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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first issue of *Europe in Review* in the new year. Looking ahead into what will likely be another fascinating 12 months, we will report about the events impacting Europe and provide insights that we hope cultivate a better understanding of an increasingly complicated world.

In this issue, we bring you the latest on the war in Ukraine, where Kyiv has demonstrated its willingness to continue its fight against Russian forces. With no immediate prospects for a cessation in violence, Europe is still scrambling to find new energy supplies after cutting Russian oil imports. The Netherlands, for example, plans to open two new nuclear power plants as part of a broader effort to diversify energy supplies.

We report on the detention of a European Parliament vice president amid an inquiry into suspected bribery by Qatar. EU lawmakers have denounced what they say could be a case of “serious foreign interference” in the bloc’s democratic processes. We also cover the death of former Pope Benedict XVI, who led the Catholic Church from 2005 until his resignation in

2013, as well as rising tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

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,

Henning Glaser, Peter Kononczuk, Glen Carey

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

War in Europe: Zelensky goes to Washington, Russia blocked at Bakhmut

Despite all the destruction and casualties it has sustained during a conflict now in its 11th month, Kyiv's willingness to take the war in Ukraine into a new year seems strong. In December, it launched two small attacks against Russian air force bases deep within Russia itself – a first in the fighting – while close to the first minutes of 2023 it struck Russian barracks in occupied eastern Ukraine, an attack which it claimed killed up to 400 enemy soldiers.

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin has, for the first time since his forces invaded Ukraine last February, referred to the conflict as a "war", rather than a "special military operation", amid signs that Russia's elite has resigned itself to a long campaign.

Since losing Kherson in November, Moscow's tactics have been to bombard Ukrainian cities with missiles and to focus its military offensive on Bakhmut in the east. Russian forces remain outside the city as the battle there reaches its fifth month.

Ukraine, for its part, has been slowly advancing towards the eastern cities of Svatove and Kreminna. Capturing these would give Kyiv control of a vital road into the Luhansk region, which is almost entirely occupied by Russia. However, a breakthrough on this front does not appear imminent and there is talk of a stalemate among top military intelligence officers.

Amid a deadlock, both sides frequently use the word "peace" but December showed once again that talk is cheap while the cost of war – including in terms of blood – is high.

Zelensky addresses US congress, leaves with early Christmas present

On December 21, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made a visit to Washington, where he met with US President Joe Biden and addressed a joint sitting of the Senate and House of Representatives.

In a speech, Zelensky urged lawmakers to view aid to Ukraine as an "investment in democracy", and not as "charity". He compared Ukraine's fight to World War II, saying: "Just like the brave American soldiers, [who] held their lines and fought back Hitler's forces... brave Ukrainian soldiers are doing the same to Putin's forces."

Zelensky returned home bearing gifts – on the day of his visit, the US Congress committed to providing Ukraine with an additional USD 1.8 billion in military assistance. The package contained items that have become staples for Ukraine's military, like artillery and

mortars, shells, medium and short-range missiles, radar-guided munitions, tank shells and more.

However, one item attracted particular attention – Ukraine is to receive a single Patriot surface-to-air missile system.

The Patriot is an advanced weapon which, due to its reputation, has frequently been requested by Ukraine. A Patriot system consists of missile-launch vehicles, a radar, a command station, antennae, and the missiles themselves, all of which make up a Patriot battery. The system's new operators will require six months of training before it can be deployed.

Putin vowed that Russia would "knock down" any such weapons deployed by Ukraine. He also called the Patriot an old system, saying that Russia's S-300 was more effective. Both the Patriot and S-300 were introduced in the early 1980s but have been significantly upgraded and modified since. Ukraine already operates the latter, having inherited hundreds of units from the Soviet Union.

S-300 systems have proved effective in deterring Russian planes and helicopters but have been found wanting against cruise missiles and drones deployed against Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure.

Kyiv has tried to plug this gap by using other hardware it has received such as American TWQ-1 Avenger missile systems, Norwegian NASAMs, German Gepard anti-aircraft guns and an Iris-T SLM missile system, as well as Italian Aspide 2000 missiles. It will be a long time before any judgement on the Patriot's importance to Ukraine can be made. [Forbes] [US Department of Defense] [Economist] [Deutsche Welle] [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [Guardian] [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Putin goes to Minsk

Putin also visited one of his allies as he flew to Minsk to meet with Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko on December 19. Employing sarcasm aimed at Western criticism of his regime, Lukashenko declared himself and Putin "the most harmful and toxic people on this planet".

Absent from the meeting was the topic of the war in Ukraine, which received no comment from either president. Despite allowing Russian forces to use its territory to stage an attack on Kyiv last February, Belarus is not an active participant in the war and has deployed no forces against Ukraine.

On December 29, the Belarusian government said that its air force had shot down a Ukrainian air defence missile. Belarusian officials wasted no time in alleging a conspiracy was afoot, accusing Ukraine of trying to "provoke a regional war". [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [New York Times] [Newsweek]

Bakhmut 'covered with blood' but battling on

In Ukraine, the increasingly battered eastern city of Bakhmut remains the focal point of the ground war. Zelensky visited the city on December 20 prior to his trip to the US, meeting soldiers and handing out awards for their "superhuman" efforts.

As *Europe in Review* has previously reported, the city has become a staging ground and field hospital for Ukrainian troops. A brutal, grinding battle of attrition reminiscent of the Chechen Wars of the 1990s has been waged there for months. Zelensky described the city as "covered with blood". Most of its civilian population has been evacuated and the majority of buildings have been flattened by incessant shelling. Those still standing are covered in holes.

The few thousand civilians who remain do so with the knowledge that they could be killed at any moment. The severely wounded are taken to a hospital at Kostiantynivka, to the south-west. There, medical personnel work through power cuts, shelling and missile strikes.

One patient there gave an interview to *France24* and was a living example of the risks that civilians face. Forty-eight-year-old builder Vyacheslav Tarasov had his arm severed by a Russian shell while out walking with a friend, having emerged from the basement he had been living in since the attacks started in August. His friend was killed in the attack.

Bakhmut itself may be broken, but its defenders are not.

While Russia had been inching closer to the city for months, December saw Moscow's offensive stall amid small Ukrainian counter-offensives. A senior Ukrainian military intelligence officer, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, said that while Russia was keeping an immense concentration of artillery guns on Bakhmut, its ground attacks were being consistently repelled.

Ukraine maintains significant numbers of soldiers and equipment dedicated to the defence of Bakhmut. While it remains difficult to confirm exactly where the frontline is around the town, Ukraine claimed that

Russian forces were stopped at Opytne, a southern suburb, and remained outside the city proper.

The Institute for the Study of War, a US-based defence think tank, argued that the Russian offensive had "culminated", meaning it had run out of steam without taking its objective. Similarly, Ukraine has only been making incremental gains towards the towns of Kreminna and Svatove, which are important gateways for Russia into the Luhansk region.

Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence, described the situation on the frontline – including Bakhmut – as being "stuck". Neither side attempted large-scale operations in December. Budanov said that Ukraine couldn't "defeat [Russia] in all directions comprehensively" while Russia was "completely at a dead end". [Institute for the Study of War] [Politico Europe] [Associated Press] [Ukrinform] [Guardian] [BBC News] [Al Jazeera] [Euronews] [New York Times] [RFE/RL] [CNN] [France24] [Atlantic Council] [Forbes] [Financial Times] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Russian military officials do not comment on frontline developments as frequently as the Ukrainians do, but other participants in the Russian war are not as constrained.

Some in the Kremlin's service are unhappy with how the battle of Bakhmut has gone so far and are openly voicing concerns. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the reputed leader of the Wagner Group mercenaries who comprise a significant part of the Russian forces attacking Bakhmut, took a barely concealed swipe at the head of Russia's General Staff, Valery Gerasimov.

A video surfaced which appeared to show Wagner Group soldiers at Bakhmut complaining about having "nothing to fight with" and asking Gerasimov "Where are you? It's about time you helped us".

Prigozhin confirmed that the video was real and said that "the guys asked me to pass along that when you're sitting in a warm office, it's hard to hear the problems on the frontline". [Military] [Foreign Policy] [Business Insider] [Newsweek] [Guardian]

'Up to 400' dead as Ukraine strikes Russian barracks

As Kyiv was being attacked by Russian drones on New Year's Day, Ukraine executed an attack of its own close to the first minutes of 2023 by striking a Russian barracks in the occupied city of Makiivka in the east.

While the Kremlin rarely acknowledges setbacks or releases casualty numbers, the Russian defence ministry acknowledged that the attack took place and gave a casualty figure of 63. Russia said its soldiers had occupied the building, a deserted "professional technical" college, and had been using it as barracks.

Ukrainian sources claimed that up to 400 soldiers were killed and that multiple vehicles were destroyed. Photographs from the scene show that the building has collapsed. Ukrainian sources added that recently mobilised soldiers were being kept at the college, which also housed a sizable ammunition dump.

Both sides say the attack was carried out using a US-supplied HIMARS missile system. As *Europe in Review* has previously reported, that system was responsible for multiple attacks carried out against Russian ammo depots in July. It consists of a truck-mounted launcher that fires guided missiles. The latest strike is similar to an attack on December 6 which Ukraine claimed was carried out on a building holding Wagner Group mercenaries, but one that Russia has not acknowledged officially.

The attack in Makiivka spurred a furious reaction from Russian war journalists, or "mil-bloggers", many of whom condemned the decision to place barracks so close to the frontline. Makiivka, which is in the eastern Donetsk region and has been occupied by Russian-backed separatists since 2014, is around 20 kilometres from the frontline.

Igor Girkin, a veteran former commander of Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas area, said the casualty numbers released by the Kremlin were low as many soldiers were still considered missing and buried under the rubble. He added he believed there were "hundreds dead and wounded". [Europe Monthly August 2022] [Guardian] [France24] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Russian missiles still raining down

Russia has continued its campaign against Ukraine's civilian infrastructure. Each wave of missile and drone strikes achieved their aim of denying Ukrainians electricity, heating and running water amid freezing temperatures. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal warned that the attacks could wipe out 50 percent of Ukraine's GDP and called for the country's allies to provide more air defence systems.

Half of Ukraine's electrical infrastructure is said to have been damaged or destroyed, and rolling blackouts are common. Ukrainian air defence appears to be getting

better and shooting down incoming missiles and drones, which is reflected in lower casualty numbers.

However, as the Associated Press reported, the impact is uneven. Kyiv is well defended, as are Ukraine's western and northern cities, but towns and villages are acutely affected by the damage to the electrical grid.

Settlements near the southern and eastern frontline suffer the most as Russia shells these places indiscriminately. Despite branding Kherson a "Russian city", Moscow's forces continue to bombard it with artillery. [Reuters] [Irish Times] [Euractiv] [Politico Europe]

Ukraine targets airfields with unusual weapon

The missiles used against Ukraine's cities are mainly launched from two sources: Russian ships in the Black Sea and large Tu-95 and Tu-22M strategic bombers which are based at airfields in Russia. The Engels and Dyagilevo bases, which are hundreds of kilometres from the front lines in Ukraine, hosted groups of these bombers which, according to observers, were in the process of being loaded for another attack when the sites were struck on December 5. Exactly how much damage was done is disputed.

Another attack occurred on December 29, when Russia announced that it had shot down a drone near the Engels airbase and that the wreckage had killed three soldiers. Ukraine has not officially claimed responsibility.

Regardless of how effective the strikes were, they reflect a growing determination in Ukraine to strike targets at longer ranges. Exactly what Ukraine is using to carry out these attacks is unknown, but many expert observers suspect that Kyiv may be weaponising its stock of Tu-141 Strizh drones – and there is clear evidence for this claim.

The Strizh is an unusual platform, with only around 150 ever built. It is a large, dart-shaped Soviet-era reconnaissance drone from the 1970s that uses a fuel-hungry jet engine to reach near supersonic speeds. Ukraine inherited an unknown number of these from the Soviet Union and, beginning in 2014, has brought them back into service.

A stray Strizh crashed in Zagreb in March. While the Ukrainians denied that the machine belonged to them, it was later confirmed to have come from Ukrainian airspace. This type of drone made another reported appearance in July, when Russia claimed to have shot one down outside of Kursk.

The Strizh, as a suicide drone, may be the only active long-range weapon system Ukraine has. In theory, due to its size and age, it should be an easy target for Russian air defences and cannot be relied on. Russia, meanwhile, possesses a vast – though by no means infinite – arsenal of cruise missiles, giving it complete dominance when it comes to long-range strikes. Ukrainian officials have requested ATACMS missiles, which would increase their strike capabilities, from the US but have been rebuffed. [Wall Street Journal] [Guardian] [CNN] [Politico Europe] [RFE/RL] [Aviation Week] [Forbes] [War Is Boring]

No prospect of peace

As the war rumbles on into 2023, neither side is talking about peace with any seriousness.

On paper, the conflict has been an unmitigated disaster for both sides, who are paying a high price in currency and in blood. Despite this, both parties have signalled a willingness to fight a long war.

Moscow has refused to negotiate unless Ukraine recognises Russia's annexation of nearly a third of its territory. Ukraine, which views the conflict as an existential battle for independence, has ruled out compromising on its territory. The war will soon be a year old and there is no end to the fighting in sight.

(wb/pk)

European Parliament vice president charged in Qatar corruption scandal

A Greek lawmaker who was one of 14 European Parliament vice presidents has been placed in custody and is awaiting trial in Belgium amid an investigation into suspected bribery by Qatar.

Belgium's public prosecutor charged MEP Eva Kaili, her partner and two others of participation in a criminal organisation, corruption and money laundering, accusing the group of accepting cash and gifts from Qatar to peddle influence for the Gulf state.

EU lawmakers adopted a resolution on December 15 saying they were "appalled" at the alleged corruption, and said that the European Parliament "denounces, in the strongest terms, Qatar's alleged attempts" to buy influence, "which constitute serious foreign interference in the EU's democratic processes". [Reuters] [Euronews]

The assembly suspended all work on legislation relating to Qatar, notably an aviation agreement between the Gulf state and the bloc, as well as plans for visa-free travel for Qataris in the EU, which Kaili supported. [Politico]

Following Kaili's arrest on December 9, the former television presenter turned politician was expelled from both Greek socialist party Pasok and the Socialists and Democrats group in the European Parliament, and was later stripped of her vice presidency role. [BBC] [Politico]

Police forces seized more than EUR 1.5 million in over 20 searches conducted in Belgium and Italy in the days following the arrest. Some searches were conducted within the European Parliament itself. [The Telegraph] [Euronews]

Kaili's partner, Francesco Giorgi, confessed to taking bribes from Qatar to influence European Parliament decisions related to the Gulf state, and named two other MEPs he suspected of having done the same. A source related to the case told Reuters that Giorgi had sought to exonerate Kaili, who has denied any wrongdoing through her lawyer.

Giorgi had worked as an aide for Italian former senior MEP Pier Antonio Panzeri, who was arrested over similar allegations in his Belgian home, where police found EUR 600,000 in cash.

Authorities say Panzeri was central in cultivating relations with both Qatari and Moroccan officials and facilitating cash flow to Brussels, most notably through his non-governmental organisation Fight Impunity. [NYT] [Reuters]

Leaked Moroccan diplomatic cables in 2014 and 2015 describe the former MEP as "a close friend" and "an influential ally". According to Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* and Italian daily *La Repubblica,* Panzeri was connected to the Moroccan secret service, the DGED.

A Belgian extradition request for Panzeri's wife and daughter, under house arrest in Italy over similar charges, mentions "gifts" from Morocco's ambassador to Poland. [Le Monde] [Politico]

Kaili has been held in detention since her arrest, and was denied pre-trial release on December 22.

Qatar has denied all accusations of misconduct since the arrests were made on December 9, a day designated by the United Nations and the European Union as International Anti-Corruption Day. [Reuters]

(qv/pk)

Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia escalate

Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia escalated toward the end of year, raising concerns that another conflict could break out between the two countries after ethnic Serbs set up roadblocks and barricades and announced that they would boycott municipal elections. [Al Jazeera]

Trucks, ambulances and agricultural machines were used as roadblocks by the Serbian minority in Kosovo along some of northern Kosovo's main roads. According to the AFP, the roadblocks, set up along the two main border crossings to Serbia, were in response to the arrest of an ethnic Serbian, who was also a former police officer, on suspicion of being involved in attacking Kosovo police officers. [The Guardian]

Following the establishment of the road blocks and in an attempt to reduce tensions with Serbia, Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani announced that the local elections would be postponed until April 23. [The Guardian]

They have subsequently been dismantled by Serbs after Kosovo reopened its main border with Serbia. This has eased tensions for now but the escalation alarmed world powers. KFOR, NATO's peacekeeping force in Kosovo, expressed its appreciation for the removal of the barricades and called on all parties to refrain from using rhetoric or taking actions that could lead to further escalation. [EuroReporter]

Serbia calls for troops

As tensions increased, Serbia's President Aleksander Vucic said he was formally requesting NATO's permission to deploy Serbian troops in northern Kosovo. [Al Jazeera] Serbian troops have not been present in Kosovo since the Serbian army was forced out of the region by the 1999 NATO intervention.

The Serbian government was considering sending 1,000 security personnel to ethnically Serbian-majority territories in Kosovo territories under the terms of United Nations Resolution 1244, according to a statement made by Petar Petkovic, the Director of Serbia's Office for Kosovo on December 8. [Balkan Insight]

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brncabic supported Petkovic's statement on the grounds that KFOR is not sufficient to maintain peace in the area and Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija are not safe. [Anadolu Agency]

Vucic has demanded the release of all arrested Serbs in northern Kosovo, and added he seeks de-escalation in the region. After a meeting in the National Security Council, Vucic asked Kosovo Serbs not to be involved in violence against NATO troops. [Reuters]

Combat readiness

Vucic placed on December 26 the country's troops on the "highest level of combat readiness" amid the tensions. The same day, the Serbian Defence Minister and the Serbian army's chief of staff travelled to the Kosovo border during which they praised the combat readiness of the Serbian army. [France 24]. [BBC] [France 24]

Vucic said that the order for combat readiness was to "protect our people [in Kosovo] and preserve Serbia." He claimed that Pristina was readying to "attack" ethnic Serbs in Kosovo and remove the blockades that ethnic Serbs had established along multiple roads in Kosovo. [ABC]

Hours following the announcement, Serbs in the ethnically-divided city of Mitrovica in Northern Kosovo created further roadblocks. The blockade—established by parking trucks—appeared overnight.

It is the first instance where Serbians have blockaded internal roads in Kosovo, with all previous blockades being set on roads leading to the border with Serbia. The blockade blocks the road connecting the Albanian majority part of the town to the Serbian majority. [Al Jazeera]

"It is precisely Serbia, influenced by Russia, that has raised a state of military readiness and that is ordering the erection of new barricades, in order to justify and protect the criminal groups that terrorise," said Kosovo's Interior Minister Xhelal Svecla. [Al Jazeera]

Serbia's military had been armed by Russian donations and military purchases. [France 24]

KFOR Investigation

The decision to place Serbia's army at combat-readiness came on the same day that KFOR said that they were investigating a shooting incident in Zubin Potok. In a statement, KFOR said that "we are working to establish all the facts." [France 24]

While Kosovo's government has the ability to remove the Serbian blockades, Pristina said that they were waiting for KFOR to respond to the government's request to remove the blockades. [Al Jazeera]

The leader of the NATO peacekeeping troops in Kosovo said that his troops are prepared to control the situation. In a statement, Major General Angelo Michele Ristuccia said that "KFOR had full capability, including personnel, to provide a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement for all communities everywhere in Kosovo." [TRT World]

Vucic said that the presence of Serbian troops in Kosovo would "dramatically reduce tensions." Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani labelled the idea as a provocation. "Vucic knows very well that the presence of the Serbian army in Kosovo ended in 1999," she said to lawmakers in her annual address on December 15 2022. [TRT World]

Kosovan police announced on December 8 in a press release that the police presence will be increased in northern provinces of Kosovo to provide security for all citizens soon before a police officer was injured in a drive-by-shooting in Serbovc. [Al-Jazeera]

(jn-lc/gc)

Former Pope Benedict XVI dies at 95

Former Pope Benedict XVI, who led the Catholic Church from 2005 until his resignation in 2013, died on December 31 aged 95. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Politico]

The ex-pontiff was a hero to Catholic conservatives, while his upholding of dogmatic views on issues like contraception and homosexuality caused unease among liberals. [Reuters] [New York Times] [BBC] [The Guardian]

His tenure was overshadowed by sexual abuse scandals in the Church. The year before his resignation, private papal documents were leaked to the media. That case, known as "Vatileaks", painted a picture of a Vatican rife with divisions and corruption. [The Guardian] [DW] [Reuters]

Benedict was the first pontiff to step down since the Middle Ages, and his death has put an end to an unprecedented period in which two popes lived in the Vatican. [The Guardian] [Reuters] [Vox News]

Leaders around the world have paid tribute to Pope Benedict, particularly in his native Germany. [Le Monde] Many have described him as one of the leading theologians of modern times. [Reuters]

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres praised his "powerful calls for solidarity with marginalised people", while US President Joe Biden recognised "his focus on the ministry of charity". [Reuters]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Benedict XVI had been a "special church leader", and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called him "a giant of faith and reason". [Euronews]

French President Emmanuel Macron said Benedict had worked "for a more fraternal world", while far-right former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro praised the pope for criticising "the errors of the so-called 'liberation theology'". [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Winter begins in energy-insecure Europe

Winter arrived and a new year began in an energy-insecure Europe without incident, with natural gas storage levels sufficient to enable the continent to maintain electricity and heat until spring, provided the weather is not colder than expected. [DWD] [Reuters]

Czech Industry and Trade Minister Jozef Sikela, whose country held the rotating presidency of the EU in the second half of 2022, announced that European governments had agreed on a gas price cap on December 19 to insulate both consumers and European businesses from temporary price spikes due to supply shocks. [WSJ] [European Commission]

EU gas cap regime

Germany had opposed the cap due to concerns that gas would be redirected away from Europe in times of shortage-induced price rises, but finally agreed to a compromise which limits caps to a three-day time span, and enables any cap to be lifted if market disruption occurs. [FT]

The cap will be implemented if a price of EUR 180 per megawatt hour is reached for month-ahead, three months-ahead, and year-ahead derivative contracts on the Dutch Title Transfer Facility (TTF), and remains at this level for three days, provided this level is also

more than EUR 35 over average global prices. [ICE] [ICE] [WSJ].

TTF's owner, Intercontinental Exchange (ICE), has protested. Only Hungary voted against the cap while the Netherlands and Austria, which had previously opposed the measure, abstained, and the majority of EU countries voted in favour.

LNG terminals under construction

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz inaugurated the Hoegh Esperanza floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) at Wilhelmshaven on December 17. [FT] The FSRU can provide a capacity of 5 billion cubic metres (bcm) per year, replacing approximately 11 percent of Russian imports, equivalent to 6 percent of annual German gas demand. [Marine Link]

Two more FSRUs are scheduled for completion within the coming month, with a fourth to be completed soon afterward, together representing over half of the 50 bcm of gas that Germany imported from Russia in 2021.

Construction of the Wilhelmshaven FSRU began immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the project, which would normally take years in Europe or the US, was completed in record time for Germany – providing a model of what can be accomplished when critical infrastructure construction becomes a national priority.

Two more terminals, at Brunsbuttel and Lubmin, are scheduled to begin operations in January. Germany is continuing to work on shore terminals scheduled for completion in the coming years as it pursues an effort to replace Russian energy.

Twelve liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, including Wilhelmshaven, are currently under construction throughout Europe, including in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, France, Italy and Greece.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire and the executive director for strategy, planning and evaluation of French electricity transmission system operator RTE informed the French Senate on December 17 that the country would be able to avoid electricity cuts and rolling blackouts this winter. [Reuters]

RTE announced that French nuclear power production on December 11 had exceeded 40 gigawatts (GW) for the first time since last March, and was expected to reach 45 GW in January as four nuclear plants

completed maintenance work and returned to service. A significant portion of the French nuclear generation fleet had been taken offline for repairs last year, coinciding with Ukraine war-induced power shortages, due to maintenance issues discovered in 2021.

UK Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Michael Gove on December 7 announced approval of the first new coal mine in the country in 30 years. The move should provide additional coal to UK plants supplying baseload power to the British electricity grid as the country, together with the rest of Europe, prolongs the service of coal plants. [FT]

EU, G7 impose price cap on Russian oil

The G7 and the EU imposed a USD 60 (EUR 56) global price cap on Russian oil on December 2 after lone holdout Poland agreed to the measure after negotiations. [WSJ]

However, Russian oil exports from the Kamchatka port of Kozmino were recorded as selling at close to USD 20 above the cap, near world prices within the week, as Asian importers purchased the crude at market prices without regard to the cap. [European Commission] [Reuters]

The price of Urals crude, which had predominantly been sold in Europe prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was priced below the cap, at USD 56, on December 27 as Russian President Vladimir Putin declared his country would not sell oil to nations participating in the cap mechanism, including the EU, the G7 and Australia. [Reuters]

The cap prohibits Western countries from insuring, financing or shipping Russian oil sold above the cap, and the practical result of the measure has been the elimination of Russian crude in EU and G7 markets without a significant effect on global or Russian crude pricing.

