID]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not explain why the statement was published, the circumstances for preventing a nuclear war, or the existing level of its threat. [RBC]

(ad/gc)

Turkey calls for reform of UNSC by increasing permanent members

Turkey has called for the United Nations to increase the number of permanent members on the Security Council from five in an effort to make it more effective and representative.

Turkey’s UN ambassador, Feridun Siniroglu, called in a meeting at the UNGA for reforms that reflect the reality of today, rather than the past. That means making the Security Council more representative, Siniroglu said. [Anadolu Agency]

Turkey's comments echoed those of US President Joe Biden, who called for an increase in UNSC permanent members at the 77th UNGA meeting.

In 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a speech to criticise the permanent five (P5) members and their veto rights on the UNSC, by saying "world is bigger than five". [Daily Sabah][Anadolu Agency]

(lc/gc)

Turkey risks losing membership in Council of Europe

Turkey may be removed from the Council of Europe (CoE) after it failed to implement a 2019 European Court of Human Rights' ruling to release jailed businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala, making it the second country to be removed from the council after Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

The council's Committee of Ministers launched infringement proceedings against Turkey and will decide on whether Turkey will be removed or suspended, Reuters reported on November 10, citing a spokesman of CoE. Turkey has a total of 3,820 judgements, of which 3,385 include violations of at least one of the human rights. [Reuters]

Turkish officials argue that Ankara has implemented 2,800 ECHR's rulings in the past ten years, but according to CoE, Turkey only fully implemented 521 of the rulings made by the European Court of Human Rights. [Reuters]

Kavala is a Turkish businessman and philanthropist who was jailed in 2017 for allegedly giving financial aid to Gezi Park protests. After the ECHR judgement in 2019, Turkey failed to implement the judgement and extended his sentence to life in April 2022 after his trial.

While the infringement proceedings are finalised, many experts believe that, in the case of Turkey's removal from the Council, 85 million citizens would be deprived of an institution that has provided restitution for thousands. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Tehran accuses Azerbaijan of helping Israel destabilise its national security

Iran has accused Azerbaijan of allowing Israel to conduct activities against its national security from its territory and threatened to take any necessary measures to stop it. [TREND.AZ]

Iran accused Azerbaijan of sponsoring pro-Israel movements and allowing the direct presence of "Zionism" in the region for many years. Tehran is concerned about Israel expanding its influence in Azerbaijan and Bahrain. [JPOST]

(ad/gc)

Turkey strikes Iraq, Syria in response to Istanbul attack

Turkey launched military operations in northern Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the November 13 terrorist attack in Istanbul that killed six people and injured more than 80, which Ankara blamed on Kurdish militant groups. [Ministry of Internal Affairs]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would continue its "struggle against all kinds of terror inside and outside our borders" and threatened a new land invasion of Syria that would target Kurdish groups. Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said that Turkey "will continue our struggle until the last terrorist is destroyed."

The Turkish Ministry of Defense said the air strikes targeted 89 "terror hubs" in the first day, including shelters, bunkers, caves, tunnels and ammunition depots. Turkey has neutralised of 184 terrorists in Syria and Iraq, according to the Ministry of Defense.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said that 67 civilians, gunmen and soldiers, have been killed in Turkish attacks in northern Syria since the airstrikes began. [Daily Sabah] [AP][RepublicWorld]

After the terrorist attack on Istiklal Avenue in the Beyoglu district of Istanbul, the Turkish government blamed Kurdish separatists for the attack, evoking its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter.

The Kurdish groups have denied involvement in the bombing and say the Turkish strikes have killed civilians and threatened the anti-IS fight. [AP]

US concerns

Two Turkish officials, who declined to be identified, told Reuters a ground offensive depended only "on the president giving the word." Another Turkish official said that "all the preparations are complete. It's now a political decision". [Reuters]

Akar was quoted as telling commanders that Turkey will "complete the tasks" during a trip to the Iraqi border in late November. Akar's counterpart US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin expressed his strong opposition to the military incursion in a phone call with Akar. [US Department of Defense]

The US responded with concerns to Erodan's threat of a military incursion into Syria. A US official on November 25 called for an "immediate de-escalation" following days of deadly airstrikes and shelling along the Syria-Turkey border, saying the actions destabilise the region and undermine the fight against the Islamic State group. [AP]

The Pentagon warned on November 23 that Turkey's airstrikes against Kurdish forces in northeast Syria endanger US troops and threatened to undermine years of progress in the war against the Islamic State. Press secretary Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said the Defense Department "is deeply concerned" by escalating attacks in Syria, Iraq and Turkey, but did not specify which parties were responsible.

"Recent airstrikes in Syria directly threatened the safety of US personnel who are working ... with local partners to defeat ISIS and maintain custody of more than ten thousand ISIS detainees," Ryder said in a press release.

Turkey and the United States consider the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a terror group for the decades long insurgency and attacks the group has staged within Turkey's borders. They disagree on the status of the main Kurdish militia in Syria, the People's Protection Units, or YPG. The Syrian Kurdish group has been a key US ally in the fight against IS.

Certain Restraint

A Russian official also called on Turkey to show "a certain restraint" and avoid a full-scale ground offensive to prevent further escalation in Syria after Turkish airstrikes killed and wounded a number of Syrian soldiers. [The Independent] [Reuters]

Turkey was seeking a deal with Russia to remove the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia from cities in Northern Syria, Middle East Eye reported.

Sources told the paper that the Syrian government's forces are expected to withdraw from the area if Turkish-Russian understandings on Tal Rifaat are completed. Similarly, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels have been told to prepare to take control of the area. [Middle East Eye]

Turkey started cross border operations in 2017, and historically completed these operations against Kurdish militants in Syria and Northern Iraq. These operations include Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, Operation Peace Shield, and most recently the claw operations. [Reuters]

On November 21, Kurdish militants in response carried out a mortar attack which killed one child and left six wounded as a result of five rockets hitting a school in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, near the Karkamis border. [Reuters]

PKK, YPG blamed

Although the PKK and YPG did not claim responsibility in the terrorist attacks, Ankara blamed them.

Moments after the explosion, Erdogan said it "smells like terrorism" and accused the PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party – for the attack. Police said the suspect was trained by Kurdish militants. [Anadolu Agency]

The perpetrator of the explosion, Ahlam Albashir, travelled to Turkey on July 27 from the Syrian city of Idlib, crossed the border illegally with the suspect Bilal Hassan. Albashir and Hassan, stayed with alleged members of YPG in Istanbul to plan the explosion. Albashir told the officials she was trained by YPG, but did not know the bag contained a bomb. [Reuters]

According to evidence revealed from camera recordings, Albashir monitored the exact location were the bomb exploded. Turkish police have arrested a total of 17 suspects who are believed to be tied to the PKK and YPG. [Reuters] [Anadolu Agency] [Ministry of Internal Affairs]

On November 14, after a condolence message from the US Embassy in Ankara, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu declared that he does not accept the US condolences, because Washington supports the YPG. Ankara has accused the YPG of being a wing of the PKK. [Anadolu Agency]

Currently, no group has claimed responsibility for the bombing, the investigations continue.

(lc/gc)

Britain identifies Russia, Iran as threats to Middle East

The United Kingdom has expressed its long-term commitment to the Middle East and North Africa and identified Russia and Iran as the major risks to security in the region.

In a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Manama Dialogue, held in Bahrain from November 18 to 20, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly commended Middle Eastern countries for recognising "sovereignty and territorial integrity when it voted at the UN General Assembly to condemn Putin's annexation of Ukraine's territory." [Gov.UK].

Cleverly emphasised the UK's security investment in the region, stating "we know that your security is our security and that any crisis here would have inevitable global repercussions." He discussed the UK's negotiation of a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC is the UK's fourth biggest export market following the European Union, United States and China. [Gov.UK].

Cleverly also identified investment in green energy projects by some Middle Eastern countries as a transformation with momentous opportunity to which the UK is committed to. [Gov.UK].

(jn/gc)

United Kingdom welcomes IAEA resolution on Iran

The United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States have welcomed In a joint statement the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governor's adoption of a resolution criticising Iran's nuclear transparency. [Gov.UK]

The resolution noted Iran's "insufficient cooperation with the IAEA on serious and outstanding issues relating to Iran's legal obligations under its Non-Proliferation Treaty Safeguards Agreement." [Gov.UK].

The statement identified the need for Tehran to provide "technically credible explanations for the presence of uranium particles at three undeclared

locations in Iran," and to identify the location of the nuclear material. [Gov.UK].

(jn/gc)

European leaders congratulate Lula on win in Brazil's presidential election

European leaders have congratulated Brazil's Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva for his presidential election victory over right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, under whom relations with the EU have been tense.

Leftist former president Lula made a stunning comeback on October 30 to defeat Bolsonaro, marking the end of Brazil's most right-wing government in decades. Bolsonaro was accused of undermining democracy, while deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon surged during his term in office, causing international concern. [Reuters]

Spain's left-wing prime minister, Pedro Sanchez, said Brazilians had chosen "to bet on progress and hope". French President Emmanuel Macron vowed to "rebuild the bond of friendship" between France and Brazil. [Politico]

Portugal's socialist prime minister, Antonio Costa, in a tweet voiced "great enthusiasm" at the prospect of working with Lula on behalf of Portugal and Brazil and on "great global causes". [Lusa]

Costa had also shown his support for Lula ahead of the second round of the Brazilian presidential elections. In a video shared by Lula on Twitter, Costa – identifying himself as secretary-general of Portugal's ruling Socialist Party (PS) – said that "Brazil and the world need Lula da Silva".

"The prime minister of Portugal obviously does not speak out or interfere in the elections of our Brazilian brothers, but the secretary general of the PS, the friend of Brazil, misses the relations of proximity, of friendship, between Portugal and Brazil," Costa said. [Europa Press]

Lula goes to Lisbon

The Portuguese prime minister welcomed Lula in Lisbon on November 18 during his first bilateral trip following his election. [Republica Portuguesa]

Speaking to representatives of immigrants, Lula encouraged Brazilians in Portugal to return to their

country, which he said would “soon” be able to welcome them with “open arms”. [LUSA]

Lula added that when he was president in 2007 and 2008 “many people who were outside Brazil returned [...] because they had job opportunities”. [LUSA]

Brazil, a former Portuguese colony, has close historical and cultural ties with Portugal. The two countries are bound by a common language, and Brazilians make up around 28 percent of the migrant population in Portugal, according to 2020 statistics.

After Bolsonaro’s election in August 2019, relations between Brazil and the EU became tense.

Bolsonaro removed protection measures in the rainforest and cut spending for science and environmental agencies. He also weakened indigenous land rights, mostly to boost the agribusiness industry. [Vox]

The Brazilian then-president responded to several European leaders’ criticism of his environmental policies by saying that deforestation was an “internal issue” and that “the Amazon belongs to Brazil”. [Foreign Affairs] Bolsonaro also framed European concerns as “undue interference” and “neo-colonialism”. [The Wall Street Journal]

Climate promises

Lula, meanwhile, has promised “to resume its [Brazil’s] leading role in the fight against the climate crisis”. [Politico]

Bolsonaro was also widely accused of weakening democratic institutions in Brazil – by intimidating the Supreme Court and violating the right of free speech, among other things. [Human Rights Watch]

Only right-wing European leaders such as Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban supported Bolsonaro. Except for a visit to Budapest in February, Bolsonaro did not take part in a single bilateral meeting in any EU country. [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace].

(msa/pk)

EU, US expand sanctions against Myanmar

The European Union and the United States have announced new sanctions against dozens of Myanmar

junta officials, including the country's top justice officials, high-ranking military officers, and entrepreneurs with close ties to the regime. [Reuters]

The EU sanctions have been imposed on an additional 19 individuals and entities as a result of "the continuing escalation of violence and grave human rights violations following the military takeover two years ago", the European Council said on November 8.

With the most recent wave of sanctions, the EU is now penalising 84 individuals and 11 organisations that are either members of the Myanmar regime or have ties to it. [Al Jazeera] [AiR, No. 46, November/2022, 3]

(aml/pk)

G7 calls on China to refrain from use of force against Taiwan

The G7 group of the world's seven wealthiest democracies has urged China to refrain from any use of force or coercion towards Taiwan amid European worries at Beijing's increasingly assertive posture on the global stage.