Urals crude had been priced at the same approximate level for months, far below the world price, due to the effect of previous Western sanctions. Russia produced around 10.8 million barrels of oil per day in 2021 and is the third largest oil producer in the world behind Saudi Arabia, at 10.9 million, and the United States, at 19 million. [EIA]

Crude oil reached a three-week high on December 27 as China eased Covid-related travel restrictions and traders anticipated increased demand from an opening Chinese economy. [Reuters]

(rw/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Government holds first round of pension reform discussion

A Belgian federal government committee met on December 9 to consider pension reform based on three proposals made by ministers in July. [BrusselsTimes]

These are the pension bonus, the condition of actual work required to benefit from the minimum pension, and how to better take into account the situation of women, who make much more use of part-time work than men. Two objectives have been put forward so far: budget neutrality and more equality between men and women. A third objective was mentioned on Friday: more solidarity between large and small pensions. [BrusselsTimes]

These discussions will be followed by bilateral meetings between the Prime Minister, Minister of Pension and the Deputy Prime Ministers. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: NGOs protest over refugee crisis

Non-government organisations in Belgium held a protest on December 19 against Prime Minister Alexander De Croo's refugee policy. [BrusselsTimes]

The protest followed three meetings between NGOs and the government. Among the organisations represented were CIRE, Doctors of the World and Doctors Without Borders. They proposed an immediate federal crisis plan on the issue. [BrusselsTimes]

"We are doing our best," De Croo said. "Two thousand places have been freed up and those who are outside have the possibility to find refuge." NGOs said "this is not true, people are sleeping in squats." [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Parliament unable to reach agreement on colonialism apology

Belgian Ministers of Parliament failed to agree on December 19 on formal apologies to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda for the country's colonial legacy after more than two years of work with a special committee on the matter. [BrusselsTimes]

The purpose of the parliamentary committee was to create clarity and to learn lessons for the future, said the Chair of the Committee, Wouter De Vriendt. "But some party chairs and the Royal Palace felt that apologies crossed a red line." [VRTNews]

Liberal parties proposed that the country expressed its "deepest regrets" expressed by King Philip during his visit to DRC in June to avoid an official apology. [BrusselsTimes]

De Vriendt said there was "insufficient willingness" to look for a compromise within the Federal government, and the distance between the opposition groups was great. "In terms of apologies, that distance even proved unbridgeable," he said. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Brussels downplays risk of winter gas shortages

The Belgian federal government has tried to downplay the dangers of gas shortages this winter in response to a recent joint report by Elia, the country's electricity operator, Fluxys, its natural gas transmission operator, and the Energy Ministry. [BrusselsTimes]

A countrywide gas shortage would likely be triggered by harsh winter temperatures. This could lead to the United Kingdom limiting its pipeline deliveries to Belgium in order to meet domestic demand. If this happened, Belgium would be unable to replace British natural gas supplies because Belgian infrastructure would be unable to receive imports from its other facilities. [BrusselsTimes]

Energy Minister Tinne Van der Straeten said during a press conference on December 8 that "even in the worst-case scenarios, we always have enough input capacity to meet our own needs." He added that "we have sufficient access to the world market. There is therefore little risk of problems with the gas supply, although it remains something that must be properly monitored." [DeTijd]

(gt/gc)

France: Riots erupt after killings at Kurdish cultural centre

Riots erupted in Paris after a gunman killed three people at a Kurdish cultural centre and nearby cafe in Paris's 10th arrondissement in what is being called a right-wing attack. [Telegraph][MSN]

French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the shooting outside a Kurdish community centre and hair salon on Rue d'Enghien. "The Kurds in France have been the target of an odious attack in the heart of Paris," he wrote. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin described the suspect as intentionally shooting foreigners, but added that there was so far no evidence he had specifically targeted Kurds. [IsraelNationalNews]

In the wake of the shootings, the suspect said he hated foreigners, a police source told the AFP news agency. The same source said the gunman launched his attack with a "much-used" pistol and was found with a box of at least 25 cartridges and "two or three" loaded magazines. Witnesses said the attacker - tall, white and elderly - shot dead two men and a woman in the city's 10th district. [BBC]

On the second day of the protests, hundreds of Kurds gathered peacefully in the Place de la Republique to pay tribute to the three victims. The protests then turned violent, though it was unclear what sparked the clashes. Police said 31 officers and one protester had been injured, and 11 arrests were made. [BBC]

In the aftermath of the shootings, Kurds have called for better protection from the French authorities. Community leaders met the Parisian police chief. [BBC]

Separately, riots erupted in several French cities after Argentina secured a dramatic 4-2 penalty shootout win over France to lift the World Cup. [MSN]

French police also arrested 490 people on New Year's Eve, while 690 automobiles were set on fire during the riots, according to the French interior ministry.

"690 cars were burned...Police and gendarmerie made 490 arrests...Thus, 2022 was the year in which the least number of cars were burned and the most arrests were made on New Year's Eve," the country's Minister of the Interior Gerald Darmanin said in the statement made on Twitter. [TasminNews]

(gc)

France: Republican party elects conservative leader

The right-wing *Les Republicains* party has elected staunch conservative Eric Ciotti as its new leader [RFI]

Mr Ciotti, an MP from the southern city of Nice, is known for hard line immigration views and the French national identity. He has proposed establishing a "French Guantanamo Bay" for Islamist extremists and has promised to defend "Jewish-Christian" France from the "invasion" of migrants [RFI]

The election of Mr Ciotti follows *Les Republicains* gaining just 4.8 percent of the vote in France's April 2022. The party continues to play a significant role in the French parliament, with French President Emmanuel Macron's minority government often needing the support of some of the 61 *Les Republicains* MPs to pass legislation [RFI]

Mr Ciotti has said that he will not agree to a formal alliance with Macron's minority government [RFI]

(jn/gc)

France: Macron's centrist government outlines new immigration law

French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist government presented the general outlines of a new immigration draft law on December 6 that will make it easier to deport illegal migrants. The details of the new law will be discussed at the beginning of 2023 in parliament.

The new law will also make it easier for foreign workers to stay in the country if they work in sectors that require additional labour. It could also help facilitate the integration of foreign workers who already unofficially work in the country. [France info]

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin described the new draft law as "integrating better and expelling better." He added that "we want those people who work, not those who rob." [France 24]

Macron said he wants the law to help to address the rise of the far-right National Rally party. Far-right leader Marie Le Pen has criticised the new draft law, saying "nothing will change" and the immigration in France is "completely out of control." [France 24]

(gm/gc)

France: Macron postpones announcement of retirement reform again

French President Emmanuel Macron has delayed the announcement of a new retirement program to January 10, rather than December 15, as originally planned, after a worker's union planned strikes against the changes. [Liberation]

Macron delayed the announcement because he wants to discuss some "key elements of the reform" with some of the newly elected leaders of select unions as well as newly elected leaders of the Greens (Les Verts) and the conservative Les Republicains. [Le Monde] [Aljazeera]

On December 5 2022, some of the main worker's unions in France announced strikes to prevent the adoption of the reform. They stated that the "government wrongly claims that raising the legal retirement age is an imperative" and further criticise the choice of time to implement the reform. [Euractiv]

The government plans to raise the retirement age to 65 from 62 under the new plan.

(gc/gm)

France: Court convicts eight suspects for role in 2016 terrorism attack

A French court has convicted eight suspects for their role in terrorism attacks in Nice in July 2016.

The attack was planned by 31-years old Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who drove a truck through a crowd of people for four minutes and was then shot dead during the attack by the police. The attack killed 86 people and injured more than 450.

Two of the eight convicted received 18-years prison sentences. They were accused of knowing about the planned attack based on text messages between them and Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, as well as of helping him to rent the truck.

Ramzi Arefa, 28, received a 12-year sentence for providing a gun to Lahouaiej-Bouhlel. The remaining were given prison sentences between two and eight years. [France 24] [Francetvinfo]

(gc/gm)

France: Free condoms will be provided to those aged 18-25 at pharmacies

French President Emmanuel Macron announced on December 8 that free condoms will be handed out in pharmacies for young people aged between 18 and 25 to help avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in the country,

Macron called the measure a “small revolution for contraception” after France experienced an increase in sexually transmitted diseases. The condoms will also be available to minors. The measure starts on January 1. [Euronews]

In France, condoms could already be reimbursed by the nation's healthcare system, but only if a doctor or midwife prescribed them.[France 24] [Reuters]

(gc/gm)

France: Ban on domestic short-haul flights planned

France is set to ban short-haul domestic flights where there is an already existing train route of less than 2.5 hours. The European Commission has approved the plan, following opposition by the Union of French Airports and the European branch of the Airports Council International. [Euronews]

The ban will be in effect for three years, after which point it must be reassessed by the European Commission. [Euronews]

Routes between Paris Orly and Nantes, Lyon and Bordeaux will initially be the only flights affected, as they currently have a ready rail alternative of less than 2.5 hours journey. [Euronews]

The proposal for the ban emerged from France's Citizens' Convention on Climate, a citizens' assembly focused on reducing the country's carbon emissions.

(jn/gc)

France: National Energy consumption drops

France has witnessed a month on month drop in the consumption of gas by 9 percent and electricity by 10.5 percent in November. [Euractiv]

In August 2022, France's Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne set an energy reduction goal of 10 percent. Energy Transition Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher said that a 9 percent drop was "the equivalent of seven nuclear power plants." [Euractiv].

The director of electricity operator RTE, Thomas Veryrenc, said that the drop in consumption was "very impressive and far from a given." [Euractiv].

(jn/gc)

France: Macron calls for calm amid possible power cuts

French President Emmanuel Macron called on people to stop adding fuel to the fire by spreading panic over possible electricity cuts and urged everyone to "stay

united and move forward" and "do their job." [France info] [France tv info]

The Minister of Energy Transition, Agnes Pannier-Runacher, said that those people who are at high risk from higher energy disruptions will receive support in case of electricity cuts. She said that preparation for a worst-case scenario in energy provision does not mean that it will take place. [Le Parisien]

(gm/gc)

Germany: Police raid climate activists

German police carried out on December 13 raids against members of the climate activist group Last Generation after it allegedly formed a criminal organisation. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [DW] [Zeit]

The raids are tied to protests at the oil refinery Schwedt in eastern Germany in April when climate activists allegedly sabotaged operations there. [AP] [EURACTIV]

The police searched eleven homes of suspects in seven federal states, Prosecutor Cyrill Klement said. "More than 11 people" are suspected of disrupting public operations and forming a "criminal organisation," he said. [AP] [DW]

Last Generation said on Twitter that laptops, smartphones and posters were confiscated during the searches. They also tweeted that the government is leading the country into a "climate collapse" and that the activists will continue "to point it out." Lilly Schubert, member of the movement, said the searches were "clearly an intimidation attempt." [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

The climate activists have gained attention and criticism because of their protests, which have included blocking roads by glueing themselves on them, throwing food at artwork as well as disrupting traffic at airports. In November, politicians debated penalties for members of the movement if they "crossed the line of peaceful protest." [Europe Monthly December 2022] [AP]

Head of the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Friedrich Merz, said the protest of the Last Generation movement "have nothing to do" with climate protection and are "dangerous disruptions" of roads and air traffic, "coercion" and "trespassing." [Zeit]

Stephan Kramer, president of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in the federal state of Thuringia, said in early December that left-wing extremists might try to infiltrate the climate movement. [FAZ]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Police arrest 25 far-right extremists suspected of plotting coup

German police arrested 25 people suspected of being members of a far-right extremist group plotting a coup to overthrow the German state. [Reuters] [DW] [AP] [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

The suspects detained in a nationwide raid on December 7 are allegedly members of the so-called "Reichsburger" (Reich Citizens) scene, a movement that doesn't believe in the legitimacy of the German state, said Justice Minister Marco Buschmann.

The group had the "goal of overcoming the existing state order in Germany and replacing it with its own form of state, which has already been worked out in outline," according to the prosecutors.

More than 3,000 police officers searched 130 properties belonging to 52 suspects in 11 German federal states during the raid. [DW] [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [EURACTIV]

Of the people arrested during the raids, 23 have appeared before a federal court and will remain in custody. [DW] [Euronews] [AP]

The investigations "provide a glimpse into the abyss of a terrorist threat from the Reichsburger scene," said German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser. [DW] [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [EURACTIV]

Two leaders were identified during the raid: Heinrich XIII Prince Reuss from an aristocratic family, who the group planned to make the new leader of Germany, and a former paratrooper of the German military. Heinrich XIII had also contacted Russian officials to establish a new German order, the prosecutors said. [DW] [Reuters]

The Russian Embassy in Berlin denied contact with the group. The planned coup "appears to be a German internal problem," said Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. [Reuters]

The group was formed around the end of November 2021 and had built a “military arm” and a counsel that was supposed to be the new German government, Germany's chief federal prosecutor, Peter Frank, said. [DW]

The group was willing to use military means and violence to overthrow the German state, prosecutors said.

“You can't say that a group comprising a two-digit or perhaps small three-digit number of people was in a position to truly put the German state system in doubt, let alone shatter it,” said head of Germany's criminal police, Holger Munch. [DW] [Zeit]

The members, “some of them with a lot of money and others in possession of weapons, and with a plan that they do want to carry out,” are what makes the group dangerous, said Munch. [DW] [Euronews]

Other suspects include a currently serving soldier of the special forces and several reservists of the German military, according to a spokesperson for Germany's Military Counterintelligence Service. [DW] [Reuters]

A former member of the parliament, lawmaker of far-right party AfD Birgit Malsack-Winkemann, was also arrested during the raid. The federal court of Berlin opened disciplinary proceedings against her. [Reuters] [AP] [Zeit] [rbb24]

Lars Klingenbeil, head of the biggest coalition party Social Democrats (SPD), said the arrests show how AfD is a “parliamentary interface for hatred, incitement and violence” and that the party “doesn’t belong in governments, courts or public service.” [Zeit] [AP]

Stricter gun laws planned

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said on December 11 that she wants to propose stricter gun laws, warning of an “increasing danger” from the “Reichsbürger” scene.

The scene grew from 2,000 to about 23,000 people in the last year, Faeser said. The German domestic intelligence service believes around 10 percent of the suspected members to be violent.

“These are not harmless crazy people but suspected terrorists who are now sitting in pre-trial detention,” said Faeser. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

Politicians of the governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) also want a stricter security system for the parliament. Dirk

Wiese of the SPD said he wants access authorisations of current and former members of parliament to be checked. [Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Police arrest Intelligence service employee for allegedly spying for Russia

The German police on December 21 arrested an employee of German intelligence service (BND) suspected of being a spy for Russia. [DW] [Euronews] [Tagesschau]

He allegedly shared information that is considered a state secret with a Russian intelligence agency and is "suspected of state treason," the federal prosecutors said. He is now in custody after police searched his home and workplace. [DW] [Euronews]

BND chief Bruno Kahl said the intelligence service will not give out further details about the case until the investigation is finished in order to not give Russia "an advantage in its intent to harm Germany." [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Several suspected Russian spies have been arrested in other European countries in the last months, such as a couple living in Sweden in November, a man posing as a Brazilian academic in Norway in October and in the Netherlands in June. [DW] [Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

Germany: EUR 60 billion pandemic relief can be used for climate fund, top court says

The German Constitutional court said on December 8 that a EUR 60 billion pandemic relief budget can be allocated to a climate fund. [Tagesschau] [DW] [ZDF]

The court dismissed a complaint by the biggest opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) filed in April. The CDU argued that the allocation of the funds for climate use was a workaround of the country's debt brake rule and therefore unconstitutional. [Europe Monthly May 2022] [Tagesschau]

The allocation is not “unproblematic,” the court said in its preliminary decision. It argued that the consequences of stopping the use of the funds for climate protection measures would be too big if it later turned out to be in line with the constitution. [DW] [ZDF]

The EUR 60 billion fund can therefore be used for climate protection provisionally and the court will make a final decision in a few months. [ZDF]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Berlin may miss 2% defence spending goal

Germany is likely to miss a defence spending goal of 2 percent of the country’s GDP, a goal set after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, government spokesperson Steffen Hebestreit said on December 5. [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

It is also “open at this point in time” whether Germany can reach the goal next year, Hebestreit added. He believes the target can still be met before the end of the current legislative period in 2025. The government is “determined to get as close as possible to the 2 percent target with the possibilities we have” and are “making a massive effort,” Hebestreit said.

The 2 percent defence spending is a commitment agreed upon by NATO members. [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Court convicts former Nazi camp secretary

A state court in northern Germany on December 20 convicted a 97-year-old former secretary in a Nazi concentration camp of complicity in the murder of more than 10,000 people in what could possibly be the final trial dealing with crimes against humanity during the Holocaust. [Politico Europe] [ZDF]

Irmgard F. was the secretary to the SS commander from June 1943 to April 1945 in the concentration camp of Stutthof in occupied Poland near Gdansk. [DW]

She was convicted of being an accessory to murder in 10,505 cases and an accessory to attempted murder in

five cases. The court sentenced her to a two-year suspended sentence under juvenile criminal law, as she was 18 or 19 at the time of the crimes. [AP] [DW] [ZDF]

Irmgard F.'s work as a stenographer and typist "assured the smooth running of the camp" and that she had "knowledge of all occurrences and events at Stutthof," the prosecutors said. It's "simply beyond imagination" that she was unaware of the mass murders, they said. [DW] [AP] [ZDF]

At the end of the trial, Irmgard F. said that she was "sorry for everything that happened" and that she "regrets" that she was "in Stutthof at the time." [DW] [ZDF]

Public prosecutor Maxi Wantzen said that the trial was "potentially, due to the passage of time, the last of its kind." Charges of murder and accessory to murder don't fall under statutes of limitation but several cases in the past had to be dropped because the accused had died or were physically unable to stand trial. [DW]

Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Israel, has worked on bringing Nazi war criminals before a court and said he "wouldn't run or rush to call this the last trial." The Simon Wiesenthal Center is currently trying to find survivors who can testify against a former guard at a Nazi camp. [DW]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government wants energy providers to justify higher prices

Energy providers will only be allowed to increase prices if they can justify the price hikes and don't exploit consumers, the Economy Ministry said on December 3. [Reuters] [ZDF] [Zeit]

The measure is supposed to protect customers and will be in place until the end of 2023. A justification for price hikes can be rising procurement costs that energy providers will be able to pass on to consumers, the ministry said. [ZDF] [Zeit]

Uniper nationalisation process finalised

Germany completed the nationalisation process of the country's biggest gas supplier Uniper on December 22 and now owns 99 percent of the company. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The European Commission approved the nationalisation, costing about EUR 34.5 billion, on December 20, saying that it complied with the EU state aid rules.

Conditions of the approval are that Germany has to provide an exit strategy by the end of 2023 and that the state can't own more than 25 percent plus one share by 2028 at the latest. Uniper also has to give up parts of its business to prevent competition. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

The German government finalised plans for the nationalisation in September but had to wait for the approval of the European Commission. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Large minority of Protestant voters could not accept united Ireland, poll finds

Almost a fifth of voters in Northern Ireland, a large proportion of them from a Protestant background, would find a vote in favour of a united Ireland impossible to accept, according to an Ipsos opinion poll.

Another 26 percent of voters would be unhappy but acquiescent, and 47 percent would be wholly content with uniting, according to the Ipsos poll. [Irish Times]

These questions were put forward in surveys throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for a joint project between The Irish Times and Arins, a research collaboration dedicated to analysing the situation across the entire island of Ireland.

This project involved two identical polls taken in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as a series of focus groups in both jurisdictions to discuss Irish unity and future referendums. [Irish Times]

The result of the polls has revealed that there is an inflexible core of unionist voters that would be staunchly against a united Ireland. General acceptance of a pro-union result was much higher in the North, with 73 percent of voters happy to remain in the UK. [Irish Times]

(em/gc)

Ireland: Apartments sold to Dublin City Council for social housing uninhabitable due to fire risk

An apartment block sold to the Dublin City Council four years ago has been found to be uninhabitable due to fire safety defects.

The council bought the 39 apartments in the Dublin neighbourhood of Rialto from realtor Kennedy Wilson instead of providing social housing in the US real estate firm's Capital Dock high-end developments at Sir John Rogerson's Quay and Clancy Quay. [Irish Times]

Despite having reached an agreement four years ago, the Rialto apartments were not transferred to the council until August of 2022. The council had stated their awareness that the apartments would require "essential maintenance works" but have recently been advised that the works required to bring them up to fire and safety standards were extensive, meaning a significant delay before they can be allocated to tenants. [Irish Times]

Kennedy Wilson bought the complex in 2014 as part of a distressed property portfolio which then went on to become the site of the Heberton Scheme. Under Part V of the planning acts, the developers of Capital Dock and Clancy Quay, both considered premium rental communities at the time of completion in 2018 and 2020 respectively, were obliged to sell 10 percent of residential schemes to their local authority for use for housing tenants.

In exceptional circumstances, councils could accept land or property "off-site" to satisfy those obligations, which resulted in the exchange. [Irish Times]

(em/gc)

Netherlands: Government will continue to restrict refugee family reunification despite court ruling

The Netherlands will continue to maintain entry restrictions for family members of people with refugee status, which the cabinet decided to implement at the end of August as part of its strategy to limit overcrowding at asylum seeker centres, according to State Secretary Eric van der Burg.

The family reunification measure is necessary to solve the asylum crisis in the Netherlands, Van der Burg said,

adding that both the cabinet and a parliamentary majority have supported it. [NLTimes]

The Dutch cabinet lost a court ruling in Haarlem on the family reunification of asylum seekers, saying the restriction has no basis in law. The case involved a Syrian woman who wanted her spouse and children to join her in the Netherlands, but who could not obtain visas.

Van der Burg said the case was about the woman's situation, not about the family reunification measure as a whole. "If the highest court comes up with a final position, we will accept it," Van der Burg said. [NLTimes]

The restrictions have been criticised. A large part of the parliament had doubts about the legal sustainability of such legislation. A proposal from the opposition to submit the restriction on family reunification to the Council of State for guidance was rejected by a majority. [NLTimes]

The restriction on family reunification applies until 2023 to family members of people who are already in the Netherlands. Once they have been granted refugee status, the family reunification visas will be issued no more than 15 months after family members apply for them. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Court in The Hague rules government can continue with rail concession

The Court of Justice in The Hague has ruled that the Dutch government can continue the process to directly award Netherlands Railways the 10-year Main Line Network concession, the international Rail Journal reported. [RailJournal][Volkskrant]

The concession will cover 95 percent of total rail passenger-km in the Netherlands including inter-city and international services, the International Rail Journal reported.

The court dismissed the lawsuit brought by the Netherlands Federation of Transport Companies (FNM), which represents new entrants Arriva Nederland, Transdev, Qbuzz, Keolis and EBS. FNM wanted an immediate end to the process before it becomes irrevocable. It filed the case on the grounds that the concession was being awarded without

carrying out market testing to determine which services can be operated commercially, as required by EU law regarding PSO contracts.

In March, Dutch transportation companies and the state will meet again in the courtroom.

The European Commission has threatened legal proceedings if the government does not involve other companies in an open tender. European Transportation Commissioner Adina Valean (Transport) warned last summer about "significant legal and financial consequences" for both the Dutch state and the NS. [Volkskrant]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Cabinet proposes bill to ban parties undermining democracy

The Dutch Cabinet has proposed a new bill that would ban parties if they undermine democracy under the new Political Parties Act.

Parties can be banned already if they pose a threat to public order. The bill is much more specific with rules regarding the transparency of each political party in the area of finance and internal organisation. The law would make it possible for parties in municipalities, water associations, and provinces to be granted EUR 25 million to make them less dependent on donations. [NL times]

Already in November, the coalition party D66 tried to make it easier for the Public Prosecution Service to ban political parties that undermine the rule of law. [NL times]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Government approves plan for two nuclear power plants

The Dutch cabinet approved on December 9 plans for new nuclear power plants, which may be built in the village of Borssele in the province of Zeeland. The government will not make a final choice for the location until the end of 2024 at the earliest. [NLTimes]

Energy Minister Rob Jetten is still considering Maasvlakte as a location for the two plants. The minister will commission an environmental impact

assessment before he definitively chooses a location. Citizens, local authorities and other stakeholders, including in neighbouring Belgium, will also be given the opportunity to express their opinion. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

Upon completion in 2035, the two reactors will account for 9 to 13 percent of electricity production combined.