The call came at a G7 meeting in the German city of Munster from November 3 to 4, one of a series of talks this year at which government ministers from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States along with European Union officials met to discuss key international issues.

In Germany, G7 foreign ministers underlined the need for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

In a joint communiqué on November 4, they called on China to avoid the use of force. The ministers insisted that any threats toward another nation's sovereignty would constitute a violation of international law, and raised concerns about increased tensions throughout the East and South China Seas region undermining geopolitical stability. [German General Foreign Office]

During the meeting, concerns were also voiced over China's violation of human rights in Tibet, the treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in the Xinjiang region, as well as the erosion of autonomy and civil rights in Hong Kong. At the same time, the G7 ministers called for cooperation with China in combating international health and climate issues. [Politico] [Reuters 1]

President Xi Jinping's assertion in October that Beijing will never renounce the use of force over Taiwan, which China views as its own territory, has caused the G7 group to reconsider its trading relationship with the Chinese authorities. However, Germany in particular has decided to maintain close economic relations, allowing the China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) to take a 24.9 percent stake in a terminal in Hamburg, Germany's largest port. [see AiR No. 44, November/2022, 1]

The G7 also pledged to send aid to Ukraine ahead of winter, including heaters, beds, blankets and sanitary portacabins. [Reuters]. [AiR No. 45, November/22, 2]

With colder weather coming up, support will need to be strengthened in order to prevent increased mortality due to food and electricity shortages. More than 30 percent of Ukraine's electricity grids have been destroyed by Russian attacks.

(aml/pk)

Russia blames US for failure on East Asia Summit statement

Russia has blamed the US for the failure for participants at the East Asia Summit to issue a final communique due to President Joe Biden condemnation of Moscow's "brutal and unjust war against Ukraine in the strongest terms."

In televised remarks after the summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that no collective decisions were made because the US and its allies had insisted on "absolutely unacceptable language regarding the situation in Ukraine." Lavrov also blamed Washington for dividing the 10-member East Asia summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc and accused NATO of expanding its activity in the Asia–Pacific region. [The Washington Post] [AiR, No.46, November/2022, 3]

The East Asia Summit included ASEAN nations as well as dialogue partners from the United States, China, Russia, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. It was held on November 13, concurrently with the ASEAN summit in Phnom Penh from November 10-13.

(aml/gc)

Macron attends Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit

French President Emmanuel Macron attended the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Bangkok on November 18. He was the first European leader to be invited to the summit. [LeMonde]

In his speech at the summit, Macron underlined the need for stability in the Indo-Pacific region and the role France has in the region. He added that the war in Ukraine is not solely a European issue and urged other participating countries to help stop the war. [france 24] [euronews]

(gm/gc)

UK, Italy, Japan cooperate in next-generation F-X fighter development

The UK, Italy, and Japan are reportedly close to concluding an agreement under which the three countries will join hands in developing and building a next-generation fighter jet to replace the Mitsubishi F-2.

This is a Japanese version of the F-16, which is currently in operation in the Japanese Air Self-Defence Force and jointly developed with American aerospace, arms, defence, information security, and technology corporation Lockheed Martin. The deployment of the new fighter jet is scheduled for 2035. [Nikkei Asia] [AiR, November/2022, 4]

(aml/gc)

New cross-border bridge aims to boost Europe-Africa trade

The EU, the governments of Cameroon and Nigeria and the African Development Bank on November 3 officially launched a cross-border bridge that connects Central and West Africa and aims to facilitate trade between the continent and Europe.

The EU contributed EUR 25 million to the construction of the 402-metre Cross River Bridge at the Cameroon-Nigeria Mfum-Ekok border crossing. [Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea] [Cameroon Radio Television]

The bloc's financial input was made possible by an Africa-EU Global Gateway Investment Package agreed at a European Union-African Union summit in Brussels in February. [European Commission 1]

The EU last December unveiled a Global Gateway strategy that aims to meet demand for transport, energy and digital infrastructure, currently served mainly by China, in emerging economies. [Germany Trade and Invest]

On the day the new bridge was officially launched, Jutta Urpilainen, EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, said: "This bridge is not just tangible infrastructure, it is a promise for greater economic integration and thereby, more trade opportunities and growth. This is at the centre of the EU's Global Gateway strategy to build trusted and sustainable connections." [Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea 1]

(acn/pk)

United Kingdom will withdraw troops from Mali

The UK will withdraw 300 troops from a UN peacekeeping force in Mali earlier than planned following similar withdrawals this year by other Western nations.

The British decision came after France and its military allies began withdrawing thousands of troops from Mali after the country's military junta began collaborating with private contractors belonging to Russia's Wagner Group.

British Armed Forces Minister James Heappey told parliament recent coups in Mali had undermined international efforts to help bring peace in the country, which has seen growing violence in recent years by groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

"We should be clear that responsibility for all of this sits in Bamako," Heappey said. Two coups in three years have undermined international efforts to advance peace. This government cannot deploy our nation's military to provide security when the host country's Government is not willing to work with us to deliver lasting stability and security." [Gov.uk]

The decision to withdraw international forces has raised fears of increased violence in Mali, which could

destabilise neighbours and embolden jihadists. The UK will continue its commitment to Mali and the Sahel through our humanitarian, stabilisation and development assistance, working in close coordination with partners, Heappey said.

(chm/gc)

Bulgaria summons North Macedonian ambassador following cultural club attacks

Bulgaria summoned North Macedonia's ambassador to Sofia after attacks against ethnic Bulgarian cultural clubs, a development that further complicates tensions between Skopje and Sofia.

Bulgaria handed the ambassador a protest note asserting that the attacks in North Macedonia should be classified as "heavy criminal acts." [Euractiv] [Balkan Insight]

The incidents have escalated tensions between the two countries, with Bulgarian officials stating that "more and serious consistent efforts are needed to fulfil the commitments related to the protection and guarantee of human rights" in North Macedonia. Sofia has threatened Skopje's EU accession plans.