The cabinet has reserved an "indicative budget" of 5 billion euros for the nuclear power plants. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Government wants to limit international students at Dutch universities

The Netherlands wants universities of applied sciences and research universities to stop accepting international students to help offset a housing crisis in the country and to limit the stress on professors. [NLTimes] [DutchReview]

In July, several universities asked international students to put off their studies in the Netherlands if they were unable to find housing. The government has argued that international students increase teachers' workloads, create housing shortages and put pressure on the affordability and quality of education. [DutchReview]

Dutch Science Minister Robbert Dijkgraaf said exceptions should be made for "very limited and targeted recruitment for specific training" for highly-required professions and in regions where the population is declining.

In February, the minister will present a proposal to limit the recruitment of international students. Until the provision is approved, the minister hopes for the institutions' voluntary cooperation. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch public more accepting of West Balkans membership in EU after Ukraine war

The Dutch public has become more favourable to EU enlargement in the Balkans following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A report published by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BIEPAG) analysed the Dutch public opinion in regard to the EU membership for the Western Balkans. [Balkan Insight]

According to the report, 66 percent of the Dutch population thinks that the West Balkan countries should be accepted into the union if they fulfil the requirements. The Dutch believe that if Balkan countries were to be accepted in the EU it would mainly be for geopolitical reasons. [European Western Balkans]

In line with public opinion, the Dutch government has said that in order to be accepted in the EU states have to fulfil the criteria and the members' ambitions. The government believes that enlargement is important because "it makes Europe more stable and increases the size of the internal market." [Government of the Netherlands]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Discrimination, racism within police needs to be taken seriously

Dutch police officers who spoke out against racism and discrimination within the organisation do not think they are being taken seriously. Current and former police officers who took part in a documentary entitled "De Blawe Familie," which aimed to raise awareness of racism, felt that they were not given enough recognition and were ignored.

Former police officer Dwight van van de Vijver, after having participated in the documentary, had planned to work as an advisor in a programme aimed at tackling exclusion, discrimination, and racism. However, he thinks that the programme will fail because it lacks support.

Another police officer, who received recognition for her stance, said that as a white woman she was "ashamed" because "the other main players have not been treated this way." [NL times]

Although according to Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution everyone in the Netherlands is entitled to equal treatment, from then, things did not change much. [NL times] [Government of the Netherlands]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch Prime Minister formally apologises for 250 years of slavery

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte apologised for the role that the Netherlands had in 250 years of slavery in an effort to address the exploitation of more than 600,000 people who worked as slaves in former Dutch colonies. [Aljazeera]

Rutte addressed slaves that had been “wrenched from their families and stripped of their humanity” and offered “the apologies of the Dutch government.” He committed to “working more intensely to enhance knowledge of the history of slavery” to ensure more awareness. [Government of the Netherlands]

Rutte made his comments during a speech at the National Archives in the Hague. [NL times]

Six Surinameese foundations from Amsterdam filed complaints against the date chosen for the apology that argued that the speech should have been held on July 1, the country’s liberation day. The Dutch cabinet said there was a need to hurry before public support for an apology decreased.

Further criticism was derived from the Surinamese chairman of the National Repair Commission Suriname (NRCS), Armand Zunder, who said the apologies should have been accompanied by substantial reparations. No official compensation was discussed between the parties involved. [PZC]

A Suriname slave registry was published online to give the chance to descendants of South American slaves in the Netherlands to get an insight into the lives of their ancestors. [Aljazeera]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: LGBTQ+ groups call for ban on conversion therapy

European LGBTQ+ rights groups want Switzerland to ban gay conversion therapy after it was prohibited in Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, Greece, and Malta amid a growing fear that Switzerland could become a hotspot for “conversion therapy tourism.”

The Swiss parliament is preparing debates on how to handle conversion therapy in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people are subject to psychological treatment in the hopes that they will become heterosexual. The therapy usually involves talking sessions but could even employ electroshocks treatments or exorcism.

Although treatments such as electroshocks are not conducted in Switzerland, LGBT groups insist that a ban is needed in order to send a signal. The practice is often related to religious beliefs and rooted in religious communities. It is mostly associated with evangelical circles although they are regularly singled out in the media.

The problem stems from the term used to define these practices. Many religious groups do not use the term "conversion therapy" but define it rather as a trip of self-finding. [Euractiv]

After neighbouring countries banned the practice there is the fear that, due to the linguistic links, practitioners will move to Switzerland. Following the German ban, conversion therapy provider Bruderschaft des Weges association has already moved to Zurich.

Although the majority of the parties are against it, it is still unclear to parliament how to deal with conversion therapy. Some parliamentarians think that the government should not do anything about it and try to enforce previous laws but conversion therapy is still prevalent in Switzerland. [Euronews]

(ava-mc/gc)

Switzerland: Councilor proposes headscarf ban in schools

Swiss Central National Councilor, Marian Binder, has proposed a ban on headscarves in schools, claiming that the veil is discriminatory against the girls who wear it. This idea is supported by many Swiss citizens and political parties.

The veil, which for some represents religious freedom, is depicted by Binder as an expression of subordination and usually forced by parents on their girls. It is necessary that schools prioritise the rule of law which stands for the right of all children to be guaranteed the same freedoms and protection, according to Binder.

The Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. The debate, therefore, derives from whether, in this case, religious law should be subordinate to state law. Bans on religious displays started with a call for a ban on facial coverings in public spaces such as restaurants and public transportation. [Aljazeera] [Switzerland Times]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Economic growth forecast to slow in 2023

Switzerland's State Secretariat for Economic Affairs forecasts that the country's gross domestic product will expand by 1 percent in 2023 and 1.6 percent in 2024.

The State Secretariat also expects that consumer prices will rise by 2.2 percent next year then slow to 1.5 percent in 2024. The Swiss National Bank has set 2 percent as its inflation target. In August the consumer price growth peaked at 3.5 percent but has since decreased. [Bloomberg]

Concerns about an energy shortage this winter have declined but there may be energy risks in 2023 and 2024.

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Asylum applications surge year-on-year in November

Switzerland had a total of 3,568 asylum applicants filed in November, 11 percent more than in October and 130 percent more than in November 2021. The main nationality groups that applied for asylum in November were Afghans, Turks and Aburundi. [Schengenvisa]

A total of 1,822 asylum applications were processed in November and nearly 90 percent were first-time applicants, with 624 applicants refused. Switzerland is a key partner of the resettlement programme of the UNHCR. It is set to provide life-saving opportunities for refugees that are fleeing conflict in their home countries. [UNHCR]

Separately, Switzerland will be unable to deport 184 refugees to Italy after its southern neighbour halted their return because of the large number of migrants arriving by sea. Switzerland times]

Italy is part of the group of the so-called Dublin states which regulates the processes of examination of asylum applications made by refugees within EU countries together with Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein. [Swissinfo]

Under the right-wing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the Italian government has already tried to tighten the screws in terms of migration by blocking rescue ships forcing them to sail to distant ports. Meloni stands for the country's security. [Euractiv]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Bern reverses policy on taking in vulnerable refugees

Switzerland has reversed its commitment to reallocating particularly vulnerable refugees in the country as the influx of refugees caused by the war in Ukraine strains their reallocation program. [InfoMigrants][Swissinfo] [SchengenVisaInfo]

Switzerland's commitment to taking in vulnerable refugees is a consequence of their participation in a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees program focused on resettling vulnerable persons fleeing conflicts. Switzerland has taken part in the programme since 2013. [State Secretariat for Migration]

The refugees received by Switzerland under the programme are mainly women, children and those suffering adverse medical afflictions from Afghanistan, Sudan or Syria. [RTE]

The nation has also frozen its intake of asylum seekers, citing a lack of capacity for new arrivals. The government has stated the move is purely a suspension in the hopes of reinstating the programme in a less turbulent time. [SchengenVisaInfo]

Parties on the left call for the programme to be reinstated and those on the right celebrate its temporary termination, whilst claims of insufficient capacity fill the air in-between. [InfoMigrants]

(mg/gc)

Switzerland: Nigerian gang seen expanding its network

A Nigerian criminal network known as the Black Axe gang has become increasingly active in the country through drug and human trafficking. [Swissinfo]

The gang traffics women into prostitution by promising them well-paid jobs in Europe. They often end up in the Red Light district in Zurich. An in-depth article published on Monday by the Neue Zurcher Zeitung (NZZ) said the Federal Office of Police expects the number of gang members to expand in the Alpine country. [Neue Zurcher Zeitung]

Interpol has warned that Black Axe is becoming a global security threat. In October, the European institution coordinated a significant operation in which more than 70 members of the network were arrested in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the United States. [INTERPOL]

(ava/gc)

United Kingdom: Labour Party sets out plan for political overhaul

The United Kingdom's largest opposition party, the Labour party, has set out plans to reform the country's political structure, including devolving power from Westminster and abolishing the House of Lords.

In a report, put together over two years by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the opposition party set out 40 recommendations to change the constitution. The most radical of these include a proposal to replace the House of Lords with a smaller, elected chamber of regions and nations.

The Labour party has also said that further devolution within regions and nations of the UK will move the country away from an over centralised system that, they say, leaves some parts of the country's potential untapped. [Labour Party]

When questioned on whether the Labour party should be focusing on the immediate cost-of-living crisis, leader of the opposition Sir Keir Starmer said that the government needed to focus on longer-term, broader constitutional weaknesses rather than shorter term 'sticking plaster' solutions. [The Guardian]

(chm/gc)

United Kingdom: Labour pledges to fast-track asylum claims

The British Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has said that the Labour party would “fast-track” claims from some asylum seekers, including Albania, in an attempt to clear the backlog of requests to enter the United Kingdom.

Labour said this would cut the number of Albanians needing to be housed in hotels after arriving in the country in small boats. The asylum backlog in the UK has increased dramatically in recent years, with the number of people awaiting an initial decision on their application standing at 143,377. [BBC News] [The Guardian]

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is coming under pressure to take action on the issue, as a record number of migrants have landed on British shores so far. Sunak has vowed to clear the backlog of asylum seekers by the end of next year.

Under a plan unveiled on December 13, a dedicated unit of 400 specialists will be set up to handle claims from Albanians. UK border officials will also be posted at Albania's main airport, under a new deal with the country.

There will also be 700 staff for a new unit to monitor small boats crossing the English Channel. [BBC News]

(chm-jn/gc)

United Kingdom: Government launches program to protect from homelessness

Tens of thousands of vulnerable people in the United Kingdom will be protected from homelessness by a GBP 654 million funding package, according to a government statement. All councils in England will receive their share of funding from the Homelessness Prevention Grant to provide vital support to those who need it the most in their local areas over the next two years. [Gov.Uk]

The money will be used to provide temporary accommodation for families, help individuals at risk of becoming homeless, pay deposits for new homes and mediate with landlords to avoid evictions. GBP 24 million of the funding will help councils support homeless domestic abuse victims, ensuring no one has to stay with their abuser for fear of not having a roof over their head. [Gov.Uk]

(gc)

United Kingdom: Government allocates GBP 75 million to support nuclear fuel production

The United Kingdom has allocated GBP 75 million to support nuclear fuel production in a bid to support the development of alternatives to Russian fuel supply and strengthen UK energy security. This will encourage investment in new and robust fuel production capabilities in the UK, backing the government's ambition to secure up to 24GW of nuclear power by 2050. [Gov.uk]

The UK's Nuclear Fuel Fund will strengthen energy security by encouraging investment into the development and commercialisation of domestic nuclear fuel production including advanced fuel technologies. G7 leaders agreed in June to begin concerted action to reduce reliance on civil nuclear and related goods from Russia, including working to diversify their supplies of uranium and nuclear fuel production capability. Russia currently owns around 20 percent of global uranium conversion capacity and 40 percent of enrichment capacity.

(gc)

United Kingdom: Government intervenes to keep rail prices down

The British government has intervened to ensure rail fare increases for 2023 are capped at 5.9 percent, 6.4 percentage points lower than the RPI figure on which they are historically based. Fares will officially rise on March 5. The government is freezing them for the entirety of January and February, giving passengers more time to purchase cheaper flexible and season tickets at the existing rate. [Gov.uk]

Due to unprecedented levels of inflation, the government has for this year only aligned the increase to July 2022's average earnings growth, more than halving the increase facing passengers. Transport Secretary Mark Harper said this was the "biggest ever" government intervention in rail fares. [Gov.uk]

"I'm capping the rise well below inflation to help reduce the impact on passengers," he said. "It has been a difficult year and the impact of inflation is being felt

across the UK economy. We do not want to add to the problem." [Gov.uk]

(gc)

United Kingdom: Police to receive GBP 287 million to help victims feels safe

The British police sector will receive a nominal funding boost of up to GBP 287 million next year to help victims feel safe and deliver more visible policing. [Gov.UK]

The rise will take total funding for policing up to GBP 17.2 billion and means that police and crime commissioners across the 43 police forces in England and Wales will receive a nominal increase of up to GBP 523 million from government grants and precept income to focus on getting the basics right, such as driving down anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood crime. [Gov.UK]

(gc)

United Kingdom: Northern Ireland Protocol Bill in limbo as UK waits to negotiate with EU

The Northern Ireland Protocol Bill appears to be suspended in the hopes of a re-negotiated deal with the European Union over the controversial trade agreement concerning the Irish border. [The Belfast Telegraph]

The Northern Ireland Protocol is the contentious solution to the issue of EU-UK trade through the Irish Border, which was considered an effort to ease tensions between the Republic and Northern Ireland. [The Economist]

The Protocol navigated the 'border problem' by implementing a kind of sea border between Britain and Northern Ireland and conducting any necessary checks for EU-destined goods in Northern Irish ports. [BBC]

Disagreeing with the effects of the protocol the DUP, Northern Ireland's right leaning major unionist party, maintained a halt to political assembly in Northern Ireland in protest. Loyalist factions outside of parliament sided with the DUP, causing some to fear a

resurgence of violence in the region. [BBC][The Belfast Telegraph]

With the DUP refusing to sit in parliament until changes have been made to the protocol and the protocol awaiting re-negotiation with the EU in the new year, Northern Ireland remains in a state of dangerous uncertainty. [The Belfast Telegraph]

(mg/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: Amendment to citizenship bill will protect natural interests and security

A Belarusian bill on amending the country's citizenship law has passed two readings at the House of Representatives "to protect national interests and the security of our state," according to a government representative. [Belta]

"The proposed amendments are designed to ensure the equal right to citizenship of the Republic of Belarus regardless of the grounds for its acquisition," said Lilia Ananich, Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Commission on Human Rights, National Relations and Mass Media of the House of Representatives.

The amendment will discourage Belarusian nationals from committing crimes against the state and aid authorities in the creation of data banks on citizens with foreign passports or other documents that may give them political or religious advantages, she said. [Belta]

Belarus has been accused by international groups of regularly violating human rights.

The Belarusian Government's continuing crackdown on political opponents, civil society, journalists and lawyers has seen the fundamental human rights of tens of thousands violated, with no sign of any of the perpetrators being held accountable, the UN rights office, OHCHR, said in March. Torture and ill-treatment were widespread and systematic, with individuals targeted for their real or perceived opposition to the Government or the election results, it said. [United Nations]

The bill will encourage people applying for citizenship to integrate more thoroughly into Belarusian society, as it obliges applicants to take the oath of allegiance, and introduces a procedure for testing official language proficiency, Ananich said. The bill allows for the removal of citizenship, including that received at birth, for taking part in extremist activities that cause serious harm to the interests of Belarus.

"We consider it fundamentally important to implement this amendment taking into account the principle of equal right to citizenship," Ananich stressed. [Belta]

(em/gc)

Georgia: Former president remains in prison

Georgia's former President Mikheil Saakashvili remains in a Georgian prison after being imprisoned for more than a year for alleged abuses of power during his time in office. [BBC]

Rumours of Saakashvili's ill-treatment during his incarceration are widespread, medical reports seemingly confirming beatings and traces of poisonous metals in his hair and nails, not to mention a visibly weak appearance.

His imprisonment has been considered political and some cite his uneasy relationship with a Russian oligarch with considerable sway in Georgian politics. [Politico]

Saakhasvili has said he was imprisoned at the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin is known to count Saakashvili, a pro-Western reformist, among his enemies. It is for this reason that many in Georgia fear the imprisonment is a move to curry favour with Moscow. [Politico][BBC]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has called for his transfer to a medical facility outside of the country. The Ukrainian president's comments follow concerns about the significant deterioration of the former government official and fellow Ukranian's health. [RadioFreeEurope][RadioFreeEurope]

(mg/gc)

Georgia: Tbilisi makes strides with government, poverty reduction, World Bank says

Georgia has made strides in effective governance and poverty reduction whilst solidifying itself as an economic competitor in the region, the World Bank said on December 6 in its Country Economic Memorandum on Georgia. [Emerging Europe][Civil.ge]

The World Bank noted that Georgia still lacks the necessary productivity in its agricultural and service sectors to alleviate unemployment and secure sustainable growth within the decade. [Emerging Europe]

This comes as Russo-Georgian trade has increased, a fact that has prompted some experts to question whether this could hinder Georgia's future progress. Economic dependence on Russia would present more challenges for a post-pandemic Georgia. Academic opinion looks to historically damaging embargoes on Georgian goods as a reminder. [Eurasianet] [Eurasianet]

Many Georgian citizens are concerned that their economic relations with Russia could undermine global efforts to halt Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and could be detrimental to Georgia's path to sustainable development. [Eurasianet]

(mg/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Court sentences Iranian citizen on terrorism charges

A court in Albania has sentenced an Iranian citizen to 10 years jail for offering services to organisations designated as a terrorist group and for participation in a terrorist organisation. [Balkan Insight]

The sentence was handed down by Albania's Special Court against Corruption and Organised Crime. The defendant, Iranian citizen Bijan Pooladrag, was found not guilty on four other charges. [Balkan Insight]

Pooladrag was arrested in 2020 on suspicion of being an Iranian agent monitoring the exiled group the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (MEK). Founded in the 1970s, MEK supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War and was designated a terrorist organisation by Iran. The organisation has largely operated out of Albania since 2013. [Balkan Insight]

The sentencing follows a cyberattack against digital infrastructure in Albania by hackers belonging to Iran's intelligence services. The cyberattack leaked stolen information online. Following the attack, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced that Albania would be cutting diplomatic ties with Iran. [Al Jazeera]

(jn/gc)

Albania: IMF calls for anti-corruption reform

The International Monetary Fund has called on Albania to improve its anti-corruption reforms, including in the judicial system.[Euractiv]

In its 2022 Article IV Consultation with Albania, the IMF identified the introduction of structural reforms as

integral to the growth of Albania's economy. Recommendations ranged from improved fiscal transparency, improving public financial management and fiscal risk monitoring. The IMF also called for addressing the informal economy, which is estimated to represent 32 percent of Albania's total economy. [Euractiv][Euractiv]

A key focus of the IMF's concerns include a proposed tax amnesty. The proposal would allow any foreign citizen or Albanian to deposit EUR 2 million of non-declared money into the Albanian banking system with legal immunity and a five to ten percent tax. Critics argue that the proposal would allow for the laundering of the proceeds of crime, including from drug and human trafficking.[Euractiv]

The IMF also identified that Albania's growth is likely to decline, whilst inflation is likely to continue rising. [IMF]

(jn/gc)

Albania ranks last in Europe for per capita income

Albania ranks last in Europe for per capita income and purchasing power, according to newly-published Eurostat data for 2021. [Euractiv]

Albania's gross domestic product per capita was 32 percent of the EU average, an improvement of one percentage point on 2020 data. Neighbouring states in the region saw greater economic improvement than Albania, including North Macedonia. [Euractiv]

At 39 percent of the EU average, Albania also came in last for per capita consumption, a measurement of consumption based on purchasing power parity and price level. The average for countries wishing to join the EU was 48 percent. [Euractiv]

(jn/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Civil society has concerns about changes to Freedom of Information Law

Bosnia and Herzegovina is working on a new Freedom of Information Law that has raised concerns about freedom of expression and transparency in the country.

Journalists and civil society groups have warned that the law will expand the grounds on which public bodies can reject Freedom of Information requests. [Balkan Insight]

The current Freedom of Information Law was passed in 2000 by the Parliamentary Assembly and it defined information as being a public good. According to the current law, any person has the right to access information to the largest extent possible and at the same time, the authorities are responsible for publishing information. [Parliamentary Assembly]

With the upcoming draft, these rights might change.

(ava/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ethnic Croatian becomes prime minister for 4-yr term

For the next four years, the vice-president of the Croatian Democratic Union, Borjana Kristo, will lead Bosnia and Herzegovina as Prime Minister. The 61 year old and vice-president of the main Bosnian Croat party is now in charge of coordinating and representing the 10-member executive body.

The appointment process was the fastest in history.

Due to the need to correct the inefficiency of the previous Council of Ministers, the members of the presidency asked the minister-elect to present her four-year programme before the members of the state presidency instead of the House of Representatives before it confirmed the election. [Balkan Insight]

Kristo has said she supports changes in the election law and stands for a functional and sustainable Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among her goals are generating processes to accelerate the Euro-Atlantic road of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to open negotiation talks for the country's EU membership. [N1]

(ava/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Human Rights Minister arrested for alleged corruption

Bosnia's State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) arrested the Minister of Human Rights and Refugees, Milos Lucic, in Sarajevo for alleged abuse of office. [N1]

Lucic is suspected of abusing his position of authority and other corruption activities, according to the prosecutor's office. His alleged actions damaged the budget of Bosnia and Herzegovina for his own benefit and other people related to him, the prosecutor's office said.

Through the operation codenamed "Diamond 2," the state agency and police raided the minister's office, his home, and other facilities to search for evidence that would prove the suspect's culpability.

The investigation gathered evidence that Lucic spent funds intended for carrying out his official duties on private trips amounting to a total of EUR 8,000 of public money. The minister is also suspected of servicing ministry vehicles at garages without authorisation. [Balkan Insight]

This event contributes to the high level of corruption registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country ranks as one of the most corrupt in Europe. [Transparency International]

(ava/gc)

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Trial for killing of Bosniaks stalled for one year

Serbia has postponed the trial of Visnja Acimovic, who was indicted for killing Bosniak prisoners of war in the Balkan country's 1992-95 war, after witnesses who were due to be heard in Belgrade Higher Court failed to appear.

This marks a full year without any developments in Acimovic's case. The last witnesses were heard in November 2021. Other hearings were cancelled because of changes in the judging panel and witnesses not showing up. The trial is expected to continue in December. [Balkan Insight]

Known as "Beba", 44, Acimovic was accused of willingly taking part in the murder of 37 Muslim Bosniak prisoners in the eastern Bosnian town of Vlasenica in June 1992 along with another soldier from the Bosnian Serb army. Acimovic is accused of violating provisions of the Geneva Convention and of war crimes against the civilian population. [Reuters]

The prisoners were brought by bus from the Vlasenuca prison to the location where Acimovic shot them. The victim's bodies were only discovered in 2000 at the Mracni Dol site. [Daily Sabah]

(ava/gc)

Bulgaria: Government denies violence against migrants

Bulgaria has denied any notion of illegality at the treatment of asylum seekers within its border in a letter sent to the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. It specifically denied any injury, unlawful detention, or ill treatment of refugees, migrants, or asylum seekers. [Yahoo News]

The letter was prompted after an investigative report by Sky News, Lighthouse Reports, and European media partners detailing allegations of abuses against asylum seekers in Bulgaria. The report released December 8 detailed first-hand anecdotal evidence from several asylum seekers in a makeshift Bulgarian jail run by border forces. [Sky News]

Nackman, a 34-year-old refugee claims he spent several hours in a wooden “cage” that was overpacked and reported attacks from dogs and frequent beatings. Abdullah El Rustem, 19 also stated that a bullet was fired through his hand on October 3. [Sky News]

The Bulgarian government said it has followed international and domestic law and has denied all such allegations, saying that “no shots were fired from our side”. They also noted that any violence was two-sided, releasing photos of damage that was allegedly caused by stones thrown by the group. [Chof]

(jk/gc)

Greece: New bill passed banning sale of spyware

Greece’s parliament has passed a bill criminalising the sale or possession of spyware after Athens admitted in September to conducting surveillance on current and former members of opposition parties SYRIZA and Pasok. [The Guardian]

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis called the bill a “brave institutional response” to the challenges of spyware and monitoring.

The bill includes measures regulating requests and approvals for monitoring within the country. It also contains the establishment of an academy of counterintelligence for the training of the intelligence

services and a unit to investigate breaches of procedure.

The company behind the 'Predator' spyware that was employed to monitor select individuals, Israeli-owned Intellexa, and five other spyware firms were raided in Athens following the passing of the legislation. The conservative government faces elections in 2023 and is seeking to distance itself from the phone-tapping scandal. [Haaretz]

(jk/gc)

Greece: Court in Florina approves opening of Macedonian language centre

A court decision in Greece has approved the launch of the first-ever official Macedonian language centre that will provide online courses. Former North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said the decision by the court in Florina in northern Greece was a "fine act which is particularly important as another confirmation of the close relations between the two countries." [The National Herald]

The decision has been controversial in Greece with some commentators expressing concern that the ruling contradicts the spirit of the Prespa Agreement, a treaty between the-then Republic of Macedonia and Greece that resolved long-standing disputes between the two countries. Some experts have said that the agreement "does not contain any such obligation for Greece" to have a Macedonian language centre. They have called for the Greek court's ruling to be overturned. [Greek Reporter]

(jk/gc)

Greek PM holds talks with British Museum chair about returning Elgin Marbles to Athens

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis held secret talks with British Museum Chair George Osborne to negotiate the possibility of the repatriation of the Elgin Marbles, 5th Century BC Parthenon sculptures, to Athens. The discussions have reached an "advanced stage" that could see an agreement being met soon. [BBC] [The Guardian]

While Athens formally requested decades ago that the sculptures be returned, a large obstacle has been the 1963 British Museum Act, which prevents removing objects from the museum unless they are duplicates or "unfit to be retained in the collections."

The Museum itself has declared that it "still intends to operate within the law" and "would not dismantle its collection." Considering this information, former UK Culture Secretary Ben Bradshaw said that when the marbles go back to Athens "they won't go back permanently." [Fox News] [POLITICO]

(jk/gc)

Greece: Government plans to extend maritime boundaries

Greece plans to double its maritime boundaries to 12 miles off Crete, according to the Greek newspaper *Ta Nea,* citing an unidentified source within the defence ministry. The plans will be implemented in March 2023 after the legal framework for the expansion is addressed, the newspaper said. [Middle East Monitor]

The government made the decision based on recent developments after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan proclaimed his desire to hunt for energy reserves within the Aegean Sea. [Greek Reporter]

Albania is also looking to roll back its previous agreements on maritime boundaries, ceding some waters to Greece in exchange for Athens' support in Albania's European Union accession bid. Egypt and Libya have also taken interest in the area, with a deal signed between the pair to divide the seas between them, which is unrecognised in international law as of yet. [The National Herald]

(jk/gc)

Greece: Internal disputes postpone Israel weapons deal

Tensions between the Greek government and military have caused a delay in a deal to purchase arms from Israel. The purchase could proceed in April 2023 while officials attempt to mend the fractured relationship between the government and the military, according to the Middle East Monitor. [Middle East Monitor]

The reasons behind the dispute have not been reported. Defence Ministry officials consider the deal to be important as Israel's Spike NLOS missiles are critical to the country's navy and the army's AH-64 attack helicopters. If the decision to buy the weapons comes after the 2023 elections, they could be sold elsewhere. [The National Herald]

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsokakis is attempting to escalate the military build-up in the Aegean Sea as tensions with Turkey have risen as of late regarding maritime boundaries and ownership of islands off the Turkish coast.

(jk/gc)

Greece: Protests erupt after Roma boy shot by police

Thousands took the streets in the Greek cities of Thessaloniki and Athens to protest the death of a Roma teenager at the hands of the police. The 16-year-old was shot in the head following a police chase after reportedly leaving a service station without payment for EUR 20 of petrol. [Al Jazeera]

Around 2,500 people demonstrated in Thessaloniki, many of whom consider the shooting to have racist motivations. In Athens, protestors chanted: "It wasn't the petrol, it wasn't the money, the cops shot because he was Roma." [BBC]

The Roma are considered a minority community in Greece and have condemned police for excessive force when confronting the Roma. The Head of the Roma Federation of Central and Western Macedonia Panagiotis Sabanis noted that this is "not the first incident of a police shooting against a Roma just because he is a Roma." [The Guardian]

(jk/gc)

Greece: Italian embassy vehicles damaged in suspected arson attack

Two cars have been damaged in an Athens arson attack, one of which was used by a senior official at the Italian embassy, though no injuries were sustained. Although two separate homemade explosive devices were attached to individual vehicles, one failed to detonate. [Euronews]

A Greek anarchist group calling itself 'Revenge Cell Carlo Giuliani', named after the well-known anti-globalisation protestor, has claimed responsibility. Their motives are said to be in support of Alfredo Cospito, an imprisoned Italian anarchist, who has been on hunger strike since October. [ABC News] [MEHR]

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni expressed concern over the official who used the vehicle, identified as Susanna Schlein, whilst Greece's Foreign Ministry commented on the attacks as "reprehensible". [AP News]

(jk/gc)

Kosovo: Applies for EU membership

Kosovo has officially applied for membership to the European Union. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti made the application on 15 December 2022 in the Czech Republic, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU. [Al Jazeera]

Kosovo is currently classified as having 'potential EU candidate' status. Kosovo's EU application is expected to take years. The most significant obstacle to the progression of Kosovo's application is the lack of recognition as an independent state by five current EU members: Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Greece and Cyprus. [Al Jazeera][Reuters]

Kosovo and Serbia must also normalise relations before Pristina's application is accepted. [Reuters]

"We want no back-door, no fast-track. We want to build the EU in our country with our people," said Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti. [Reuters]

Ivica Dacic, Serbian Foreign Affairs Minister, called for EU states who do not recognize Kosovo as an independent state – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain – to challenge the announced EU membership application. [Serbia Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

(jn-lc/gc)

North Macedonia: Nine police officers arrested for corruption

North Macedonia said on December 27 that it arrested nine police officers stationed on the Tabanovce border

with Serbia for allegedly taking bribes from migrants to ease their crossing. An additional three officers were charged but not arrested. [Washington post]

Authorities said in a statement that the commander of the station, along with his deputy and seven others, face charges of "criminal association, bribery and abuse of authority." Police said the alleged activity was ongoing for more than two years, in which the officers operated in an 'organised manner'. [ABC News]

North Macedonia has been in accession talks with the European Union since July 2022 and has been directed by the Council and the European Union that fighting corruption is one of the most important prerequisites for a successful bid. This was made clear in the recent votes on Romania and Bulgaria's Schengen accession, which was blocked by Austria and the Netherlands for concerns over migration issues in the Western Balkans.

(jk/gc)

North Macedonia: Government takes emergency steps to reduce air pollution

North Macedonia announced on December 24 that it would take emergency measures to tackle air pollution in the capital Skopje and three other cities.

Included in these measures are suspending sports events on any day with severely high levels of air pollution, limiting construction work to a six-hour period, and recommending companies to excuse people aged over 60 or pregnant women from work. [Euronews]

The North Macedonian health authorities estimate that over 3,000 people a year die as a result of air pollution. IQAir, an air quality technology company, has named Skopje as the third most polluted city in the world based on their findings with air pollution now 28 times the safety threshold recommended by the World Health Organisation.

The principal reasons for the increasing levels of pollution is mostly due to the common usage of household wood-burning stoves, which has only increased with rises in energy prices. [Latin Times] [AP News]

(jk/gc)

Serbia: Parliament adopts 2023 budget plan

The Serbian parliament adopted the 2023 budget on December 9. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic announced that the budget was approved by 156 deputies in the 256-seat parliament with a 62 percent approval rate. [National Assembly of Republic of Serbia]

The budget projects growth at 2.5 percent of national output, the same rate as the 2022 budget and a 3.3 percent deficit, which will be lower than the 2022 deficit percentage of 3.9 percent. [Reuters]

The new proposed budget will include projects for renewable energy resources to decrease the dependence on Russian oil. A new project for hydropower plants, Djerdap 3 on the Danube river and Bistrica in Western Serbia, will be financially secured by the government. [Balkan Green Energy News]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: AK Party considers bringing elections 'slightly' forward

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AK Party is considering a “slight change” on the date of elections scheduled for mid-June, Reuters reported, citing a senior party official. AKP wants elections to be held on June 18, AK Party spokesperson Omer Celik said at a news conference when asked about the possibility of snap elections. Since this date corresponds with the summer holiday season, AKP wants to evaluate bringing the date slightly forward, Celik said.

(gc)

Turkey: Court sentences Erdogan foe to jail

A Turkish court sentenced on December 14 Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, a potential rival of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to 2.7 years in jail for insulting public officials during a speech he made in 2019. [Reuters]

After the verdict was announced, Imamoglu and the leader of minority opposition IYI Party Meral Aksaner

condemned the result. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, chairman of Imamoglu's Republican People's Party (RPP), cut his visit to Germany short to show his support to Imamoglu. On December 15, leaders of "Table of Six" met again at Sarachane to oppose the verdict given by the criminal court. [Twitter] [Anadolu Agency]

US President Joe Biden released a press release saying that Imamoglu's conviction was "inconsistent with respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law." Mayors of Paris, Rome, Budapest, Prague, Brussels, Athens, and Sarajevo showed their support to Imamoglu on Twitter. [Euro News]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Istanbul Municipality investigated for terrorism links

Turkey's Interior Affairs Ministry announced on December 24 that an eight-person inspection committee assigned to investigate the Istanbul municipality for terrorism activity has handed over its report to the country's prosecutor's office. [Ministry of Interior]

The investigation, which started in December 2021, alleged that 455 of the municipality's employees were affiliated with a known terrorist organisation and that some of them were affiliated and linked with Gulenist organisations and other organisations. The Turkish government accused Gulenist supporters of being behind a failed coup attempt in 2016. [BBC]

Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu pushed back, accusing members of the Justice and Development Party of criminal activity, including membership in armed terrorist organisations. He questioned why the investigation only covered his administrators. [Sözcü]

Imamoglu said that the number of terrorists in Istanbul Municipality increased significantly to 1,668 from 557 previously announced.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan says 2023 elections will be his last

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his presidential candidacy in the 2023 elections will be his

last, though he said he would continue to be active in politics. [Balkan Insight]

Opposition parties expressed doubt about Erdogan's claim since he has said on multiple occasions that he would stop running as president. Opposition politicians have claimed that his presidential bid is unlawful. Ali Mahir Basarir of the People's Republican Party (RPP) said on Twitter that Erdogan's candidacy is not legal under the 101st Article of the Turkish Constitution and the Presidential Election Law. [Cumhuriyet][Sözcü]

The leaders of six opposition parties – RPP, DEVA, Democrat Party, GP, Good Party (IYI), SP – created a joint opposition named "Table of Six" led by the main opposition party RPP to run against Erdogan. They are expected to announce their candidate in 2023. [Altılı Masa]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Fist Fight in National Assembly leaves one MP hospitalised

A member of Turkey's National Assembly was hospitalised after a fight erupted on December 6 during the second day of 2023 budget planning.

Huseyin Ors, the lawmaker from the opposition Good Party (IYI Parti) was brought to the intensive care ward due to head trauma allegedly caused by Zafer Isik, MP from ruling party Justice and Development Party. [Haber Türk]

According to IYI Party spokesperson, Kursat Zorlu, Ors left intensive care on December 7, but his situation was still considered critical, due to his previous heart condition. Zorlu added that "it is a sad day on behalf of the Turkish Grand National Assembly and a shameful day for those who carried out the attack." [Balkan Insight]

Leaders and members of the opposition parties visited Ors in hospital but there is no formal apology from Zafer Isik himself or the ruling party AKP on the matter.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Founders of religious group sentenced to jail for marrying under-aged girl

The founders of Hiranur Society, a fundamentalist religious group, were sentenced to jail for the sexual assault of a minor, under-age marriage and tampering with medical documents. [Balkan Insight]

The victim filed a sexual assault case against Kadir Istekli after their divorce in 2021. She presented the court with a picture of herself in a wedding dress when she was 6 years old and was forced to marry Kadir Istekli, who was 29 years old. The offender and his family denied all allegations. [NTV]

In the indictment, a prison sentence of 67 years, 10 months and 15 days was sought for Istekli, while 22 years and 6 months in prison were sought for his father Yusuf Ziya Gumusel and mother Fatima Gumusel. [Sözcü]

Turkey's religious authority, Diyanet published a statement following criticism from the public by stating "our children are our most intangible value. Protecting the rights of the child and protecting the best interests of the child in all areas of life is a religious, legal and humanitarian responsibility."

The leaders of opposition parties urged the closure of extreme religious societies. The building of Hiranur Society was closed by Istanbul Municipality in early December. [BBC]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Court arrests journalist under disinformation law

A Turkish court ordered the arrest of journalist Sinan Aygul on the allegations of spreading false information in accordance with a disinformation law that was adopted in October.

Aygul was detained on December 14 after he wrote on Twitter that a 14-year-old minor was being sexually assaulted by a police officer and a sergeant in the Turkish province of Bitlis. Aygul later retracted the story.

Aygul was detained three hours after he tweeted about the alleged assault and apologised for publishing a story without confirmation from authorities. He was

detained on the grounds of leading the public into hatred and hostility and with the possibility of creating panic among crowds. [Reuters]

Sinan Aygul was released from Bitlis Prison on December 23 with the condition of judicial control requested by his lawyer. In a video statement made by Aygul on Twitter, he thanked the public for their support and wished he would be the only journalist detained under the disinformation law. [Twitter]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Baykar launches new jet-powered drone

Turkish defence company Baykar announced the maiden flight of its first jet-powered unmanned fighter jet on December 14. The drone completed its first flight for 18 minutes in total in Duzce, a Turkish province 80 kilometres outside of Istanbul. [Baykar]

Selcuk Bayraktar, Baykar's Chief Technology Officer, announced Kizilelma's importance in unmanned air combat, showing features of the vehicle on Twitter. The new jet-drone will be able to conduct air to air operations and could impact the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and Libya. [Reuters]

Kizilelma will be able to stay in the air for about 4 to 5 hours and will be controlled by satellite via Ukraine's Ivchenko-Progress company. [Defense News]

(lc/gc)

Turkey extends FX-protected lira scheme for a year

A presidential decree published in the official Gazette on December 17 will extend a 2022 decree into this year as the government aims to protect the Turkish Lira from devaluing against hard currencies.

The Turkish government in December 2021 introduced a state-backed scheme to stem the Lira's devaluation, which has been triggered by interest rate cuts. In 2022, the Lira lost 29 percent of its value against the US Dollar. (USD 1 = TL 18.67) [Reuters]

Economists have said that Turkey's monetary policies will be shaped according to the outcomes of the

presidential and parliamentary elections, which are planned for June 2023. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan announces natural gas reserve in Black Sea

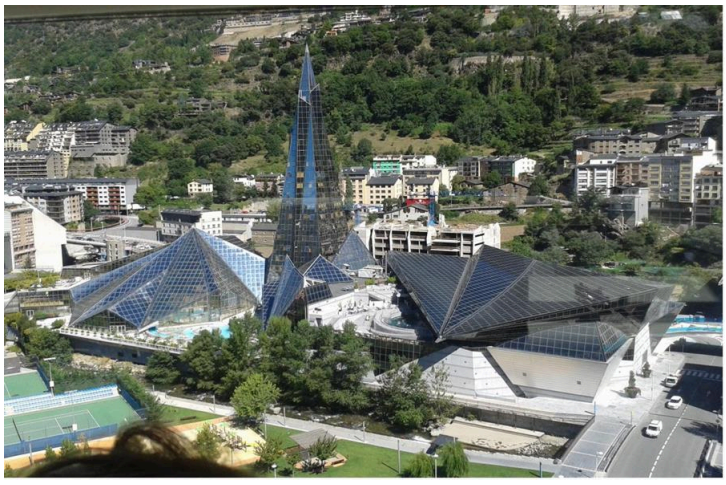
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that a new natural gas reserve has been found in the Black Sea after the last cabinet meeting of 2022 with reserves of 58 billion cubic metres. [Reuters]

Minister of Energy and Natural Resources Fatih Donmez said Turkey "now has 710 billion cubic metres of natural gas reserves. he said. [BBC]

Turkey is dependent on imports of natural gas from Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran. The latest discoveries will allow Turkey to decrease its dependency on other countries on energy resources as well as help decrease its annual energy bill. [Al Jazeera]

(lc/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe



Italy: 2023 budget approved, opposition complains of haste

The first budget drawn up by Italy's hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who came to power after snap elections last year, gained final parliamentary approval on December 29 through a vote of confidence easily won by the government. [Reuters]

The budget raises the 2023 deficit to 4.5 percent of GDP from 3.4 percent forecast in September, earmarking some EUR 21 billion in tax cuts and relief measures for businesses and families struggling with high energy bills.

The budget law also lowers the retirement age, and offers tax amnesties and lower penalties to help those who have defaulted on payments. [Reuters] [Euronews] [Bloomberg]

Governments in Italy have frequently used confidence votes to drive key laws through parliament.

Opposition parties accused Meloni of not allowing parliament sufficient time to review the budget bill. [Reuters] [Euronews]

The government responded by saying that it had no alternative as Italy's parliamentary elections in September reduced the period that is usually used to draw up and assess the finance bill. [Reuters] [Euronews] [Bloomberg] [TheLocal]

(rmp/pk)

Italy: Right-wing government tightens rules for migrant rescues

Italy's recently installed right-wing government has given the green light to new rules that rescuers who aid asylum seekers at sea say could put migrant lives at risk.

A cabinet decree passed on December 28 prohibits ships from staying at sea after a rescue and searching for other migrant vessels in distress. Instead, charities have been advised to request a port and head to it "without delay." Ships will be impounded if the rule is defied. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Non-governmental organisations often take part in rescue operations in the Mediterranean that last several days, taking on board hundreds of people. Now captains will face a fine of EUR 50,000 if they breach the new rules. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Riccardo Gatti, who is in charge of a rescue ship operated by the Doctors Without Borders NGO, told *la Repubblica* newspaper that the decree "increases the risk of death for thousands of people." [Reuters] [In-Cyprus]

The new rule was approved after Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said that the European Union should do more to protect its borders and to stop migrant flows.

She told lawmakers in parliament on December 13 that the EU "has to relaunch effective implementation of the commitments undertaken a long time ago with regard to cooperating on migration with our partners in Africa and the Mediterranean, involving them more in the prevention of and fight against human trafficking." [Italian Government]

Meloni's comments came after her country took in over 500 migrants on December 11 from two rescue ships that were allowed to dock in an Italian port.

She criticised what she suggested was the inaction of other European nations, saying: "I don't think it's a solution to say that Italy should be the only port of disembarkation in the EU and then for every 100,000 people who come in, other countries take 30." [Euronews]

Some 104,000 migrants arrived in Italy in 2022, 67,000 in 2021, and 34,000 in 2020, according to interior ministry data. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

(rmp-km/pk)

Italy: Ex-PM Berlusconi under fire for promising prostitutes to footballers

Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been criticised for promising to deliver prostitutes to his Monza football team.

In a social media post filmed at Monza's Christmas party on December 14, Berlusconi was heard making the promise to his team if they beat the AC Milan and Juventus football clubs.

He said: "As I told the lads earlier, if you beat any of the top teams, I'll get a bus full of whores to come to your locker room." [Politico]

Daniela Sbrollini, a senator from the centrist Italia Viva party, said that the former prime minister's comments

were “usual misogynist language from Berlusconi. A joke in bad taste that leaves you speechless”. [Reuters]

In response, Berlusconi, a member of the centre-right Forza Italia party, wrote on Twitter: “Frankly, I didn't think, and no one could have imagined, that a simple playful and clearly paradoxical ‘locker room’ joke that I addressed to my Monza players could arouse comments that were as malevolent as they were trivial and unrealistic. I pity these critics.” [Twitter]

Forza Italia is part of the country’s recently installed government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her hard-right Brothers of Italy grouping, which won a decisive victory in September parliamentary elections. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

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. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

(km/pk)

Italy: Deputy health minister urged to step down over vaccine comment

A deputy health minister from the ruling far-right Brothers of Italy party has come under fire for questioning the efficacy of Covid vaccines, with critics calling on him to resign.

When Marcello Gemmato was asked in an interview if Italy’s death toll would have been higher if not for a vaccination rollout, he said he would not “fall into the trap of taking a side for or against vaccines.” [The Local] [Euro Weekly]

The minister, who is a pharmacist by profession, previously opposed the Covid “green pass”, a proof of vaccination that was required to access public spaces when Italy had high numbers of coronavirus cases in 2020. [Wanted in Rome]

The founder of Italy’s centre-left opposition Democratic Party, Enrico Letta, called for Gemmato’s resignation, while Carlo Calenda of the centrist opposition Action Party tweeted: “A health undersecretary who doesn’t [keep] his distance from no-vaxxers is certainly in the wrong job.” [The Local] [Euro Weekly]

The president of Italy’s National Federation of Medical Guilds, Filippo Anelli, said that the country’s vaccination campaign had prevented around 150,000

deaths and halved the number of potential Covid-related casualties. [The Local]

After his comments provoked controversy, Gemmato said that his words had been "taken out of context", adding that "vaccines are precious weapons against Covid." [Wanted in Rome] [The Local]

(rmp/pk)

Italy: Lawmakers seek parliamentary probe into 1983 disappearance of 'Vatican Girl'

Opposition lawmakers in Italy have requested a parliamentary inquiry into three unsolved disappearances, amid an effort to pressure the Vatican into turning over any information it may have on the cases.

One of the cases is the 1983 disappearance of 15-year-old Emanuela Orlandi from the Vatican City, an event which inspired the Netflix documentary "Vatican Girl." The other cases involve two young women whose disappearances were never solved.

In calling for the inquiry on December 20, Senator Carlo Calenda of the centrist opposition Action party said that the goal was to pressure the Vatican to release any additional information on the cases. He added that the Holy See's official position of not having any information was "hardly credible."

Calenda said: "We must restore a principle that the Italian state has great respect for the Vatican and its role as a sovereign state, for its spiritual teaching, but is in no way submissive to the Vatican state." [Euronews]

Under the Italian constitution, parliamentary inquiries can be used to look into unresolved cases and to conduct investigations "on matters of public interest." [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Italy bans mobile phones in classrooms

Italy's new hard-right government has issued a ban on cell phones in classrooms, with the education minister saying that children "go to school to study, not to chat".

The rule was laid out on December 20 by Education Minister Giuseppe Valditara, who sent circulars to all schools in Italy. Valditara described the use of mobiles during lessons as an "element of distraction", adding that it was "disrespectful to teachers". [Euro Weekly] [The Local] [Wanted in Rome] [Italy News]

The education ministry justified the ban by citing a Senate report that compares the use of phones to being addicted to narcotics. The report said that both have "the same and identical chemical, neurological, biological and psychological implications."

However, no disciplinary action will be taken against pupils who break the rules.

The head of Italy's National Association of Principals, Antonello Giannelli said the ban was "acceptable both in substance and in form." But he added that phones can be used to make teaching more inclusive.

"Yes, to the cell phone as a teaching tool. No, as a distraction tool," said Giannelli. [The Local] [Public News Time]

(rmp/pk)

Italy: Greens say new rules on hunting wild boar breach EU rules

Italy's hard-right government has eased restrictions on hunting wild boar, a move that critics say flouts EU nature conservation rules.

After a recent increase in the wild boar population, hunting of the animals will be allowed in both urban and protected areas.

Coldiretti, an Italian farmers' lobby, said the move was needed because Italy was "being invaded by 2.3 million wild boars in cities and the countryside". [Euractiv]

The change is opposed by the left-wing Green Europe Party, whose leader Angelo Bonelli said the move breaches EU rules on nature conservation.

Bonelli said: "We will put up a fight in parliament, but we have a complaint ready for the European Union." He added that he was sure legal action would be taken against Italy by the EU. [Reuters]

The new rules on hunting boar were introduced in an amendment to the 2023 budget approved on December 29.

(km/pk)

Portugal: Parliament votes to legalise euthanasia

Portugal's parliament voted on December 9 to make medically assisted death legal under certain conditions, in the third attempt to decriminalise the practice in almost two years. [AP]

Lawmakers passed a bill that makes psychological support mandatory for people seeking euthanasia and establishes a minimum wait of two months between their request and a medically assisted death. [AP] [BBC] [Reuters]

A parliamentary majority of 126 to 84 was in favour of the initiative. [BBC]

For the bill to become law, it requires the approval of conservative president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who has blocked the initiative twice in the past. [Reuters]

The first time, De Sousa sent the bill to Portugal's Constitutional Court, which upheld some of his concerns. The second time, he vetoed an amended version. [BBC]

While De Sousa said he would be quick to announce his decision, the far-right Chega party has launched an appeal that is expected to delay the process. [Reuters] [La Vanguardia]

If the bill becomes law, Portugal will become the sixth country in the European Union to legalise euthanasia. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Parliament passes windfall tax for energy and food firms

Portugal's parliament on December 20 approved the Socialist government's proposal for a new 33 percent tax on windfall profits for energy companies and food retailers. [Reuters] [Lusa]

The new rule aims, "in view of the exceptional situation we are experiencing, to discourage excessive increases in sales margins [for] companies operating in these essential sectors," the government said on its official website.