The parliament of North Macedonia in early November adopted a new law that prevents clubs and political parties from employing names or symbols associated with fascism, causing Bulgarian officials to express their continued fear of "anti-Bulgarian ideology." [Balkan Insight]

The cultural clubs' have come under scrutiny for their symbolic ties to controversial figures, such as King Boris III, who oversaw Bulgaria's alliance with Axis powers during World War II. The Tsar Boris III cultural club was the site of a shooting. [StarTribune]

(jk/gc)

France and UK sign agreement to stop migrants from crossing Channel

France and the United Kingdom signed on November 14 a EUR 72 million funding agreement for 2022 and 2023 to stop illegal migrants from crossing the English Channel by boat. [Reuters]

France will receive the money in return for reinforcing security on its beaches to prevent illegal migrants from crossing the channel. The agreement will bolster surveillance and efforts to dismantle smuggling networks. [le monde]

The number of officers in northern France will increase by 40 percent during the coming months as a result of UK funding to step up action to reduce illegal small boat crossings.

The arrangement means, for the first time, specialist British officers will also be embedded with their French counterparts, which will increase information sharing, improve understanding of the threat, and ensure British expertise is at the heart of efforts to disrupt crossings and clamp down on people smugglers. [Gov.Uk]

They will also strengthen security at ports to help clamp down on illegal entry by funding investment in surveillance technology, drones, detection dog teams, CCTV and helicopters to help detect and prevent crossings. The funding will go towards supporting reception and removal centres in France for migrants whose journeys to the UK are prevented. [Gov.Uk]

France's Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and her British counterpart James Cleverly issued a joint statement following their talks in Paris on November 11, calling for "the urgency of tackling all forms of illegal migration including small boat crossings and addressing their root causes." [Gov.Uk]

The British Conservative party wants to prevent more asylum seekers from arriving in their country. In April, the UK announced a policy that some asylum seekers arriving in the country should be sent on a one-way ticket to Rwanda. Those plans are currently challenged before court. [BBC]

(gm/gc)

Greece's natural gas resources could meet EU demand

Greece could supply natural gas to the European Union for the next five years with 2,000 billion cubic metres of offshore reserves, according to a report by the newspaper Handelsblatt. [Greek Reporter]

The war in Ukraine and the energy crisis demands a reconsideration of Greece's decision to develop its offshore natural gas reserves, the German-language

business newspaper said. Developing the country's gas reserves has been sidelined for reasons of climate policy and the supposed reliable availability of cheap Russian natural gas.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in April that Greece will speed up gas exploration projects in concert with private investors. The development of the country's national energy resources will increase its energy independence, Mitsotakis said at the time, setting a 2023 deadline for further exploration. [Greek Reporter]

Greece's large untapped reserves may support the nation's overall economic growth in the upcoming years as the demand for natural gas is still expected to grow for the foreseeable future. [International Energy Agency]

(jk/gc)

Athens denies Turkish claim that Istanbul bombing suspect could flee to Greece

Greece pushed back against Turkey's accusation that the suspect in the Istanbul terror attack had planned to flee to Greece before being caught. [Ekathimerini]

"No one can enter the country illegally," Citizen Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos said, adding that Greece condemns any "act of terrorism." Turkish Interior Minister Suleiman Soylu made the accusation about the suspect fleeing across the border to Greece.

Prime Minister Kriakos Mitsotakis expressed in a Twitter post his "sincere condolences" to the families of the victims, to President Erdogan and to the Turkish People. [Neos Kosmos]

Tensions have increased between the two countries during recent weeks.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used his G20 speech to reiterate previous threats against Greece, stating that Turkey "can come suddenly one night." He added that Greece's efforts to boost its military presence on the Greek Aegean islands "will be of no use." [Politico]

(jk/gc)

North Macedonia: Interior Minister meets Austrian counterpart to discuss border control

North Macedonia's Interior Minister Oliver Spaskovski met with his Austrian counterpart Gerhard Karner to discuss measures to protect the country's borders against illegal migration through Greece. [SchengenVisa News]

"Consistent action in the fight against the smuggling mafia is of particular importance," Karner said. Austria will keep more than 26 police officers in North Macedonia until the end of 2023.

Karner said in earlier comments that it was an 'inopportune' moment to vote on the expansion of the Schengen Area to include Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Albania based on the "increased influx of refugees." [BNN] [Kurier]

(jk/gc)

Poland builds razor-wire fence along border with Russia

Poland has begun constructing a razor-wire fence along its border with the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad amid fears in Warsaw of a possible surge in illegal migration. [Euronews] [Reuters] [AP News] [Independent]

The decision to build the barrier comes after Russia reportedly authorised flights from the Middle East and North Africa to Kaliningrad. [AP News] [Euronews]

"Due to the disturbing information regarding the launch of flights from the Middle East and North Africa to Kaliningrad, I have decided to take measures that will strengthen the security on the Polish border with the Kaliningrad oblast by sealing this border," said Poland's Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak. [AP News]

The new border fence will comprise three rows of razor wire and will incorporate cameras and other electronic monitoring systems, according to Blaszczak. [AP News]

The barrier will be similar to one installed by Poland on its border with Belarus last year amid a migrant crisis that Warsaw accused Minsk of orchestrating. [Reuters] [AP News]

Thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants attempted to cross the border from Belarus into Poland in autumn 2021 in what western nations called a "hybrid" attack mounted by Minsk. Russia-allied Belarus was accused of orchestrating the crisis to destabilise the EU and distract attention from a build-up of Russian troops near Ukraine's border. [Europe Monthly December 2021] [Reuters]

Amid an ongoing standoff between Russia and the West over the Kremlin's subsequent invasion of Ukraine, observers fear Moscow could emulate Minsk by inciting migrants to illegally cross from Kaliningrad into Poland. [Euronews]

"We are not seeing many migrants from the Kaliningrad oblast right now, but it may become similar to the flow of people from Belarus," said Agnieszka Legucka, an analyst for the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

"The reaction from the Polish authorities is a preventive policy. Russia does not have much time when it comes to the war in Ukraine, so it is trying to push many elements of blackmail towards the European Union, including migrants," Legucka added. [Euronews]

(ek/pl)

Russia still plans to send giant magnet to France for international nuclear fusion project

Russia is still planning to send one of six giant magnets to be part of the world's largest nuclear fusion project in France, one of the last international scientific programmes Moscow remains involved in after invading Ukraine in February.