The measure, introduced as Europe struggles with a shortage of energy amid Russia's war in Ukraine, was described by Nuno Felix, the head of tax affairs at Portugal's finance ministry, as "exceptional and strictly temporary". [Reuters]

The new windfall tax is set at 33 percent, the minimum rate that European Union regulations specify for energy sector profits that are considered excessive. [Republica Portuguesa]

Excess profits are defined as those 20 percent above the average for the previous four years. [Republica Portuguesa]

Portuguese consumer prices increased by 10.1 percent year on year in October, marking a three-decade high. Inflation slowed slightly to 9.9 percent in November. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal to cut bureaucracy for green hydrogen projects

The Portuguese government will scrap mandatory environmental assessments for "green" hydrogen projects in March in an effort to "accelerate investment to fight climate change", Prime Minister Antonio Costa has said. [Reuters] [Republica Portuguesa]

The measure is part of a package called "Simpler Environment" which aims to reduce bureaucracy that hinders investment in sectors related to a transition to cleaner energy, Costa said. [Republica Portuguesa]

The set of measures includes the removal of mandatory environmental licences for solar power plants that occupy less than 100 hectares, and for wind farms with towers more than two kilometres apart. [Reuters]

The government said that the changes will take place "without prejudice to compliance with environmental law". [Lusa]

However, the scrapping of environmental assessments has been criticised by some as potentially detrimental for the environment. Climate NGO GEOTA warned such moves could "cause significant damage". Reuters]

Portugal is focusing on low-cost wind and solar power for the production of hydrogen and other renewables, and the government has said the country is on track to

achieve carbon neutrality by 2045. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Bid to scrap 'golden visas' blocked in parliament

Portugal's ruling Socialist Party has voted against scrapping the country's "golden visa" scheme, even though Prime Minister Antonio Costa late last year signalled that he wanted to abolish the programme. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

A proposal by the Communist Party to end the scheme, which grants residency to foreigners who plough money into the country, was rejected in parliament.

"The government explicitly said that this issue would be assessed. And that assessment and analysis [...] hasn't been concluded", news outlet EUObserver cited what it reported was an official source as saying. [Schengen Visa Info]

Investment through the "golden visa" scheme climbed by almost a half in November after Costa suggested that he intended to scrap the system. The scheme saw EUR 65.6 million invested in November, an increase of 48 percent compared to October. [Europe Monthly December 2022] [Reuters]

The system was launched ten years ago and has raised EUR 6.67 billion in total, with most of the money going into real estate. [Lusa]

The visas have been criticised for driving up housing and rental prices in Portugal, while the European Commission has called for the initiative to be brought to an end, warning that it created risks of money laundering and corruption. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

The CEO of Kleya, a company helping foreigners move to Portugal, said that such visas had put Portugal "on the map" and that those involved in the process had to comply with "very strict rules". [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Spain: Constitutional court blocks bill on selecting judges in unprecedented move

In an unprecedented intervention, Spain's constitutional court has blocked the Senate from voting on an amendment to the country's penal code that could have changed the way that judges are chosen and appointed, raising tensions between political parties.

Spain's top court, which has a conservative majority, on December 19 accepted an appeal by the centre-right opposition People's Party to stop a vote in the upper house of parliament that could have reduced the majority required for picking judges. This could have led to a swing to the left in the court.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, of the ruling left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, said the court ruling was unprecedented in recent Spanish history and interfered in the work of the legislature. [Associated Press]

He added that the People's Party's "aim was to retain by spurious means power that the citizens denied them in elections."

A People's Party representative welcomed the court's decision, saying: "The rule of law has won." [Reuters]

Although the constitutional court often accepts appeals to stall legislation that has been passed, it has never previously halted or intervened in the legislative process before a bill became law. [Associated Press] [Catalan News]

(km/pk)

Spain: Reform of sedition law approved as opposition raise concerns

Spain's upper house of parliament on December 22 gave the final approval for reforms to laws on sedition, a move that benefits several convicted Catalan separatists by reducing their prison sentences.

The reform has been criticised by opposition politicians, who claim it was designed to ensure support for the government from a Catalonian party on key legislation.

Originally proposed by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's ruling left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and its junior coalition partner Unidas Podemos, the reforms replace the law on sedition with a lesser crime of aggravated public disorder - which carries a maximum jail term of three years.

In 2021, Sanchez pardoned nine of 12 Catalan separatist leaders who were sentenced two years earlier for sedition after a failed attempt to break away the northeastern region of Catalonia from Spain in 2017. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Critics have said that the reform of the sedition law was an attempt to appease the left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) party to secure support for the 2023 state budget, which was passed on December 20.

Both the ruling Socialists and the ERC party have denied any link between the reform and the budget. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Spain: Transgender rights bill passed by parliament amid criticism

Spain has passed a bill that makes it easier for people aged 16 and over to change their legally registered gender. The move, designed to help transgender people, has been criticised by conservative opposition politicians and some feminists. [BBC] [Reuters]

Until now, individuals applying to change the gender listed on their identity cards have had to provide proof of two years of hormonal treatment. They have also needed a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, or distress arising from their gender identity differing from their biological sex. [BBC]

Under the new rules, 14 to 16-year-olds in Spain will no longer need judicial approval to legally change their gender, although they will require parental consent. [Reuters] [DW]

The bill was backed by 188 lawmakers in a parliamentary vote on December 22, while 150 opposed it and seven abstained.

The change was championed by the left-wing Podemos party, which is part of the governing coalition.

Spanish Equality Minister Irene Montero, from Podemos, said that the new law “guarantees trans people’s rights” and added that resistance to the change stemmed from “transphobia”. [BBC]

The bill was opposed by right-wing parties and also caused a divide among members of Prime Minister

Pedro Sanchez's governing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party. [Al Jazeera] [BBC]

Some feminist groups have said that the change in law could threaten women's rights, for example by enabling men who identify as women to compete in women's sports.

Meanwhile, transgender rights activists gathered outside parliament in Madrid to celebrate as the law was passed by MPs. [Reuters] [New York Post]

The move by Spain came as the Scottish parliament approved a bill to make it easier for transgender people to change their gender legally. Nine other European nations including Denmark, Ireland and Portugal have introduced systems in which people can declare which gender they identify with. [BBC]

(rmp/pk)

Spain approves paid 'menstrual leave' and extra abortion rights

The Spanish parliament on December 15 approved a bill that grants paid leave to women with painful menstrual periods, making the country the first in Europe to take such a step.

The bill, which was approved by Spain's left-wing government in May, also gives women additional abortion rights.

Under the measures, women will be eligible for paid sick leave because of menstrual cramps. The financial costs will be covered by the state. [France 24]

Meanwhile, 16 and 17-year-olds will be able to have abortions without the permission of their parents, and a mandatory three-day "reflection period" before a termination will be scrapped. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Irene Montero, Spain's equality minister, said: "We recognise menstrual health as part of the right to health and we fight stigma and silence." [Euronews]

Critics of the changes argue that they could stigmatise women in the workplace, and that employers might favour hiring men.

The law still needs approval by the Senate. A vote in the upper house is not expected for some months.

(km/pk)

Spain: New code discourages sexism in children's ads

A new ethics code came into effect in Spain on December 1 that aims to prevent sexism in toy advertisements for children.

Apart from discouraging what are considered to be sexist stereotypes – for instance, targeting girls with ads for beauty products and boys with those for technology toys – the "self-regulatory" code will also encourage representation of children of different ethnicities and with disabilities.

The government said in a statement: "The characterization of girls with sexual connotations will be prohibited and the exclusive association of toys with roles such as caring, domestic work or beauty with them (girls), and action, physical activity or technology with boys, will be avoided." [Associated Press]

Under the new regulations, all commercials for children's products must be understandable to minors. Audiovisual ads must include pictograms, including the price of a product and assembly instructions, that take up at least seven percent of the screen. [El Pais] [La Moncloa]

The new code was agreed in April by toy producers, advertising firms and Spain's consumer affairs ministry, and replaces a similar code from 2005.

(km/pk)

Spain experiments with shorter work hours in bid to boost productivity

The Spanish government has unveiled an experimental plan aiming to help small and mid-sized businesses boost their productivity by reducing work hours.

Companies taking part in the initiative must cut their work week by at least a half day without lowering salaries. The change will need to be implemented within a year and the programme maintained for at least two years. [Euronews]

For the first 12 months, the government will contribute to financing training and measures to boost

productivity for companies that reduce their work hours.

Businesses that qualify must cut working time for 30 percent of their workforce if they have up to 20 employees, and for 25 percent if they have 21 to 249 workers.

To benefit from the plan, staff must be employed full-time with such a company. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: Gov't to plough EUR 350m into saving wetlands

The Spanish government has agreed to invest EUR 350 million into an effort to save the Donana wetlands in the south of the country.

Ecologists say the wetlands, which are a UNESCO world heritage site, are dying because of drought, climate change, and a misuse of water in the area. [El Pais] [ABC]

In 2021, an EU court ruled that Spanish authorities failed to protect the wetlands. The government now faces a fine unless it takes action to save the ecosystem.

Agriculture around the wetlands and unauthorised wells have also damaged the site. To combat this, the government said that its plans for the wetlands will include "the reduction of extractions from underground water sources and the recovery of surface water."

In response, the World Wildlife Fund conservation organisation said: "We consider this a great step." But It added: "We believe that the priority is to close down all the farms using illegal irrigation in the area around Donana."[Associated Press]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Croatia: Young pupils to have free meals in move against poverty

All primary school pupils in Croatia will receive one free meal from this month in a move aiming to tackle child poverty. [Telegram]

Radovan Fuchs, the minister of science and education, announced the news on Christmas Day. Previously, 30 percent out of over 300,000 primary school pupils had access to a free meal, according to data from the ministry of science and education.

Now the scheme will cover everyone. “That’s why I think that such a decision is absolutely fair, because it is not right for any child to go hungry today,” said Fuchs. [Telegram]

Providing free meals for primary school children facing poverty was part of Croatia’s Child Guarantee National Action Plan, which it submitted to the EU last August. The EU asked all member states to draw up such plans as part of steps to tackle child poverty in Europe. [Eurochild]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Illegal logging increases during energy crisis

Illegal logging in Croatia has increased over the past year as rising energy costs have been accompanied by a jump in demand for firewood.

A total of 528 cases of such logging were reported in 2022 throughout Croatia. Forestry official Martin Svetic said that demand for firewood had increased significantly.

Croatia saw record electricity prices last year, with costs reaching a high of EUR 494 per megawatt hour in August 2022 compared to EUR 106 in August 2021. [Statista]

The majority of Croatia's forests are state-owned and regularly patrolled. Most cases of illegal logging occur in privately-owned forests, which cover over 600,000 hectares, according to the N1 newspaper.

Owners of private forests are normally not the ones behind illegal logging, but local media have reported that they allow logging companies into such forests. [N1] [Hina]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Cocaine seized from drug smuggling gang

Croatian authorities say they seized some 120 kg of cocaine from a drug smuggling group in multiple raids in November and December. [Telegram]

Croatia is considered a strategically important country for drug smuggling into Western Europe due to its geographical position and its access to the Mediterranean Sea. Multiple police raids in 2022 led to the seizure of hundreds of kilos of both cocaine and heroin. [emcdda] [occrp] [Frontex]

Investigators believe that the latest batch of seized cocaine was originally stolen from a 200 kg shipment by a Balkans drug gang in the spring of 2022. [Telegram] [Jutarnji]

(iy/pk)

Czech Republic: Populist ex-PM takes on liberal democratic rivals in presidential election

Populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, a controversial Eurosceptic billionaire, is looking to return to power, this time as head of state, in presidential elections on January 13 and 14 in which he faces liberal democratic rivals.

Babis's narrow defeat in October 2021 parliamentary elections was seen by some observers as a sign that a

populist wave in Central and Eastern Europe was receding amid growing unity among its opponents.

But now Babis, of the opposition ANO party, hopes to tap into the kind of anti-establishment discontent seen during large street demonstrations in recent months that called on the Czech government to give more financial aid to vulnerable citizens. [Balkan Insight] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The Czech president does not have executive powers, but plays an important role in setting the tone in national politics and shapes how the country is seen abroad. [Politico] Incumbent Milos Zeman cannot run again because he has served the maximum two terms allowed.

Babis's main rivals in the presidential elections are non-partisan former military general Petr Pavel, and former university rector Danuse Nerudova, another non-partisan. The latter two have the support of the centre-right Together governing alliance. [Euractiv]

Neck and neck

A poll conducted by the Median agency between December 27 and 29 found that Pavel had 28.71 percent support, Babis had 28.51 percent, while Nerudova was on 25.12 percent. Surveys suggest, however, that Babis is unlikely to win if he faces Pavel or Nerudova in a run-off round.

Amid high inflation, Babis wants welfare benefits increased, with caps on fuel and food prices. [E15] He has criticised the Czech authorities for what he says is the excessive aid the country has given to Ukraine. The government in Prague has been supportive of Kyiv's fight against Russia, sending military supplies such as tanks and artillery to the Ukrainian armed forces.

Babis says he supports the fight against climate change, but only if this does not endanger jobs. He has also pledged to strongly defend his country's interests in the EU.

Pavel, meanwhile, supports the Czech Republic's orientation towards the West and the strengthening of cooperation within the EU and NATO. His priorities include an active foreign policy, an innovative economy, a healthy environment and education. [E15]

Nerudova, in turn, wants to be the voice of the younger generation. She wants a tougher stance on both Russia and China. She is also pushing for pension reform and gender equality initiatives. [E15]

Zeman admits pro-Russian stance was a mistake

Zeman admitted in his last traditional Christmas speech to the nation before the end of his mandate that his pro-Russian stance had been a mistake. In a televised address on December 24, he stressed the need to continue supporting Ukraine so that the country can defend itself. [English Radio]

After Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, Zeman attended Russian Victory Day celebrations in Moscow the following year. He also defended Russia against his own country's intelligence services over a 2014 explosion at an ammunition depot in the east of the Czech Republic. A report by the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) had pinned the blame for the explosion on the Russian secret services. [EiR November 2022]

After Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Zeman changed his mind on Russia. He described the attack on Ukraine as a "crime against peace" and called Putin a "madman". [Euronews]

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Spa town criticised for PR drive aimed at Russian-speaking tourists

Authorities in Karlovy Vary, a Czech spa town in the west of the country, have been criticised for a promotional campaign to attract Russian-speaking visitors amid the war in Ukraine.
[Euractiv] [CT24] [BrnoDaily]

"At a time when we are hosting a large number of war refugees from Ukraine, this could be a security threat in the extreme for this very vulnerable group," said Karlovy Vary councillor Adam Klsak in a letter to the town's mayor, Andrea Pfeffer Ferklova.

One suggestion for a possible slogan to be used in the promotional campaign was "Karlovy Vary understands you", but this was later withdrawn, according to news outlet Denik N.

Ferklova defended the promotional drive, saying it was aimed at EU citizens. "It is not aimed at Russia, but at people who live … mostly in Germany, and speak only Russian."

Those targeted by the campaign should be treated as a separate market from Russians living in Russia, Ferklova added.

But councillor Klsak said it was “clear that some Russians living in the EU do not share European values.”

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic: Ex-MP charged with rape

Czech prosecutors on December 12 charged ex-MP Dominik Feri, of the centre-right TOP 09 governing coalition party, with two counts of rape, with one of the cases involving a 17-year-old girl, and one count of attempted rape.

The former lawmaker could face up to ten years in prison if convicted. [Seznam Zpravy]

Police began investigating Feri when, in spring 2021, several women accused him in the media of sexual coercion, harassment and violence. He resigned from the lower house of parliament the same year. [Prague Morning]

“I welcome the fact that after a two-year wait I will be able to present evidence to the court proving my innocence,” news outlet Seznam Zpravy cited the ex-lawmaker as saying.

Feri became the youngest MP and the first black legislator in the Czech parliament in 2017. The following year he was selected for POLITICO's list of 28 people who would shape Europe in 2019.

(vs/pk)

Czech Republic creates post of national security adviser

The Czech Republic has created the new post of National Security Adviser, whose job will be countering hybrid threats and disinformation, and intelligence coordination. [Euractiv]

The step was approved by the country’s National Security Council at a meeting on December 7.

The new adviser will be appointed and dismissed by the government, will be based in the Cabinet office and will report to the prime minister.

Czech premier Petr Fiala has announced that he plans to nominate Tomas Pojar, an adviser on foreign and

security affairs, to the new post. [Denik N]

(vs/pk)

Hungary: Central bank chief blames gov't as inflation hits highest level in EU

The governor of Hungary's central bank has blamed the government's fiscal policy for driving prices up as the country's annual inflation rate hit the highest level in the EU.

Economic Development Minister Marton Nagy warned that the year-on-year rise in the cost of goods and services – which stood at 23.1 percent in November, according to EU statistics agency Eurostat – could climb further to reach between 25 and 27 percent in the first quarter of 2023. [Reuters]

Soaring prices are among the biggest challenges facing the nationalist government led by Viktor Orban, whose policies have been sharply criticised by the Hungarian central bank. [Europe Monthly December 2022] [Telex]

The bank's governor, Gyorgy Matolcsy, urged an end to price caps on fuels, basic foodstuffs and mortgages. [Reuters]

Matolcsy told a parliamentary committee on December 5 that the caps had led retailers to increase the prices of non-capped goods, driving inflation up by an additional 3 to 4 percent. [Reuters] [Telex]

Analysts have said there is an increasing disconnect between the central bank and Orban's economic policy. [Telex] Despite Matolcsy's warnings, the government on December 13 announced the extension of price caps on basic foodstuffs until April. [Reuters]

Fuel price cap lifted amid shortages

However, the government on December 6 scrapped a cap on fuel prices earlier than planned after petrol shortages caused panic buying across the country. That cap was introduced in November 2021 amid soaring prices. The step led to a drop in imports as foreign suppliers were deterred from selling to Hungary. [Associated Press]

State energy company MOL said it could not keep up with demand due to the decrease in imports and technical issues in its refinery that hindered domestic production. [Financial Times] MOL's chairman, Zsolt

Hernadi, said the country must “restore confidence” among oil importers. [Bloomberg]

According to Orban’s chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, lifting the fuel price cap – which had been set to expire at the end of December – was “the only way to ensure security of supply”. [Reuters]

Gulyas blamed EU sanctions on Russian oil for causing “tangible disruptions to Hungary’s energy supplies”. [Budapest Times]

Pensions increased

Meanwhile, Orban announced old-age pensions were being increased by 15 percent as of January 1. In a Facebook video posted on December 13, he added: “We Hungarians protect families with price caps and utility cost reductions.” [Hungary Today]

Finance Minister Mihaly Varga said the government was working to “preserve the value of pensions even in the ‘sanctions crisis’”. [Index]

(msa/pk)

Hungary: Ruling party calls for probe into opposition funding

Hungary’s governing Fidesz party has called on the State Audit Office to investigate foreign funding received by the opposition before the country’s general election last April. [Budapest Times]

Janos Halasz, the deputy leader of Fidesz’s parliamentary group, said that “worrying details” had emerged about foreign financing of the opposition Everyone’s Hungary Movement (MMM). [Budapest Times]

According to declassified information released by the Hungarian intelligence services, an organisation called Action for Democracy provided funding worth EUR 4.4 million to the MMM. [Hungary Today]

Hungarian law prohibits parties from accepting financial support from foreign organisations or citizens. [Budapest Times]

MMM’s former candidate for prime minister, Peter Marki-Zay, admitted that the movement had received funding from the United States but said all rules concerning financing had been respected. [Telex]

Marki-Zay added that MMM is not a party but a civil movement, and that it acted in accordance with the law because the political parties supporting him did not receive money from abroad. [Telex]

The nationalist government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban and the conservative media have coined the term "dollar-left" to refer to the scandal. [Hungary Today]

Orban's government has been accused in recent years of misusing EU funds, increasing government control over the country's courts and media, and eroding the rule of law. [Europe Monthly December 2022] *(Also see separate story in this issue)*

(msa/pk)

Slovakia: Gov't loses no-confidence vote, early elections loom

Slovakia's centre-right government has been dismissed by the president after lawmakers passed a vote of no-confidence in it, sealing the fate of an administration that had barely been able to rule the country and faced making increasingly questionable political trade-offs to pass legislation.

The prime minister, now in a caretaker role, is attempting to cobble together a new coalition that commands a majority in parliament. At the same time, the prospect of early elections hangs in the air, with former populist premier Robert Fico eyeing a political comeback that could potentially end Bratislava's support for Kyiv amid the war in Ukraine.

Storm clouds gathered over the ruling coalition in the summer following a feud between Finance Minister Igor Matovic, head of the centre-right Ordinary People's party (OL'aNO), and Economy Minister Richard Sulik, the leader of the centre-right Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS).

The conflict saw Sulik delivering an ultimatum to Prime Minister Eduard Heger of OL'aNO and demanding that Matovic be removed from his government post. [AP]

Political chaos

Sulik blamed Matovic for collaborating with a far-right party in order to pass an anti-inflation and family assistance bill that the SaS opposed, and the economy minister subsequently openly questioned the continued viability of the coalition.

The refusal of Heger to fire his fellow party member led to Sulik resigning and pulling his SaS party out of the ruling coalition on September 5. What was left of the coalition attempted to rule the country without a parliamentary majority. Those efforts had little success and even less public support.

The SaS continued to stir up opposition to Heger's administration, with the party saying "We have no confidence in this government" and questioning its role as an anti-corruption platform – a promise that the government had made when it came to power in 2021. [AP] [Euronews]

December 15 saw tensions culminate in a parliamentary vote of no-confidence in Heger's government, with 78 votes in the 150-member chamber against it. In spite of Matovic offering to resign on the spot, Heger's government was no more. Sulik did little to hide his contempt for the government, exclaiming "Finally" and describing its demise as "a fitting conclusion". [Euractiv] [Politico] [Dennikn]

Early elections?

President Zuzana Caputova has demanded that a majority government be formed by the end of January, saying that otherwise she would advise parliament to call snap elections. Caputova asked Heger to remain as a caretaker leader for the time being. [Euronews] [Dennikn] [Dennikn] [Spectator] [AP]

Many analysts say that reviving the coalition is an impossible task. Despite this, Heger has begun an attempt to rebuild his shattered government, but with no role for Matovic, who is the least popular politician in the country. [Spectator]

A political free-for-all could now emerge with heavyweights like former prime minister Robert Fico from the opposition Smer-SD party, and Peter Pellegrini from the centre-left Hlas party, vying for power.

Fico, a populist, would likely end Bratislava's support for Ukraine, which since the start of the war has taken the shape of numerousweapons shipments and other aid. Many fear that an election victory by the Smer-SD leader could see an ideological swing akin to that in Slovakia's southern neighbour Hungary, and could lead to closer relations between Bratislava and Moscow. [Euractiv]

Fico was in second place with 16 percent support in a poll conducted by Europe Elects on December 15, behind Hlas, which was on 20 percent. OL'aNO was in

fifth place, behind its former SaS ally, which was in fourth place. [Euractiv]

Many Slovaks blame US, NATO for war in Ukraine

A poll by the Bratislava-based Globsec think tank published in December found that the number of Slovaks who believe the US and NATO are to blame for the war in Ukraine – 39 percent – is almost the same as those who blame Russia – 43 percent.

At the same time, 68 percent of Slovaks believe that support for Ukrainian refugees should be reduced, while 52 percent perceive Ukrainian refugees negatively. Slovakia differs from its neighbours Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, where the majority of citizens are in favour of their countries accepting Ukrainian refugees. [Balkan Insight]

(cg/pk)

Slovakia: No electricity price hike for households in 2023, gas to rise by 15%

The Slovak government announced on December 1 that electricity prices for households would remain unchanged in 2023, while gas prices would rise by around 15 percent. The price of heat from large heating companies is to increase by 15 percent on average. [Aktuality]

The plans were announced before parliament passed a vote of no-confidence in the government on December 15 amid political turmoil. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Energy prices for households in Slovakia are usually set by the Office for the Regulation of Network Industries, but for this year the prices were decided by the economy ministry. [Euractiv]

The finance ministry said that the government would help tackle expensive energy by direct state subsidies to power suppliers. [Sme]

According to Prime Minister Eduard Heger, without such steps, prices for electricity would have increased by 380 percent, gas by 225 percent and heat by 80 percent. Households stand to save a total of EUR 6 billion, or EUR 3,000 per household. [Pravda]

(vs/pk)

Slovakia: EU monitors urge more rights for LGBTQIA+ and Roma people

The European Parliament's monitoring delegation for democracy, the rule of law and human rights has urged the Slovak government to increase moves to recognise the rights of the country's LGBTQIA+ and Roma communities. [Euractiv]

"Ending discrimination and removing all obstacles faced by these communities in exercising their fundamental rights requires universal recognition of the problems and a non-partisan effort to address them," said the head of the delegation, Dutch MEP Sophie in 't Veld. [TVNoviny]

The delegation called for improved legal recognition of same-sex couples and their children in Slovakia, and called for reforms to help transgender people.

The monitoring delegation said that it would closely follow developments in Slovakia, including ongoing judicial reforms. [Euractiv]

(vs/pk)

Slovenia: First female president sworn in

Natasa Pirc Musar was sworn in as president of Slovenia on December 22, becoming the first woman in the young republic's history to hold the prestigious position, following November run-off elections. [Anadolu Agency]

Musar, who was previously best known outside of Slovenia as Melania Trump's lawyer, bested Anze Logar, a candidate from the right, to win the public's vote. An independent candidate, Musar hopes to bridge the nation's ideological divide and emphasise human rights and LGBTQ issues in Slovenia.