Russia will send the 200-ton poloidal field coil, built under the supervision of Russian nuclear agency Rosatom, by sea from St Petersburg. After it is sent, It is expected to arrive in France's southern port city Marseille. [France 24] [TASS]

The ring-shaped magnet will be part of the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, or ITER, being built in southern France. ITER, which means "the way" in Latin, is a collaboration between 35 countries that are attempting to demonstrate the technological and commercial feasibility of nuclear fusion. [CNN]

The coil has been moved from the factory up a river to the coastal port where it is now waiting to embark for its sea voyage to France, Sabina Griffith, Communication Officer for ITER said. “We expect it to arrive here in February," she said.

Nuclear fusion, the process that powers active or main sequence stars, releases large quantities of energy by combining the nuclei of two hydrogen atoms to generate one heavier helium nucleus. This is the opposite of nuclear fission, the process used in current nuclear power plants, where atom nuclei are split apart.

Scientists believe nuclear fusion reactors could be safer than nuclear fission power plants since they cannot cause chain-reaction meltdown accidents like Japan’s Fukushima or Ukraine’s Chernobyl nuclear disasters. They do not produce radioactive waste and generate four times more energy. [ITER] [IEF]

Nuclear fusion requires extremely high temperatures long enough for the reaction to occur. Recent breakthroughs in China in January, where fusion was sustained for a record-breaking 17 minutes, and in the United Kingdom a month later, where scientists were able to generate the highest amount of sustained fusion energy, have paved the way for ITER. [CCFE] [FT] [EUROfusion] [MPG]

The scientists working on ITER hope it will be able to start and sustain thermonuclear fusion longer, producing more energy than needed to trigger the reaction. [CBS]

The delivery of the magnet had been scheduled in May. Sanctions against Russian ships docking in Europe’s ports has delayed it. [Euronews]

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24 has led to sanctions that have barred the country from participating in international scientific projects. Many major international scientific bodies severed ties with the Kremlin after the invasion, and Russia has pulled out of key international collaborations, like the International Space Station. [CBS] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

These tensions surrounding the project are reminiscent of the conditions of its inception in 1985, when former US President Ronald Reagan met his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev to discuss ways of easing tensions between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Since then, China, India, South Korea, Japan, and the nations of the European Union

joined the project, projected to be fully constructed in late 2025. [Eurasian Times]

(qv/gc)

North Macedonia strengthens ties with Albania in pursuit of EU accession

North Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama met in Skopje to bolster mutual cooperation between their two nations as they pursue European Union accession. [ABC News]

They signed a memorandum of understanding for infrastructure and energy projects and sought to align their economic policy to meet EU demands. Additionally, they also reached an agreement to return stolen icons from North Macedonia. [RadioLiberty]

After the meeting, Kovachevski stated the importance of their cooperation with Albania "especially during the global economic and energy crisis, with serious challenges in providing electricity and food." [Greek Herald]

(jk/gc)

Turkey: Swedish envoy summoned over images 'insulting' Erdogan

Turkey summoned Swedish Ambassador Staffan Herrstrom in Ankara after images allegedly insulting to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan were projected on the Turkish embassy building in Stockholm.

Turkey condemned what it called Kurdish "propaganda," which featured Erdogan's face. The images were reportedly part of a protest supported of the Kurdistan Workers Party, which is considered a terrorist organisation by both Turkey and the European Union.. [Euronews] [abc news]

The incident comes at a time of strained bilateral relations between Turkey and Sweden, as Sweden seeks Turkey's approval to join NATO.

(chm/gc)

Ukraine builds wall on border with Belarus

Ukraine plans to build a reinforced concrete wall and other fortifications on its border with Belarus, a close Russian ally that Moscow used as a staging ground for its February 24 invasion. [Reuters] [Ukrinform]

Ukraine's Presidential Adviser Kyrylo Tymoshenko said a three kilometre barbed-wire-topped wall had gone up in the region of Volyn on the border with Belarus, which Kiev says remains a threat. There were also sandbags and trenches, he said.

He added that other work was also under way in the regions of Rivne and Zhytomyr that also border Belarus, but he did not elaborate. [Reuters] [Ukrinform]

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom signs digital trade deal with Ukraine

Ukraine will be guaranteed access to British financial services in order to rebuild its damaged economy after the signing of a "ground-breaking" new digital trade deal between the two countries. [UK Gov]

The UK government said the deal would support Ukraine's economy during the war and lay the foundations for its recovery and revival. The UK has also cut tariffs on all goods from Ukraine to zero.

Ukraine's First Deputy PM and Minister for Trade and Economy, Yulia Svyrydenko, said the agreement shows that Ukrainian IT companies operating are in demand around the world, despite all the challenges of war, which started when Russia invaded in February. [The Independent] [BBC News]

(chm/gc)

Forced abortions on women in Moldovan asylum were inhuman and degrading, ECHR says

The imposition of abortions and birth control on three intellectually disabled women in a neuropsychiatric asylum in Moldova were inhuman and degrading, the

European Court of Human Rights said. [ECHR, G.M. and Others v. the Republic of Moldova]

When medical staff learned that the women were impregnated after being raped repeatedly by one of the asylum's head doctors, they forced them to have abortions. One of the victims was also injected with a contraceptive coil without her consent.

The doctor was convicted for having raped a total of 16 residents in the asylum.

The court held that Moldova had violated its duties to thoroughly investigate the allegations of ill-treatment, brought up by the applicants and that its criminal law had not provided effective protection against such medical interventions without the patient's consent.

It held that Moldova had to pay each woman 30,000 and 25,000 respectively for damages. [ECHR, G.M. and Others v. the Republic of Moldova]

(aml/gc)

EU slaps more sanctions on Iran over crackdown on protests

European Union foreign ministers decided on November 14 to impose further sanctions on Tehran over a violent crackdown on protests against the Iranian government that were sparked by the death of a woman at the hands of the country's so-called morality police. [Reuters]

The EU ministers slapped asset freezes and travel bans on 29 individuals and three organisations for their role in the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini and in the suppression of subsequent protests across the country that challenged the Islamic Republic's authorities. [Euronews]

Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, said: "The EU strongly condemns the unacceptable violent crackdown [on] protesters. We stand with the Iranian people and support their right to protest peacefully and voice their demands and views freely."

A total of 97 individuals and eight organisations in Iran are now subject to EU sanctions, including Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi, who is responsible for the country's law enforcement forces. [Council of the European Union]

Also on the sanctions list is the head of Iran's cyber police. According to the EU, he is responsible for the arrest of people who voiced online criticism of the Iranian regime. Meanwhile, state broadcaster Press TV is on the list for "broadcasting the forced confessions of detainees". [Euronews]

The latest European sanctions package includes a ban on the export of equipment that can be used for internal repression. [Council of the European Union]

On October 13, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the death of Mahsa Amini and urging the Iranian government to allow an impartial investigation. MEPs also called on the EU to punish those Iranian officials involved in the death, as well as in violence against demonstrators. [European Parliament] [The European Sting]

Iran faced international criticism when Mahsa Amini died in police custody in September after she was arrested for breaking strict hijab rules and accused of wearing her head covering too loosely.

(acn/pk)

Albania, Italy plans to build EUR 1B underwater pipeline

Albania and Italy plan to build a EUR 1 billion pipeline across the Adriatic Sea to provide water to drought-stricken regions of Italy, an Italian newspaper reported. [Euractiv]

Corriere Della Sera published information on the project, which will transport water from Gjirokaster in Albania to Puglia in Italy through 85 kilometres of underwater pipes and 120 kilometres of land pipelines.

The pipeline will take four years to build. The division of construction and running costs of the pipeline remain unknown. [Euractiv]

President of the Puglia region, Michele Emiliano, reportedly reached out to Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama expressing interest in the project. The Albanian government has made no comment on the proposed pipeline.

The proposal comes as Europe continues to experience its worst drought in 500 years, with olive oil producing regions, such as Puglia, continuing to experience worsening impacts. [BBC][OliveTimes]

(jn/gc)

Greece, Libya in diplomatic spat after Athens abruptly cancels visit to Tripoli

A diplomatic spat between Greece and Libya after the Greek foreign minister refused to disembark from his plane in Tripoli after learning that the foreign minister of North African country's caretaker had arrived at the airport to greet him.

Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias had agreed to visit Tripoli allegedly as a personal favour to the Chairman of Libya's Presidential Council, Mohamed al-Menfi, under the condition that he would not interact with members of the transitional government. Dendias cancelled his visit when he realised that Najla Al-Mangoush, Foreign Minister of the Libyan caretaker government, was waiting to greet him. [Greek Reporter]

Athens had previously disputed a Turkish-Libyan oil and gas exploration deal that Al-Mangoush had signed a few weeks prior. Athens has frequently reiterated the UN's position that the Libyan caretaker government is not permitted to make such agreements. [Politico]

After refusing to disembark, Dendias then flew to Eastern Libya to meet with the Heads of Committees of the Libyan House of Representatives, who are opposed to the caretaker government, in the hopes of maintaining a strong relationship with the Parliament.

Anti-Greece protests were reported in Libya following the political row. Protestors condemned "anyone trying to violate Libyan sovereignty," which they said had been displayed by "inappropriate and undiplomatic behaviour by Greece toward the Libyan state." [Anadolu Agency] [Crisis24]

(jk/gc)

Turkey's Erdogan calls for normalisation of ties with Egypt

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan travelled to Qatar for the opening ceremony of the World Cup, where he met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and leaders from other Middle Eastern countries. After his meeting with el-Sisi, Erdogan said the two countries should start the process of normalisation. [Daily Sabah]

Ties between Turkey and Egypt started to fray after the Egyptian military toppled Mohammad Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government. Erdogan publicly stated he will not support the military-led administration and he called el-Sisi a "murderer," "putschist," and "cruel." [BBC]

The meeting between the two leaders should be considered a meeting between nations, rather than just between two leaders, Erdogan said. [Sözcü]

Intelligence delegations from Turkey and Egypt also met to discuss military, political and commercial issues following the meeting between Erdogan and el-Sisi on November 20. A senior official said significant discussions began and countries may enter serious cooperation on regional issues, Reuters reported, citing regional and Turkey sources that spoke on the condition of anonymity. [Reuters]

Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters that both Ankara and Cairo may restore full diplomatic relations and "political consultations between deputy ministers could be rescheduled soon. An ambassador might be appointed in the coming months." [Daily Sabah]

(lc/gc)

Turkey's Central Bank may receive deposit of USD 5B from Saudi Arabia

Turkey is reportedly discussing a deal with Saudi Arabia that would see the Gulf state inject USD 5 billion into Turkey's central bank, according to reports.

A spokesperson for the Saudi Ministry of Finance told Reuters that the Kingdom was in a "final discussion" to make the deposit with the central bank. The Financial Times reported that Ankara and Riyadh are in talks about the potential deposit, which would be designed to bolster Turkey's foreign currency reserves. [Reuters]

The move would also repair fractured relations between the two countries after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and expand Turkey's commercial links to Saudi Arabia ahead of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's re-election bid in 2023. [Financial Times]

(chm/gc)

Erdogan tells Netanyahu relations should be based on respect

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan told Israel's former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who won an election in November, that it is important to maintain relations on a basis of respect for mutual interests, Reuters reported, citing the Turkish presidency. [Reuters] [CNN]

Erdogan told Netanyahu he was saddened by "events two days ago in the West Bank". Netanyahu offered his condolences for those who died in a bomb attack in Istanbul, Reuters reported, citing the presidency.

Netanyahu's Likud Party said in a statement that both countries agreed to work together on economic and diplomatic issues to create a new era of cooperation.

Political relations have been strained for years between two countries. Ankara expelled the Israeli ambassador in 2010 after the Mavi Marmara incident. Ten Turkish citizens were killed during an Israeli raid on the Mavi Marmara, a ship trying to deliver aid to Gaza.