Her predecessor, Borut Pahor, had served 10 years as head of state, the most allowed under Slovenian law. [Delo]

Musar was officially proclaimed president in a parliamentary session. She told lawmakers: "With today's oath, I have committed myself that every day of my life will be dedicated to you." [Delo]

Among those congratulating Musar on taking office was Chinese President Xi Jinping, who emphasised the importance of continued Sino-Slovenian relations. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Interior minister quits after criticising PM

Slovenian Interior Minister Tatjana Bobnar tendered her resignation to liberal Prime Minister Robert Golob on December 9 after criticising his leadership. [Vecer] [Dnevnik]

Bobnar, who only recently survived a vote of no confidence over her open migration policy, clashed with Golob amid allegations of political interference in Slovenia's police force, specifically the appointment of a new police commissioner.

Bobnar wanted the choice of commissioner to be hers, and not dictated from above, which she viewed as interference.

Bobnar said that Golob's choice of candidate would be an "obstacle to the efficient development" of the police force. Critics also claimed that Golob wanted to remove high-ranking police officers who are linked to the previous populist government. [Delo] [Delo]

Golob responded by ordering the police to publish a public report on any political pressures that may have been involved. He accepted Bobnar's resignation – the first in his cabinet, which was formed after a parliamentary election last April. [Euractiv] [Vecer] [Delo] [Delo]

Marta Kos, a former vice president of Golob's Freedom Movement, announced that she would be leaving the party in solidarity with Bobnar, apparently frustrated at the direction the grouping is moving in. Kos was set to be the party's main candidate in November presidential elections but withdrew her candidacy.

In a Facebook post, Kos wrote: "I have always represented democratic principles, professionalism, the values of non-corruption, equality and human rights. I can say the same of Tatjana Bobnar [...] My resignation is therefore also direct support for Tatjana Bobnar." [Delo]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: New 'solidarity' ministry to be set up after referendum

The Slovenian government has announced that a new ministry will be set up to tackle a housing shortage, a cost-of-living crisis and a range of other pressing problems facing citizens. [Delo]

The "ministry for a future of solidarity" is being created following a referendum in November that saw almost 57 percent of the public vote in favour of such a move, along with other initiatives.

Establishing the ministry was a part of the liberal ruling coalition's election promises and is the brainchild of labour minister Luka Mesec, the head of the Left party, which is a member of the coalition.

The new ministry will oversee housing policy, champion "economic democracy", and encourage employee engagement in private companies, allowing staff a greater share of profits and a larger say in how firms are managed.

At the same time, it will be tasked with working towards a socially and environmentally responsible economy, role modelled on successful European economies. [Vecer] [Gov.si]

The ministry will also aim to improve access to long-term care, in particular for the elderly, in order to prevent institutionalisation and to increase the time they spend with their families.

Simon Maljevac, a deputy labour minister and the general secretary of the Left party, will lead the new ministry. [Delo]

(cg/pk)

Slovenia: Jesuit priest disciplined after sex abuse reports

A Roman Catholic priest and specialist in religious art has been disciplined by his Jesuit Order after reports that he sexually and psychologically abused nuns in Slovenia in the 1990, prior to serving the order in the Vatican.

Father Marko Ivan Rupnik, who is of Slovenian descent, is a prominent artist who has designed chapels around the world. The Jesuits said that they started an investigation after a complaint was lodged with the Vatican in 2021 over "the method by which he carried out his ministry."

It is claimed by up to nine nuns that Rupnik had sexual relations with them. However, some believe that the number of alleged victims could be as high as 20. One woman told reporters that the priest had exercised "psycho-spiritual" control over her, and that her subsequent complaints were ignored. [Reuters]

The Jesuits imposed restrictions on Rupnik, while the Vatican took no further action, deeming that the allegations against him were beyond the statute of limitations, the order said in a statement. [Reuters]

(cg/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Centrist coalition government formed after snap election

A centrist majority government that bridges a traditional divide between the left and right took office in Denmark on December 15 after a snap election.

The new Cabinet, the first centrist administration in 44 years and also the first majority government in Denmark since 1993, comprises the centre-left Social Democrats, the centre-right Venstre party and the centre-right Moderates.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's Social Democrats performed exceptionally well in November 1 early elections and netted 50 seats, pulling far ahead of other contenders and paving the way for the party to return to power.

Venstre, the main opposition grouping in the previous parliament, lost 20 seats and came in second.

The Moderates are a new party that was founded by ex-prime minister Lars Rasmussen, the former head of the Venstre grouping, who quit the latter party in 2021.

Frederiksen, who is resuming her role as premier, called the parliamentary elections following a mink culling scandal that had eroded trust in her minority government and raised questions about her decision-making. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The three coalition parties have 89 seats in the 179-member parliament, but also have the backing of four MPs from the semi-independent Danish territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. [Politico] [dr.dk]

Speaking at a press conference, Frederiksen said: "We have set high ambitions, both in terms of ensuring higher employment, more people getting work, high climate ambitions and a fairly comprehensive reform programme."

The last centrist government to take power in Copenhagen, some 44 years ago, lasted only eight months. However, coalition party leaders are optimistic. Venstre leader Jakob Ellemann-Jensen said: "Despite our disagreements, we have decided to go together. We have all had to reach out to each other." [AP]

Ellemann-Jensen and Rasmussen are respectively taking on the roles of defence and foreign ministers. [dr.dk] [Politiken] [Politiken]

Initially there were hopes of bringing more parties into the coalition, but the Social Democrats' former allies on the left refused to climb aboard, as did far-right parties. [Berlingske] [Berlingske]

Denmark has been beset by uncertainty in recent months following the fallout of the mink scandal and disagreements over migration policies, while a cost-of-living and energy crisis added to domestic instability.

Internationally, tensions escalated following the destruction of the Nord Stream gas pipelines in September, close to the Danish exclusive economic zone, while Russian aircraft continue to intrude into Danish airspace. [Euronews] [Reuters]

(cg/pk)

Denmark: New Faroese government expected after elections in wake of crisis

The centre-left Social Democrats are expected to form a new coalition government on the Faroe Islands after securing their best ever general election result in a vote held following a political crisis.

The December 8 election on the North Sea archipelago took place after Foreign Minister Jenis av Rana was fired over comments seen as homophobic.

Rana's Christian Conservative party then withdrew its support from the ruling coalition of which it was a part, leaving Prime Minister Bardur a Steig Nielsen with a minority government. [Dr.dk]

Rana, who is staunchly opposed to homosexuality and to the introduction of officially recognised gay partnerships, had said that Soren Pape Poulsen, the former head of the Danish opposition Conservative party, would not be fit to serve as prime minister due to his sexual orientation.

Rana added: "Living as a so-called homosexual is against my own personal constitution, as well as my party's, and which I think the Faroe Islands should also have." [HighNorthNews]

The elections saw the opposition Social Democrats gain 26.6 percent of the vote, translating into nine of the 33 seats in the single-chamber Logting, the Faroese parliament.

It is expected that the Social Democrats will form a coalition government with the liberal Framsokn party and the pro-independence Tjodveldi party. This would net the coalition 18 seats, a slim majority.

The conservative Union Party to which Nielsen belongs did not perform as well as expected, gaining no new seats.

A key issue for voters was abortion, as the Faroe Islands have some of the most restrictive laws in Europe in this area. A woman can have an abortion only under specific circumstances such as cases of rape, incest or if the mother's health is at risk, and any request for a termination must be approved by two doctors.

The Christian Conservatives have announced that they are in favour of keeping the existing laws. [Dr.dk]

The Faroe Islands are a semi-autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. The Faroese

government has certain privileges and autonomy on domestic policy, but Copenhagen generally handles foreign and defence policy.

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Ethics council to review abortion laws

A Danish ethics council is set to review the country's abortion laws, which many see as lagging behind those in other European countries, such as Sweden and France.

Denmark mostly allows pregnancies to be terminated only before the 12th week, a legal restriction that has been in place for over 50 years.

While it is possible to have an abortion after the 12th week, this requires a patient to have psychological and medical assessments in order to determine whether a termination should be allowed.

Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten reported that of the 803 people who applied for this type of abortion in 2021, 53 were rejected. [Politiken]

According to the chairman of the ethics council, Leif Vestergaard Pedersen, various pro-life and pro-choice arguments are taken into consideration, while ethics and medical professionals are also consulted.

The council consists of 17 members, nine of whom are nominated directly by an ethics committee and eight who are nominated by government ministries. [National Ethics Centre] [Danish Parliament]

The council will publish a recommendation for the government by the summer.

Pedersen cited changing attitudes towards abortion legislation across the globe as the reason for deciding to review the issue. He told Danish news outlet Politiken: "It has been a long time since the Ethics Council looked at the abortion rules, and there are currently many conflicts across the European and American continents in this area."

Americans lost their constitutional right to abortion after a controversial Supreme Court ruling last year. Meanwhile, Denmark's Nordic neighbour Finland repealed its strict abortion laws in October following a citizens' initiative.

(cg/pk)

Denmark: Millions to be invested in hydrogen energy project

Danish renewable energy firm Orsted has said it plans to invest between USD 141 and 705 million into developing a new hydrogen-producing facility in the North Sea, a move that comes amid wider EU efforts to move away from fossil fuels. [Reuters]

The energy project would allow wind and solar-generated power to be stored in other mediums, such as hydrogen or methane gases, to prevent excess energy production from going to waste.

Orsted announced on December 6 that, in the project's first phase, some 150 Megawatts of storage capacity is expected to be available, which could be increased to 3 Gigawatts at a later stage.

Although not considered a true renewable, hydrogen energy is classified as a green energy source when it is produced by renewable means. However, the technology has yet to be widely adopted.

In a joint declaration in May, North Sea nations agreed to increase the exploitation of renewable power in the region as part of a strategy to diversify European energy sources. Some EUR 800 billion has been earmarked for the joint undertaking, expected to deliver 150 GW of electricity to Europe by 2050.

(cg/pk)

Finland: Bill that split ruling parties passes as PM warns gov't could collapse

A disputed nature conservation bill that split Finland's ruling coalition has been passed by MPs after weeks of uncertainty, as Prime Minister Sanna Marin warned that a lack of cooperation by the parties in power could lead to the government collapsing.

Efforts to adopt an EU nature conservation law – which would see increased protection for Finland's forests – had previously twice failed.

The Centre Party, a key member of Marin's coalition government, had decided on November 29 to vote against the bill's adoption, breaking a coalition

agreement. The party viewed the bill as damaging to Finland's forestry industry. [Aamulehti]

In response, the Green Party, another member of the governing coalition, pulled out of negotiations with the Centre Party over a separate agricultural bill. [yle] [yle]

In Finnish politics, it is customary for coalition parties to support bills in parliament after they have been agreed on by ministers.

Simultaneously, a bill on self-determination rights for the country's indigenous Sami people also proved to be a sticking point as the Centre Party broke with the coalition's lines to vote against that measure. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Marin faced personal criticism from Sami leaders for failing to pass the legislation. Finland has been reprimanded by international bodies for its lack of headway on indigenous rights in the past.

On December 7, Marin tackled disputes within the coalition head on. In a speech to parliament, she said: "It's not right that the government's rules of the game are broken, that proposals unanimously decided on in government are not defended in parliament."

She added: "I want this country to have a functioning government with this coalition, but it is not possible for the rules to be continually broken without any consequences."

The prime minister warned the Centre Party, saying: "We stated that if there is a similar situation in future, where the government's rules of cooperation are not followed, then there would no longer be a government." [yle]

Marin added that finance minister and Centre Party leader Annika Saarikko had reached an agreement to continue to cooperate with the rest of the coalition. [Euractiv]

The nature conservation bill was passed by parliament on December 13, while the agricultural bill was approved on December 7. [Aamulehti]

(cg/pk)

Finland plans budget cuts, windfall tax on energy firms

The ruling coalition in Finland plans to reduce debt and cut state spending in order to save some EUR 9 billion over the next decade, while imposing a hefty windfall tax on energy companies.

The finance ministry said that Finland aimed to "balance general government finances" and at the same time "stop the growth of the debt ratio." [Euractiv]

Unveiling a key component of the plans, the ministry in December proposed a temporary windfall tax on power companies. The levy, set at 33 percent of excess profits, goes beyond what many in the energy sector had expected. [Euractiv]

The tax could cost Finnish power companies up to EUR 1.5 billion, far higher than initial estimates of EUR 100 million. Energy lobbyist Jukka Leskela cautioned: "Firms must be able to continue their investments, so that we can get past the energy crisis." [yle]

Meanwhile, the price of electricity for households is not to exceed 20 cents per kilowatt hour under a proposal by centre-left Prime Minister Sanna Marin which caused surprise in parliament. The opposition was in favour of the price cap, while Marin's coalition partners were cautious of the high costs associated with such a move. [Euractiv]

Finns were hit by a rise in energy costs of between 40 and 60 percent in the final quarter of 2022 compared to 2021 levels. [yle]

(cg/pk)

Finland: Sami parliament passes self-determination law

The parliament of the indigenous Sami people has passed a measure aiming to enshrine their right to self-determination in Finnish law. [Samediggi]

The legislation, which has been at the centre of a longstanding controversy involving the Finnish government, would have to be backed by the national parliament in order to take effect. [Euronews]

The issue of self-determination has been causing a headache for the centre-left government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin, who was criticised and subsequently apologised for a lack of action following a deadlock in her ruling coalition on the matter.

The Sami want to be able to choose themselves who is or is not permitted to be entered on Sami electoral rolls, a position that is supported by the United Nations and the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights watchdog.

Currently, the Finnish government decides who is listed on Sami electoral rolls, a situation that angers many in Europe's only recognised indigenous group.

Legislation to give the Sami the right to self-determination has been opposed by the Centre Party, a partner in the governing coalition headed by Marin, and has been stalled for months.

A previous ruling by Finland's supreme administrative court saw around 100 people added to the Sami electoral roll, despite claims that some of them didn't have a strong Sami identity, even if they self-identified as members of the indigenous group. [AnadoluAgency]

The Centre Party says that it is protecting the rights of people who identify themselves as Sami and who will lose out on representation if legislation on self-determination is passed by the national parliament.

(cg/pk)

Finland splashes out on military hardware

Finland has stepped up an armaments drive as it draws closer to its goal of joining NATO amid raised tensions with its eastern neighbour Russia.

In its latest move, the government in Helsinki has approved a EUR 223.6 million deal for Israeli-made SPIKE missile systems in order to boost anti-tank capabilities. The purchase is being facilitated through NATO's Support and Procurement Agency and the Land Combat Missiles partnership programme.

Finland has also procured some 350 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles for EUR 361 million, and another USD 323 million worth of air-to-air and air-to-surface weaponry, in deals announced by the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency on November 29. Combined with a November purchase of guided rocket munitions, Helsinki has now spent some EUR 1.2 billion on American hardware. [YLE] [YLE] [Reuters]

Other recent defence deals saw Finland buying self-propelled artillery systems from South Korea at a cost of EUR 134 million, ammunition and protective equipment from Germany worth about EUR 47 million,

as well as approximately EUR 12 million worth of naval munitions from Sweden.

The purchases are being facilitated by increased defence expenditure, which will rise by EUR 1 billion compared to last year to EUR 6.1 billion in 2023. [Euractiv]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February prompted Finland, along with Sweden, to launch bids to join NATO in a major shift in European security. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(cg/pk)

Norway: PM under fire over new advisor amid conflict of interest concerns

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store has come under fire for hiring an advisor who recently worked for an international consulting firm, an appointment which triggered concerns that the new aide could have a potential conflict of interest.

The advisor, Kristoffer Thoner, worked for McKinsey, a consulting firm which operates worldwide. McKinsey was at first reluctant to divulge Thoner's client list, as company policy dictates that clients must give consent for such information to be released. [Dagens Naeringsliv] [Aftenposten]

After coming under pressure, McKinsey eventually did release the names of companies that Thoner had advised, one of which was Norway-based media conglomerate Schibsted. [Dagens Naeringsliv]

Many criticised Store for hiring Thoner in the first place, arguing that the prime minister had no way of knowing if his new advisor's past work would lead to potential conflicts of interest.

While in opposition, Store and his Labour Party colleagues had criticised former Prime Minister Erna Solberg from the centre-right Conservative Party for hiring consultants and PR advisors. [NRK]

(ef/pk)

Norway approves new oil and gas projects

Oslo has given the green light to three oil and gas operators to start new drilling projects in the North Sea

and Norwegian Sea as Europe searches for sources other than those from Russia.

Energy companies Equinor, Aker BP and Neptune Energy now have both the approval of the government in Oslo and of their boards to launch drilling based on recent discoveries of reserves in Norwegian waters.

Norway has become the European Union's largest supplier of natural gas after supplies from Russia were cut amid the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store previously said that Norway was looking to bring in EUR 120 billion from oil and gas sales in 2022, which is four times as much as in 2021. [Upstream]

The government, a centre-left coalition elected in 2021, has also set goals of developing offshore wind power to reach 30 gigawatts by 2040. While the country is a major exporter of oil and gas, its power grid is reliant on renewable energy sources. [Upstream] [Euronews]

Store announced in November that Norway was upping its climate-protection goals and aiming to cut emissions which impact the environment by at least 55 percent by 2030. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

The move to authorise fresh drilling came ahead of the end of a tax deduction system. Norway granted deductions to support oil and gas production in the North Sea and Norwegian Sea during the Covid-19 pandemic. The end of the system will provide an estimated increase in state revenues of over EUR 192 million in 2023. [Upstream] [Euronews]

(ef/pk)

Norway: Load-bearing capacity of collapsed bridge was too small, probe finds

An inquiry has found that a 150-metre timber and steel bridge in southern Norway which collapsed last summer had a load-bearing capacity half of what it should have been.

After the Tretten Bridge gave way on August 15, the Norwegian Safety Investigation Authority closed 14 similar wooden bridges around the country. An ensuing investigation found that only four of those 14 passed inspection. [AP News] [NRK]

The Tretten Bridge, which had only opened in 2012, collapsed as two vehicles were crossing it. The drivers of both vehicles were rescued and there were no casualties. [AP News] [NRK]

(ef/pk)

Sweden toughens stance on work visas, undocumented migrants

Sweden's new minority government, which is reliant on a far-right grouping, has announced a tougher line on undocumented immigrants, while the country's parliament has voted through a law that makes it more difficult for immigrants to obtain work visas.

The legislation means that if a person wants to apply for an immigrant work visa in Sweden, their wages must match the median salary requirements in the country – around EUR 2,900 a month.

The new rule would have precluded around 60 percent of the current immigrant working population in Sweden from obtaining a visa, domestic news outlets have reported. [Svenska Dagbladet] [Goteborgs-Posten]

The centre-right coalition government, which took power in October following general elections, lacks a parliamentary majority and is dependent on the far-right Sweden Democrats, who want to severely curtail immigration. [Europe Monthly November 2022

The ruling coalition put forward the proposal to raise wage requirements for immigrants after the idea had been tabled by the previous centre-left Social Democrat government.

The Green, Left, and Centre parties did not vote in favour of raising the threshold, with a spokesperson from the Centre Party arguing that the change would hamper many trades or professions. [Svenska Dagbladet] [Goteborgs-Posten]

Meanwhile, Maria Malmer Stenergard, the Swedish minister for migration, announced that the government would be taking a tougher stance on undocumented immigrants, and suggested introducing identity checks with DNA sampling. [Le Monde] [Dagens Nyheter]

Malmer Stenergard also suggested that state employees in Sweden should be required to report any undocumented immigrants they encounter, drawing

criticism from teachers, nurses, and social workers. These suggested changes to immigration policy have not yet been implemented, however. [Le Monde] [Dagens Nyheter]

(ef/pk)

Sweden halts environmental inspections of hydropower plants

Sweden will postpone checks on the environmental permits of its hydropower plants for a year in order to ensure maximum energy production, Environment Minister Romina Pourmokhtari announced at a press conference on December 12.

The move aims to ease the country's energy situation amid an increase in blackout warnings over the past year.

The regulatory checks, intended to ensure compliance with water standards, could cut into hydropower plants' ability to produce energy as the country braces for colder temperatures. Hydropower accounts for 40 percent of Sweden's total energy supply. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

Ebba Busch, a deputy prime minister and minister of energy, business and industry, told reporters at the same press conference: "We are now in a situation where every kilowatt hour counts." [Reuters].

Other energy sectors have seen problems recently, with one of Sweden's three nuclear reactors shutting briefly in November. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Sweden's new centre-right government dissolved the country's standalone environment ministry in October, a decision that was criticised by the opposition Green Party. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Police chief transferred after misconduct and favouritism allegations

Stockholm's police chief, the highest-ranking police officer in the country, has been transferred to other duties pending investigations into claims of misconduct and allegations that he promoted a colleague he had been dating.

Mats Lofving is accused of harassing Linda Staaf, his former partner and the current director of the operational unit of Swedish police. The complaints of harassment did not come from Staaf herself but from a member of her office. [Dagens Nyheter] [Le Monde]

Staaf said in a statement on December 13 that she did not feel like the victim of a crime, but did note that she would often see Lofving following her after their relationship ended. [Le Monde]

Lofving is also accused of favouring Staaf while she was his partner, including promoting her to her current role without the requisite experience or training. [Dagens Nyheter] [Le Monde]

(ef/pk)

Sweden to return bodies and artefacts of native Sami people

The Swedish government announced plans on December 19 to return the bodies of 18 indigenous Sami, along with numerous cultural artefacts, from the country's museums and universities to the Sami people.

Swedish Education Minister Mats Persson said: "The Sami people have suffered historically, among other things through the looting of graves and investigations conducted for racial biology research." [Reuters]

The Sami are an indigenous group who live in the far north of Sweden, but also in Finland, Norway and Russia.

The return of artefacts and remains has been a goal for Sami activists since the 1970s, the decade in which they gained recognition from the authorities in Stockholm. [Reuters] [Sweden Government]

The Swedish government said in a statement that it expects the process to be completed by March 2024. [Reuters] [Sweden Government]

Last year, the Finnish government announced that the bodies of native Sami people which were exhumed for research purposes in the 19th and 20th centuries would be returned to burial sites. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

(ef/pk)

Sweden fights to preserve forestry practices

Sweden is attempting to defend its clear-cutting forestry practices amid debate over a proposed EU ruling that would ban trade in products including wood, soy, cocoa and beef that have been grown or farmed in areas subjected to deforestation.

The new EU rules could, according to the Swedish government and lumber industry, define clear-cutting practices as deforestation, thereby endangering the practices, which aim to harvest mature trees while letting saplings grow.

The lumber industry in Sweden accounts for 10 percent of all industry in the country. Sweden has around 70 percent forest cover, making it one of the most forested countries in the European Union. [Dagens Nyheter] [Politico]

Stockholm's opposition to the proposed EU ruling on deforestation runs against the wishes of many indigenous people in Sweden who want to end clear-cutting. [Dagens Nyheter]

A centre-right coalition took power in Sweden in October following parliamentary elections. The coalition is reliant on the support of the far-right Sweden Democrats, the only party in parliament that opposes measures to combat climate change. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(ef/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Croatia joins Schengen area, entry for Romania and Bulgaria blocked by Austria

Croatia on January 1 became the 27th country to join Europe's Schengen area. Meanwhile, Austria has blocked Romania's and Bulgaria's entry to the zone, which allows people to move between countries without border checks. [Euronews]

Romania's and Bulgaria's accession needed to be approved unanimously during a vote by European interior ministers in Brussels on December 8. Austria's opposition stemmed from what Chancellor Karl Nehammer said was the arrival of 75,000 unregistered migrants in his country in 2022. [UPI]

Some EU member states have also urged the Bulgarian government to strengthen reforms to tackle corruption and organised crime.

The European Commission, the EU's executive, has said that both Bulgaria and Romania meet the criteria for joining the Schengen zone, in which a total of 420 million citizens live. The two countries will now have to overcome Vienna's objections.

European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson said she believed both Bulgaria and Romania were fit for entry to the scheme. "They have been waiting for a long time. The citizens of Bulgaria and Romania deserve to be fully part of the Schengen area." [Euronews]

Meanwhile, Davor Bozinovic, the Croatian interior minister, tweeted: "Croatia is in Schengen! There are no more borders on our European journey. We met all the conditions. With Croatia in Schengen, everyone benefits – citizens, the economy, Croatia and the EU." [Croatiaweek]

Croatia, which has been a member of the EU since 2013, on January 1 also switched to the European single currency after being given the go-ahead in the middle of last year. It hopes its adoption of the euro will raise the country's standard of living and make it easier for travellers to visit. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

(iy/pk)

EU, Hungary strike deal over frozen funds and Ukraine aid

The EU has agreed to lower the amount of funding being withheld from Hungary over rule-of-law concerns in exchange for Budapest unblocking key European policies, including aid for Ukraine. [Politico] [Euronews] [Reuters] [DW]

The deal was struck on December 12 after months of tensions between EU institutions and Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist government.

At the end of November, the European Commission had recommended withholding EUR 7.5 billion in cohesion funds for Hungary under the so-called conditionality mechanism, which links pay-outs of money by Brussels to the maintenance of democratic standards in the bloc's member states. [European Commission] [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Orban then vetoed a EUR 18 billion aid package for Ukraine in an attempt to gain leverage and acquire the EU funds. The Commission had promised the money for Kyiv in early November, and the delays were causing frustration in EU institutions. [Politico]

After the latest deal, the amount of Hungary's cohesion funds to be frozen has been reduced to EUR 6.3 billion.

The agreement also includes the conditional approval of Hungary's post-Covid recovery plan. [Euronews] Europe Monthly December 2022]

However, to unlock EU recovery funds amounting to EUR 5.8 billion, Budapest will have to implement 27 "milestones" set out by the Commission. These include judicial independence reforms, new rules on auditing and reporting on EU funds, and the establishment of new anti-corruption bodies. [Politico] [Euronews]

Without the approval of the recovery plan, Budapest would have lost 70 percent of its post-Covid funds by the end of the year. [Reuters]

In exchange, Orban has agreed to drop his veto on financial aid for Ukraine through the EU budget.

Hungary will also unblock a proposal for a global minimum tax of 15 percent for large international corporations – a plan put forward by the OECD. [Reuters] Budapest had been opposing the initiative for months, saying it was not the time to raise taxes. [Euronews]

The EU Budget Commissioner, Johannes Hahn, described the deal with Budapest as a "big moment for rule of law and EU funds".

In a tweet, he said the use of the conditionality mechanism had proved effective by "delivering structural improvements".

Balazs Orban, a key aide to the Hungarian prime minister, said the agreement with the EU was in his country's national interest, [Index] and also praised the deal as "a victory for the European Union". [Reporting Democracy]

(msa/pk)

Vote on Polish judicial reform bill shelved after opposition from president

Poland has shelved plans for a parliamentary vote on a judicial reform bill needed to unlock a stream of EU funds after President Andrzej Duda suggested he would veto the measure. [TVN24] [Reuters] [TVP World] [Notes From Poland]

Amid a standoff between Warsaw and the European Union, the bill aimed to address concerns over judicial independence in Poland and pave the way for the unblocking of billions in funds from Brussels for Warsaw. [TVN24] [Reuters]

Poland's government, led by the ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, said that it had agreed "key milestones" with the European Commission as a prerequisite for EUR 35.4 billion in Covid recovery funds to be released. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

However, highlighting a rift in Poland's ruling camp, PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski called the bill "extremely destructive." [Reuters]

Duda – who as president has the right to veto legislation – said that the bill would require further

scrutiny to ensure it complies with his country's constitution and upholds "Poland's sovereign right" to shape its justice system. [TVN24] [Reuters]

PiS spokesperson Rafal Bochenek said: "In connection with the appeal of President Andrzej Duda, a decision was made... to take the bill on changes in the judiciary off the [parliamentary] agenda." He added that "such an important act requires in-depth discussion." [TVN24]

The proposed bill would have assigned disciplinary cases against judges to Poland's Supreme Administrative Court, instead of to the Chamber of Professional Responsibility, which currently handles them. [TVN24] [Euractiv]

The chamber was introduced in July 2022 to replace a controversial disciplinary body for judges – which the EU had said undermined the political independence of the Polish judiciary and eroded rule-of-law principles. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

But Brussels had said that the new chamber still did not go far enough to ensure the independence of the judiciary. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in a Facebook post that the standoff with the European Commission must end, and that EU funds would "indirectly" boost Poland's defence capabilities and "seriously strengthen" its sovereignty. [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

ECHR upholds racial-hatred conviction against far-right French politician

The European Court of Human Rights upheld on December 20 the conviction of a far-right French politician by a Parisian court after making anti-Muslim statements on a television show in 2016. [Francetvinfo]

Eric Zemmour said in December 2016 that France had been "invaded" by Muslims living in the country and used derogatory language to describe the Muslim community as a whole. He made the comments on the TV show "C à Vous" on France 5,

The Paris Court of Appeal in 2018 fined him EUR 3,000 for "inciting discrimination and religious hatred." Zemmour challenged this judgement but the Court of Cassation dismissed the appeal in September 2019. [ECHR]

Zemmour complained to the European Court of Human Rights about the judgement, alleging a "violation of his right to freedom of expression". The European Court of Human Rights now ruled that the judgement of the French court did not violate his freedom of expression, and that the fine he was sentenced to was justified. [ECHR]

(gm/gc)

ECHR rules against Greek parliament's 2018 immunity ruling for defence minister

The European Court of Human Rights has unanimously ruled that the Greek Parliament's refusal to lift the immunity of Panos Kammenos, when he was defence minister in 2018, "directly hindered" the right of Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis to a fair trial in defamation proceedings she brought against him. [ekathimerini]

Bakoyannis had attempted to lodge a complaint regarding Kammenos' social media post criticising her attendance of the inauguration ceremony of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Kammenos's immunity had prevented Bakoyannis from pursuing her case.

The ECHR said this "directly hindered" her right to a fair trial in the defamation proceedings. It was ordered that Greece should pay Bakoyannis EUR 5000 in damages and EUR 1240 in costs and expenses. [Anadolu Agency]

(jk/gc)

EIB bank loans EUR 350m to steel firm in bid to cut emissions

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has granted a EUR 350 million loan to Italy's Danieli Group, a global leader in steel plant production, aiming to help the company achieve climate neutrality by 2050.

The money is to be used to develop electric furnaces and put more emphasis on recycled products. The ABS Sisak plant in northern Croatia, which is operated by Danieli, will receive EUR 122.5 million of the loan, with the rest going to the company's plants in Italy.

EIB Vice President Gelsomina Vigliotti said: "The steel industry alone is responsible for 10 percent of global

CO2 emissions. This operation shows the commitment of the EIB to developing more sustainable and innovative alternatives like recycled steel production, helping to reduce environmental impact and safeguard jobs in both Italy and Croatia". [European Investment Bank] [devdiscourse]

(iy/pk)

EU-Western Balkans summit held in Tirana

At the annual EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana on 6 December, the European Union reinforced its commitment to deepening ties with the Western Balkans following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [European Commission]. [Associated Press]

EU leaders have reaffirmed "the full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans." [European Commission]

The EU-Western Balkan's summit is an annual event involving the leaders of Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia - the region's six countries, EU representatives and the heads of the European Council, European Commission and the European External Action Service. [Carnegie Europe]

Serbia did not attend the summit, claiming that the reaction of the EU to the appointment by Kosovo's Prime Minister of a candidate to a position which did not come from a list of candidates Serbia considers appropriate. [European Western Balkans]

"No one will be in Tirana on December 6, and come nicely, take your daily allowances, travel as you wish, all of you from Europe, all of you from the Western Balkans, talk about how Serbia is to blame for everything," Serbian President Aleksander Vucic said. [European Western Balkans]

This was the first time the summit was held in a Western Balkan country. [European Commission]

(jn/gc)

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia hold trilateral meeting in Moscow

Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia Mher Grigoryan, Deputy Prime Minister of Azerbaijan Shahin Mustafayev and Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Alexei Overchuk held a meeting in December of the tripartite group in Moscow. Armenian government press reported that they discussed the Russian effort to unblock economic and transport links between them. The parties agreed to continue working toward implementing earlier agreements and maintaining peace in the regions.[NEWS.AM]

(ad/gc)

Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary, Romania back Black Sea electric cable

The leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania agreed on the construction of an underwater electricity link across the Black Sea at a meeting in Bucharest on December 17. [Euronews] [RFE/RL] [Reuters]

The project involves laying down a 1,100-kilometre cable linking Azerbaijan to Hungary via Georgia and Romania, and is expected to be completed within six years. [RFE/RL]

Aimed at transporting Azeri energy from renewable sources, the Black Sea cable would become a new way of delivering power to the European Union, which is seeking to wean itself off Russian energy. [Euronews] [European Commission]

“Since the beginning of Russia's war [in Ukraine], we have decided to turn our back on Russian fossil fuels and to diversify towards reliable energy partners,” said European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, who attended the meeting in Bucharest. [RFE/RL] [European Commission]

Von der Leyen said the cable would “help reinforce [Europe’s] security of supply” and added that the EU would be ready to financially support the project after a feasibility study. [RFE/RL] [European Commission]

She praised the “great benefits” the Black Sea cable could bring to Georgia by transforming the country into an electricity hub and integrating it with the EU internal electricity market. [European Commission]

Von der Leyen added that the project could also help bring electricity to Moldova and Ukraine, playing a role in the reconstruction of Ukraine’s energy system,

which has been devastated by Russian missile strikes. [European Commission]

(msa/pk

Bulgarian minister says EU commitment gained to ensure Schengen accession

Bulgaria's Justice Minister Krum Zarkov said in an interview that a clear deadline was given to him on Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen area in a European Council meeting in Brussels. In the interview, given to *Nova TV*, he noted that Bulgaria should join the visa-free region by October 2023 at the latest. [Euractiv]

Bulgaria's accession was blocked on December 8 by Austria and the Netherlands, the latter of which cited reports under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. Radev indicated: "We should not be alarmed by these reports. We have fulfilled our commitments", noting that the Cooperation and Verifications Mechanism was suspended by the European Commission in 2019.

Radev has maintained that he wanted guarantees on the accession, which have allegedly been obtained. "We are on the way to reaching a deadline for Bulgaria's entry into Schengen", said Radev on December 22. [Euractiv]

(jk/gc)

Finland may sell arms to Turkey amid bid to join NATO

The Finnish government has signalled that it may relax its restrictions on exporting weapons to Turkey, a step demanded by Ankara before it approves Helsinki's bid to join NATO.

Finland does not sell military equipment to Turkey because of concerns about human rights abuses and Ankara's 2019 land offensive in northern Syria.

Finland, alongside Sweden, applied to join NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February but is still waiting for the green light from Ankara and Budapest. All 30 members of the military alliance including Turkey and Hungary have to approve candidate countries.

Turkey specified that the two Nordic nations would only be admitted if a number of criteria were met. These include "concrete steps" against people living in Sweden and Finland whom Turkey says are affiliated with the PKK, a Kurdish militant group, and considers to be terrorists.

Although Helsinki has never enacted a full ban on selling military hardware to Ankara, there have been no new sales permits since 2019, when Turkish troops marched into Kurdish-held areas of Syria. Turkey considers this to be a de facto embargo, though Finland denies this. [Euronews] [Reuters]

Helsinki has suggested that it could now soften its attitude in order to acquiesce to Ankara's demands. Finnish Defence Minister Antti Kaikkonen on December 18 told news outlet YLE: "Little by little, we have to be able to think of Turkey as a future ally. It must be taken into account as part of the overall consideration" of arms export permits. [YLE] [YLE]

YLE reported that Helsinki had already given Turkey an "initial green light" to purchase arms from the Nordic nation.

Kaikkonen had visited his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar a week earlier in order to hammer out a deal, and assured Akar: "We [Finland] take the security concerns [of Turkey] seriously". Kaikkonen added that Helsinki would consider allowing weapons export permits to Turkey on a case-by-case basis. [YLE] [AP] [AP] [Reuters] [Reuters]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Finland and Sweden "have taken significant, concrete actions to fulfil their commitments, including those related to the security concerns on the part of our ally, Turkey."

Extradition refusal complicates Swedish NATO bid

However, Stockholm's bid to join NATO has been complicated after Sweden's Supreme Court ruled that the country cannot extradite exiled journalist Bulent Kenes to Turkey, despite a demand by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The court ruled in Kenes's favour on the grounds that the crimes he is accused of in Turkey are not crimes in Sweden. Kenes had edited a newspaper linked to Fethullah Gulen, whom officials in Ankara blame for a 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. [Al Jazeera] [AP News] [The Guardian]

The court also said that Kenes's extradition would pose "a risk of persecution based on the person's political

views." [AP News]

Erdogan directly named Kenes as one of the people he wanted Sweden to extradite to Turkey during a November press conference with Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson. [Al Jazeera] [AP News] [The Guardian]

(cg-ef/pk)

Italy, UK, Japan to jointly build next-generation fighter jets

The United Kingdom, Italy and Japan are set to cooperate in the development of sixth-generation fighter jets.

In a joint statement, the prime ministers of the three countries announced a joint Global Combat Air Programme that aims to develop next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035 to rival the warplanes of Russia and China.

While Moscow and Beijing were not mentioned by name, the statement said the new fighter jets were needed amid increasing "threats and aggression" against the "rules-based, free and open international order".

The prime ministers added that the project was "designed with our Allies and partners at its very heart," and sought future "interoperability with the United States, with NATO and with our partners across Europe, the Indo-Pacific and globally."

Currently, all three countries are flying US fifth-generation F-35 stealth fighters, with versions of the warplane assembled in Italy and Japan. [The Government, UK] [CNN] [AiR, No.50, December/2022, 2]

(aml/pk)

Switzerland allocates EUR 10.5 million to Western Balkans

Switzerland joined the Regional Challenge Fund, a financing facility designed to support jobs for the youth, by allocating EUR 10.5 million to support cooperative training projects in Western Balkans countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. [Sarajevo times]

The EUR 49 million Regional Challenge fund aims to increase the competitiveness of enterprises in the Western Balkans. Investments in equipment and infrastructure are allocated through competitive regional challenges. The German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development commissioned the fund while six Western Balkans Chambers Investment Forums execute it. [Regional Challenge Fund]

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, an agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs that deals with international cooperation, will deploy the funds. The Swiss agency is responsible for cooperation with Eastern Europe and the overall coordination of development activities. Its goal is to reduce poverty. [Federal Department of Foreign Affairs]

(ava, gc)

Oil tanker logjam off Turkish coast resolved after insurance agreement reached

A logjam of Russian oil tankers that were forced to wait offshore due to Turkish insurance regulations was resolved, according to Norwegian ship insurer Gard's announcement, after an agreement was reached between Turkey and insurers that enabled the free movement of Russian oil ships from December 13. [Reuters]

More than 20 Russian crude oil tankers had queued off the Turkey coast due to new insurance rules added by Turkish officials ahead of the G-7 price cap on Russian oil. The price cap does not allow Russian oil to be sold for more than USD 60 a barrel. This caused a build-up of oil tankers in the Bosphorus Straits in early December as insurers tried to adjust to the restrictions. [Reuters]

Turkish maritime officials issued a notice in November which asked for additional guarantees from insurers for ships that will transit through the straits, starting at the beginning of December. According to Turkish maritime officials, the reason behind this decision was due to insurance companies not being willing to insure Russian oil tankers. [Anadolu Agency]

Russian deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko signalled potential political involvement by Moscow if the issue was not solved. Norway's Skuld stated in a note that "the Turkish government's requirements go well beyond the general information that is contained in a confirmation of entry letter." [Al-Jazeera] [Reuters]

Turkish officials were quoted as saying that the logjam was due to the G7 price cap. Additional controls were imposed to prevent a possible accident on the straits that could cause billions of dollars in damages. [Reuters]

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen weighed in on the shipping disruption, saying that the issue could be resolved with appropriate measures from both sides. Yellen said Russia could be behind the logjam because most of the ships were carrying Kazakh oil. [Reuters] [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Turkey seeks to improve ties with Syria through trilateral mechanism

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called for a trilateral mechanism with Russia and Syria to start dialogue between Ankara and Damascus.

The countries' intelligence agencies will meet first, then the foreign ministers could meet to start the process, Erdogan was reported as saying by broadcaster Haberturk. After these, the leaders of the three countries could meet. Reuters]

The RIA Novosti news agency reported a positive stance from Russia on the possibility of meeting between countries to re-establish relations between Damascus and Ankara. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, also commented on this by saying that Turkey is open for dialogues in order to protect the rights and interests of our country. [TRT Haber] [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

EU to monitor deal between Albania and UAE for luxury developments

The EU has said it will monitor a deal between the Albanian government and an Emirati company for the development of Albania's Durres port. [Balkan Insight]

The deal would see a luxury complex on more than 800,000 square metres of public land being built in the port city. The deal, struck between Prime Minister Edi Rama and Abu Dhabi-based company Eagle Hills Real Estate Development L.L.C was endorsed by Albanian lawmakers in late November. [Balkan Insight]

Critics say that there had been a lack of transparency about the project, including the government's failure to disclose the portion of the agreement relating to the identity of one of the beneficial owners of the investment. [Exit][Balkan Insight]

A delegation from the EU expressed concerns that the deal with the developer may be in breach of Albania's pre-accession pact with the EU. [Balkan Insight]

(jn/gc)

German president visits Skopje

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited North Macedonia and Albania to discuss the European Union accession process.

Steinmeier addressed the North Macedonian parliament, stating that the nation "is on a very good path, as proven by the first EU accession conference as well as the European Commission's country report." Steinmeier listed a number of steps that could be taken to accelerate the negotiations including "measures to fight corruption and modernise the public administration, to name just two examples." [European Western Balkans][The Independent]

Skopje began European Union accession talks in July, yet North Macedonia's bid is currently held up by a dispute with EU member Bulgaria as the process requires a unanimous decision. As such, the leftist government in North Macedonia has introduced an amendment in its constitution to acknowledge the presence of an ethnic Bulgarian minority to ease the dispute – an amendment Steinmeier said was "an important decision". [Ekathimerini]

(jk/gc)

China wants to boost cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has put forward a set of proposals for boosting cooperation between Beijing

and countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

Beijing is "ready to introduce more new measures in such fields as import of agricultural and food products, e-commerce, finance, connectivity, and facilitation of cross-border travel," the Chinese foreign ministry said in a statement.

Wang made his proposals in a video speech on December 16 during the 17th National Coordinators' Meeting for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. [AiR, No.51, December/2022, 3]

Meanwhile, on December 13 Hungary and China signed an agreement on the establishment of an intergovernmental Belt and Road Cooperation committee between the two countries.

Hungary is the first European country to sign such an agreement on the Belt and Road initiative, which is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 150 countries.

The accord between Budapest and Beijing was signed by Wang and Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto. [CGTN]

According to a readout issued by the Chinese foreign ministry, Szijjarto thanked China for "its strong support for Hungary's economic and social development over the years." The readout added that "Hungary always sees China as a partner, not a rival."

However, the Indo-Pacific strategy of the European Union, of which Hungary is a member, views China as a partner and competitor.

(aml/pk)

European Council chief urges Xi Jinping to open up China market

European Council President Charles Michel urged China to open up its market to Western business during a meeting with President Xi Jinping in Beijing on December 1 at which the leaders discussed trade relations.

Michel also called on Beijing to use its influence with Moscow to stop the war in Ukraine. Further topics discussed were human rights in China and tensions in the Taiwan Strait. [European Council]

Xi, meanwhile, called on EU institutions and member states to "gain an objective and correct perception of China, and rise above ideological antagonism, transcend confrontation of systems, and reject a new Cold War, whatever form it takes."

He said China was open to European companies and expressed hope that the EU would provide Chinese firms with a "fair and transparent business environment." [Global Times]

Xi's comments came as the EU faces a looming trade dispute with America in the wake of US President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), a massive USD 350 billion investment plan to build a new "green" economy while providing subsidies and tax credits to companies using US products or producing in the US.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has warned of "distortions" of competition caused by the IRA. [European Council] [Global Times] [Politico] [Euronews] [AiR, No.49, December/2022, 1]

Meanwhile, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Stefano Sannino, Secretary General of the EU's diplomatic service, said during a meeting in Washington on December 1 and 2 that the European Union and America want to increase coordination on their approach to relations with China.

Both agreed on the importance of diversifying their countries' economies and building resilient supply chains in order not to become dependent on China.

They also said they were worried about "provocations" by Beijing that "increase the risk of crisis in the [Taiwan] Strait", and voiced concern over human rights in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Hong Kong. [European External Action Service] [AiR, No.49, December/2022, 1]

(aml/pk)

First ever EU-ASEAN leader summit held in Brussels

The first-ever summit between the leaders of the European Union and ASEAN took place on December 14 in Brussels, marking 45 years of diplomatic relations between the two regional organisations.

The summit was co-chaired by European Council President Charles Michel and the 2022 ASEAN Chair, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. During the summit, the leaders reaffirmed the organisations'

shared values, such as the rules based international order, the respect of territorial integrity, as well as sustainable multilateralism.

Topics discussed were regional and international security issues, climate change and energy issues, economic cooperation and trade.

ASEAN, which consists of Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, is the EU's third largest trading partner outside Europe after the US and China. European Council] [AiR, No.50, December/2022]

(aml/gc)

UK, Polish delegations meet Taiwan's President Tsai

The head of the British parliament's foreign affairs committee, Alicia Kearns, has emphasized the importance of deterrence in maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, following a meeting with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen.

The meeting took place during a visit by a seven-member British parliamentary delegation to Taiwan from November 29 to December 3 during which military conflicts, cyber threats, defence cooperation and a range of security issues were discussed.

Tobias Ellwood, the chair of the British parliament's defence committee and also part of the delegation, said that Taiwan's submarine programme was discussed, and added that Britain should provide Taiwan with military support, including weapons and intelligence sharing.

The visit came after British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said that the "golden era" of UK-China ties was "over," adding that China's challenge to British values and interests had become "more acute." [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News 1]

On December 6, Tsai met with Waldemar Andzel, the chair of the Polish parliamentary group on Taiwan. Andzel reaffirmed Poland's support for Taiwan in the face of pressure from China and expressed hope for deepening bilateral cooperation, especially on semi-conductors and education. [Taiwan News 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan] [AiR, No.49, December/2022, 1]

(aml/pk)

Austrian defence ministry buying 36 helicopters from Italy

The Austrian ministry of defence has confirmed it is purchasing a total of 36 new helicopters from the Italian government in a deal worth over EUR 870 million.

The first of the helicopters was delivered to the Austrian army at Brumowski Air Base on December 21, with the rest to be delivered in several stages by 2028. Austrian Defence Minister Klaudia Tanner said the deal had “enormous benefits”.

The Leonardo AW169 helicopters will replace ageing Alouette III machines which are scheduled to be phased out by the end of 2023. While the new helicopters will be armed, they are also expected to be used for tasks high in the mountains such as search and rescue missions or putting out forest fires.

The purchase of the helicopters is part of a larger plan by the defence ministry to gradually renew the Austrian army's equipment, with investment of EUR 16.6 billion planned up until 2032. [Der Standard] [VPK]

(iy/pk)

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovakia discuss ways to improve ties

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovakia expressed their commitment to expand trade after a meeting between a member of the Bosnian Presidency, Denis Becirovi and the newly appointed ambassador of the Slovak Republic, Roman Hloben.

Their meeting focused on the Slovak support of Bosnia through the Visa Group, a group that aims at reflecting the efforts of the countries of Central Europe to work together on issues of common interest. The group wants to contribute to the building of European security and to promote cultural cohesion. All of the activities of the group make it possible to strengthen the Central European region. [Visegrad Group]

The two discussed support for the process of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession to the Erasmus Plus Programme, a programme to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe. [Sarajevotimes] [European Commission]

(ava/gc)

Bulgaria holds talks with Turkey on natural gas pipeline

Bulgarian caretaker Energy Minister Rosen Hristov said that Sofia has begun negotiations on the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Turkey.

The project would review the previous Burgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline, which was abandoned in 2011. Russian oil company Lukoil is backing the project, which will allow Bulgaria to import oil through the potential pipeline from the Mediterranean Sea. [SeeNews] [Euractiv]

(jk/gc)

Bulgaria's defence minister meets with Ukrainian counterpart

Bulgaria's Defence Minister Dimitar Stoyanov met with his Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov to discuss military assistance and cooperation shortly after the parliament in Sofia voted to approve supplying military equipment to Kyiv. [Ukrinform]

Following the meeting, Stoyanov said the Bulgarian parliament supported supplying military equipment and an increase in the contribution to the European Union Military Assistance Mission to support Ukraine.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party is concerned that military support to Kyiv will drag it into the conflict and has appealed to the constitutional court to overturn parliament's decision.[Novinite]

(jk/gc)

Estonia will get military support from UK

Estonia's Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur and his British counterpart Ben Wallace signed an agreement that sets out the activities of Estonia and the United Kingdom in the coming year to implement decisions taken at the NATO summit in Madrid. [BALTICTIMES]

"We reached agreement on the significantly increased contribution of the United Kingdom to Estonia's security in the coming year," Pevkur said. In January,

Chinook helicopters will arrive in Estonia, in March Apache helicopters, in April Typhoon fighters, and in May an additional battle group will be deployed to Estonia for the large-scale exercise Kevadtorm (Spring Storm), Pevkur said.[BALTICTIMES]

The UK is also planning to contribute to increasing security in the Baltic Sea. The UK aims to reinforce Estonian divisions and maintain multiple launch rocket systems, brought to Estonia in the summer of 2022, to reinforce the allied battle group, and Stormer short-range air defence systems. [BALTICTIMES]

(ad/gc)

German embassy criticises Slovenian MP's comments on Nazi Germany

The German embassy in Ljubljana has voiced concern at "dangerous" comments by a Slovenian parliamentarian who compared conditions in his home country to those in Nazi Germany.

The controversial remarks came after Slovenia held a referendum at the end of November on a range of government proposals. The referendum was called by the right-wing opposition Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) in a bid to undermine the governing liberal coalition that bested the SDS in elections last year.

But, in a blow to the SDS, the public supported government plans in all three questions posed by the referendum. That prompted SDS parliamentarian Branko Grims to say: "I strongly doubt that people were fully aware of the content of their decisions."

Grims complained about "deception" by the media, which he claimed had made "statements in the wrong direction" and "managed to channel a discussion about ideology, and personal prejudices, who is for this and who is for that, instead of people deciding what is better for their wallet." Grims concluded by saying that "the situation in Slovenia is getting increasingly similar to that in Germany in 1933".

The German embassy in Ljubljana responded with a statement on November 28 that said Slovenia was "firmly anchored in the EU, where everyone can freely express their opinion, choose between a wide range of parties in elections, freely choose their religion, vote in referendums without pressure and fear and on the basis of freely available information."

Modern-day Slovenia has “nothing in common with the Germany of 1933,” the statement said, adding: “Such comparisons are not only unfounded but also dangerous – they downplay the events that followed the national-socialist rise to power.” [Delo] [Euractiv]

(cg/pk)

Greece’s prime minister backs Albanian EU bid during historic visit

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited the Greek minority in Southern Albania to express his support for Albania’s European Union accession bid. This is the first time a Greek prime minister has visited Albania’s ethnic Greek minority for 31 years. [AP News]

Mitsokakis also expressed that it is “Albania’s obligation, in the framework of its rapprochement with Europe, to fully respect your [the Greek minority’s] rights,” regarding the right to self-determination.

Albania initiated EU membership negotiations in the summer of 2021 and has sought to ease previous tensions with Greece in order to gain support from its neighbour. Recently, Tirana has considered ceding some maritime territory to Athens in order to gain additional support as the Greek government seeks to begin natural gas exploration within the Aegean Sea. [The National Herald]

(jk/gc)

Secret talks held between Greece and Turkey

Senior officials from Greece and Turkey held a private meeting in Brussels hosted by Germany to help reduce tensions between the two countries, according to Greek media.

Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin, Greek Prime Ministry Diplomatic Office Director Anna-Maria Boura and German Chancellery Foreign and Security Policy Adviser Jens Ploetner attended the meeting. [MEHR] [Tasnim News Agency]

Steffen Hebestreit, the German chancellor’s spokesperson confirmed that top foreign policy advisers from the two governments had held a meeting in Brussels, accompanied by senior officials from the German government. Hebestreit noted that

"both the Greek prime minister and the Turkish president responded very positively" to Germany's facilitation of said meeting. He also indicated that further meetings are expected in the future. [Daily Sabah]

Tensions between Greece and Turkey have been on the rise as of late amid a military build-up around the Greek Aegean islands close to Turkish territory. Turkish rhetoric has persistently heightened its rhetoric, warning Greece to stop militarising or Ankara "will take the necessary steps on the ground", warned Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. [POLITICO]

The Greek government has condemned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's threat that Turkish missiles "can hit Athens." Greece's Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said that "it is unacceptable and universally condemnable for threats of a missile attack against Greece to be made by an allied country, a NATO member." [AP News]

(jk/gc)

Poland to buy military observation satellites from France

Poland has signed a deal to buy two military observation satellites from France as part of an effort to boost its defence and security capabilities. [Euronews] [Reuters] [Notes From Poland] [TVP World] [AP News]

The EUR 575 million contract was agreed between the Polish Armament Agency and Airbus Defence and Space, which develops the satellites. [Reuters] [Euronews]

"This is an extremely important... opportunity to complement all that is related to deterrence and early warning capabilities," said Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak about the agreement. [Euronews]

The satellites – whose image data has a margin of error of 30 centimetres – are planned to be launched in 2027, but Poland will have access to French reconnaissance data before then. [Notes From Poland] [Euronews] [Reuters]

The deal comes as Warsaw continues to increase its focus on security amid the ongoing war in Ukraine and recent migrant crises on the Polish-Belarusian border. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

“The current situation shows how important it is for each country to be autonomous in its assessment of the situation,” said French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu, who signed off on the deal with Blaszczak in Warsaw. [Notes From Poland]

In addition to helping the Polish military identify potential threats earlier, Blaszczak said the satellites could aid the civilian sector in coordinating responses to natural disasters. [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

Slovenia, Hungary planning gas interconnector

Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob has floated a plan to build a gas interconnector between his country and Hungary, which is dependent on Russian gas.

The Slovenian and Hungarian power grids were connected for the first time on December 2, prompting the leaders of the two countries to suggest deepening their energy cooperation by means of a gas interconnector. [Vecer] Most of Slovenia’s gas infrastructure is located in the vicinity of the Hungarian border.

Ljubljana in November finalised a three-year deal with Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach to provide Slovenia with some 300 million cubic metres of gas a year – around a third of its needs – via Italian and Tunisian pipeline networks.

Slovenia receives a large amount of its gas from Russia, and the government is seeking alternatives, but is still willing to supply Hungary. [Euractiv]

Referring to a potential new gas interconnector, Golob said: “Such a connection would allow Hungary to free itself of reliance on Russian gas in the medium term and find an independent source that would traverse Italy.” He added: “If we go down this route, I see this as an expression of solidarity between the two countries.”

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban voiced support for an interconnector project, saying that Budapest was considering alternative gas sources, including from Slovenia.

(cg/pk)

Switzerland rejects Germany's request to re-export Swiss-made ammunition to Ukraine

Switzerland has rejected for the second time Germany's request to re-export ammunition to Ukraine because of the effect that this would have on Swiss neutrality.

The German Defence Ministry asked the government in Bern for permission to supply 12,400 rounds of Swiss-made ammunition to Ukraine for anti-aircraft tanks. This would have been used to help Ukraine in its war with Russia. [Euronews]

The Swiss government rejected the request after doing the same in June. In the framework of international conflict, Switzerland cannot agree to requests for transfers of war materials of Swiss origin to Ukraine following the principle of equal treatment in neutrality law. [FDFA]

The ammunition was originally supplied to Germany years ago on the condition that the German government would need to ask for permission from Switzerland to re-export them to other countries. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Turkish official travels to Skopje to strengthen ties

Turkish Parliament Speaker Mustafa Sentop visited Skopje on December 20 where he met with his North Macedonian counterpart Talat Xhaferi to discuss cooperation between the two countries. Sentop reaffirmed Turkey's support for stability in the Balkans, which is "extremely important for Europe." [Anadolu Agency]

(jk/gc)

Erdogan discusses energy policies with Putin

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin discussed possible energy projects for both countries, as well as the future of the Black Sea grain export agreement

brokered by Turkey and the United Nations on December 11 during a phone call. [Reuters]

Both presidents exchanged opinions on the possibility of a regional gas hub in Turkey, following the meeting between chief of Gazprom Alexei Miller and Erdogan in the first week of December. Putin suggested redirecting Russia's Nord Stream pipelines to Turkey, an idea that Erdogan supports, according to a statement from the Russian Presidency. [Reuters]

On the topic of the Black Sea grain export agreement, Russia and Ukraine are seeking changes in the agreement to help both countries to increase their grain exports. While Russia is seeking better guarantees, Ukraine is asking to increase the number of Ukrainian ports open for shipping. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Four people die trying to cross the English Channel from France to United Kingdom

Four undocumented migrants died when a small boat capsized on 14 December 2022 as they tried to cross the English Channel from France to the United Kingdom. Another 43 people were rescued by French and British authorities. [Liberation]

After the incident, Alex Fraser, the British Red Cross's director of refugee support, said that "nobody puts their life at risk like this unless they feel they have no other option." He called for "more accessible safe routes for people to claim asylum." [Redcross.org.uk]

France and Britain signed in November a EUR 72.2 million agreement to work together to stop migrants from crossing the channel. France will receive the money from the United Kingdom and in return will reinforce border security. [Liberation] [Le Monde] [BBC]

Since 2014, at least 205 migrants have died or were lost in the English Channel trying to cross from France to the United Kingdom.

(gc/gm)

Vatican apologises after pope called minorities 'cruellest' troops, says Moscow

Moscow says the Vatican has apologised after Pope Francis called soldiers from Russia's Chechen and Buryat ethnic minorities the "cruellest" troops fighting the war in Ukraine.

The Russian authorities had issued a formal protest over the pope's comments in a November interview with *America*, a US-based monthly Christian magazine. [Newsweek] [CNN]

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters on December 15 that Moscow now considered the matter closed and that she hoped for constructive dialogue with the Vatican. [Reuters] [Newsweek] [Euronews]

Buryats are an ethnic group in Siberia, near the Russia-Mongolia border. Buryat men, along with those from Chechnya, a republic of Russia, have been mobilised for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters] [Euronews]

Pro-Kremlin leader Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, said that the pope had fallen "victim to propaganda".

[Newsweek]

Chechnya's population is predominantly Muslim. Kadyrov said that Chechen troops are "deeply religious" and that "each fighter knows that in times of war, one should not forget about honour, dignity and even respect for the enemy." [Newsweek]

(rmp/pk)

Belarus, UAE consider deepening economic ties

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko met with the leadership of the United Arab Emirates at an official reception in Minsk to discuss how to further deepen cooperation between the two countries.

"The complementarity of the economies of Belarus and the UAE is a favourable factor for the development of trade and economic cooperation," Golovchenko said. The Persian Gulf emirate is an example of how to effectively use domestic opportunities to integrate into the global economy, while maintaining tradition and culture, he said. [Belta]

Golovchenko assured Emirati partners of Belarus' readiness to fully support the 28th UN Climate Change

Conference which is to be held in the UAE in 2023, as well as other creative initiatives.

“We are convinced that sincere and open relations between the leaders of our countries will further contribute to the development of mutually beneficial cooperation between Belarus and the UAE” he stressed, noting the promising increase in foreign trade this past year. The Emirate is a regional partner of the United States. [Belta]

Belarus not only seeks to use the UAE market to export goods and services, but also the logistic advantage of supplying its products from the UAE to the Middle East and Africa.

A flagship investment project, The Northern Waterfront, is underway with the participation of the Emirates. “I am confident that we can build on this success and implement joint projects in other areas, including agriculture, industry, tourism, and healthcare” Golovchenko said. [Belta]

(em/gc)

France’s foreign minister visits Morocco to improve ties

France’s Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna met with her Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita in Rabat on December 16 to work on improving bilateral ties after they frayed over immigration. [Diplomatie.gouv.fr]

Since September 2021, Morocco has refused to repatriate its citizens living in France as irregular migrants. France reacted by halving its visa quota for Moroccans. Colonna said that the two countries should return to “full consular cooperation” after the meeting. [France24]

French President Emmanuel Macron will visit Morocco in early 2023, as announced during the meeting. He already spoke with Morocco's King Mohammed VI on the phone on December 14 2022. [Le Monde]

(gm/gc)

North Macedonia wants to strengthen ties with Egypt, Kazakhstan

North Macedonia wants to increase its economic cooperation with Egypt and Kazakhstan. North

Macedonian Foreign Minister Boyar Osmani said that an agreement was reached with Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry on strengthening economic relations.

Osmani said that extensive discussions focused on illegal migration and said that his country appreciated the Egyptian role in confronting illegality and that these efforts must be supported. Besides agreeing to meet again later in 2023, the two discussed Egypt's role in preventing illegal immigration and the cooperation needed from European and international partners in doing so. [Daily News Egypt]

The Ambassador of North Macedonia to Kazakhstan Sali Limani said in a recent interview that the two nations "have a lot of things in common" and should pursue economic cooperation with Astana. In November, North Macedonia and Kazakhstan signed a recent memorandum on economic cooperation, which Limani hailed as a "determined and fruitful meeting". [Astana Times]

(jk/gc)

Bulgarian chief prosecutor accused of 'corrupt acts' by US Congressman

US Congressman Warren Davidson has accused Bulgarian Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev in a series of official letters and social media posts of "corrupt actions" undermining the "stability and security of NATO allies in Europe." [Euractiv]

Davidson, who is a member of the House Financial Service Committee, sent an official letter to Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to act against Geshev for "blatant disregard of US sanctions [on Russia] by the Bulgarian Prosecutor General." He further noted that "most of the malign Russian influence is centred in Southeastern Europe, including amongst NATO countries such as Bulgaria."

In June 2021, the US Department of the Treasury's office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned three Bulgarians and targeted more than 65 individuals and entities for significant acts of corruption under the Magnitsky act.

The Bulgarian prosecutor's office started investigations on these charges but came to the conclusion that there were none. Davidson expressed disappointment, saying that "we have seen only escalation in the misconduct of the Bulgarian judiciary" since the sanctions.

(jk/gc)

French President Macron visits Washington

France's President Emmanuel Macron visited Washington where he met with President Joe Biden and senior US officials to discuss legislation that subsidises American-made products.

European leaders have expressed concern that the USD 420 billion Inflation Reduction Act is unfair to non-American companies and would be a serious blow to their economies as Europe deals with the fallout from Russia's February invasion of Ukraine. [Senate Democrats] [Whitehouse.gov] [France 24]

The bill is meant to address inflation and climate change. Biden signed the bill in August.

Biden called Macron his friend and Macron announced after the visit that they will "fix" the issues arising from the subsidies together.[France 24] [BBC]

(gc/gm)

US voices concern about potential Turkish ground operation in Syria

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin raised concerns about a possible ground operation in northern Syria following a bomb attack in Istanbul on November 13 during a phone call with his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar.

During the phone call, Austin expressed the US's strong opposition to an operation that threatens the safety of US military personnel in Syrian territory and called for de-escalation. Akar told reporters that the US asked us to re-evaluate. "We conveyed to them our sensitivities and thoughts and asked them to keep their promises." [Reuters]

On December 7, White House spokesperson John Kirby also commented on the issue stating that a ground operation will put civilians at further risk and the operation should be avoided at all costs. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

EU, Japan vow joint effort on clean energy

The European Union and Japan have signed a memorandum of cooperation aiming to help develop an international hydrogen market. Under the agreement, both sides are to cooperate in sustainable and affordable production, trade, transport, storage, distribution and use of renewable and low-carbon hydrogen.

The EU and Japan in May 2021 adopted a Green Alliance, under which Tokyo and Brussels committed themselves to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and to speeding up a transition to “clean” energy. [European Commission] [AiR, No.49, December/2022, 1]

(aml/pk)

EU, Pakistan review joint drive against malnutrition

Representatives of the EU and Pakistan’s south-eastern Sindh province met on December 7 to review a USD 60 million programme aimed at fighting malnutrition that was launched together with the local government in 2018.

The programme, which concluded last year, is reported to have attained a 92 percent success rate in curing conditions linked to malnutrition in individual cases. [DAWN] [AiR, No.50, December/2022, 2]

(aml/pk)

EU, Thailand sign deal to step up cooperation

The European Union and Thailand have signed a Thai-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, marking a milestone as they commemorate 44 years of diplomatic relations.

The agreement, inked on the sidelines of the first ASEAN-EU summit held in Brussels, includes pledges to cooperate on multiple fronts such as climate change, transport and social affairs, and will see political dialogue stepped up.

The deal is also expected to serve as a basis for the resumption of Thai-EU Free Trade Agreement

negotiations after years of hiatus. [Bangkok Post] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand] [AiR, No.51, December/2022, 3]

(aml/pk)

Belgium ‘playing with fire’ over Taiwan, says China

China warned Belgium that it is “playing with fire” over Taiwan after the Federal Parliament published a draft resolution which condemns China's “aggressiveness” towards Taiwan and calls for the Belgian government to “strengthen” its ties with Taipei. [BrusselsTimes]

In a letter addressed to the Chair of the Federal Government's Foreign Affairs Committee Els Hoof by Chinese Ambassador to Belgium Cao Zhongming, Belgium was warned not to “support 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces through any means.”

The letter also says that Belgium is “'playing with fire' on the Taiwan question” in a way that “will seriously damage relations between relevant countries and China”. [Politico]

The letter condemned Van Hoof's November visit to Taiwan as a “harmful act that violates the one-China policy” and noted that such signals could “damage peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait”. Belgium, like the rest of the EU, is officially committed to the so-called 'one-China' policy, according to which Taiwan is viewed as part of China: a view that meets strong resistance of Taipei. [BrusselsTimes]

The Chinese Ambassador's warning comes at a time of growing tension between Beijing and Brussels. Last October, a diplomatic dispute broke out between Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib (MR) and Beijing, when she suggested in an interview that Chinese trading vessels might be repurposed as military warships. [BrusselsTimes] [Politico]

(gt/gc)

Croatian city hit by earthquake to be rebuilt with Japan’s help

The Croatian city of Petrinja is to be rebuilt with the help of the Japanese government, two years after it

was hit by a magnitude 6.2 earthquake. [Telegram] [Reliefweb]

The city, located about 50 km southeast of the capital Zagreb, was struck on December 29, 2020. The quake left eight people dead and caused over EUR 5 billion of damage.

The first meeting for the rebuilding project was held on December 12 in Petrinja and was attended by Japan's deputy ambassador to Croatia, Tatsuyuki Ueda.

Victoria Zinchuk, the director of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Croatia, thanked Japan for supporting the project, saying: "We are looking forward to the work that awaits us in the next two years." [Telegram]

(iy/pk)

Denmark, Indonesia sign deal on joint investment of up to USD 500m

Denmark's Investment Fund for Developing Countries has signed a deal on joint investment projects worth up to USD 500 million with the Indonesia Investment Authority, a sovereign wealth fund.

The money is set to be used to boost green transition technologies and social development in Indonesia. [Sfwinstitute] [Reuters]

(cg/pk)

German President Steinmeier and China's Xi discuss Ukraine, Covid

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and China's President Xi Jinping discussed Russia's war in Ukraine and China's recent withdrawal from its zero-Covid policy in a phone call on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and China.

Steinmeier underlined Germany's commitment to supporting Ukraine despite the energy crisis in Europe, and asked Xi to "use his influence on Russia and influence [Russian President Vladimir] Putin." Xi reiterated China's position in favour of peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.

Xi said China wanted to deepen relations and cooperation between Beijing and Berlin, and said that companies from both nations should have equal and fair opportunities to invest in each other's economies.

Berlin at the end of October allowed a controversial investment by Chinese shipping company Cosco in Germany's largest port in Hamburg. [AiR No. 44, November/2022, 1].

Critics said that Germany could become economically dependent on China through such deals. They added that an investment of this type would not be possible for German shipping companies in China. [Federal President, Germany] [FMPRC] [AiR, No.52 December/2022, 4]

(aml/pk)

Germany, Taiwan introduce reciprocal automated customs clearance program

Germany and Taiwan launched a reciprocal automated customs clearance program on 10 December, according to Taiwan's National Immigration Agency.

The program allows Taiwanese travellers to use Germany's EasyPass border control system, while Germans can use Taiwan's e-Gate system. This aims to facilitate travel and trade between the two economies.

After the US, South Korea, Australia and Italy, Germany is the fifth country to have a reciprocal customs clearance agreement with Taiwan, while Taiwan has become the fourth non-European Union country which Germany has granted the privilege. [Focus Taiwan] [AiR, No.50, December/2022]

(aml/gc)

Hungary, South Korea to increase economic cooperation

Hungarian Foreign and Trade Minister Peter Szijjarto has met with his South Korean counterparts Park Jin and Ahn Duk-geun to discuss increased economic cooperation and regional security.

Among the topics broached by Szijjarto and Park in Seoul on December 20 was how to improve business conditions for South Korean companies in Hungary amid rising energy prices.

Szijjarto praised South Korean companies investing in Hungary, expressing hope for closer cooperation in the future. Both ministers highlighted nuclear energy, especially the research and development sector and small modular reactors, as an area for cooperation with high potential.

The two also agreed to cooperate on the international arena, including in the UN and the Visegrad Group-plus-Korea format. The Visegrad Group is a regional cooperation platform comprising the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland.

Park asked for Hungary's support in coordinating a united multilateral response against North Korean "provocations". Szijjarto said his government would continue to support South Korean denuclearisation initiatives. Szijjarto also assured Park of Hungary's official support for South Korea's bid to host the 2030 World Expo in the southern city of Busan.

Park asked for Budapest's support against potential "discrimination" arising from the EU's new Carbon Boundary Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which will prospectively levy a carbon tax on energy-intensive imports such as cement and electricity from 2026.

Ahn joined Szijjarto and Park to sign a memorandum of understanding on trade and investment cooperation and to discuss the details of the CBAM.

The memorandum follows bilateral ministerial trade talks held on October 24 and comes ahead of an expected Trade and Investment Promotion Framework deal between Hungary and South Korea which will cover supply chain, digital, clean energy and other trade issues.

South Korea and Hungary upgraded their relations to a strategic partnership in late 2021. They have seen their bilateral trade grow from USD 2.8 billion in 2010 to USD 4.8 billion in 2021. [Korea Times] [South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [South Korean Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Energy] [AiR, No.52 December/2022, 4]

(aml/pk)

Italy offers EUR 3m aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Italy has pledged to provide an additional EUR 3 million for humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Almost 1 million Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh after having fled Myanmar, where they experienced discrimination and persecution as a Muslim minority in the majority-Buddhist country.

The aid announcement was made on December 14 by Italy's ambassador to Bangladesh. [New Age] [reliefweb] [AiR, No.51, December/2022, 3]

(aml/pk)

Netherlands plans restrictions tech-exports to China

The Netherlands plans to impose new export controls on chip-making equipment to China as the European country aligns with the US on tightening restrictions on Beijing's access to high-end technology. [Bloomberg]

The Dutch restrictions will limit China's chipmaking and military ambitions but could hurt Dutch firm ASML Holdings NV, one of the world's most important suppliers of machines necessary for the production of semiconductors. According to its latest report, China accounted for 15 percent of ASML's revenue last year. [Reuters]

The final decision will have important consequences since China is the Netherlands' third-largest trade partner after Germany and Belgium. [Reuters]

The US has some leverage over the Netherlands since ASML uses US-made components. American officials have advanced a possible ban on the sale of foreign equipment that contains US technologies if the Netherlands does not comply. [Bloomberg]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands condemns Taliban ban on women working at NGOs in Afghanistan

The Netherlands condemned the Taliban's ban on women working at NGOs.

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a tweet in response to the ban and condemned the Taliban's decision by saying that "women are a crucial part of humanitarian work" and that "this decision may have terrible consequences for millions of Afghan people already facing a difficult winter." [Twitter]

The Taliban's Ministry of Economy has announced women can no longer work in local and international non-governmental organisations operating in Afghanistan. The main reason is the disobedience to the Taliban's interpretation of the dress code. The ban concerns more than 180 domestic and international NGOs. The organisations will lose their permit to operate if they do not stick to the rules. [NL times]

European Union Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell strongly condemned the Taliban's ban saying that this decision would contribute to erasing women from public spaces. The decision, which follows the last week's ban on women attending universities, goes against international humanitarian law and principles. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Portugal, India sign deal on labour mobility

Portugal and India have signed a bilateral labour mobility agreement aiming to foster safe migration pathways for Indian workers. The initiative also aims to provide access to information to migrants at all stages of their journey. [MSN] [The Print] [AiR, No.49, December/2022, 1]

The two countries held talks in New Delhi on November 29 with the support of the International Organization for Migration.

(aml/pk)

Beijing bans export of Chinese processors to Russia

The Chinese government has reportedly banned the export of Loongson processors to Russia and other countries in a move seen as hurting Moscow, which has sought to find an alternative to US-made AMD and Intel processors after the companies halted supplies after the war in Ukraine.

The ban was imposed because Beijing considers the processors developed and produced by Chinese chip manufacturer Loongson Technology Corporation Limited as "strategically important." They are said to be used by China's military-industrial complex. [South China Morning Post] [AiR, No.51, December/2022, 3]

(aml/gc)

Australia reopens embassy in Switzerland

After a 30-year break, the Australian government has officially reopened its embassy in the Swiss capital Bern. The embassy was closed due to cost reasons but the re-opening draws attention to the importance of the relationship between Switzerland and Australia.

On the occasion of the re-opening, the Swiss Economics Minister held talks with Australia's Minister of Trade and Tourism on issues relating to cooperation within the World Trade Organization and bilateral economic relations. [Swissinfo]

Australia is the world's twelfth-largest economy and an important business partner for Switzerland. According to Australian statistics, Switzerland is the eleventh largest investor in Australia. While Switzerland is known for the transport of pharmaceuticals, watches, and precision technology to Australia, Australia exports medicines, gold, meat, and silver to Switzerland.

The Australian market offers considerable potential for Swiss businesses and scientific communities because of its strong demand for innovative products and services. [Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research]

Australia's presence in Switzerland is now seen through the embassy in Bern, the Austrade Office in Zurich, and Australia's Permanent Mission and Consulate-General in Geneva. [Minister of Foreign Affairs]

(ava, gc)

Team:

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