The two countries re-appointed ambassadors this year as tensions started to ease. [Daily Sabah]

(lc/gc)

US deploys drones to Greece base

The United States has deployed eight MQ-9 Reaper drones to Larissa Air Base in central Greece as part of an agreement made between Athens and the US European Command to defend "against actions threatening peace." [Anadolu Agency]

The Greek military claimed that the drones would "contribute to NATO's interoperability and deterrence," which aligns with Washington's support of NATO's deterrence capabilities. [Greek Reporter]

The US must avoid hurting relations with Turkey, which "have grown increasingly fraught over time," Jonathon Lord, a Senior Fellow and Director of the Middle East Security program at the Center for a New American Security and former staff member on the House Armed Services Committee, said.

In September, the US Department of State cautioned Turkey to respect and protect the sovereignty and

territorial integrity of Greek Islands in the Aegean. [Washington Post] [Greek Reporter]

(jk/gc)

Belarus, Cuba strengthen ties

Belarus and Cuba are strengthening their trade and business ties as the Russian allies align their foreign policies, according to Sergei Klishevich, a member of Belarus' House of Representatives.

Discussions between the countries have "intensified in various areas, ranging from medicine to industry, agriculture and the IT sector," Klishevich said. "There are no topics that would, let's say, cause disagreements or some disputes." [Belta]

Cuba's well developed medical sector and pharmaceutical technology, from vaccines to cancer treatments, will play "a part in this friendship," Klishevich said. Cuba supports Belarus's foreign policy on "virtually all issues," he added. [Belta]

Vladimir Andreichenko, the country's Chairman of the House of Representatives and Santiago Perez Benitez, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Cuba, met in Minsk to discuss the possibility of further cooperation. [Belta]

The President of the National Assembly of People's Power of Cuba, Juan Esteban Lazo Hernandez, has an upcoming visit to Belarus, which was also discussed in the meeting. [Belta]

(em/gc)

Belarus discusses expanding cooperation with Russia's Far East Primorye region

Senior Belarusian officials met with the governor of Russia's Far East territory of Primorye to discuss how to expand trade ties between the two. President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko and Governor of Primorye Oleg Kozhemyako held their meeting in Minsk.

Golovchenko said that the negotiations, which he described as "friendly, warm and constructive atmosphere," bode well for future bilateral cooperation. Kozhemyako is a regular visitor to Belarus

and the ties between the two "yield results in trade and economic relations," Golovchenko said. [Belta]

Trade between Belarus and Primorye increased by 80 percent in 2020 so far, building on a rise in 2021 to USD 32.7 million from USD 17.3 million in 2020.

Exports from Belarus to the Far East region consist primarily of defence and security products, equipment used to filter liquids or gases, cheese, butter, cream and construction plastics. Imports from Primorye consisted largely of parts for vehicles, medicines, fish and electric batteries. [Belta]

"For us, every visit to the Republic of Belarus is always an important event," Kozhemyako said, adding that many of the region's enterprises and retail chains are stocking Belarusian products. Primorye also has interest in buying Belarusian utility vehicles and electric buses, he said. [Belta]

Other points of interaction outlined by Kozhemyako were the launching of a joint venture between the Ussuriysk auto repair plant and the Minsk Electrotechnical Plant, the active work being done on seed potato supplies and the organisation of direct flights.

Lukashenko said that once a few minor issues have been addressed, they can make significant progress in terms of import substitution, one of the most important steps for Belarus. "All economic problems that we are dealing with today in both Russia and Belarus can be overcome," he said. "This year has already shown that we will cope. We just need a little time, but we will cope." [Belta]

(em/gc)

EU, Bangladesh hold first 'political dialogue', aiming to strengthen ties

The European Union and Bangladesh held their first so-called political dialogue in Dhaka on November 24, paving the way to putting their relationship on a firmer footing.

The meeting in Dhaka launched what will now be an annual event, alternating between Bangladesh's capital and Brussels.

The meetings aim to intensify cooperation on foreign and security policy. The significance of the format to the EU was underlined by Brussel's proposal at the first

meeting to launch discussions on a partnership cooperation agreement with Bangladesh. [EUReporter] [AiR, No. 48, November/2022, 5]

(aml/pk)

Netherlands, South Korea agree to boost trade cooperation

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to deepen their nations' cooperation in semiconductors and nuclear energy and they upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership during a meeting on November 17 in Seoul, Korea.

The two countries are complementary partners in the semiconductors industry: South Korea focuses on semiconductor manufacturing while the Netherlands specialise in semiconductor production equipment. Both leaders agreed that strengthening their high-tech ties would contribute to stabilising global supply chains. The two nations should communicate more regularly to discuss Dutch plans to build new nuclear power plants, the leaders said.

During the meeting, the leaders exchanged their positions on regional and global issues, such as tensions in the Korean peninsula and Russia's war in Ukraine. Rutte said he supported strong sanctions until North Korea completes denuclearisation. They subsequently condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine and reaffirmed their commitment to liberal and democratic values.

Rutte and Yoon issued a joint statement on their bilateral strategic partnership, outlining their commitment to a secure, free, and interoperable cyberspace and green energy development among others. [Yonhap News Agency] [AiR, November/2022, 4]

(aml/gc)

United Kingdom to remove Chinese-made security systems from government buildings

The UK government has ordered government departments to stop installing Chinese-made security systems in sensitive buildings and to disconnect all existing Chinese systems from their core networks and replace them.

British Cabinet Office Minister Oliver Dowden justified the move to parliament by stating that the Chinese security systems pose a threat to national security, explaining that the systems are "produced by companies subject to the National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China."

The law obliges every citizen and organisation to ensure China's national security.

Calls from parliament to ban security systems made by Chinese companies Hikvision and Dahua had come up earlier this year. The reasons were security concerns and the fact that the security systems were and still are allegedly used for mass surveillance in the northern Chinese region of Xinjiang. [Deutsche Welle] [Politico] [AiR, No. 48, November/2022, 5]

(aml/gc)

Russia, China reaffirm friendship

Russia's new Ambassador to China, Igor Morgulov, met on November 27 with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during which both underlined the importance of friendship between their two nations.

Their meeting focused on the continuation of good relations between Moscow and Beijing, with Morgulov saying that "Russia-China ties cannot be broken, and the friendship between the two countries can overcome any challenge."

Russia's war in Ukraine was not specifically addressed during the meeting, however, both countries called for a "multipolar world" and said they "do not believe in unipolar hegemony." These comments targeted Western economic sanctions, mainly by the US, against Russia and China. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua] [AiR, No. 48, November/2022, 5]

(aml/gc)

Russian troops train Lao soldiers on explosive ordnance disposal

A delegation of 24 Russian troops visited Laos from November 17-24 to engage in a joint training operation with the Lao People's Armed Forces, training them in explosive ordnance disposal operations. [Laotian Times] [AiR, November/2022, 4]

(aml/gc)

India will continue to import Russian oil, foreign minister says

India will continue buying Russian oil because it benefits the country, Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar said after meeting his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. Jaishankar added that the two countries were expanding their trade ties. [Deutsche Welle]

Jaishanka visited Moscow on November 8 for the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine in February. He was accompanied by a delegation consisting of senior officials from the gas, shipping, and finance industries.

According to Lavrov, the two countries are seeking to expand their trade ties and to cooperate more closely in nuclear energy and space travel. The joint production of modern weapons was also discussed, as the two countries inked a USD 677 million deal last year to manufacture around 670,000 AK-203 assault rifles in India as a part of New Delhi's push for self-reliance in defence manufacturing [see AiR No. 49, December/2021, 1]. [Al Jazeera]

Before the meeting, Russian president Vladimir Putin, when talking about bilateral relations between Russia and India, had said that the two countries have "special ties that are built on the foundation of really close allied relations for decades." [The Diplomat]

New Delhi, which has not explicitly condemned Russia for the Ukraine invasion, has emerged as Moscow's largest oil customer after China as Western buyers seek to wean themselves off fuel from Russia. [Reuters] [Voice of America] [AiR, No.46, November/2022, 3]

(aml/gc)

UK, India announce visa agreement

The United Kingdom and India announced details of a reciprocal immigration agreement a day before British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak held his face-to-face

bilateral meeting with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

Under the deal, struck on the side-lines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in Indonesia, up to 3,000 visas will be granted to young Indian nationals to work in the UK for up to two years. The same number of visas will be offered by India to Britons and will be available to people aged between 18 and 30. The scheme, plans for which were first announced last year, will open early next year. [Politico]

A successful conclusion of the visa deal comes after talks on a UK-India trade deal were scuppered after British Home Secretary Suella Braverman expressed concerns about a potential increase in Indian migration to the Kingdom. Ahead of his bilateral talks with Modi, Sunak said he didn't want to "sacrifice quality for speed" in talks for a UK-India trade deal. [Politico]

The visa's agreement will be seen as a signal that London is open to granting more work and study visas to Indian citizens as part of commitment to a hoped-for free trade agreement. [Deccan Herald] [Politico] [Hindustan Times] [AiR, November/2022, 4]

(aml/gc)

Vatican accuses China of breaking recently renewed deal on bishops

The Vatican has demanded an explanation over the appointment of a bishop to a diocese in China not recognised by the Holy See, and has accused Beijing of violating a deal with the Catholic Church that was renewed only in late October. [See AiR No. 43, October/2022, 4]

Although the exact details about the deal between the pope and the Chinese government are not known to the public, the agreement reportedly includes a provision that the Chinese government is responsible for nominating bishops in China, and that the pope then has the right to either approve or veto candidates.

According to the Vatican, however, the pope's final judgement was ignored by the Chinese government when it chose Giovanni Peng Weizhao as a bishop for the south-eastern Jiangxi province.

The Vatican is demanding an explanation and said it hoped that "similar episodes are not repeated."

[Reuters] [Vatican News] [AiR, No. 48, November/2022, 5]

Critics of the agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government have pointed to growing restrictions on religious freedoms in China for Christians and other minorities.

The Vatican has said that the deal will not pave the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing, a move which would require the Holy See to sever ties with Taiwan. The Vatican's ties with China were cut in 1951 after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. [AiR, No. 43 October/22, 4]

(aml/pk)

Belarus considers Sudan as stepping stone into Africa

Belarus wants to improve its ties with African nations and views Sudan as a stepping stone into the continent, according to the country's Chairman of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly, Vladimir Andreichenko.

Belarus has "been actively developing its relations with the countries of Africa, where Sudan plays an important role," Andreichenko said. He made his comments after meeting with Sudan's Ambassador to Belarus, Mohammed Omer Musa Ali. [Belta]

The agreements in 2017 between the two countries resulted in more than 100 Belarusian tractors being delivered to Sudan and supplies of peanuts being sent to Belarus for food processing, Andreichenko said, adding that not all the deals had been implemented to date. [Belta]

Both countries plan to discuss how to further develop inter-parliamentary relationships and cooperation on an economic and humanitarian basis, while also furthering implementing all agreements reached in 2017. [Belta]

On November 15, representatives of Belarus' Minsk Automotive Plant (MAZ), one of Belarus' largest mechanical engineering companies, discussed further cooperation with the Republic of Chad. Belarus and Chad are eager to implement shared projects in different economic sectors. [Belta]

(em/gc)

Team:

Anastasiya Drobava (ad), Ann-Charlotte Neumann (acn), Antonia Lawrenz (aml), Charlotte Hughes-Morgan (chm) Christopher James Godwin (cg), Emelia Macdonald (em), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Ethan Flanagan (ef), Giulia Taraborrelli (gt), Glen Carey (gc), Greta Middendorf (gm), Henning Glaser (hg), Hsu May Maung, Jemina Nuredini (jn), Johnny Khouri (jk), Katherine Mansfield (km), Ketevan Esaiashvili (ke), Lara Cin (lc), Madeleine Piesold (mp), Maria Rusu (mr), Maria Simon Arboleas (msa), Marlene Busch (mb), Maximilian Ohle (mo), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rex Wempen (rw), Venus Phuangkom, Viktoria Styková (vs), Warren O'Broin (wb)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe