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Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of Europe in Review (EiR), which informs about the events and developments impacting the continent in constitutional politics, foreign relations, regional governance, and security. As always, we provide you with a concise and comprehensive impression of what has been happening in European affairs over the past four weeks through both detailed reporting and brief overviews.

While the Russian war in Ukraine continues unabated, with the latest Russian attacks on Odessa and a looming Ukrainian counteroffensive, China is edging closer to Russia. To solidify the Sino-Russian axis, Russian President Vladimir Putin could receive his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping only a few days after the International Criminal Court indicted him for the alleged forced deportation and abduction of Ukrainian children by Russian authorities. The announcement of the two leaders to conduct more trade in rubles and yuan to reduce their reliance on the American dollar, along with the BRICS' decision to launch their own trade currency, signifies for some observers a decline in the role the US currency plays in global trade.

In national politics, the war in Ukraine, energy and climate policies, gender issues and LGBTQ+ rights, racism, and economic difficulties in the financial sector continue to play an important role in Europe, albeit under different auspices.

While Finland joins NATO, the Czech Republic inaugurated a president who strongly supports Ukraine. However, thousands also protested the Czech Republic's support for Kyiv on the streets, while a populist who opposes military aid for Ukraine has taken the lead ahead of early elections in Slovakia.

In France, the Macron government forced through its pension system reform plan that would raise the retirement age by two years after months of intense parliamentary debate, mass strikes, and demonstrations across the country. Meanwhile, Dutch politics were upended by the unexpected election success of the Dutch farmers' party, following thousands taking to the streets to protest the government's plan to reduce nitrogen emissions in the agriculture sector.

With these and many other developments covered, we hope you enjoy reading the news from the almost fifty countries of Europe and would very much like to invite your feedback on the EiR!

Kind wishes,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

War in Europe: Putin indicted by ICC as Ukraine readies new offensive

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has put out an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin, issued just days before the Russian president hosted his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Moscow. As key developments in the Russia-Ukraine conflict took place far from the battlefield, Moscow's fighter jets intercepted and downed a US surveillance drone in the Black Sea. Russia has also arrested prominent American journalist Evan Gershkovich on alleged espionage charges.

On the frontline, Russian forces are grinding forward in and around the embattled eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut after eight months of fighting there. Meanwhile, Ukraine has been telegraphing its intention to launch an offensive of its own. The European Union has agreed a deal to provide 1 million artillery shells and missiles to Kyiv, while Ukrainian armed forces have confirmed the delivery of Western tanks and fighting vehicles, together with fighter jets for the first time.

While more political barbs than ground have been exchanged recently between the two sides, the brutality at the front is soon likely to intensify.

Ukrainian children learning to 'love Russia'

Putin and Russia's commissioner for children's rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, became the first individuals to be indicted by the International Criminal Court in relation to the war in Ukraine, with an arrest warrant issued for the two on March 17.

While the exact contents of the warrant are not public, it relates to the alleged forced deportation and abduction of Ukrainian children by Russian authorities. Moscow denies the charge and has stated that there are 1,400 Ukrainian children it describes as “orphans” in its adoption system.

Moscow has simplified the process for granting such children Russian citizenship. Lvova-Belova has personally adopted a child from Ukraine, saying of the children that “there is some negativity, maybe at first, but later it turns into love for Russia”. Children from Mariupol were displayed at Russia’s concert to mark the first anniversary of what it calls its “special military operation” in February.

Ukraine claims that the children have been forcefully deported and separated from their families. The US-based Yale Humanitarian Research Lab published a report alleging some 6,000 Ukrainian youngsters have been sent to “re-education camps” in Russia to receive “pro-Russia patriotic and military-related education”.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an advisor to the Ukrainian president, said that negotiations with Moscow would be impossible since Putin was “an obvious international criminal”.

The ICC has indicted heads of state before, and Putin joins Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in this regard. However, an arrest warrant for the head of state of a member of the UN security council is new territory.

It is extremely unlikely that Putin will be detained. Moscow is not a signatory to the Rome Statute which gives the ICC jurisdiction. The Russian president is not expected to travel to any country that would enforce the warrant, and officials in Moscow have made nuclear threats against any nation that would do so. [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Euronews] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [NBC News] [Bloomberg]

Russian jet downs US drone

A US military drone was taken down by Russian fighter jets over the Black Sea on March 14, escalating tensions between the two powers.

Footage of the incident shows Russian Su-27 warplanes flying over the MQ-9 Reaper surveillance craft and dumping fuel on it, before one of the jets appears to strike the drone, damaging its propeller.

Russia accused the US of violating its airspace and denied intentionally taking down the drone, a claim

which was proven false after a video of the incident was publicly released. America argued that the drone was in international waters at the time and that the Russian interception was “unprofessional”. Moscow has awarded medals to the Russian pilots involved.

The US is continuing to fly drones over the Black Sea, using the machines to observe Ukraine and Crimea, but has moved these flights further away from Russian airspace “for now”, according to a senior American military official. [Irish Times] [NBC] [BBC News] [CNN] [Reuters] [Guardian] [Associated Press] [Scientific American]

Russians advance at Bakhmut amid house-to-house fighting

Back in Ukraine, Bakhmut remained the focal point of Russia’s efforts – but there are indications that Moscow’s most recent push is stalling.

Russia launched a renewed attack against the city in January, with Wagner Group mercenaries deployed as the tip of the spear. Since then, Russian forces have pushed the Ukrainian defenders back to the city’s northern and southern flanks. A similar offensive has taken place around the city of Avdiivka, though the fighting there is less severe and Ukrainian supply lines are secure for the moment.

At Bakhmut, however, the vital supply roads used by the defenders have come under fire and, by the beginning of March, the city’s fall seemed imminent. Alexander Rodnyansky, an adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky, became one of the first Ukrainian officials to address the prospect of retreating from Bakhmut. On March 1, Rodnyansky told CNN that Ukrainian troops would leave the city “if need be”.

While casualty rates in the battle had long favoured Ukrainian defenders, the push on the flanks has allowed Russian forces to even the odds in this regard. Despite the deteriorating situation, Ukrainian defenders have so far managed to hold on to Bakhmut, though Russian forces finally entered the city proper on March 6 after pushing the defenders across the Bakhmutka River that divides it.

Despite the increasing cost, Ukrainian commanders have agreed to continue defending the city, a course of action endorsed publicly by Zelensky. [Associated Press] [Reuters] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Euronews] [Wall Street Journal]

The situation around Bakhmut stabilised towards the middle of March as Russian forces failed to encircle the

city or cut its supply routes.

The Institute for the Study of War, a US-based defence think tank, observed that casualties taken by the Russian forces over the past few weeks around Bakhmut are now causing Moscow's offensive to slow down. The institute said that Russian units, particularly the Wagner Group, "urgently need to replenish their personnel" in order to continue advancing.

While the Russian offensive has stalled, Moscow's forces occupy enough ground on the northern and southern flanks of the city to make sustaining a defence much more difficult than it was previously. While Ukraine's defence of the city was viewed by some expert observers as "strategically sound", Ukrainian casualties have increased. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian forces committed to Bakhmut were able to halt the Russian advance, even if they have thus far been unable to reverse it.

In the absence of any counter-offensive, or a renewed Russian offensive, the fighting has reverted to close-quarters urban warfare in the city proper, with individual streets and buildings emerging as key positions. Russian forces have advanced as far as the AZOM industrial complex in the north and control many of the city's southern neighbourhoods. [New York Times] [Guardian] [Reuters] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Institute for the Study of War]

Ukraine looks to deploy Western hardware in new offensive

With temperatures rising and the soil hardening, March saw an increase in talk of a new Ukrainian offensive. Ukraine has largely been on the defensive since retaking Kherson in early November 2022, but that may be about to change.

There is one highly likely target for the operation: Melitopol. This city in the Russian-occupied part of the Zaporizhzhia region sits on major road and rail links and is surrounded by flat ground, which is ideal terrain for offensive action.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said that an attack on this axis would "split the Russian troops into two halves" and make Moscow's operations in the south-west of Ukraine difficult to sustain. Of course, Russia is alive to this threat and has heavily fortified the city and its outlying areas.

If there is an offensive, it will come when the infamous Ukrainian mud hardens. The US expects a start in May, while Ukrainian presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak

told reporters on March 10 that the operation was two months off.

Newly-supplied Western weapons will likely play a leading role in any such operation. European-made Leopard 2 and Challenger tanks will join US-made Bradley and Stryker fighting vehicles to complement Ukraine's armoured component, which consists almost entirely of outdated Soviet vehicles and Russian captures.

Ukrainian forces have been training on these new platforms for months and some of these modern tanks are already in the country. Ukraine has also made progress with another of its requests: fighter jets. Poland and Slovakia have agreed to provide Soviet-era Mig-29 fighter jets to resupply Ukraine's air force. *(See separate story in this issue)*

With Russian forces deeply entrenched, Ukraine will need to make full use of these donations for its offensive to succeed. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [Institute for the Study of War] [Wall Street Journal] [Euractiv] [Kyiv Post] [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [POLITICO Europe] [Washington Post]

Inexperienced troops

Even with these reinforcements, Ukraine faces significant hurdles after over a year of warfare. A Ukrainian commander, known by his callsign Kupol, recently spoke to *The Washington Post* about the issues facing the Ukrainian army.

Kupol's unit, an air assault brigade, has been involved in fighting and was present at Soledar before the eastern town was captured by the Russians. He said his unit suffered heavy casualties and was replenished by inexperienced troops, often with inadequate training. These, he added, failed to stand their ground in the face of mass attacks by Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries.

A Ukrainian military official echoed Kupol's concerns, telling *The Washington Post* that the army's NCO corps, which forms its essential frontline leadership, has been depleted by casualties. Experienced leaders at the front are hard to replace, and their absence compounds discipline problems. Kupol was demoted for speaking out about these issues.

Others are more optimistic. While US advisors have questioned Ukraine's decision to defend Bakhmut, they have also assessed that Russia continues to lose more men in the fight there. They have also said that Ukraine is deliberately holding forces back from

Bakhmut, in order to build a reserve for its future offensive.

Ukraine has sent tens of thousands of soldiers abroad to be trained by Western armies and has been aggressively conscripting reserves, while several new assault units have been formed. Ukrainian ground forces commander Oleksandr Syrskyi, who has come in for criticism for the decision to hold Bakhmut, said that Kyiv needed time to rebuild its forces and added that "some people defend, others prepare".

While the success of Ukraine's next offensive will depend on how well it can mitigate these problems, Kupol believes there will be an offensive regardless. [BBC News] [Washington Post] [Kyiv Post] [Telegraph] [POLITICO Europe]

EU seeks 1 million shells for Ukraine

A crucial requirement of Ukraine's long-term war effort is a steady supply of artillery ammunition. Shell shortages have dogged the Ukrainian army since the start of the war and the country's backers have scoured their reserves to come up with enough to keep Ukrainian guns firing at just a third of what their Russian counterparts use.

In the latest effort to get shells to Ukraine, the European Union on March 23 announced a EUR 2 billion joint purchasing plan for 1 million artillery shells and missiles. The plan also encourages deeper industrial cooperation in the European arms sector, as it calls for shells to be sourced from European manufacturers within the next 12 months. The funding is to be split between purchases specifically for Ukraine and shells to fill depleted European stores.

European Council President Charles Michel said that the EU would "stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes", while President Zelensky thanked EU leaders, but called for deliveries to be made quicker as "the faster we act together, the more lives we save".

Russia enjoys a significant artillery advantage over Ukraine, in terms of both guns and shells. An Estonian government estimate puts Russian shell use at between 20,000 and 60,000 a day, compared to Ukraine's use of between 2,000 and 7,000. The war in Ukraine has consumed ammunition of all types at rapid rates, and both Western and Russian industry have struggled to cope with demand. [POLITICO Europe] [BBC News] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Barrons] [Guardian]

(wb/pk)

Putin and Xi pledge economic cooperation, express friendship during meeting in Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping pledged to deepen bilateral economic cooperation and jointly criticised the West for its interference in other nations' affairs after two days of meeting in Moscow, where warm words of friendship were expressed between the two leaders.

The two referred to each other as good friends and described their countries' relations as the best they have ever been. They said in a joint statement that Washington was undermining global stability and that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was barging into the affairs in the Asia-Pacific region. [Reuters][CNN]

The summit – long touted by the Kremlin as a show of support from its most powerful friend – was Putin's biggest display of diplomacy since he ordered his invasion of Ukraine a year ago. Xi, who called Putin his "dear friend," praised his Russian counterpart in turn, saying the country's development had "significantly improved." [CNN]

China billed the trip a "journey of friendship, cooperation and peace," amid a push from Beijing to frame itself as a key proponent for the resolution of the Ukraine conflict. Xi's trip was seen in some Western capitals as a ringing endorsement of the Russian leader in the face of broad international condemnation of his war. [CNN]

The two men signed a joint statement on "Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation for a New Era" and a joint statement on a "Plan to Promote Key Elements of Chinese-Russian Economic Cooperation" until 2030. They also outlined a plan for the further development of bilateral relations and cooperation in all areas in the short term. A large package of cooperation documents was signed. [Kremlin]

Putin's praise

Putin praised Xi for a peace plan he proposed last month, and blamed Kyiv and the West for rejecting it. [Reuters]

"We believe that many of the provisions of the peace plan put forward by China are consonant with Russian approaches and can be taken as the basis for a peaceful settlement when the West and Kiev are ready

for it," Putin said in a statement. "However, so far, we have not seen such readiness on their part." [Kremlin]

Xi also addressed in his statement the war in Ukraine, though he fell short of backing Moscow's war efforts.

"Regarding the Ukraine settlement, I would like to emphasise that we have always upheld our unwavering commitment to the goals and principles of the UN Charter, adopting an objective and unbiased position," Xi said. "We have been proactive in promoting reconciliation and the resumption of talks. We always support peace and dialogue, and firmly stand on the right side of history."

The White House said China's position was not impartial, and urged Beijing to pressure Russia to withdraw from Ukraine's sovereign territory to end the war. Top US diplomat Antony Blinken said the visit showed China's intent to provide "diplomatic cover" for alleged Russian atrocities in Ukraine. The United States and its allies have warned that China is considering sending lethal aid to Russia for its war effort, which Beijing has denied. [Reuters][CNN]

Xi's visit came days after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Putin for war crimes. The ICC said that Putin was responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of Ukrainians and that of the unlawful transfer of people from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. [ICC] [The Moscow Times] *(See separate story in this issue)*

Economic cooperation

Putin and Xi also pledged to improve economic ties. They want to increase the volume of trade in goods and services, and deepen ties in eight strategic areas, primarily finance, industrial manufacturing and technology, as well as transport and logistics, according to their joint statement. [Kremlin]

They also said they would conduct more trade in roubles and yuan as they seek to reduce their reliance on the US dollar for trade.

"Expanding settlements between our countries in national currencies is a serious incentive for promoting trade and investment cooperation," Putin said. "As of the end of the first three quarters of 2022, the share of the rouble and yuan in mutual commercial transactions reached 65 percent and continues to grow, which allows us to protect mutual trade from the influence of third countries and negative trends on global currency markets." [Kremlin]

The BRICS group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa could create a "fundamentally new" common currency, Russian State Duma Deputy Speaker Alexander Babakov said. BRICS nations have discussed the creation of a payment system as they seek to reduce their dependence on the dollar. [Tendies] [Pressenza]

"It is likely to be done," Babakov said when asked if the BRICS countries could start printing a single currency. "Neither the euro nor the dollar is backed by anything, and our countries can do what the Bretton Woods system destroyed," he added. [Pressenza]

China's role

China is trying to revamp its image and position itself as an advocate for peace and defend its relationship with Russia as good for global stability. Xi stressed the importance of multilateral institutions to help reshape the post-Covid 19 global order. [Kremlin] [CNN]

Russia and China will strengthen their cooperation within multilateral structures, including BRICS, and the Group of Twenty, Xi said. The countries will promote genuine multipolarity in a bid to facilitate post-pandemic global economic recovery, all while stepping up our constructive efforts to shape a multipolar world and improve global governance. [Kremlin]

"This includes contributing to global food security, energy security and the uninterrupted operation of supply and value chains and working together to shape a community of common destiny for humankind," Xi said. [Kremlin]

Xi also reiterated both nations' bilateral position on trade. [Kremlin]

"President Putin and I agreed to step up our comprehensive planning efforts at the top level, increase trade in energy, resources and electronics, make our respective value chains more resilient, while expanding cooperation in IT, the digital economy, agriculture and trade in services," Xi said. "We agreed to develop conventional trade sectors alongside emerging industries in a complementary and synchronised manner, and to continue providing for uninterrupted cross-border logistics flows and shipments."

(gc)

Finland officially joins NATO, Sweden still waiting

Finland on April 4 officially became the 31st member of NATO, days after Turkey and Hungary approved its accession. But Ankara and Budapest, which had delayed the decision for months, are still holding up Sweden's bid to enter the Western military alliance.

Russia, which has a 1,300 km border with Finland, pledged to bolster its defences near the frontier if NATO sends additional troops to its new member country.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Helsinki's move to join the alliance was an "encroachment" on Russia's security. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu warned that Finland's accession raised the prospect of the conflict in Ukraine escalating. [Reuters] [AP] [The Guardian] [Sky News]

Meanwhile, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's secretary general, hailed what he described as "a good day for Finland's security, for Nordic security and for NATO as a whole". As part of the alliance, Helsinki will have a security guarantee that an attack on one NATO member is considered an attack on all.

The Hungarian parliament on March 27 passed a bill to allow the Finns to join the military club, and Turkey did the same three days later. All NATO countries must approve an applicant nation's bid.

'Concrete and authentic steps'

Following decades of official military nonalignment, Finland and Sweden simultaneously applied to join NATO in May 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, marking a seismic shift in European security and geopolitics. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in March that Helsinki had taken "concrete and authentic steps" to meet Turkey's security concerns, notably over the presence of what Ankara deems to be Kurdish terrorists in Nordic countries. [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, tensions between Turkey and Sweden escalated in January after a copy of the Koran was burned and an effigy of Erdogan was hanged in a Stockholm protest. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Orban complains of 'blatant lies'

Budapest has a different set of grievances against Sweden. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said in

February that some in his country were reluctant to admit nations to NATO that have been “spreading blatant lies about Hungary”.

Stockholm has been one of the most critical voices in the European Union over Hungary’s problems with the rule of law. At the same time, Budapest is still waiting for Brussels to pay out EUR 5.8 billion in grants earmarked for Hungary from the EU’s Covid-19 recovery fund.

The money has been frozen over concerns that Orban has undermined democratic standards, and commentators have said that Budapest may be using its power to halt NATO enlargement to extract the funds from the EU. [Politico]

Finland’s accession marks the first enlargement of NATO since North Macedonia joined in 2020. [BBC] [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Macron forces through controversial pension reforms

After two months of intense parliamentary debate, large-scale strikes and protests all over the country, the French government forced through its pension system reform plan that would raise the retirement age by two years, extending the contribution period.

Trade unions, left-wing parties and the far-right National Rally have opposed the reform. They claim the pension reform overturns social achievements and discriminates against certain workers, notably women, and jobs requiring physical labour. They argue that the reform will also have a negative impact on youth unemployment. [Euronews]

President Emmanuel Macron’s government has said it wants to raise the retirement age by two years to 64 and also extend the period workers have to pay for greater fiscal stability in the coming years. According to the French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire, the reform should cut government expenditures by EUR 17.7 billion by 2023. [BFM Business][Europe in Review March/2023]

More than one million protestors took to the streets on March 24 in response to Macron’s pension reforms. The protests have since intensified across major cities, with allegations of police violence and almost 800

persons arrested during a one-week period. [Le Monde, Le Parisien] [Le Monde][Brookings]

Article 49.3

Despite the opposition to the reform, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced on March 16 that the new pension draft legislation would be forcibly adopted using article 49.3 of the French Constitution, circumventing the parliamentary system. The draft legislation had been continuously rejected for weeks by most opposition parties, from both right and left sides of the political spectrum. [France Info]

The National Assembly criticised the decision and Socialist deputies described the move as "anti-democratic." On March 20, the National Assembly, at the request of the deputies, held two separate ballots on a motion of censure towards the reform.

The motion of censure was not approved both times since it didn't garner the 287 votes out of 577 necessary. The first ballot received 278 votes in favour of the censure while the second ballot, proposed by the notorious far-right party National Rally, was generally rejected with only 94 votes. [L'Express]

"The government decided to use a constitutional tool called Article 49.3, which allows it to pass a law in parliament without a vote on the text," Tara Varma, a visiting fellow at Brookings Institution, wrote on March 31. "The decision resulted in the government facing two votes of no confidence, which it didn't lose — but the main one, pushed by a centrist minister of parliament, fell short by only nine votes, indicating how volatile the political situation in France is right now."

Macron, who has become more unpopular amongst French voters, gave an interview on French public television on March 22 in an attempt to defend this political choice. Macron and his government used the article 49.3 twelve times since he came to power, the highest rate in recent French political history. [RTL]

Relative Majority

"After winning the presidential election last year and beating Marine Le Pen, Macron found himself short of a full majority in the subsequent legislative elections," Varma wrote. "He has since been struggling with a relative majority, preventing him from pushing the reform agenda he believes he was elected to implement and forcing him to make deals with different political parties inside the National Assembly."

The town of Sainte-Soline has become a centre of protests against the pension reform, with clashes between police and protesters. At least 200 protestors and 47 policemen were injured in clashes. Two protesters are still in critical condition. [Le Monde]

Many of the demonstrations across the country have turned violent. On March 23, more than 450 people were arrested, with 441 security forces injured. [France24][France24]

(pl-sm/gc)

Farmer party's election victory upends Dutch politics, forces government to halt emissions cuts

Politics in the Netherlands were upended by the unexpected victory of a Dutch farmers' party in elections after thousands of farmers took to the streets to protest the government's plan to reduce nitrogen emissions in the agriculture sector.

The Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB), which was only set up in 2019 in the wake of widespread ongoing protests, will become the biggest party in the upper house of parliament after winning 15 of 75 seats. The Dutch government agreed to pause its plan to cut nitrogen-based emissions drastically after BBB delivered a major upset in the elections. [BBC] [TSLN]

The BBB has fought government plans to slash nitrogen emissions, which are considered harmful by some climate change advocates to biodiversity, by dramatically reducing livestock numbers and buying out thousands of farms. The BBB's appeal rapidly spread beyond its rural heartland, on a populist platform that represents traditional, conservative Dutch social and moral values. [BBC] [TSLN]

Some Dutch voters said they viewed the party's success as a victory against the country's elites as well as the government. They said it showed support for the preservation of rural life in the Netherlands and the farming economy, though voters from all parts of the country, including suburban areas, supported the BBB. [NYTimes]

"This isn't normal, but actually it is! It's all normal citizens who voted," BBB leader Caroline van der Plas said.

A left-wing Green-Labour alliance was on course to win 15 Senate seats, while Prime Minister Mark Rutte's

four-party coalition is poised to fall back to 24 – down eight seats. Turnout was estimated at 57.5 percent, the highest for years. The biggest loser was the far-right Forum for Democracy party. [BBC]

BBB's victory will make it difficult for Rutte's government to pass the law that would cut nitrogen emissions by 50 percent by 2030 in the Netherlands, that would fight climate change and place the country's policy in line with European Union requirements to preserve nature reserves. The prime minister's party, which does not have a majority in the Senate or the House, needs a coalition vote to pass laws. [NY Times]

Mass protests

The elections happened in the wake of mass protests against the government's plan to force farmers to reduce their nitrogen emissions. The Dutch government had introduced measures to overhaul agriculture in an attempt to reduce greenhouse gases and to protect national nature reserves imposed on Holland by the European Union. [Daily Mail]

More than 10,000 Dutch farmers protested in The Hague on March 11, saying they will be hurt or financially ruined by the restrictions. They also said it would lead to a drop in agricultural production. Dutch farmers loathe Prime Minister Mark Rutte's plans to cut livestock numbers and buy out farms to reduce nitrogen emissions, which are caused by manure and fertiliser. [Daily Mail]

Farm organisations, such as Farmers Defence Force and the non-political freedom movement, Samen voor Nederland, have described the government's emission plan as "unrealistic." They said the problem is being exaggerated and use slogans, such as "No farmers, no food" and "There is no nitrogen problem" during protests. [Reuters]

"The nitrogen crisis is made up, they say that the nitrogen blows always from a farm and is harming the new Nature Reserves," Nynke Koopmans, Dutch farmer said. "You can't measure nitrogen but they have sorted off the farms they want to get rid of. They are targeting the farms closest to the Nature Reserves."

The country's finance and agriculture ministries in 2021 had planned to buy hundreds of farms in an attempt to reduce nitrogen emissions. They wanted to use the land for more sustainable agriculture. The Dutch government introduced the Nitrogen Action Programme (PAS) in 2015 to further reduce emissions. Four years later, the PAS was considered inadequate by the Council of State. [Reuters][Dutch News]

Left-wing political parties have also opposed the government's restrictions on nitrogen emissions. Dutch opposition parties GroenLinks, PvdA and SP have argued that the industrial, transport and aviation sectors should do more to reduce emissions. [NL Times]

For Ben Apeldoorn, a dairy farmer in the Utrecht Province who voted for the pro-farmers party, the BBB win felt like "a victory of the common man over the elite." [NYTimes]

(ava/gc)

EU bodies, slew of European nations restrict TikTok use amid cybersecurity fears

The EU and a slew of European countries have banned or restricted the use of Chinese social media app TikTok on official devices amid concerns over cybersecurity and data privacy.

All three of the EU's main institutions – the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament – suspended the use of TikTok on all their officially issued devices as of March 20. The European Parliament also "strongly recommended" that its members and staff should remove the app from their personal devices. [CNN]

A number of European nations have taken similar moves. Denmark's parliament urged politicians and staff members to delete the app from official phones, citing an "espionage risk." [Euronews] On March 6, Denmark's defence ministry banned the use of TikTok on work phones because of "security considerations." [Associated Press]

Belgium banned the app from federal government phones on March 10, expressing concern over the data collected by TikTok. [Reuters]

Britain banned the app on all government devices on March 16 after a security review. [UK Government] On March 24, France forbade the "recreational" use of apps like TikTok, Instagram and Twitter on government employees' phones. [Al Jazeera]

Apart from these, the Netherlands, Norway, Latvia, Estonia and Slovakia have also imposed similar bans or suspensions on the use of TikTok on official phones. [Delfi][The Local] [Reuters] [Delfi] [Slovak Spectator]

In February, Norway's justice minister apologised for not admitting that she had installed TikTok on her work phone when she was questioned about the issue in parliament. [Europe in Review, No.3, March/2023] [Associated Press]

On March 27, a Polish advisory body recommended banning the app on the phones of public administration employees. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the US in February told all federal agencies to remove the app from their phones within 30 days. The US Congress enacted a "No TikTok on Government Devices Act" at the end of last year. [Associated Press]

Concerns over spying by China

Lawmakers and regulators in a string of countries are concerned that TikTok and its Chinese parent company ByteDance can potentially put sensitive information from app users into the hands of the government in Beijing. A Chinese law of 2017 authorises the government to demand data from Chinese companies for the purposes of national intelligence. [New York Times] [EuroNews]

Last year, TikTok disclosed to its European users that its staff in China could access their personal data. Since then, the Chinese company has attempted to allay concerns from both users and regulatory authorities by assuring them that personal data and content cannot be accessed or tampered with by the Chinese government. [The Guardian] [AiR, No.9, February/2023, 4]

In December, Forbes reported that ByteDance employees tracked its journalists' location data to identify sources, leading to the firing of four ByteDance staff in the US and China following an internal investigation by the Chinese company.

US ultimatum

The US administration is now demanding that ByteDance sell its stake in the app or face a complete ban in America. [The Wall Street Journal]

ByteDance has consistently stated that it operates independently and does not share user data with the Chinese government. TikTok has refuted claims that it gathers more data than other social media platforms and has criticised bans of the app, saying there is a lack of supporting evidence. [EuroNews]

Apart from European countries and the US, TikTok has been banned from government phones by Canada and

New Zealand.

Taiwan banned the public sector from using TikTok after a warning by the FBI that it posed a national security risk. India has had a complete ban on the app since 2020, imposed after a clash between Indian and Chinese soldiers in a disputed border region. [EuroNews]

(rs/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Former members of parliament allegedly received illegal payments

Belgium is in the midst of an illegal payment scandal after former members of parliament and eight former top civil servants were accused of allegedly receiving illegal salaries and unwarranted pension payments since the 1990s, according to the country's chamber of representatives.

An investigation by the chamber revealed that a number of payments received by the implicated politicians were illegal. The chamber further announced that the payments will be stopped , though it is uncertain if those implicated will be required to return any money. [VRTNews]

Herman De Croo, a Flemish Liberal coalition member of the Belgian parliament's chamber of representatives, allegedly received an additional

payment of around EUR 6,000 a month, while his colleague Siegfried Bracke (N-VA, opposition) allegedly received around EUR 3,000 a month extra.

De Croo said that he acted in good faith and has asked the chamber authorities to investigate the matter. Bracke is in South Africa and said he does not want to respond until he has learned more about the accusations. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Anti-racism protests held across country

Protestswere held across Belgium on March 21 in recognition of the International Day Against Racism and Discrimination and calling on the government to improve the conditions of refugees in the country. The death of Sultan Zadran, a bike messenger of Afghan descent, who died while delivering for Uber Eats, was viewed as an exemplary tragedy by some protest leaders. [BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews]

“Everyone, without distinction, has the right to a decent wage, affordable housing and social protection,” Sarah Scheepers of Platform 21/03, from one of the protest groups, said in Antwerp. “Today we see too often that certain ethnic groups are treated as second-class citizens, second-class workers, second-class students.” [BrusselsTimes]

Uber has said it is willing to pay significant compensation to the family of Zadran, who was killed when his bicycle was crushed by a FlixBus bus in Brussels. [BrusselsTimes][BrusselsTimes]

Trade union BTB-ABVV, the Belgian Union of Transport Workers, is representing Zadran’s family in its demand for compensation following the accident. The union had its first consultation with Uber regarding support for the victim’s family and relatives. It also said that the offer from Uber was “a very generous proposal”, which reportedly includes money for funeral costs, repatriation, and other compensation. Zadran has family both in Pakistan and Brussels. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Federal nuclear agency advises against extending use of older nuclear

plants

Belgium's Federal Agency for Nuclear Control (FANC) has ruled that the country should use the Doel 4 and Tihange 3 nuclear power plants during 2025 and 2026, rather than extending operations of older plants Doel 1, 2 and Tihange 1 as the country tries to ensure winter power supplies. [LeSoir] [BrusselsTimes]

The government negotiated with Engie, the operator of the country's nuclear power plants, the extension of the Doel 4 and Tihange 3 to November 2026. The government decided to extend by 10 years the planned lifespan of two other reactors; Doel 4, near the northern port city of Antwerp, and Tihange 3, near the eastern city of Liege. Engie has opposed extending the older power stations because they may not meet safety standards. [BrusselsTimes][Europe Monthly March 2023]

FANC has ruled that the government's previous plan would be difficult to fulfil and agreed that the safety concerns are justified and "the alternative scenario is preferred in terms of nuclear safety". While working on the proposal, the watchdog spoke to Engie, which said that the plan provides "an opportunity... as long as the new nuclear fuel will be available". [DeMorgen] [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Spear phishing attack on MP linked to China

Belgium's cyber security agency linked spear phishing attacks targeting a member of parliament (MP) to China-sponsored hackers.

MP Samuel Cogolati reported the attacks in January 2021. The attacks were thought to be in response to Cogolati's resolution warning that "crimes against humanity" are being committed by Beijing against Uyghur Muslims in China. [TheFinancialTimes]

Brussels has also announced that the Chinese-owned video sharing app TikTok will be temporarily banned from all devices owned or paid for by the federal government. It cited cybersecurity, privacy, and misinformation concerns. [AP News]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Brussels court ruling gives three detained Iranians asylum

Three Iranian nationals, who were supposed to be deported from Belgium in December, were granted asylum by the government after a court in Brussels ruled that the men had been unjustly detained by immigration authorities in the region of Flanders. [Brussels Times]

After their first asylum claim was rejected by a court, the three Iranians were to be deported back to Iran, despite the country's violent political unrest and repressive government. All three refused to board the plane when they were being deported. A spontaneous crowd of protestors gathered at the airport in support of the men. [Brussels Times]

After the airport incident, the men were then held in an asylum centre in the Flemish municipality of Steenokkerzeel. A local court then ruled that the men could stay in Belgium. After the ban was upheld, Belgium's Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Nicole de Moor, granted all three refugee status. [Brussels Times]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Flemish government reaches an agreement on nitrogen emissions

The Flemish regional government in Belgium reached an agreement on nitrogen emissions on March 10, after weeks of farmers' protests in Brussels.

Flemish Prime Minister Jan Jambon announced on Twitter that an agreement had been reached between the parties that make up the regional government's coalition. [VRT News] [VRT News] [VRT News] [Belga News] [Brussels Times]

While the nationalists and liberals supported plans to reduce nitrogen emissions, which had been proposed by the Flemish Environment Minister Zuhal Demir, the Christian Democrats refused to accept the proposals. The party argued that the farming and agriculture industries should be treated equally when it comes to efforts required to reduce nitrogen emissions. [VRT News]

This agreement comes as the Flemish government hopes to halve nitrogen emissions by 2030. [VRT News]

Jambon said that if the public enquiry finds that the measures demanded by the Christian democrats won't interfere with the halving of nitrogen emissions, "we will implement them". Minister Demir tweeted that the proposal "has been approved unchanged by all the coalition parties". [VRT News]

(gt/gc)

France: Government plans test artificial intelligence surveillance for criminal acts

The French government plans to start a trial of surveillance cameras integrated with artificial intelligence ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games. The software would be used to detect possible terrorist acts or serious breaches of security that otherwise would be difficult to do with current technology. [France24]

Left-wing parties within parliament and left-leaning members of the European Parliament have pushed back against the proposal, warning that the plan violates the privacy of individuals under the French Constitution and European law. [France24] [France24]

The testing of the technology will run until the end of 2024, allowing it to be used at other large events. Public authorities and transport security bodies in Paris will be able to request to use it. [France24]

(sm/gc)

France: Greenpeace criticises government for receiving Russian uranium

Greenpeace has criticised France for receiving a shipment of uranium from Russia after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

"The continuation of this nuclear trade with Russia in times of war is scandalous," said Greenpeace campaigner Pauline Boyer. If the government wants to be consistent with its support for the Ukrainian people, it should cut all contracts with Russia, Boyer said. [Greenpeace]

France is fully dependent on Russia's enriched uranium to operate its nuclear power plants, with Russian influence being much more extensive than French companies believe, according to Greenpeace. [Greenpeace]

The French government has denied the accusation. "Our country does not depend in any way on Russia for the operation of its nuclear power plants and has been able to diversify its sources of supply," it said in a statement. [The Moscow Times]

During the invasion of Ukraine, France has continued to operate a plant based in Siberia to recycle radioactive materials. [LeMonde]

(ava/gc)

Germany: Government plan to ban fossil fuel heaters criticised as economically 'devastating'

A draft law in Germany, introduced by Economy and Climate Change Minister Robert Habeck that would ban installing new oil and gas heaters from 2024, has garnered criticism. [EURACTIV] [Tagesschau]

The Liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) made it clear that they were against the bill. The draft law was "well-intentioned in terms of climate policy" but economically and socially "devastating," Finance Minister and FDP leader, Christian Lindner, said, adding that the plan will have to be "fundamentally revised" before his party would agree to it. [EURACTIV]

According to the draft law, every newly installed heating system would have to be at least 65 percent powered by renewable energy. Pre-existing oil and gas heaters would remain and be repaired if necessary, Green party leader, Ricarda Lang, said [Tagesschau]

The aim of the law is to reduce emissions in the construction sector.

(mb/gc)

Germany: Climate change damage could cost economy as much as EUR 900 billion

Damages caused by climate change could cost the German economy up to EUR 900 billion by 2050, according to a joint study by economic research companies Prognos, GWS and Germany's Institute for Ecological Economic Research. [Reuters] [DW] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

The study calculated the damages caused by extreme weather events, such as extreme heat, drought and floods. The study analysed several scenarios differing in severity. Damages caused by climate change could include loss of agricultural yields, damage or destruction of buildings and infrastructure, and a weakened healthcare system. The study did not account for non-financial damage such as health impairments, deaths from heat, floods and loss in biodiversity. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

The study comes amid debates in the ruling coalition on how Germany could cut greenhouse emissions in challenging sectors such as transportation and construction to become carbon neutral by 2045. Possible damage cost could be reduced completely through climate adaptation measures such as carbon storing if climate change was only mild, the study found. It added that around 60 percent to 80 percent of costs could be spared under such measures depending on how strongly the climate would change. [Reuters]

According to Germany's economy ministry, climate change already cost Germany about EUR 145 billion between 2000 and 2021, 80 billion of which were in the past five years alone, including the 2021 floods in the states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government introduces new 'feminist' foreign policy

The German government on March 1 announced "feminist guidelines" to shape the country's foreign policy and diplomacy as Berlin seeks to emphasise the concerns of women worldwide.

According to these guidelines, Germany's foreign policy will prioritise greater representation of women in government and security sectors, as well as allocate more development funds to projects that fight gender inequality. Berlin also plans to establish an "ambassador for feminist foreign policy." [Reuters] [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau] [AP]

"We will work hard to give our foreign service a more female face and to raise the proportion of women in senior roles," German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said. Currently only 26 percent of Germany's ambassadors are female. [Reuters]

The 80-page report on new guidelines — titled Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy — is a cornerstone of Baerbock's agenda and was included in the coalition agreement to form a government between her Green party, the business-friendly Free Democrats, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats. [Politico Europe]

The report outlines 10 overarching guidelines, first reported by ThePioneer, including offering gender-sensitive humanitarian aid abroad, ensuring women and marginalised groups are involved in economic processes, and considering gender issues in climate and energy foreign policy.

The "feminist foreign policy is not foreign policy for women, but for all members of a society," Baerbock said. That includes those "marginalised by society on the basis of gender identity, origin, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation or other reasons," she said. [Politico Europe]

Critics said there is a danger of coming across as "moralising". The leader of the conservative party Christian Social Union, Markus Soder, said the plan is "incomprehensible" and that "travelling the world and telling everyone else what they should and should not do is doomed to failure". [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Government introduces national water strategy

The government on March 15 introduced the country's first national water strategy as it seeks to be better equipped to deal with long dry seasons caused by climate change. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

"The consequences of the climate crisis for people and nature are forcing us to act," Environment Minister Steffi Lemke said. [Reuters]

Under this strategy, the government plans to set up water reservoirs in forests, floodplains and towns. It also includes goals like restoring forests and developing guidelines to distribute water in case of shortages, especially to extremely dry regions via long distance water pipes. [Tagesschau]

Germany is a water-rich country, but weeks of high temperatures and scant rainfall in recent years have drained the water levels of the Rhine river, the

country's commercial artery, affecting farmers' crops in many parts of the country. [Reuters]

Local and federal governments should be able to keep an overview on where and how much water is available in the country through a new registry system, the 120-page strategy showed. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Police officer shot in raids on far-right movement

A German police officer was shot and wounded during home raids of suspected members of the far-right Reichsbuerger (Reich's Citizens) movement near Stuttgart on March 22.

The police arrested one suspect on charges of attempted murder and grievous bodily harm. The raids targeted 5 suspects and 14 other people who might have kept useful material across Germany and Switzerland, the prosecutors said.

Among the people searched were several security service members, police officers and reservists, according to the prosecutors. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

The raids followed searches in December, during which the police arrested 25 people, including two leaders of the movement.

The Reichbuerger movement is accused of plotting to overthrow the German state, accepting the use of force and loss of lives to do so. The investigation sparked a discussion on stricter gun laws in Germany. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Crimes against journalists hit record in 2022

Crimes against journalists tripled during the last four years, reaching the highest level since the start of data collection in 2016, the German Federal Police said in a report in March. [DW][Welt]

The police recorded, in preliminary data, 320 attacks on the press in 2022, of which 46 were violent. Other crimes included threats, property damage or incitement. About a third of the violent crimes

recorded were related to the government's coronavirus lockdown policies.

"Even if the occasions for such protests disappear, the radicalization and anti-press attitudes of certain groups will be a continuing problem," Petra Sitte, a media policy spokesperson for the Left Party in opposition to the governing coalition, said. [DW]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Carbon emissions still rising despite 80% targets being met

Ireland's carbon emissions are rising despite the implementation of most measures under the government's 2021 Climate Action Plan , according to a progress report published by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) on February 28. [gov.ie] [Irish Times]

Ireland has implemented 760 out of 965 measures under the action plan but emissions are rising as the country uses more fossil fuels. Transportation is also "an enormous component" of greenhouse gas emissions, according to Shane Conneely of Chambers Ireland – the country's biggest business network. The continuous drainage of peatlands and intensive agriculture have caused Ireland to have one of the highest emissions per capita. [Irish Times] [gov.ie] [Irish Times] [Irish Times]

Sadhbh O'Neill, coordinator of the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition, said that it was "the lack of political will" that curbed the country's progress against emissions. The biggest obstacle to sustained greenhouse gas reductions, according to climate scientist Professor Peter Thorne, is the uncertainty of providing infrastructure at scale and inappropriate locations. [Irish Times] [Irish Times]

The government approved the Annex of Actions on March 7, which provides detailed steps to achieve the targets set out in the December 2022 Climate Action Plan. It includes legally binding carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings.

The Minister for Environment Eamon Ryan said the plan "sets out a roadmap for systemic change to reach our national climate objectives" and that it is "one of the most ambitious climate laws in the world." [gov.ie] [Irish Times] [Irish Times]

The Environmental Protection Agency is leading development on the country's first "climate change assessment." It will be based on scientific research and systematic observations on the ground, and is due to be published in late 2023. This will show how Ireland has adhered to the 2022-2025 carbon budget and will provide a more definitive conclusion on the Irish government's climate performance. [Irish Times]

This spring, the establishment of a just transition commission will go to the government for approval. It will provide independent, evidence-based advice on the implementation of policies for the Climate Action Plan. [Irish Examiner]

Reducing emissions- alternative fuels

The production of green hydrogen – created through the electrolysis of water – and sustainable aviation fuel – produced from biomass instead of petroleum, or green hydrogen combined with carbon dioxide – could contribute to the reduction of emissions.

Concerning the latter, Aircraft Leasing Ireland – an Irish Business and Employers Confederation body that represents the aircraft leasing sector in the country – commissioned a report which stated that Ireland could take a leading global role in the development of sustainable aviation fuel by taking advantage of the island's efficient wind energy. [Independent] [Irish Examiner] [auroraer]

Sustainability in transport being contested in government

Transport Minister, and leader of the Green Party, Eamon Ryan is also set to establish a group which will ensure the transport sector in particular meets emission reduction targets. The National Transport Authority has published a model which will be considered as part of the government's strategy to meet these targets.

Among several measures, it includes a EUR 10 daily charge for driving in cities, which has caused tensions between the ruling coalition parties of Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, and the Green Party. A politician from the liberal-conservative Fine Gael, Emer Higgins, has said that plans should prioritise the improvement of public transport infrastructure, such as investing in infrequent bus routes, rather than increasing charges for road-users and businesses that are already affected by the petrol and diesel price increase. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times] [Independent]

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar has ruled out congestion charges for motorists in the short-term, as major cities

like Dublin, Limerick and Cork are not ready for such a change in terms of public transport, cycling, and walking facilities. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times] [Independent]

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report on March 20, which featured a “final warning” concerning rising emissions, and UN secretary general Antonio Guterres called on countries to accelerate deadlines of achieving net-zero emissions by 2040, rather than 2050. [Irish Times]

(wd/gc)

Ireland: Government plans referendum to remove outdated reference to women

Ireland’s Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and Equality Minister Roderic O’Gorman announced plans to hold a referendum in November to remove an outdated reference to women that features in the country’s constitution. [gov.ie] [Sky News] [The Journal] [Irish Times] [Reuters]

The Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality and the Special Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality recommended the referendum. The committee has asked for changes to specific articles that deal with gender and family life, recommending non-discriminatory and gender-neutral language. [gov.ie] [Sky News] [The Journal] [Irish Times] [Reuters]

Varadkar said that the constitution “needs to be modernised” and that amending this article will “enshrine gender equality” within it. [gov.ie] [Sky News] [The Journal]

Article 41.2 has received attention by politicians and news broadcasters, as it states that "by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved" and that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home."

Specific recommendations for this article included its removal and replacement with gender-neutral language, which obliges the government to take reasonable measures to support care within the home and community. [gov.ie] [Sky News] [The Journal] [Irish Times] [Reuters]

Leader of the centre-left social-democratic Labour party, Ivana Bacik – who also chaired the Special

Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality – said that "outdated gender stereotypes" which feature particularly in Article 41 regarding women and mothers "should have no place in a constitutional text." [Irish Times]

(wd/gc)

Ireland: Social Democrats' new leadership is shaking up opinion polls

Support for the centre-left Social Democrats party has more than doubled following the unopposed election of its new leader, Holly Cairns. [RTE] [The Journal]

It was the biggest change seen in the Ireland Thinks poll – conducted on March 3 for the Sunday Independent – with support for the party rising from four to nine percent. Cairns had been party leader for two days. [RTE] [The Journal] [Irish Examiner]

Her political career began in 2018, when she got involved in the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment – an article in the Irish Constitution which prohibited abortion unless the pregnancy was life-threatening. The next year, Cairns put herself forward in the local elections in which she initially lost by a single vote to an independent candidate, Finbarr Harrington. A recount found that she had won by one vote, and thereby became the only woman lower house member elected in Co Cork – the southernmost county in Ireland – in the 2019 elections. [Irish Examiner]

Sinn Fein politician, Louise O'Reilly, was cited by the Journal as saying that the poll results may indicate a "new leader bounce." O'Reilly, along with Education Minister Norma Foley, were glad to see a young woman enter a position of leadership, and Foley added that "it's very good for the body politic." [The Journal]

Cairns also received the second highest personal approval rating at 43 percent, with Fianna Fail leader and Tanaiste Micheal Martin coming first at 45 per cent. [The Journal]

The main opposition party, the republican and socialist Sinn Fein, holds the largest figure of 29 percent, despite support having dropped by two percent. The left-wing electoral alliance People Before Profit - Solidarity came last at 2 percent, having dropped down one. [RTE]

(wd/gc)

Ireland: Government is 'failing' on youth mental health, advocacy group says

The Irish government has failed to deliver on its commitments to youth mental health, according to the advocacy group Children's Rights Alliance (CRA). [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times]

The CRA's 15th annual report card, which evaluates the government's progress on actions for children, found that the lack of "persistent" action has caused "deepening inequalities" among the "most marginalised and vulnerable" young people in Ireland. Youth mental health received the lowest grade possible for the second year in a row. [Irish Examiner]

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service reported that 4,100 children were waiting for their first appointment in September 2022, which is almost double the figure during the same period in 2021. [Irish Examiner]

The CRA said the government was "failing children and young people with mental health difficulties" as they continue to be admitted into adult psychiatric units due the shortage of inpatient beds in Camhs. [Irish Times]

The Annual Mental State of the World Report found that Ireland is one of the five countries that have the lowest mental health scores in the world. Young adults, between 18-24, are five times more likely to have mental health setbacks than their older counterparts, according to the report. [Irish Examiner]

(wd/gc)

Ireland: Government publishes national action plan against racism

Ireland's Minister of State Joe O'Brien has announced the publication of the National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) for 2023-2027. Equality and Integration Minister Roderic O'Gorman said the plan will end racism in Ireland "in all its forms." [gov.ie] [RTE] [Irish Examiner]

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister, Micheal Martin, and several other speakers involved in the creation of the

plan, attended the launch on March 21. [Irish Examiner] [The Journal]

NAPAR was implemented as part of an European Union-wide response against racism, led by the European Commission. It is the first action plan against racism in 15 years. [The Journal] [Irish Times]

The plan was developed by an independent Anti-Racism Committee established in 2020, which submitted an interim report to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in April 2021. The interim report highlights gaps in policies and provisions related to countering racism. It presented well-documented evidence showing that racism is experienced by various groups and at all levels of society. [gov.ie] [Irish Examiner] [The Journal] [RTE]

The NAPAR outlines commitments from several government departments and public bodies to tackle structural racism, address discrimination, and promote inclusion of ethnic and racial minorities. The implementation plan for its first year has already been approved by the government.

The Ireland Against Racism Fund was created as part of the NAPAR, which will provide EUR 1 million to local and regional/national anti-racism initiatives and projects. An independent Special Rapporteur on Racial Equality and Racism will monitor its implementation and the government will check the progress of the plan twice a year. [gov.ie] [Irish Examiner] [The Journal] [RTE][gov.ie] [Irish Examiner] [The Journal] [Irish Times]

(wd/gc)

Ireland's data retention law is unenforceable, European Court of Justice rules

Ireland's new data retention law is "inapplicable and unenforceable," according to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), as it was not submitted to the European Commission prior to its enactment. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times]

The Department of Justice had stated that a draft of the Communications Act 2022 had not been submitted to the European Commission's Technical Regulation Information System (TRIS). Senior counsel Ronan Lupton – and a specialist in data and communications law – told the Irish Times that the lack of notification

may be attributed to legislators not viewing the 2022 Act as falling under the TRIS procedure. [Irish Times]

The act was written in the summer of 2022 and signed into law by Ireland's president in December to amend the previous 2011 law of the same name. The 2011 Act had been ruled as illegitimate by the CJEU on at least three occasions since 2014. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times]

It was legally challenged most recently by Graham Dwyer – an Irish man convicted of murder in 2015 – who argued that his case should have been discarded as the mobile phone records which aided in his conviction were collected unlawfully. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times]

The CJEU ruled in favour of Dwyer's challenge, because according to European Union (EU) law, an application to access location data and mobile phone traffic must be authorised by an independent court or tribunal. The 2011 Act granted any senior Garda,or police, with the power to approve such applications. [Irish Times]

The 2022 Act temporarily continues to allow Garda to access data for criminal justice purposes while legislation is created and consultations with relevant authorities are carried out to facilitate data retention which will withstand legal challenge. A legal officer for the European Commission said it would remain in a draft stage until later last month. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times]

TRIS was established to prevent new technical barriers to trade created between member states. All EU members must submit laws before they are enacted so a consensus can be reached among the bloc. [enterprise.gov.ie] [Irish Examiner]

Former Assistant Garda Commissioner for Dublin, Pat Leahy, said: "This ruling significantly tilts the balance in favour of the criminal." Likewise, another former assistant commissioner, Michael O'Sullivan, stated traffic data was a "vital part" of investigations, and that this ruling "will be welcomed by criminals because they know that it places law enforcement at a distinct disadvantage." [Irish Examiner]

Figures provided to the Irish Examiner – a national daily newspaper – show an almost 80 percent drop in the total number of data requests between 2018 and 2021. [Irish Examiner]

(wd/gc)

Ireland to receive an extra MEP seat in European Parliament as population grows

Ireland is likely to get at least one extra seat in the May 2024 elections to the European Parliament as a result of its growing population. [Independent] [RTE]

Proposals being considered would bring up the number of Irish members of the European Parliament (MEP) from 13 to 14, as the Irish Census showed that the country's population increased by almost 362,000 since the previous elections held in 2019. A draft report of the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) additionally stated that Ireland will have 14 MEPs for the 2024-2029 parliamentary term. [Independent]

An MEP and member of the Irish republican and democratic socialist Fine Gael, Sean Kelly, has said that his fellow MEPs would welcome this decision, as gaining even one seat goes a long way for smaller countries.

The European Parliament's seat distribution follows a "degressive proportionality" meaning that a country with a small population will not receive more seats than a country with a larger one. The ratio of population to seats increases with the population of the country. Smaller countries possess less influence on European affairs. [Independent] [RTE]

(wd/gc)

Netherlands: Government announces new law to regulate mid-market property rentals

The Netherlands is taking steps to regulate mid-range property rental prices through the Affordable Rent Act, the country's Housing Minister Hugo de Jonge said.

The act will impose a housing valuation points system and will keep rent prices closer to the house worth to protect renters from inflated prices. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

"Many tenants pay the top price for a home that is really not worth it," De Jonge said. "With the Affordable Rent Act, we protect tenants, ensure a fair rent, and make renting affordable again for people with an ordinary income." Under the law, landlords will be

fined if they charge more rent than the home is worth. [rijksoverheid.nl] [NLTimes]

De Jonge also wants to ensure environmental sustainability in rentals. “Landlords with a good energy label can ask for a higher rent, and tenants benefit from a lower energy bill,” De Jonge said. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch society has ‘structural, persistent inequality,’ report says

The Netherlands has persistent structural inequality that is impacting the European country, according to a report by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP).

The differences between social classes – determined by factors such as money, education, profession, social network, and attractiveness – put pressure on social cohesion. Groups that experience greater economic pressure are less likely to vote, according to the report. [NLTimes]

Efforts to tackle economic class differences are often inefficient. The SCP wants to discuss how the government can help people on several fronts simultaneously. Examples include very targeted help, particularly at crucial moments in life, and organising society in a way that differences play less of a role. A concept such as unattractiveness can also be tinkered with, for example, by improving teeth, removing a tattoo, helping with clothing choices and helping with presentation. [NLTimes]

In the report, the SCP divided Dutch society in seven social classes: the working-upper class, the younger-privileged, the upper-income earner, the working-middle group (the majority), the low-skilled retirees, the insecure workers, and the precariat (people who are very vulnerable and underprivileged). [NLTimes] [dutchnews] [RTLNieuws]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Organisations accuse Dutch government of human rights violations

Human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, PAX, Defense for Children, and the Bootvluchteling Foundation, have accused the Netherlands of human rights violations regarding their asylum seeking policy that left thousands in degrading conditions in Greek camps under the European Union-Turkey asylum deal. [NLTimes]

“Tens of thousands were trapped in appalling and degrading conditions on the Greek islands,” the organisations said in a joint statement. “We want to talk about restoration of rights by the government and the conditions for any future migration deals.” [NLTimes]

According to the organisations, the Netherlands, which heads the Council of the European Union, played an essential role in concluding and implementing the asylum. The Netherlands “could have foreseen” that things would go wrong after warnings from non-governmental organisations.

“Amnesty also warned the government in 2016 that this would be a historic mistake. It is distressing that many politicians, including our own prime minister, are still proud of the EU-Turkey deal.”

The EU-Turkey deal was supposed to stop asylum seekers from coming to Europe in large numbers.

“Based on the deal, Greece would be allowed to return people who illegally crossed from Turkey to the Greek islands back to Turkey, even though it was already clear that Turkey was not a safe country because it could not provide for the basic needs of asylum seekers. In addition, Greece had a dysfunctional asylum system,” the organisations said.

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Governments limits number of flights from Amsterdam

The Netherlands plans to reduce the number of flights at the country’s international airport in Amsterdam for environmental reasons, the country’s Infrastructure Minister, Mark Harber, said.

The government plans to limit flights from Schiphol Airport to 440,000 per year, Harber said. The company running the airport said it didn’t want to go below 460,000 flights per year. [NL Times]

Harber and the management of Schiphol Airport have said that they will prioritise environmental impact, rather than the number of flights. [NL Times]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Government plans to build first offshore green hydrogen factory

The Netherlands will build its first green offshore hydrogen factory by 2031 in the northern province of Groningen, Climate and Energy Minister Rob Jetten said. [rijksoverheid.nl] [NLTimes]

The government chose the location for the new hydrogen plant so that it is as close as possible to the wind farm that will provide it with energy, using far fewer electricity cables than if it was located on the mainland. [NLTimes]

The Netherlands is accelerating its offshore green hydrogen industry because it is becoming increasingly clear that hydrogen is necessary for the sustainability of industry and heavy transport, Jetten said. Groningen politicians expressed the wish to be the first province no longer dependent on fossil fuels following years of gas extraction and fracking earthquakes.

“With this plan, we are a global leader,” Jetten said. [NLTImes] [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Switzerland: Pensioners take government to European Court of Human Rights over climate action

The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights heard on March 29 a case brought by more than 2,000 Swiss female pensioners claiming that the government’s insufficient climate action has violated their human rights.

The retired women, allegedly at an increased risk of temperature-related deaths due to their age and gender, argued that the government has not done enough to lower greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change contributed to 30 percent of heat-related deaths in the country in 2021. [Reuters]

The women have also raised concerns that the country's 2022 11-week heatwave forced them into a "climate lockdown." They claimed that they had to stay indoors to escape the life-threatening heat, restricting their movement and undermining their health. [ABC]

The legal battle started six years ago, but Swiss courts rejected the case twice.

The Swiss government has claimed the case is inadmissible, with Romania, Latvia, Austria, Slovakia, Norway, Italy, Portugal and Ireland all echoing Bern's calls for the dismissal of the very first climate action case brought against a government at the European Court. [News24]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Small majority consider nuclear power a priority

A survey by the Zurich-based Sotomo Institute of 9,000 Swiss residents showed that 55 percent consider nuclear power a priority to help resolve the energy crisis. The institute conducted the survey to determine public opinion about nuclear energy use. [Swissinfo]

In 2017, Switzerland prohibited the issuing of new licences for nuclear plants under the Federal Energy Act. [SFOE]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: UBS agrees to buy out Credit Suisse

Swiss authorities announced on March 19 that the country's largest bank, UBS, agreed to buy out its rival, Credit Suisse, which received financial assistance from the country's central bank days earlier. [Reuters]

UBS will pay about EUR 2.94 billion for Credit Suisse and it will take on the first EUR 5 billion in losses from unwinding derivatives and other risky assets. The deal stripped shareholders of their voting rights.

The takeover will cost the Swiss government EUR 300 billion in liquidity and loans, including absorbing EUR 9 billion in potential losses related to the takeover using tax income. The total cost is equivalent to a third of the country's entire 2022 economic output.

Credit Suisse shares have been under pressure after a series of missteps and compliance failures damaged its reputation with clients and investors. Several senior executives, including its top investment banker and its chief risk officer, were ousted from their positions.

The bank has tried to regain investor confidence by taking what it described in October as a “series of decisive actions” that included cutting 9,000 jobs. It is undertaking a “radical restructuring of the Investment Bank, an accelerated cost transformation, and strengthened and reallocated capital,” it said. [Tendies]

Before the bailout, Credit Suisse’s shares plummeted after its largest shareholder said that it would not increase its stake from 9.9%. [Tendies]

There are mounting concerns that the bank’s bailout will undermine the economy. They include an increased tax burden, decreased competition in the country’s financial sector, and the country’s tainted reputation as a global stable financial centre. The Social Democratic Party has called for an investigation.

It has also raised concerns about the number of employees who will lose their jobs. “In addition, tens of thousands of jobs outside of the banking industry would potentially be at risk,” the Trade unions and the Swiss Bank Employees Association said. [Swissinfo]

Already in October 2022, the bank had to cut jobs following restructuring plans aimed at recovering heavy losses. [Swissinfo][CNN]

The problems besetting Credit Suisse were further aggravated by the contagion after the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank. US regulators took possession of the bank due to "inadequate liquidity and insolvency" after massive withdrawals effectively created a bank run. [Tendies]

“The last ten years with money, the cost of money was zero,” Ronald O'Hanley, the CEO of State Street, said. “That doesn't lead to good capital allocation decisions. We're actually seeing a correction from that zero cost of capital to something that's more reasonable. I think you'll see better allocation of capital going forward.” [Tendies]

Before the UBS buyout, Credit Suisse Chairman of the Board, Axel P. Lehmann, told a financial conference that the bank was regulated.

“We have strong capital ratios, and a very strong balance sheet,” Lehmann said. “We are all hands on deck. So that’s not the topic whatsoever.” [Tendies]

(sw-ava/gc)

United Kingdom: Sturgeon resigns as Scottish first minister

United Kingdom politician Nicola Sturgeon has formally resigned from her position as First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), the most prominent party in Scottish politics.

Humza Yousaf, who was elected using the single transferable vote system, replaced Sturgeon as Scotland's first minister and SNP leader after winning 48.2 percent in the first round of voting against two other candidates. Humza then won 52.1 percent of votes in the second round of elections. [BBC]

Yousaf defeated rivals Kate Forbes and Ash Regan in a leadership contest that exposed deep divisions within the party. Sturgeon's husband Peter Murrell recently resigned from his position as chief executive of the SNP after the party admitted to covering up its dramatic fall in membership.

SNP members are also frustrated with the lack of progress towards Scottish independence. "The SNP has lost its way," former minister Regan said. "There's been no progress on independence in the last few years, despite the worst UK governments of all time."

Some party members see Yousaf as a continuation of Sturgeon's leadership given his public support. He hassted that he "will do things my own way." [BBC]

Yousaf is the first Muslim to lead a major UK party and the youngest first minister of Scotland at just 37 years old. His supporters claim that he is the best choice to unite the party and to continue the power-sharing agreement with the Scottish Green Party, which it is thought would have collapsed if the other candidates had won the leadership election. [BBC][BBC]

For many Scottish people independence from the United Kingdom is a top priority and is something that Sturgeon campaigned for during her time as first minister. Yousaf has promised to create a minister for independence in his government. [BBC]

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak congratulated Yousaf on his victory. Sunak said during a call with Yousaf that the new first minister's push for an independence referendum would be a distraction from "delivering on the things that are top of the priority list for people across Scotland." [BBC]

Yousaf said: “We will be the generation to win independence for Scotland.” [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: New immigration bill causes controversy

A highly controversial bill regarding illegal migration has passed the second reading in the House of Commons. The new law would require everyone who arrives in the United Kingdom (UK) through an illegal route, such as by small boats, to be detained for 28 days.

Illegal migrants will have their asylum claim deemed inadmissible and will then be deported back to their home country if it is deemed safe, or to a third country. The government will turn down formal applications from migrants who entered the country illegally.

The new regulations will extend to people who have fled from war-torn countries, such as Syria and Afghanistan, and those who have been smuggled into the country by gangs to work, who will no longer be covered by modern slavery laws. Former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has disapproved of the policy. [The Guardian] [UK Parliamentary]

Home Secretary Suella Braverman said that after the small boats have been stopped, parliament will vote on an annual cap of the number of refugees the UK will allow in the country through legal routes, ensuring an orderly system. Many critics believe that the bill is incompatible with the UN Refugee Convention and the European Convention of Human Rights, which Braverman was unable to confirm when introducing the bill to parliament. [The Guardian]

The plan may also run into issues regarding where they can send asylum seekers who arrive illegally. The government tried to send them to Rwanda in February, following the Nationality and Borders Act in 2022. The decision was halted after legal objections.

Even if they are successful in being able to send immigrants to Rwanda it is thought that only about 200 people can be transferred. There are no return deals with the EU since Brexit, leaving the question of where all these asylum seekers will be sent still lingering. [Refugee Council][The Guardian]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: MPs approve bill to make street sexual harassment a crime

Members of Parliament (MPs) in the British House of Commons have backed plans to criminalise street sexual harassment in England and Wales.

Walking behind someone as they walk home at night, making aggressive comments or gestures towards someone in the street, obstructing someone's path and driving or riding a vehicle slowly nearing someone on a journey, would be considered criminal acts under the new bill, which will now go to the House of Lords for review. [BBC]

The bill comes a year after a survey by YouGov for the BBC was published, which suggested that two thirds of women did not feel safe walking alone at night. [BBC]

While sexual harassment is already illegal in the UK, the bill aims to improve enforcement as it has never been a specified criminal offence to harass and intimidate someone in public, leading to an underreporting of cases. Sexual harassment cases will also be taken much more seriously with the maximum jail time increasing from six months to two years. [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: Brexit Windsor Framework officially agreed for Northern Ireland

A new Brexit agreement has been formalised between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) for Northern Ireland. The Windsor Framework was presented to Parliament in February, and officially approved in the Commons on March 22 with 525 votes to 29. [BBC] [Sky News]

Designed to smoothly facilitate trade between the UK and Northern Ireland, the framework will introduce red and green lanes to reduce border checks on goods, and ensure goods arriving in Northern Ireland will not be at risk of moving into the EU Common Market. [BBC] [Sky News]

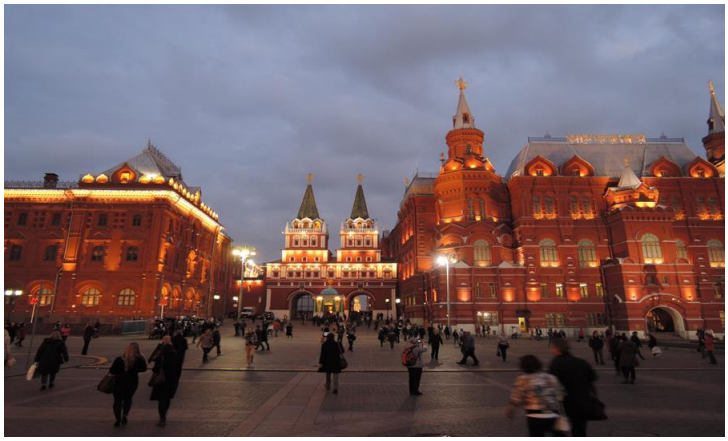
It will implement the Stormont Brake mechanism, which permits the Northern Ireland Assembly to object to new EU rules. As such, the Northern Ireland

Assembly will harbour increased influence over EU rules. [BBC] [Sky News]

The framework has been widely welcomed by many Northern Ireland parties. However, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) alongside Conservative Brexiteers voted against the deal, citing EU law taking precedence in Northern Ireland as a primary concern. It is not clear what the DUP's strategy henceforth will be. However, it is clear Downing Street will continue Brexit implementations in Northern Ireland regardless of their objections.

(cl/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



Moldova: Official language changed from Moldovan to Romanian

The Moldovan government approved on March 16 a law that will change the country's official language in all legislative documents from Moldovan to Romanian. [Reuters]

Moldova's pro-European Union Party Action and Solidarity (PAS) drafted a constitutional amendment that would replace the term Moldovan language with Romanian language. The party has a majority in the parliament with 63 seats out of 101 seats. [MSN]

The bill will implement a 2013 decision by the country's constitutional court that ruled that the text of the Declaration of Independence takes precedence over the constitution. In the Declaration of Independence, the state language is Romanian. [Deschide]

Separately, Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean held talks with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and Prime Minister Nicolae Cuica on his first official trip abroad on March 1. Leaders of both countries pledged to boost economic ties following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Anti-government protesters demand energy subsidisation

Moldovan anti-government groups demanded during protests on February 28 in Chisinau that the government fully subsidise winter electricity bills, and that the government avoid any involvement in the war against Ukraine. [AP News]

The organisers of the protests, known as the Movement for the People', were supported by the members of Moldova's pro-Russian Shor Party. Demonstrators waved Moldovan flags during the protests with slogans "Down with Maia Sandu'' and "Down with the dictatorship." [Euronews]

Hundreds of police were deployed during the protests, which disrupted traffic in the capital. They arrested 54, and protected government buildings. Leader of the Shor Party, Ilan Shor, accused police of "thwarting the peaceful rally". [ABC News] [Reuters]

The protests stirred fears of more unrest after thousands of demonstrators took to the streets. It was the second anti-government rally held in Chisinau in two weeks and comes amid growing concerns of attempts to destabilise Moldova, Ukraine's neighbour.

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Officials give mixed signals about Russian gas purchases

Moldova gave mixed signals about its position on Russian gas purchases, with a national gas executive saying that they had resumed and the energy minister saying the opposite.

The Head of Moldovagaz, Vadim Ceban, said on March 20 that the company had resumed its purchase of Russian gas from Gazprom after a three-month pause. Ceban made his comment on Telegram. Five days earlier, the country's Energy Minister Victor Parlicov

told reporters that Moldova was no longer receiving Russian gas.

He added that Moldova will not tolerate "blackmail" imposed by Gazprom over the payment of gas supplies.

Moldova, wedged between Ukraine and European Union member Romania, was able to secure European supplies thanks to EUR 300 million in credits from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. [Reuters]

Russia has provided gas to Transnistria, a Moscow-backed separatist region, but supplies have not reached Chisinau since December.

"Transnistria didn't pay for gas before and it's not paying now," Parlicov told reporters. "Gazprom puts up with debts from there. But when the (rest of Moldova) was getting gas, the Russian company resorted to supply cuts, to blackmail." [Euractiv]

Gazprom had allowed this for 30 years, Parlicov said, to keep the pro-Russian sliver of land from collapsing. "They understand that if they abandon this contract they will practically be allowing the region to collapse," he said.

Moldova, one of Europe's poorest countries, has been buffeted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the presence of pro-Russian separatists on its doorstep. Led by pro-European President Maia Sandu, Moldova accuses Russia of plotting to destabilise it. Transnistria, meanwhile, said it had foiled a Ukrainian plot to assassinate its leaders. [Euractiv]

(lc/gc)

Russia: International Criminal Court issues arrest warrant for Putin

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for war crimes. [The Moscow Times]

"The President of the Russian Federation is allegedly responsible for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation," said the statement published by the ICC. [ICC]

The ICC has opened war crimes cases to punish all the Russian officials involved with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [The Moscow Times]

“There are reasonable grounds to believe that Ms Lvova-Belova bears individual criminal responsibility for the aforementioned crimes, for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/or through others,” the statement issued by the Court referred also to the Commissioner for Children’s Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova. [ICC]

Russia responds

Russia has launched a criminal case against ICC prosecutor Karim Ahmad Khan, and ICC judges Tomoko Akane, Rosario Salvatore Aitala, and Sergio Gerardo Ugalde Godínez following criminal charges against Putin and Lvova-Belova. [Meduza]

“The criminal prosecution is obviously illegal since there are no grounds for criminal liability,” the Russian Investigative Committee said in a statement. [Telegram]

The agency has cited the 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Internationally Protected Persons. [Meduza]

Among the solutions, the agency stated the possibility of “preparations to attack a representative of a foreign country with an aim to complicate international relations” [Telegram]

Threats

Russia’s former President Dmitry Medvedev suggested that Russia could target the ICC courthouse with a hypersonic missile following criminal charges against Putin and Lvova-Belova. [NLTimes]

"So, judges of the court, look carefully at the sky," said Medvedev in a statement. [Telegram]

Medvedev denounced the ICC as being "shitty" and "useless," saying that many of the largest nations decided not to join. He also alleged that the ICC has been corrupted by US influence, which is not a member of the ICC< and suggested it was essentially ineffective. [NLTimes]

The ICC’s arrest warrant is bravado “against the largest nuclear power,” Medvedev said, noting that Russia also withdrew from participating in the ICC.

“The consequences for international law will be monstrous,” he said. After all, this is the collapse of the foundations, the principles of law. Including the postulates of the inevitability of responsibility. Now no one will go to any international bodies, everyone will negotiate among themselves.” [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Putin warns of economic impact from sanctions

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned during a cabinet meeting on March 29 about the possible negative effects of Western sanctions on the country’s economy, saying that "illegitimate restrictions in the medium term can really have a negative impact." [AA]

Russia needs to be “responsive and swift” in its efforts to maintain economic growth and act without “excessive red tape or delays,” Putin told his cabinet of ministers. “We need to ensure a steady growth in domestic demand. In the current environment, it is domestic demand that operates as a leading economic growth factor and takes centre stage.” [Kremlin]

Russia's economy is beginning to gradually collapse due to its long war with Ukraine and sanctions introduced against the aggressor country, the Wall Street Journal reported. Russia's government revenue is being squeezed and its economy has shifted to a lower-growth trajectory, likely for the long-term, it said. [WSJ]

The Wall Street Journal wrote: “Russia's biggest exports, gas and oil, have lost major customers. Government finances are strained. The rouble is down over 20% since November against the dollar. In addition, the labour force has shrunk as young people are sent to the front or flee the country over fears of being drafted. Uncertainty has curbed business investment.” [WSJ]

Russian companies made profits of 2.34 trillion roubles (EUR 27.8 billion) in January, according to data from the federal statistics service. That was down 21.3 percent from the same period last year, while the business climate deteriorated. Rosstat's business confidence index, which has been rising so far this year, slipped in March, down 3.3 percent in the manufacturing sector and 2.3 percent lower in the mining industry. [USNews]

"Russia's economy is entering a long-term regression," Alexandra Prokopenko, a former Russian Central Bank

official who left the country shortly after the invasion, said. Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska also warned that Russia is running out of cash. “There will be no money next year, we need foreign investors,” the raw-materials magnate said at an economic conference. [WSJ]

The government’s energy revenue fell by nearly half in the first two months of this year compared with last year, while the budget deficit deepened, the Wall Street Journal reported. The fiscal gap hit USD 34 billion in those first two months, the equivalent of more than 1.5 percent of the country’s total economic output. This is forcing Moscow to dip deeper into its sovereign-wealth fund, one of its main anti-crisis buffers. [WSJ]

(gc)

Russia: Moscow reportedly turns to Soviet-era weapons in Ukraine fight

Russian forces are increasingly relying on heavy Soviet-era weapons that can cause mass casualties and significant collateral damage in their bid to make headway in capturing eastern Ukraine, as fierce, prolonged fighting depletes its resources, Euronewsreported, citing British and US defence officials.

Russian bombers are thought to have been launching hefty 1960s-era anti-ship missiles in Ukraine, the UK Defence Ministry said. The Kh-22 missiles, with a reported range of 1,000 kilometres, were primarily designed to destroy aircraft carriers and can carry a nuclear warhead. [Euronews]

Russia and Ukraine have expended large amounts of weaponry in what has become a grinding war of attrition for the eastern region of Donbas, known for its coal mines and factories, placing huge strains on their resources and stockpiles. [Euronews]

Russia halted its disposal of Soviet-era weapons before it invaded Ukraine in 2022, the Moscow Times(MT)’s Russian service reported, citing procurement data. Russia’s Defense Ministry last signed a contract for the disposal of Soviet-era artillery ammunition in January, it reported.

The MT report comes amid widespread reports of the Russian army being plagued with equipment shortages throughout the 13 months of its invasion. A Russian army contractor on the battlefield told MT on condition

of anonymity that mothballed Soviet equipment is making it to the frontlines in large quantities in poor condition due to improper storage. [The Moscow Times]

Oryx, a website that tracks destroyed and captured equipment in the Russo-Ukraine war, estimates Russia lost 8,590 armoured vehicles in 2022.

Draftees, Female Soldiers

Draftees in the defence unit for Russia's Belgorod region said they were forcibly sent to the front without training.

The complaints of the draftees were recorded in a video posted on Telegram. [Telegram]

According to the soldiers they were deployed by the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) army with no orders or explanations. Following multiple casualties in the platoon, the draftees noted that they wish to serve the country through the legitimate Russian Armed Forces and not the DNR army. [Meduza]

Russia will also recruit inmates from women's prisons to serve in the Russian military, according to the Ukrainian government. A train with sleeping cars for the transfer of prisoners was spotted moving towards the Donetsk region. One of the cars had female convicts in it, Ukraine's Ministry of Defence said. [Telegram]

Around 100 are believed to have been mobilised. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Lawmaker introduces bill in Duma to push back conscription age

A senior Russian lawmaker introduced a bill to push back the age of conscription to compulsory military service to 21-30 years from the current 18-27 years. [Reuters]

The bill was introduced by Andrei Kartapolov, a former general who chairs the State Duma's defence committee and represents the ruling United Russia bloc, just over a year into Moscow's military campaign in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his backing in December to a Defence Ministry proposal to increase the age range. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu plans to increase the total number of serving combat personnel – professional contract soldiers and conscripts – to 1.5 million from 1.15 million. [Reuters][Meduza]

Conscripts cannot legally be deployed outside Russia. In September, though, Moscow unilaterally annexed four Ukrainian regions where fighting is continuing, and now considers them Russian territory. [Reuters] [Meduza]

Although Russia's campaign in Ukraine appears to have stalled, the Kremlin has repeatedly denied planning any further mobilisation.

(ava/gc)

Russia: Activist sentenced 8.5 years because of anti-war posts

Russian activist Dmitry Ivanov was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison on charges of spreading false information about Russia's armed forces. [The Moscow Times]

Ivanov is the head of the Telegram channel for the Moscow State University with over 10,000 subscribers. He used the page to denounce the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Telegram] [The Moscow Times]

"You have to understand that Russia is not Putin," Ivanov said. "Russians are against this criminal war." [Mediazona]

(ava/gc)

Russia: University student flees to Lithuania to avoid being arrested for anti-war stance

A Russian university student, Olesya Krivtsova, has fled house arrest to evade prosecution for criticising the war in Ukraine.

"I'm in Lithuania now and I can't believe it's all over," Krivtsova wrote on her Telegram account. Several days later her name appeared on the Ministry of Interior Wanted List. The house arrest was changed to imprisonment in absentia. [Telegram][Telegram]

Krivtsova could face more than ten years in prison on charges of justifying terrorism and repeatedly discrediting the Russian Armed Forces on social media. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Kremlin critics submits 50 human right complaints in prison

Kremlin critic and activist Alexei Navalny submitted more than 50 complaints against the Russian government to human rights commissioner Tatiana Moskalkova during his incarceration.

"Navalny, like any other person in his position, having been convicted, must have a full package of rights: conditions of detention, access to a lawyer, the opportunity to work," Commissioner Moskalkova said. The commissioner's comments came after the European Union decided to include her in its latest sanctions packet. [The Moscow Times]

Moskalkova pushed back against the sanctions. "These actions are in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all other international legal acts on human rights," she told TASS in February. "They also undercut democratic dialogue and human rights diplomacy that allowed us to really help people. There's little choice but to express regret that the humanitarian bridges that were so painstakingly built by commissioners have been burned in favour of the current political situation."

Nalvany's imprisonment has shined attention on the human rights conditions in Russia. In January, Navalny was sent to solitary confinement for the eleventh time. He suffers from health problems and now he is being denied visits from his family. [The Moscow Times]

The blogger has survived poisoning by a nerve agent. Even though he has been unable to challenge the president at the ballot box, his voice retains its power for many Russians and he continues to be viewed as a political threat by Kremlin.He has millions of Russian followers on social media – many in their early 20s or younger – and his campaign group's anti-corruption videos have reached millions.

In June, Navalny was transferred from one penal colony to another, where his treatment by the administration and guards became harsher, Amnesty International said. The colony administration has placed Navalny in a punishment cell four times, either

citing minor infringements of prison rules, such as an unbuttoned prison shirt or giving no explanations at all. [Amnesty International]

Oscar

Separately, the documentary Navalny won an oscar. The riveting real-life thriller follows Navalny's political rise, his survival of an assassination attempt by poisoning and his subsequent imprisonment.

Directed by Daniel Roher and presented by CNN Films and HBO Max, the film Navalny documents a methodical investigation by CNN Chief International CorrespondentClarissa Ward and journalist group Bellingcat to unmask Navalny's would-be killers. [CNN]

His daughter, Dasha Navalnaya, recently told CNN's Erin Burnett that her father is still calling on Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine. [CNN]

"Navalny is usually ignored as much as possible" by Russian officials, a journalist for Rossiya 1, who preferred to remain anonymous, said. [The Moscow Times]

"I can't judge the qualities of this documentary because I haven't watched it," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "It would be illogical to say anything. Although I did not look, but I dare to assume that there is a certain element of politicisation of the topic." [Interfax]

(ava/gc)

Russia awards US action movie star friendship medal

Russian President Vladimir Putin has awarded Steven Seagal, a US action movie star, the Order of Friendship Medal for his contribution to improving Russia's international relations.

Seagal received the award for his "immense contribution to the development of international cultural and humanitarian cooperation," according to a decree published on the government's website. [Government]

The actor is known for his strong support for Putin and is currently working on a documentary about the war in Ukraine. In 2016, he was granted Russian citizenship and served as a special envoy of the Russian Foreign

Ministry for humanitarian services. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Belarusian furniture store replaces Sweden's IKEA

The Russian Union of Shopping Centers recently signed a cooperation agreement with the Belarusian company Swed House to open furniture stores in the country after Sweden's IKEA suspended operations because of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Meduza]

"We have now received more than 100 requests from shopping centres that want to host Swed House," head of the Union of Shopping Centers, Bulat Shakirov, said. Swed House produces household goods, furniture, and textiles but, according to Shakirov, some items are even cheaper than those sold by IKEA. [TASS]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Yalta International Economic Forum to be held in Moscow

The Yalta International Economic Forum will be held in September in Moscow. The forum was initiated by Russia in 2015, just a year after it annexed Crimea. The event was cancelled in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. [Meduza]

In 2022, it was suspended because of the "unstable international situation." Usually, the forum takes place in Crimea, but for reasons linked to the high level of terrorism danger in the peninsula, this year the event might take place in Moscow. [Interfax]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Government will publish trade statistics after long pause

Russia has started to publish trade statistics again after a year-long pause. The publication of trade statistics was stopped in March last year following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions that the country was under. [The Moscow Times][Interfax]

(ava/gc)

Ukraine: Kyiv approves law to establish office of International Criminal Court

The Ukrainian government on March 3 approved a draft agreement to establish an office of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Ukraine. The office would focus on investigating pending cases since the start of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. [Ukrainian Government]

The establishment of a Ukrainian office will "allow the ICC prosecutor to more fully investigate international crimes committed in Ukraine," Andriy Kostin, Attorney General of Ukraine, said. [Kyiv Post]

Ukraine recognises the jurisdiction of the Court to identify, prosecute and try the perpetrators and accomplices for acts committed on the territory of Ukraine during the Revolution of Dignity, as well as crimes committed on the territory of Ukraine since February 20, 2014, in accordance with the Rome Statute. [Ukrainian Government]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Kyiv wants more independence from Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for more "spiritual independence" from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) as he accused the church of undermining the country's unity and collaborating with Moscow.

Authorities ordered the UOC on March 10 to leave its base in the 980 year-old Pechersk Lavra monastery complex in Kyiv. The church has to leave the location by March 29, the Ministry of Culture said. The government accused the UOC of breaking its tenancy agreement in the sprawling gold-domed monastery complex in the hills above central Kyiv. [IBTimes]

Ukrainian Culture Minister Oleskandr Tkachenko told Reuters that violations of the tenancy agreement included the construction of new buildings on the vast monastery complex, and that the state had the right to take the site back. [IBTimes] [Reuters]

UOC spokesperson Metropolitan Klyment said the government had not shown the Church any

documents proving violations of the tenancy agreement at the monastery or justifying the need to leave. He added that the buildings had the correct permissions. [IBTimes]

The government's decision prompted Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill to ask Pope Francis and other religious leaders to help stop the crackdown. Kirill has strongly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In his appeal, he urged religious leaders and international organisations to "make every effort to prevent the forced closure of the monastery." [Reuters]

Kyiv has also opened criminal cases against over 50 UOC clergy in the past year on charges including treason and collaboration with Moscow. Some have been swapped for Ukrainian prisoners of war who had been held by Russia. [IBTimes]

Ukraine will not "allow the terrorist state any opportunity to manipulate the spiritual life of our people," Zelenskyy said. The order is part of an ongoing crackdown on the UOC, with authorities carrying out property searches and sanctioning bishops since October.

The independent Orthodox Church in Ukraine, competitor of the UOC, has been gaining followers since the Russian invasion in February 2022. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Government appoints new anti-corruption investigator

The Ukrainian government appointed a new anti-corruption investigator on March 6, as the country continues its crackdown on corruption as part of the European Union accession process. [Reuters] [Kyiv Independent] [Ukrainian Government]

Semen Kryvonos, the former chief of the State Inspection of Architecture and Urban Planning, was appointed as the new director of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) for a seven-year term. Officials should "fear God, the people of Ukraine and NABU" during his term, Kryvonos said in a video statement. [Reuters]

The Kyiv-based NGO Anti-Corruption Action Centre voiced concerns about Kryvonos' lack of experience and alleged ties to the presidential administration.

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Nearly all Ukrainians want to join EU by 2030

A poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology for the National Democratic Institute (NDI) showed that 92 percent of Ukrainians want European Union membership by 2030, while 86 percent said that they want the country to be a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member by 2030.

The poll by the NDI was conducted between January 4 and 16, 2023. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine needs more rehabilitative care, WHO says

Ukraine needs more rehabilitative care for the injured as the country's forces try to repel Russia after it invaded the country in 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) said during a conference on March 7. [EURACTIV] [WHO]

The conference by WHO Europe and the WHO country office in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Ministry of Health, focussed on rehabilitation, assistive technology like hearing, vision and mobility aids, and disability inclusion in conflict. [WHO]

"Since the Russian invasion, the need for rehabilitation has never been greater in Ukraine and neighbouring countries," Satish Mishra, from the WHO's European office, said. Some Ukrainians have to travel to neighbouring countries to receive care for injuries.

In the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine, WHO said it was stepping up its efforts to support health authorities in strengthening rehabilitation and assistive technology services to enhance disability inclusion in the country. [WHO]

Before the war, over 2.7 million people in Ukraine were registered as living with disabilities, but this number has likely increased amid the violence. Thousands of people with complex conflict-related injuries require short-term and long-term rehabilitation services.

At the same time, the need for rehabilitation for issues not directly related to the war, such as noncommunicable diseases, ageing or accidents, also continues.

Many people in Ukraine rely on assistive technologies, such as mobility aids and self-care products, which may get damaged or left behind during evacuations. Disruptions to public transport and unstable electricity and water supply due to attacks against critical infrastructure also hinder the functioning of hospitals and citizens' access to health care.

Rehabilitation of the wounded and access to assistive technologies is a government priority, Iulliia Sokolovska, deputy head of President Zelenskyy's cabinet, said. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albania: Europe's first 'wild river' national park declared

The Vjosa River, one of Europe's last remaining wild rivers, has been declared a national park by the Albanian government. [The Guardian]

The designation on March 15 includes an initial investment of EUR 75 million to stop wastewater from being poured into the river. It includes the protection of 32,000 acres along the 190 kilometres of the Albanian section of the river. Plans for the building of eight hydropower stations along the river and its tributaries were cancelled as part of the declaration. [The Washington Post]

With more than 1,000 flora and fauna species calling the river home, the Vjosa River flows 270 kilometres

from the Pindus mountains in Greece, through the forests of Albania and to the Adriatic coast. The Vjosa River is a rarity in Europe, as it remains without dams or other artificial constructions. [The Guardian][The Guardian]

The declaration comes after a decade-long campaign from non-governmental organisations, including Save the Blue Heart of Europe, a campaign to protect Balkan rivers, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the outdoor clothing company Patagonia. [The Guardian]

"Vjosa is a symbol of human history and also a very important part of the history of our country. Maybe Albania does not have the power to change the world, but it can create successful models of protecting biodiversity and natural assets, and we are proud to announce the creation of this first national park on one of the last wild rivers in Europe," said Mierla Kumbaro Furxhi, Albania's tourism and environment minister [The Guardian]

Environmentalists continue to raise concerns over the Albanian government's green lighting of a new international airport due to be built along the Vjosa River, near the city of Vjosa, claiming that the airport will do irreparable damage to the ecosystem [The Washington Post]

(jn/gc)

Albania: Government announces creation of Holocaust Museum

The establishment of a Holocaust museum in the only country in Europe which saw its Jewish population increase during World War II has been announced. [Euractiv]

The Besa museum will be established in the capital of Tirana. Prime Minister Edi Rama announced the museum during a visit to Jerusalem. [Euractiv]

It was the concept of 'besa,' or keeping a promise once given, that drove the help offered by Albanians to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution across Europe. During World War II, Jews from neighbouring countries fled to Albania, where they were taken in by local families and given shelter and hidden.

"The rescue of Jews during World War II is one of the most beautiful pages in the history of the Albanians," Albanian Culture Minister Elva Margariti said.

“Christians and Muslims sacrificed everything to protect them. The Besa Museum will be a bridge of communication between generations, a dialogue space for sharing the best values of our people.” [Euractiv]

(jn/gc)

Albania: Russian photographers seeks political asylum

A Russian citizen who was arrested in Albania over espionage charges is seeking political asylum following plans for her extradition to Russia. [Euractiv]

Svetlana Timofeeva, a photographer, was arrested for entering a closed military facility which once manufactured AK-47s, dating back to Albania’s communist era.[Euractiv]

“The return of this citizen to Russia would be contrary to the prohibition of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment,” her asylum request stated. Timofeeva claims that if returned to Russia she will face persecution for her opposition to the invasion of Ukraine [Euractiv].

“This is not a special liberation operation, this is one man’s war against our brothers and a crime against our people,” she posted on social media. [Euractiv]

(jn/gc)

Greece: Government will hold elections on May 21

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced on March 28 during his cabinet speech that parliamentary elections will take place on May 21. Mitsotakis said if voting results on May 21 lack a clear majority, the second round of elections will be held in early July. [Anadolu Agency]

Mitsotakis urged citizens to vote for his conservative Nea Dimokratia (ND) party to form a single-party government.

"The country and its citizens need clear horizons...the national elections will be held at the end of the four-year term, as I had committed from the start," Mitsotakis said during the televised cabinet meeting. [Reuters]

A deadly rail disaster as well as runaway inflation that has left many people struggling to pay their bills, has stirred public anger, and has helped to erode ND's lead over the opposition leftist party Syriza. [Reuters]

A new electoral system, setting the bar high on winning an absolute majority in the 300-seat parliament, means that the May 21 poll is unlikely to be conclusive and a second round of voting in early July is expected. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Greece: Deadly train crash in Greek history kills 57

A passenger train travelling from Athens to Thessaloniki with more than 350 people collided head on with a cargo train on March 1, killing 57 people in the deadliest crash in Greek history.

Authorities arrested a 59-year-old station master of a train station in the city of Larissa who testified before a prosecutor. The majority of the victims were university students. Fifty-six people were missing after the crash. [Hürriyet][Reuters][Reuters]

Greece's Minister of Transport Kostas Karamanlis resigned immediately after the collision and said he has taken over a system that is "not fit for the 21st century". His ministry failed to make necessary improvements during his time in office, he said. [Reuters]

Following the crash, thousands of people started demonstrations against the government and Hellenic Train, the company responsible for administration of the rail network. Police tear gassed the demonstrators during the protests. Demonstrators included more than 2,000 university students that blocked the roads in front of the Greek parliament for a moment of silence. [Reuters]

Several unions linked to railway workers said they would go on strike on March 2, which led to Hellenic Train to suspend all scheduled trains in Greece. Government workers, teachers, and students showed their support by joining the protests on March 8. [Reuters]

A number of train routes reopened on March 22, three weeks after the train crash. The decision to close all railroad activities was taken due to security concerns. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Greece: Government increases minimum wage

The Greek government will raise the minimum wage by 9.4 percent to EUR 780 starting from April 1, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced in parliament on March 17. [Reuters]

During his speech in parliament Mitsotakis said: “This increase obviously does not solve the problem, but it certainly offers a very important relief and above all, it indicates our intention to upgrade salaries in both the public and private sectors.” [Anadolu Agency]

The latest minimum wage hike will mark the third increase since Mitsotakis took office in 2019. Before Mitsotakis' administration, the minimum wage in Greece was EUR 650 per month. [Anadolu Agency]

(lc/gc)

Serbia: Member of ruling SNS party sentenced for arson attack

Former President of the Belgrade municipality Grocka and an active member of Serbia’s ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Dragoljub Simonovic, has been sentenced to five years in prison on March 20 for incitement to violence and jeopardising the life of journalist Milan Jovanovic in 2018. [Balkan Insight]

Simonovic’s accomplices were also sentenced, with Vladimir Mihajlovic sentenced to four years in prison, Aleksandar Marinkovic to four years and six months, and Vladimir Novakovic to three years and six months. The three men threw a Molotov cocktail at the car of Jovanovic’s wife. The fire then spread to Jovanovic’s house.

Marinkovic was tried in absentia as he has been on the run since 2020, as a result of which an international warrant for him has been issued. This is the second first-instance verdict, since the first one, under which all the defendants were sentenced to prison, was annulled by the Court of Appeal, which ordered a retrial. [Balkan Insight]

Simonovic categorically denied the accusations of his involvement, while Jovanovic claimed that he was attacked solely because he wrote about Simonovic’s

affairs, then Mayor of Grocka. All the defendants have the right to appeal to the Court of Appeal. [Balkan Insight]

(lc/gc)

Serbia: Protestors oppose removal of two prosecutors from corruption probe

Serbian opposition supporters in Belgrade on March 2 held a protest in response to the dismissal of two deputy prosecutors, Bojana Savovic and Jasmina Paunovic. [Reuters]

The country's senior prosecutor, Nenad Stefanovic, removed the two during their investigation into an embezzlement case at a state-run energy company. Stefanovic said in a statement that the two were replaced due to their "slow work", after they asked to be taken off the case.

The protestors gathered around the Serbian government and shouted "thieves", carrying banners that read "We won't give up our Lauras," referencing European Chief Prosecutor Laura Kovesi, as she was fired as the Head of the Anticorruption Directorate in Romania. [AP News]

(lc/gc)

Turkey's Erdogan sets May 14 for presidential election

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan officially has set parliamentary and presidential elections for May 14, a month earlier than previously planned and three months after earthquakes left millions homeless across southern Turkey and threatened the leader's domestic popularity.

Erdogan changed the dates for the elections, initially planned for on June 18, under the authorization given by Article 116 of the Turkish constitution. He said he changed the date because of a conflict with nation-wide university entrance exams. [Anadolu Agency]

"May our decision to renew the elections be beneficial for our country, our nation, the Turkish Grand National Assembly and our political parties," Erdogan said after putting his signature on a decision confirming the election date, which was then published in the Official Gazette. "We are starting the election calendar even as

we are focusing all of our attention on healing the wounds caused by the earthquake, rebuilding and restoring our cities and ensuring that our people obtain homes as soon as possible." [AP]

The elections will be held in the wake of devastating earthquakes that struck the country in February. They claimed more than 50,000 lives and displaced millions of people. Voters who have lost their homes in the February 6 earthquake will be able to vote in the cities in which they are now residing, Erdogan said. His campaign will refrain from using songs out of respect for those who lost their lives, he said. [Official Gazette]

Erdogan has ruled over Turkey since 2003, first as prime minister and as president since 2014. The upcoming elections could present him with his stiffest electoral challenges. One poll released last month showed the 69-year-old trailing his secular rival by nearly 10 percentage points. [AP News] [Reuters] [BangkokPost][AP]

Erdogan will head into the election with Turkey facing one of its worst economic crises during his career, with the country experiencing staggering inflation during the last two years. The government policies, such as low interest rates, have led to skyrocketing prices for food and other essentials. [BangkokPost]

'*Table of Peace*'

This could improve the chances for rival candidates.

The main opposition coalition, Table of Six, nominated on March 6 Kemal Kılıcdaroglu, a 74-year-old former civil servant and economist, as their candidate. Kılıcdaroglu heads the largest party in the bloc, the Republican People's Party (CHP). The coalition includes CHP, Good Party (IYIP), Felicity Party (SP), Democrat Party (DP), Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Future Party (GP). [Millet İttifakı]

"Our table is the table of peace," Kılıcdaroglu said. "Our only goal is to take the country to the days of prosperity, peace and joy". [Daily Sabah] [BBC Turkish]

After the opposition coalition reached an agreement on Kılıcdaroglu's candidacy, Eurobonds rallied and there was a fall in credit default swaps. Timothy Ash, an economist focused on Turkey and a strategist at BlueBay Asset Management, said the reaction showed "people are more confident about the future." He said that in the short term, there will be an expectation of a return to orthodox economic policy and improved central bank governance. [TheMediaLine]

Initial Opposition

The leader of IYIP, Meral Aksener, initially did not want Kılıcdaroglu to be named as the presidential candidate. She supported the Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem Imamoglu and the Mayor of Ankara Mansur Yavas. Aksener's party left the coalition on March 3. [HaberTürk]

Three days later, Aksener accepted the proposal made by CHP to appoint mayors Imamoglu and Yavas as vice-presidents. After the agreement, IYIP returned to the Table of Six. [Reuters] [Reuters]

The co-leader of pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), Mithad Sancar, told reporters that HDP will support Kılıcdaroglu after "clear and open" talks. Sancar added: "Our expectation is a transition to a strong democracy." [Reuters]

HDP, in coalition with five other parties under the name Labor and Freedom Coalition, announced on March 22 that they will not nominate a candidate. Co-Chairperson of HDP Pervin Buldan said: "We will fulfil our historical responsibility against one-man rule in the upcoming presidential elections". [BBC Turkish]

HUDA-PAR Support Erdogan

Chairman of HUDA-PAR, Zekeriya Yapıcıoglu, announced on March 11 that his party will support Erdogan in the elections and asked the party's supporters to vote for Erdogan in the upcoming elections. The ultra-Islamist party is known to have relations with Hezbollah, a Kurdish Sunni militant organisation. [Euronews] [Euronews]

The New Welfare Party joined the Republic Alliance on March 24. Chairman of the party Fatih Erbakan announced his withdrawal as a presidential candidate from the upcoming elections and pledged their support to the Republic Alliance led by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The New Welfare Party is an islamist political party and the successor of the Welfare Party which was banned and shut down in 1998. [Sözcü]

The Republic Alliance consists of the ruling party AKP, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the Great Unity Party (BBP), YRP and HUDA-PAR.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Top-court unfreezes pro-Kurdish party's accounts

Turkey's top court ruled to unfreeze bank accounts of a pro-Kurdish party accused by the state of links to terrorism, likely to have a pivotal role in upcoming elections and to pose a threat to President Tayyip Erdogan. [Reuters]

The Constitutional Court reversed its own previous narrow ruling to block the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) accounts containing government aid. Its statement gave no reasons. [Reuters]

The initial decision to freeze the accounts was made as a part of the closure case HDP is currently facing due to alleged links to terror organisation Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The court did not release a statement regarding the decision.

HDP will get financial support from the Treasury that amounts to EUR 26.45 million in 2023. HDP is the third largest party in the Turkish parliament. It won 11.7 percent of votes in the 2018 general elections. [NTV]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Activists ask ICC to probe abuses

Turkish and European activists and human rights lawyers have filed a request to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to conduct a formal investigation into human rights violations in Turkey, which they allege have increased since the 2016 coup attempt. [Court House News]

Belgian law firm Van Steenbrugge Advocaten, Belgian-based Turkish NGO Turkey Tribunal, and the European judges' association, MEDEL, have filed complaints against Turkey in the ICC for "crimes against humanity." The estimated number of people who were tortured and unlawfully imprisoned after the 2016 coup attempt has surpassed 200,000. [Euractiv]

Former Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Johan Vande Lanotte unveiled details of the 4,000-page dossier sent to the court's prosecution office seeking a probe into allegations of crimes against humanity. The prosecution office receives hundreds of such submissions each year from around the world, and they rarely lead to an investigation.

Turkey is currently not a member of the ICC, hence the court does not have a right to rule on the country. Despite this, the crimes could be prosecuted in a Hague-based court, they said. A ruling would impact other ICC-member countries. [AP News]

The official request was submitted in early February but due to the earthquake in Turkey on February 6, the activists and lawyers involved in the case made the announcement on March 1. [The Guardian]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Police disrupt International Women's Day march

Turkish police fired pepper spray at a group of protestors during the Feminist Night March held to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 in Istanbul. [Reuters]

The Governorship of Istanbul announced in March that the protests will not be permitted. Police closed streets leading to the Istanbul neighbourhood of Taksim and closed entrances to local metro stations on March 8. [Cumhuriyet]

Groups of women travelling to Taksim got arrested by the police before the march started. During the protests thousands of demonstrators held banners that read "government resign", "We are not afraid, we do not obey", "You will not walk alone" and chanted "this will be the last march you try to prevent."

The annual Feminist Night March started in 2003 and has encountered obstacles and prohibitions over the years under the Justice and Development Party-led government. [BBC Turkish]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Radio and Television Supreme Council fines TV channels

Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK), the state agency responsible for regulating radio and television channels, fined five TV channels on March 22.

RTUK did not renew the working licence of Germany's Deutsche Welle (DW) Turkish after access to DW Turkish was banned in July 2022. It said the decision was based on the "wrong choice of field activity" during the licence renewal process. [Bianet]

RTUK also fined Halk TV after reporters promoted the latest book by Selahattin Demirtas, the former Chairman of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). He was

later jailed for connection to the PKK. The channel was suspended for five days in March and an administrative fine at the upper limit was imposed. The channel was also fined an unspecified amount for a broadcast violation on another program. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Several other TV channels were fined for misinforming the public and promoting violence against women in domestic settings. [Sözcü]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Floods kills 18 people in earthquake-affected cities

Floods caused by heavy rain killed at least 18 people on March 15 in the southeastern part of the country, only weeks after deadly earthquakes struck the region. [Balkan Insight]

The floods destroyed tent cities in Adiyaman, Sanliurfa and Hatay after citizens lost their homes to the twin earthquakes on February 6. Volunteers are rebuilding the tent cities. [Cumhuriyet]

Turkey's Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said in a press conference that water supplies were shut down in the areas to prevent long-term damage to the cities' water pipes. [Anadolu Ajansı]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Competition Board fines Elon Musk over Twitter takeover

The Turkish Competition Board announced on March 6 its decision to fine Elon Musk for his purchase of Twitter. The board decided to fine Musk 0.1 percent of Twitter's gross income. [Reuters]

The board made the decision after Musk failed to get permission from the authorities in the takeover of the social media platform. Turkey has no judicial authority over business transactions in the United States. Twitter has not announced it will comply with the fine. [Anadolu Agency]

Musk's takeover did not effectively violate competition, but the probe still ended with a fine due to the lack of board permission, according to the board.

(lc/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy: Opposition Democratic Party elects left-wing radical as new leader

Italy's opposition Democratic Party (PD) has elected far-left politician Elly Schlein as its leader, making her the youngest and first female chief of the grouping, which is trying to rebuild its position after being routed by the hard right in parliamentary elections last year.

Schlein, aged 37, will lead opposition in parliament to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who stormed to power in September as Italy swung sharply to the right, triggering concern among liberals across Europe. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

In her grouping's internal election, Schlein surprised some by gaining 54 percent of the vote to beat party veteran Stefano Bonaccini, president of the northern region of Emilia-Romagna.

Left-wing agenda

The Democratic Party is traditionally centre-left but Schlein has promised to make it more radical as it challenges the governing coalition. Supporters view her as a breath of fresh air while critics have expressed concern that her left-wing agenda could damage the Democratic Party's electoral appeal.

Schlein has vowed to make issues like poverty, health care and climate change her top priorities. After she

was elected leader, she said: “The democratic people are alive and are ready to rise up. This is a clear mandate for real change.” [Reuters]

Schlein’s appointment to the top job in her party means that both Italy’s premier and the de facto leader of the opposition are now women, although the two are diametrically opposite in ideological terms, Politico reported, noting that Schlein, a lesbian, has a liberal stance on issues from LGBT rights to migration.

Polar opposites

Meloni, meanwhile, has described herself as a Christian mother who defends “Europe’s classical and Judeo-Christian historical and cultural roots and identity.” Her coalition government has introduced tougher rules aimed at cutting illegal migration. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

In the past, Schlein, who has both Italian and American citizenship, worked on the campaign team of former US President Barack Obama. In 2015, she left Italy’s Democratic Party when it was led by former centrist Prime Minister Matteo Renzi because of a political disagreement but recently rejoined the grouping. [Politico]

Despite the differences between Schlein and Meloni, the prime minister offered her congratulations, saying: “I hope that the election of a young woman at the helm of Via del Nazareno [the headquarters of the Democratic Party] can help the left to look ahead and not back.” [ANSA]

(km/pk)

Italy: Tougher penalties for people-smugglers planned after migrant deaths

Italy’s prime minister has announced a plan to raise penalties for people-smugglers following a shipwreck that killed more than 70 migrants.

Giorgia Meloni on March 9 said that her cabinet had approved a decree ushering in new rules that could punish smugglers with up to 30 years in prison for any migrant deaths. [BBC]

The premier, whose right-wing government has been criticised by humanitarian groups and opposition leaders for its handling of migrants, said: “Our task is to find solutions to the problem, and today... the best

way to honour victims is to do what one can so that this tragedy isn't repeated." [Reuters]

On February 26, at least 72 migrants died after the boat that was carrying them broke apart off the coast of Calabria in south-west Italy.

Earlier in February, an Italian court declared unlawful a government decree which allowed only migrants who were deemed to be vulnerable to disembark at port. [Europe Monthly March 2023] [The Local] [AFP-Barron's] [Dawn]

Meanwhile, on March 10, hundreds of migrants were rescued off the coast of Calabria. Three coastguard boats were dispatched to save 500 people, while two more vessels and a navy ship picked up another 800 migrants who were further out at sea. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera] [ABC News]

EU leaders agreed in February to take tougher measures against a rising number of unwanted migrants and to speed up the return of those who are not granted refugee status in the bloc. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(km-rmp/pk)

Italy moves to ban lab-grown meat to protect food heritage

The Italian government on March 28 approved a bill that bans synthetic food products including laboratory-grown meat in a move to protect the country's food heritage.

Under the bill, the production, sale, import and export of synthetic food for human consumption will be banned. Violators could be fined up to EUR 60,000 and have their synthetic products confiscated. [ANSA]

Among those to support the move were farmers' lobbies like the Coldiretti group, whose president, Ettore Prandini, said: "After meat, experimentation has been extended to fish and to milk, endangering the natural nature of the foods that are the biggest part of our diet."

Among those opposing the move were animal welfare groups which see lab-grown meat as something that could help the environment and protect animals.

Alice Ravenscroft, head of policy at the Good Food Institute Europe, an international NGO working to

build sustainable food systems, said: “The passing of such a law would shut down the economic potential of this nascent field in Italy, holding back scientific progress and climate mitigation efforts.” [Reuters]

Last year, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cleared cell-cultured chicken for human consumption but the European Food and Safety Authority (EFSA) has not followed suit.

If the EFSA were to issue approval, Italy would not be able to ban the sale of synthetic food produced in the European Union because of the bloc’s rules allowing the free movement of goods and services. [BBC]

The Italian bill must now be approved by parliament before becoming law.

(km/pk)

Italy: Protest over restrictions on same-sex couples’ rights

Hundreds took to the streets of Milan on March 18 to protest a move by Italy’s hard-right government to stop gay couples in the city from registering children.

While Italy has a nationwide ban on same-sex couples registering children, since 2018 Milan’s centre-left mayor, Giuseppe Sala, had defied the government and allowed registrations to go ahead. [BBC] [Aljazeera]

This came to an end when the interior ministry sent a letter to courts in the city insisting that the ban must be respected. Sala called the move “an obvious step backwards”.

Same-sex civil unions have been legal in Italy since 2016, but opposition from the Catholic Church has helped prevent gay couples from registering children.

Hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has put a strong emphasis on traditional family values since coming to office last year, when she declared in a speech: “Yes to natural families, no to the LGBT lobby”. [BBC] [Aljazeera]

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

(iy/pk)

Italy: Proposal to ban smoking outdoors causes controversy

Twenty years after Italy prohibited smoking in indoor public areas, a proposal by the health minister to extend the ban to outdoor settings has triggered controversy within the right-wing government.

Under Health Minister Orazio Schillaci's new plan, smoking would be forbidden at public transport stops, the outside area of bars and in parks when children or pregnant women are present.

Junior Culture Minister Vittorio Sgarbi said: "This is something typical of an authoritarian and dictatorial communist regime."

The ban would also see smoking e-cigarettes and vaping prohibited in some outdoor areas.

The leader of the right-wing League party, which is part of the ruling coalition, voiced scepticism. Matteo Salvini said on Twitter: "E-cigarettes are helping so many people to give up regular ones. As an ex-smoker who quit four years ago, the ban on smoking them [e-cigarettes] outdoors seems over the top." [Reuters]

However, the Italian Association of Environmental Medicine welcomed the proposed ban, saying that vaping leads to addiction.

The new rules would need to be approved by the cabinet before being passed on to parliament.

Health association Fondazione Umberto Veronesi has estimated that more than 43,000 people die in Italy every year for smoking-related reasons. [ANSA]

(km/pk)

Italy: New EUR 4.9bn energy relief package approved

The Italian government has approved a new relief package worth EUR 4.9 billion in an effort to cut high energy bills.

Aimed at families and businesses, the latest measures were announced by Rome on March 28, and extend a move by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government to earmark EUR 21 billion to reduce energy costs for the first quarter of the year. [Reuters] [ANSA]

The government has also extended until June a bonus pay-out designed to help low-income families with energy bills. [Reuters][ANSA]

Separately, businesses will receive help via a tax bonus, available if their spending on gas and electricity increased by more than 30 percent in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period in 2019. [Reuters] [Zawya]

(iy/pk)

Italy: Navy captain sentenced to 30 years for passing secrets to Russia

An Italian navy captain was sentenced to 30 years in prison on March 9 after being found guilty of selling secrets to Russia.

The officer, Walter Biot, was arrested in 2021 and accused of selling classified information for EUR 5,000. Italy later expelled two Russian diplomats. A court the same year rejected Biot's request to be freed pending trial. [ANSA]

Biot allegedly gave a memory card containing 181 photographs to a Russian embassy employee. Forty-seven of the pictures were marked as "NATO secret" and 57 as "NATO confidential". [Reuters]

A military prosecutor wanted Biot to be sentenced to life in prison. He said that Biot "displayed a high degree of disloyalty and criminal ability, but also... greed."

Biot's lawyer said that his client never handed over documents that could "put Italy or other countries at risk". He announced that Biot would appeal the verdict.

(km/pk)

Portugal: VAT on basic food items scrapped after protests at cost of living

Following months of strikes and street protests, Portugal's government has announced a new series of measures to tackle the rising cost of living amid steep inflation.

The package, unveiled on March 24, includes the removal of value-added tax (VAT) from essential food items and a one percent increase in civil servants' wages. [Portugal Resident] [Lusa]

Finance minister Fernando Medina said the goal was to create “stability and confidence”. He added that the reduction of VAT to zero on some products depended on an agreement with the food sector. [Portugal Resident]

A week previously, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Lisbon in a protest called by the CGTP-IN union.

Workers from both the public and private sectors marched to demand a hike in pay and pensions of at least 10 percent or a minimum rise of EUR 100 a month. They also called on the government to intervene and cap soaring food prices and to tax “the colossal profits of large companies”. [Lusa]

Earlier, Portuguese Economy Minister Antonio Costa Silva had ruled out imposing caps on the prices of food products. [Reuters]

Portugal’s socialist government has faced multiple protests since December. Teachers, doctors, railway workers and other groups have staged strikes. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly February 2023] [Europe Monthly December 2022]

According to official data, more than half of Portuguese employees earned less than EUR 1,000 per month last year. Portugal’s minimum wage, EUR 760 a month, was raised from EUR 705 in December. [TPN/Lusa]

State inspectors step up checks in shops

The government on March 9 launched stepped-up price checks in supermarkets throughout the country after the cost of essential foodstuffs rose almost 29 percent over the last year.

Earlier in March, inspectors from Portugal’s food and economic safety agency (ASAE) “found situations such as different prices between the shelf and the checkout, and cases of products being underweight,” said senior government official Nuno Fazenda, who is responsible for tourism, trade and services. [Portugal Resident]

Food prices in Portugal have climbed way beyond the country’s overall level of inflation – which was at 8.6 percent in February on an annual basis – and more than in the eurozone, where foodstuff prices that month rose 15 percent year-on-year on average. [INE] [Eurostat] [Publico]

In December, the Portuguese parliament passed a 33 percent tax on windfall profits for food retailers and

energy companies to discourage excess profits. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Gov't moves to tackle housing crisis

Portugal's socialist government on March 30 unveiled a series of steps to tackle a housing crisis, including a ban on new licences for short-stay holiday apartments in some areas of the tourism-dependent country. [Lusa]

The measures come amid strong social pressure to solve a housing shortage that has been growing, especially in the capital, Lisbon, in Porto, the second-largest city, and in the southern Algarve region. [The Portugal News]

The "More Housing" package was drawn up after public consultation, and aims to increase available housing, support tenants and protect them from being evicted. [The Portugal News]

Housing groups blame a tourism-focused economy and policies encouraging wealthy foreigners to invest for making it expensive for locals to rent or buy homes. [Reuters]

The Portuguese Association of Real Estate Developers and Investors criticised the package for what it said was a "lack of incentives for construction" and called some of the new government measures "an attack on private property". [Lusa] [Portugal Resident]

But the Association of Lisbon Tenants has welcomed the package. [The Portugal News]

The measures are due to be discussed in parliament and, if approved, will be presented to conservative President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa for signing into law. The president, who has the power to veto the package, previously described the programme as "inoperable". [The Portugal News]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: OECD says faster courts, simpler taxes needed to boost FDI

Lisbon should move to increase investor confidence through steps such as cutting red tape, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has recommended in its latest report on foreign investment in Portugal. [The Portugal Resident]

The report, published on March 20, was a joint initiative between the OECD and Portugal's Agency for Investment and Foreign Trade (AICEP). [Lusa]

The OECD acknowledged Portugal's "impressive economic rebound" and the rapid growth of foreign direct investment (FDI) over the last decade but said that the overall level of such investment remained "relatively low". [OECD]

The report blamed regulatory barriers such as "burdensome" licences and permits and "too complex" tax regulations for holding back FDI.

The OECD also found that the length of judicial proceedings in Portugal was still an obstacle, "despite improvements in the efficiency of courts in recent years".

The report recommended reforms such as further digitalization, increasing the speed of licence-issuing and court proceedings, and improving the efficiency of the country's immigration authority.

The Portuguese minister for internationalisation, Bernardo Ivo Cruz, said there was "total alignment" between the government and the report's conclusions. [Lusa]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Navy charges sailors who refused to monitor Russian warship

Portugal's Navy has accused 13 sailors from the patrol vessel *NRP Mondego* of disobedience after they refused to monitor a Russian warship because of what they said were "serious technical limitations" in their own craft. [Portugal Resident]

The sailors were ordered to track the Russian ship to the north of Porto Santo, the easternmost island of the Madeira archipelago, on March 11, but refused to carry out the mission. [TPN/Lusa]

The Portuguese seamen said one of the engines and an electric power generator on their vessel were not

working properly. The Navy inspected the ship days after the incident and concluded that the mission had been “safely achievable”. [Lusa] [TVP]

The Portuguese Navy’s chief of staff, Admiral Gouveia e Melo, said that it “cannot forget, ignore, or forgive acts of indiscipline”. [Lusa] [Expresso]

The case is being examined in two processes: a disciplinary procedure within the Navy and a criminal inquiry in a civil court. [TSF]

The sailors’ lawyers said that the public position taken by the Navy’s chief of staff was against the “principle of the presumption of innocence”. [CNN Portugal]

A little more than two weeks after the incident, the *Mondego* had to abort a mission in the Selvagens Islands, south of Madeira, for technical reasons, Portugal’s Lusa news agency reported.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Portugal’s naval units have monitored Russian warships passing near Portuguese territorial waters on several occasions. [TVP]

(msa/pk)

Spain: Government sees off no-confidence vote

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s Socialist-led coalition government has seen off a vote of no confidence called by the far-right opposition Vox party ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled to be held before the end of the year.

The no-confidence motion was on March 22 backed by 53 MPs but opposed by 201. The centre-right opposition People’s Party abstained, drawing criticism from Vox. [France24] [Politico]

Vox said its motion was partially a response to reforms of the law on sedition that were introduced by Sanchez and his left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) in December, a move that benefited several convicted Catalan separatists by reducing their prison sentences.

The reforms were criticised by opposition politicians, who claimed the changes were designed to ensure support for the government from a Catalonian party on key legislation. [Europe Monthly January 2022]

Vox also tried to capitalise on public anger at the government's botched sexual offences legislation. In an unintended outcome, lawyers have used the new rules to reduce sentences for people convicted of sex crimes. [The Guardian] [Independent/AP] [lavanguardia][ABC Espana]

Controversially, Vox leader Santiago Abascal chose to break with custom and not stand as an alternative prime minister in the no-confidence vote, instead choosing 89-year-old independent candidate Ramon Tamames, a former communist, for the role.

Tamames pledged that if the motion was successful, his only act as premier would be to call for a national election to be held at the same time as local elections in May. [AP News]

Sanchez addressed Abascal before the vote, saying: "The candidate that you have presented is simply a decoy for you to hide behind and for you to hide your despicable political agenda."

Abascal, meanwhile, called Sanchez's administration the "worst Spanish government in decades". [The Guardian] [Independent/AP][lavanguardia] [ABC Espana]

(iy-km/pk)

Spain: Ruling coalition agrees on reform of pension system

The governing left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and leftist junior coalition partner Unidas Podemos have announced an agreement on reforms to Spain's pension system that have won the support of some of the country's major labour unions.

With a sharp expected increase in the number of retired people set to put an extra burden on state finances, the agreement will see social security costs on businesses go up for higher-wage earners. [AP News]

Ione Belarra, leader of Unidas Podemos, announced the agreement on March 10, saying that the changes would increase state revenue without harming future pensioners. [ANSA]

Under the reform, instead of the retirement age being raised, a new "solidarity tax" will temporarily remove tax exemptions from social contributions for businesses and people who earn more. [Reuters]

The pension system changes are necessary for Spain to receive its fourth tranche of pandemic recovery funds from the EU.

The secretary general of the UGT labour union, Pepe Alvarez, said: "I want to congratulate the government… for their ability to negotiate with the European Union, because this is a deal that has Europe's backing and that has enormous importance for our pensions." [AP News][La Moncloa]

Some business groups are against the move, claiming that it will burden companies. [AP News]

(km/pk)

Spain: Gender quotas aim to promote equality in Cabinet and big firms

Spain's centre-left government on March 4 proposed a gender equality law under which at least 40 percent of Cabinet positions will have to be filled by women.

The same rules will apply to the boards of publicly listed companies which have more than 250 workers and an annual turnover of over EUR 50 million. [Reuters]

"If women represent half of society, then half of the political power and half of the economic power must belong to women," said Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who belongs to the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

At present, women make up 44 percent of Congress, the lower house of the Spanish parliament, and 39 percent of the Senate, the upper chamber. [Reuters]

In Europe, a similar quota system was introduced in Belgium in 1994. Since then, France and Germany have pledged to ensure gender parity in Cabinets. [The Guardian] [Financial Times]

In February, Spain became the first European nation to grant paid menstrual leave for women who struggle with painful periods. Spanish MPs also passed legislation that made it easier for teenagers to change their officially listed gender and to have an abortion. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(rmp/pk)

Spain: Government approves plans for offshore wind energy amid protests

The Spanish government has approved plans that designate swathes of marine areas off the country's coast as eligible for wind energy production.

Energy Minister Teresa Ribera said the plans allow wind farms to be built on waters covering 5,000 square kilometres. [El Pais]

The decision comes after five years of negotiations with regional governments, maritime sector stakeholders, and the tourism and fishing industries.

But Alfonso Rueda, the conservative leader of the north-western region of Galicia, claimed that the central government had ignored local opinion and warned that he would not authorise any offshore wind farms that could endanger fish stocks.

Other critics of the plans include environmental organisations in the north-eastern region of Catalonia, which criticised the building of wind farms around the Gulf of Roses, near the border with France. Five such groups said in a statement: "Until now, this was an area of special protection given its exceptional natural value." They added that the region was "incompatible with large energy infrastructure." [Reuters]

Spain has said it aims to develop between 1 and 3 gigawatts (GW) of installed offshore capacity by 2030. [Catalan News]

(km/pk)

Spain: Drought hits olive oil output, sparks fears of major wildfires

Olive oil output in Spain, the world's largest producer, is likely to fall by half compared to last year amid a long-term drought, the European Commission has predicted.

The decrease in Spain, which produces around 40 percent of global supply, could see 10 percent less olive oil available worldwide this year, according to Spanish exporters' association Asoliva. [Reuters 1]

The country, which has had three years of below-average rainfall, saw its first major wildfire in 2023 burning more than 3,000 hectares of land in the eastern Valencia region at the end of March.

In 2022, according to the European Commission's European Forest Fire Information System, 493 blazes ravaged 307,000 hectares of land in Spain, a record for the country. After an unusually dry winter, concern has risen over the possibility of another year of major wildfires.

Environment Minister Teresa Ribera said that "out-of-season" fires are becoming increasingly common. [AP News]

During the most recent blaze, emergency services evacuated eight communities, with over 1,500 residents having to leave their homes. [Le Monde]

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said: "These fires we're seeing, especially this early in the year, are once again proof of the climate emergency that humanity is living through, which particularly affects and ravages countries such as ours." [Reuters 2]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Far-right opposition increases lead in opinion poll

Austria's far-right opposition Freedom Party (FPO) has increased its lead in an opinion poll ahead of federal elections scheduled for next year.

A new survey by pollster Unique Research found that 31 percent of people said they would vote for the FPO, an increase of three percentage points since a similar study in January. [Der Standard] [Kurier] [Europe Monthly February 2023]

The latest findings cement the FPO's position as the country's most popular grouping, ahead of the governing conservative Austrian People's Party (OVP), whose support is at 22 percent, according to the poll.

The OVP's ruling coalition with the Greens has become increasingly disliked throughout the country, with many citizens unhappy with how the government has handled issues like migration and inflation.

Backing for the opposition left-wing Social Democratic Party (SPO) stood at 25 percent, the same as in the January poll. However, the grouping suffered big losses during March 5 local elections in Austria's southern Carinthia region.

While the SPO maintained its majority in the regional authority, it lost nearly ten percentage points of support compared to the last such election. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

The OVP unexpectedly gained nearly two percentage points in Carinthia, while support for the Freedom Party rose to just under 25 percent.

However, the FPO's result in the region was a far cry from the 2000s, when Carinthia was a far-right stronghold and, under the leadership of Jorg Haider, the party regularly won over 40 percent of the vote there. [Europe Monthly March 2023] [Euractiv]

Since Haider's death in 2008, the Social Democratic Party has won every election in Carinthia. [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, in Lower Austria state elections earlier this year, the FPO gained 24.2 percent of the vote – an increase of almost 10 percentage points since the last such election in 2018. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Leopard tanks will be sent to Germany for upgrading

Austria will send 48 Leopard tanks to Germany for upgrades by the end of the decade as it modernises its military amid the war in Ukraine. [Der Standard] [Defence-Aerospace]

The first of the tanks will arrive in September and will undergo a technical refurbishment at the Krauss-Maffei Wegmann arms facility in Munich.

Plans for the upgrades, which are expected to cost around EUR 560 million in total, were a long time in the making, with financing finally secured last autumn. [Der Standard] [Defence-Aerospace]

Defence Minister Klaudia Tanner said: “The war in and around Europe makes it clear that a well-established national defence is of existential importance to a neutral state.”

Vienna is modernising its army across all sectors as it increases military spending. The upgrade of 112 armoured personnel carriers is currently being carried out in Austria. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Millions in state funds for firms switching to green energy

The Austrian government has made available new funding worth EUR 600 million to encourage companies in switching to renewable energy.

The programme, which will be available until 2026, aims to decrease dependence on Russian gas as well as reducing fossil fuel consumption. [Der Standard] [Invest in Austria]

It is part of wider plans by the climate and economy ministries that aim to make Austrian industry climate neutral by 2040, with a total of EUR 5.7 billion in state funds available for this purpose over the next seven years. [Der Standard]

Companies of all sizes can apply for government funding, which will be available for projects including research and technology development. [Der Standard] [Invest in Austria]

Economic Affairs Minister Martin Kocher said: “Current challenges in connection with the energy crisis and climate change are issues that we have to deal with.” [Der Standard] [Invest in Austria]

(iy/pk)

Austria: EU Commission approves EUR 700m from Covid recovery plan

The European Commission has approved Austria’s request for EUR 700 million in grants from the

EU's post-Covid pandemic recovery plan. [Kurier] [Europa]

Originally submitted on December 22 last year, Vienna's request was granted on March 10. [Kurier] [Europa]

Austria has already received a payment of EUR 450 million in September 2021 from the plan as part of pre-financing. Vienna is eligible for a total of EUR 3.75 billion in EU Covid recovery grants. [Kurier] [Europa]

A large part of the money will be used to help the country reach its climate goal of generating all electricity from renewable energy sources by 2030. [Kurier] [Europa] [IEA]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Vote of no confidence against PM fails

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic has survived a vote of no confidence in parliament.

The motion to remove him, put forward by the right-wing opposition Homeland Movement (DP) party, failed to gather the 76 votes it needed to pass in the 151-seat parliament.

A total of 56 MPs voted in favour of the motion, which was initiated after a series of government scandals. [N1] [Hina]

This includes a scandal in 2020 involving state-controlled oil pipeline operator Janaf in which the firm's CEO and two MPs were investigated for suspected bribery. No charges were ever filed. [intellinews] [N1]

Croatia's ruling conservative party, the Croatian Democratic Union, said there had been no basis for the vote of no confidence. [N1][Hina]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Sunday trading to be restricted

The Croatian government has announced plans to heavily restrict the amount of Sunday trading shops can do.

From July 1, stores will be allowed to open only on 16 Sundays a year amid government efforts to provide a better work/life balance for employees.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said: "We found a model of 16 working Sundays, and I think it is a good balance." [N1] [Hina]

The Croatian Employers' Association has criticised the changes, claiming they will lead to a reduction in wages and consumption growth and an overall drop in GDP. [Hina]

Shops will be able to choose the 16 Sundays on which they remain open. Stores in airports and at bus and train stations will be exempt from the new rules. [N1] [Hina]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: PM unveils EUR 1.7 bn plan to ease cost-of-living crisis

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic has announced a new EUR 1.7 billion aid package to counter rising energy costs and inflation. [Hina] [Euractiv]

"Our main task is to ensure that we go through this crisis together so that everyone remains standing on their feet," Plenkovic told reporters on March 13. [Hina] [Euractiv]

As part of the package, caps on gas and electricity prices introduced last year will be extended to at least the end of September. [Reuters] [N1]

Financial aid will also be provided to a long list of beneficiaries, including fishermen, farmers, transport sector workers and people on state pensions of less than EUR 610 a month. [Hina] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Court rules financial support for stay-at-home parents can be cut

The Croatian High Administrative Court has ruled that a plan by local authorities in the capital, Zagreb, to cut financial support for stay-at-home parents is legal.

Parent groups have heavily criticised a September decision by the Zagreb City Assembly to reduce the monthly allowance of such people from 65 percent of the average monthly wage to 50 percent of the national minimum wage. [N1] [Hina]

This translates into a cut of nearly EUR 400 a month in social benefits for stay-at-home parents who live in Zagreb. [Croatia Wise][Wage Indicator]

The court decision means that the capital can introduce the new rules from July 1.

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Gender pay gap widens, study finds

The gender pay gap in Croatia has widened, according to a survey which found that women's wages are 16 percent lower than men's on average. [N1] [hrturizam]

The study by the Moja Placa salary survey website found that the average monthly pay for Croatian women is EUR 923, compared to EUR 1,100 for men. [N1] [hrturizam]

This gap has widened since 2019, when the European Institute for Gender Equality reported a difference of 12 percent. [GEI 2019]

The smallest companies in Croatia have the narrowest pay gaps, while the biggest firms have wider differences. [N1] [hrturizam]

Job search website Moj Posao reported that wage disparities increase the most when women take a break from their careers to start a family, while people under the age of 24 who are starting their careers have the smallest gap. [N1] [hrturizam]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Army introduces advanced new radios

The Croatian army has unveiled advanced new domestically-made radios adapted to NATO standards.

Defence Minister Mario Banozic said at a demonstration: "Compared to similar devices so far, it has significant advantages. We are not talking just

about the price but about maintenance and further development." [N1] [Hina]

A defence ministry official involved in the development of the new radios said that the system, named TAKRAD, could be used in potential NATO-led operations with allied forces. Croatia became a member of the Western military alliance in 2009.

The radio system will be introduced in the Croatian army over the course of the year. Croatia also plans to sell it on the global market for EUR 6,300 per unit. [N1] [Hina]

(iy/pk)

Czech Republic: Pro-Western president who strongly backs Ukraine inaugurated

Former NATO general Petr Pavel, who has signalled a pro-Western course and voiced strong support for Ukraine, was sworn in as the president of the Czech Republic on March 9.

Pavel won presidential elections in January, a victory that marked a break with a populist trend in the region. In a speech after his inauguration at the historic Prague Castle, he vowed to return "dignity, respect, decency" to the office of head of state.

Pavel, an independent candidate who was supported by his country's centre-right governing coalition, defeated populist former Czech premier Andrej Babis, whose term as prime minister was marked by a series of scandals.

In the presidential race, Babis was backed by outgoing head of state Milos Zeman, a divisive figure who was in favour of close ties with Moscow, though after Russia's invasion of Ukraine he backed Kyiv and admitted that his pro-Kremlin stance had been a mistake.

Backing for Kyiv

Pavel, meanwhile, has urged allies to provide Ukraine with more weapons as Kyiv battles Russia's invasion, saying the only exception for military support should be nuclear arms. Pavel has also called on NATO and the European Union to accept Ukraine as a member. [Intellinews] [Prague Morning] [European Monthly February 2023]

Pavel has said that he will meet his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky in a sign of Prague's

backing for Kyiv.

Though the Czech presidency is largely a ceremonial function and does not come with executive power, it plays an important role in setting the tone for national politics and in shaping perceptions of the country abroad.

Pavel's predecessor Zeman fostered close relations with Beijing and worked to make the Czech Republic China's "gateway" to Europe. [Fmprc] [Reuters] [European Monthly February 2023]

Meanwhile, shortly after his electoral victory, Pavel held phone talks with Taiwan's President Tsai-Ing Wen, a move which China said it "deplores". Beijing claims Taiwan as its territory under its "One China Policy". [Reuters] [Euractiv]

At odds with Orban

In terms of relations closer to home, Pavel has strongly criticised Hungarian right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, whose Fidesz party won its fourth consecutive victory in parliamentary elections last April.

The Hungarian leader, who has clashed with the European Union amid accusations that he has undermined the rule of law, has for years been a strategic ally of the populist nationalists who rule in Poland and who have faced similar allegations. [European Monthly March 2023]

Whereas Pavel has encouraged Western nations to boost military help for Ukraine, Orban has been criticised for his friendly ties with the Kremlin. [Intellinews] [Denikn] [Radio Prague International] [CT24]

(pk-jbn)

Czech Republic: Thousands protest against poverty and support for Ukraine

Thousands rallied in central Prague on March 11 to protest against the country's rise in inflation and its military support for Ukraine.

The demonstration, led by a new political party called PRO, took place during an anti-poverty event. [Washington Post] [ABCnews] [France24] [wionews]

The party's leader, lawyer Jindrich Rajchl, said: "We have gathered here today to take a stand against this poverty." He added that the country needed leaders who "care about the interests of Czech citizens first".

Protesters called on Prime Minister Petr Fiala's centre-right cabinet to resign, claiming that the government cares more about Ukraine than its own country. [France24]

Demonstrators chanted: "Stop the war, stop NATO!" Some were seen carrying bags marked with a "Z", a symbol used by Russian troops who have invaded Ukraine.

According to Czech media, a protester with a megaphone called on the crowd to tear down a Ukrainian flag from the nearby National Museum. Three police officers were injured as the authorities detained 20 people at the museum. [Denikn] [Expats]

Prague has supported Kyiv in its fight against Russia's invasion by providing military aid and taking in over a million Ukrainian refugees.

The protests came two days after Petr Pavel, a former NATO general who strongly backs Kyiv, was instated as the new Czech president. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Inflation in the Czech Republic hit 16.7 percent in February amid soaring energy bills caused by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Novinite]

(jbn/pk)

Czech Republic: President signs bill to slow pension growth amid budget strain

Czech President Petr Pavel on March 16 approved a contested bill to slow down the growth of inflation-linked pension payments amid increasing pressure on the budget.

The centre-right government said the country would save the equivalent of some EUR 800 million this year by limiting a rise in the average monthly pension from EUR 73 to EUR 31. [Radio Prague]

Approved in a rushed procedure, the bill is the government's first move to curb a surging budget deficit. State coffers had a record shortfall of some EUR 5 billion in the first two months of this year amid a

steep rise in welfare pay-outs and energy subsidies at a time of rocketing inflation. [Reuters]

Opposition lawmakers criticised the bill, warning that it would hurt some of the country's most vulnerable people. [Radio Prague] [Bloomberg]

The opposition has threatened to challenge the move in the country's constitutional court. Former Prime Minister Andrej Babis plans to rally senior citizens to protest against the bill.

(yl/pk)

Hungary: 'We've lost our way', central bank chief says, criticising government

As Hungary struggles with the highest inflation in the EU, its central bank governor has said that the country has "lost [its] way", amid tensions with Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government over fiscal and monetary policy.

"In the past decade, Hungary had clear objectives. To create a million new jobs. Now it has none," central bank chief Gyorgy Matolcsy told parliament on March 8. [Reuters]

His comments came after the central bank left interest rates unchanged in late February, dismissing calls by the nationalist-populist government to cut borrowing costs amid a slowdown in the economy. [Reuters]

Orban said: "If the situation is that this inflation is principally due to an increase in international energy prices, and sanctions policy (...) then it is not for sure that the money supply in the economy needs to be reduced at this pace and to this extent." [Reuters]

In December, Matolcsy blamed the government's fiscal policy for driving prices up, and urged an end to price caps on fuel, basic foodstuffs and mortgages. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

Hungary's inflation peaked at a 27-year high of 25.7 percent in January. It crept down to 25.4 percent in February, but that was still the highest figure in the European Union. [Trading Economics] [Daily News Hungary]

(msa/pk)

Hungary: Justice minister vows to defend 'anti-LGBT' education law in EU court

Hungarian Justice Minister Judit Varga has said Budapest will fight in the EU's top court to defend a controversial education law that is deemed by Brussels to be anti-LGBT. [Reuters] [Telex]

"We continue to stand by our conviction (...) that education is a national competence and that parents have the right to decide on the upbringing of their children," Varga said in a Facebook post on March 9.

The European Commission referred Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in mid-2022 over the Hungarian Child Protection Act as well as the closure of an independent radio station. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

The Commission argued that the law, whose stated purpose was to fight paedophilia, infringed the EU charter of fundamental rights and several EU rules because it banned making available to minors content portraying homosexuality or transsexuality.

In February, NGOs called on EU countries to join Brussels' case against Hungary. [Euronews]

The CJEU has in the past ruled that a number of measures introduced by Hungary are unlawful. These include a law deemed to infringe on academic freedom, and the "Stop Soros" law, which made it illegal to help immigrants claim asylum. [Telex]

(msa/pk)

Poland: Parliament defends Pope John Paul II after reports of child abuse cover-up

Poland's parliament has adopted a resolution defending the "good name" of Polish-born Pope John Paul II amid an outcry over reports that the late pontiff helped cover up child sexual abuse by priests. [Politico] [Euronews] [DW News] [Notes From Poland] [France24]

The claims against the former pope were made in a documentary aired by Polish broadcaster TVN, which said that he transferred priests accused of paedophilia in an effort to avoid scandal during his time as archbishop of the southern city of Krakow between 1964 and 1978. [Euronews] [DW News]

The documentary created controversy and led to fierce debate in Poland – an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country in which John Paul II is still revered as a spiritual guide by many and where the government has close ties with the Church. [Politico] [Euronews]

'Shameful media campaign'

The resolution adopted by Poland's parliament, where conservatives have a majority, condemned "the shameful media campaign, based largely on the materials of the communist apparatus of violence" against the "Great Pope – Saint John Paul II, the greatest Pole in history." [DW News]

"We will not allow the image of a man whom the whole free world recognises as a pillar of victory over the Evil Empire to be destroyed," the resolution added, referring to the Soviet Union and the hold it had over satellite countries including Poland. [DW News]

Pope John Paul II, born Karol Wojtyla, is seen in his home country as a catalytic figure in the 1989 downfall of the communist regime in Poland. [Politico] [Euronews]

TVN has been criticised for using sources from communist-era institutions, which opposed the Church, as part of the evidence for its documentary. [Politico] [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

But the broadcaster said that its journalists also spoke to victims of abusive priests, victims' family members, and former staff members of John Paul II's diocese, adding that the Polish Church kept its own records sealed.

US ambassador called in

Poland's foreign ministry "invited" US ambassador Mark Brzezinski to discuss the TVN report and its repercussions. The broadcaster is owned by American company Warner Bros Discovery. [Euronews] [Politico]

In a statement, the ministry accused TVN of carrying out activities which are potentially "in line with the goals of a hybrid war aimed at causing divisions and tensions within Polish society" and which could reduce the country's "capacity to deter a potential enemy" and diminish its resilience to threats. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland]

Some observers say that Poland's governing right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party may use the controversy surrounding the documentary as a key

point in its campaign ahead of parliamentary elections this autumn. [Euronews] [Politico]

Religion and politics

The Catholic Church is particularly influential among Poland's older population and those in rural areas – demographics which typically support PiS. [Politico]

"PiS will probably try to use this entire situation as a pretext for a cultural war, and ride on the strong emotions people still feel," said Christopher Lash, a historian and professor at Lazarski University in Warsaw. [Euronews]

The Polish Catholic Church has faced a number of controversies regarding sexual abuse in recent years, resulting in the Vatican sanctioning several high-ranking members. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

When asked about the latest allegations against his predecessor John Paul II, Pope Francis said: "It is necessary to place things in their time... at that time, everything was covered up." [Politico]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Opposition strikes non-rivalry pact for Senate elections

Polish opposition parties have struck a pact to not field candidates against each other in autumn elections to the Senate, a move designed to increase their chances against the country's ruling right-wingers.

Though less powerful than the lower house of parliament, the Senate has been hailed by the opposition as one of Poland's last remaining strongholds of democracy and a source of resistance to what critics say is the governing party's erosion of the rule of law.

A previous deal by opposition groupings to refrain from taking each other on in elections to the upper house helped them gain a slim Senate majority in 2019.

The new pact has been agreed by the centrist Civic Platform (PO) – the country's biggest opposition party, the centre-right Poland 2050 grouping, The Left (Lewica) and the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), together with Yes! For Poland, a group of local government activists.

Jacek Bury, a senator from Poland 2050, said that the upper house was "one of the last bastions of democracy, freedom and normal law-making" in the country, adding: "Now the time has come for us to carry this wisdom and cooperation further." [Notes from Poland] [TVN24] [Dziennik Gazeta Prawna] [DW]

The Senate is able to amend legislation but its decisions can be overridden by the lower house, which is controlled by the ruling nationalist and populist Law and Justice (PiS) party and its allies, who came to power in late 2015 and won parliamentary elections again four years later.

PiS has come into conflict with the European Union amid accusations – which it denies – that the party has undermined democratic norms and that it is bent on stacking Polish courts with its yes-men.

Brussels has refused to release EUR 35.4 billion in Covid recovery funds for Warsaw until PiS reverses some of the sweeping legal changes it has made during its eight years in government. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Law and Justice is ahead of its rivals in the polls, with recent surveys showing it is backed by over 33 percent of Polish voters, but the figure is down from the 43.5 percent the party gained in parliamentary elections four years ago.

While lawmakers are elected to Poland's lower house by proportional representation, senators are chosen under a first-past-the-post system, meaning that the opposition benefits from not fielding multiple candidates for one area who could siphon votes from one another. [Notes from Poland] [TVN24] [RP] [Dziennik Gazeta Prawna] [DW] [RP]

(wd/pk)

Poland: Counter-intelligence agency detains nine suspected of spying for Russia

The Polish Internal Security Agency has detained nine people suspected of spying for Russia and planning to sabotage deliveries of arms to Ukraine. [gov.pl] [The Guardian] [AP] [Reuters] [BBC] [Notes from Poland]

Three suspects were detained on March 15, while six others were held at an earlier unspecified date. All nine have been charged with espionage and plotting acts of sabotage, the Polish government said on its website.

Belarusian news outlets – including state television – reported that three of the detainees were Belarusian citizens. Polish authorities have only disclosed that the suspects were from "beyond the eastern border" of Poland. [The Guardian] [gov.pl] [Notes from Poland] [AP] [Reuters]

The Polish counter-intelligence agency said the suspects had monitored rail infrastructure in the south-eastern Podkarpackie province. The agency uncovered evidence including dozens of electronic devices and GPS trackers intended to be planted on shipments heading to Ukraine, Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski said. [gov.pl]

A number of cameras were also found close to Rzeszow-Jasionka airport in south-eastern Poland, situated about 100 kilometres from the border with Ukraine, Polish radio broadcaster RMF FM reported. [RMF FM]

The airport is an international logistics hub which has been used to deliver humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine, and several leaders have passed through it recently, including US President Joe Biden on his way to Kyiv in February. [The Guardian] [Notes from Poland] [AP] [BBC] [Reuters] [gov.pl]

The Polish counter-intelligence agency said it had discovered that the "spy ring" was also conducting disinformation efforts to undermine relations between Warsaw and Kyiv and to provoke anti-NATO sentiment.

Kaminski – who is responsible for the Internal Security Agency – told a news briefing in Warsaw on March 16 that the suspects were preparing acts of subversion to paralyze deliveries of weapons, equipment and aid to Ukraine. [The Guardian] [AP] [BBC] [Notes from Poland] [gov.pl]

According to the Polish government website, the suspects were paid by Russia and were rewarded regularly for their intelligence activities. [gov.pl]

Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said that Poland's NATO allies were offering help in an investigation into the spy ring. [The Guardian] [gov.pl]

(wd/pk)

Poland: Forestry policies fail to meet EU standards, bloc's top court rules

The EU's top court ruled on March 2 that Poland should adopt legislative measures allowing the government's national forestry plan to be legally challenged, adding that the scheme fails to comply with the bloc's biodiversity conservation rules. [Curia] [Euractiv] [Politico] [Notes from Poland]

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) said the forest management plan violates an EU animal and bird settlement directive. It added that by limiting the ability of environmental groups to challenge the plan in court, Poland breaches EU rules which guarantee access to justice. [Curia] [Gazeta.pl] [Euractiv] [Politico] [Notes from Poland]

The Polish plan outlines how forests are to be managed and what works are to be undertaken in the 429 state-managed forest districts across the country.

Bartosz Kwiatkowski of Frank Bold, a law firm which specialises in environmental and social issues, told news outlet Gazeta.pl that the Polish forestry plan is subject to public consultation but officials are not obliged to take into account suggestions made by citizens.

The CJEU ruling comes after the European Commission took Poland to court in 2021 over a government decision to allow tree felling during the breeding season of protected bird species.

The commission said the move by Poland infringed the EU's habitats and birds directive – an argument which the government in Warsaw rejected. [Politico] [Euractiv]

The European Commission will now monitor whether Poland complies with the CJEU judgement. Kwiatkowski said that if Warsaw ignores the ruling, or delays its implementation, the EU's executive has the right to file another complaint against Poland to the bloc's top court, which could result in the imposition of financial penalties or sanctions. [Gazeta.pl]

In a separate high-profile case, the CJEU ruled in 2018 that Poland should stop logging in Bialowieza in the east of the country, home to Europe's last primaeval forest. The court said Poland had violated EU wildlife laws. [IUCN] [Curia] [Gazeta.pl] [Euractiv] [Politico] [Notes from Poland]

(wd/pk)

Slovakia: Populist who opposes military aid for Ukraine takes lead ahead of early election

Populist former Prime Minister Robert Fico's opposition Smer party, which opposes military aid for Ukraine, has taken the lead in opinion polls, raising fears that if the grouping wins Slovakia's September early parliamentary elections it will undermine EU and NATO unity on Russia.

Following months of political turmoil, the elections have been called after the country's centre-right governing coalition disintegrated late last year amid infighting over issues such as Covid-19 measures, the energy crisis and budget consolidation. [Bloomberg]

Fico, who has already been premier three times, has voiced scepticism over EU sanctions against Russia. He has also insisted that "Ukrainian fascists" started the war in Ukraine in 2014 and that Kyiv could not take back Crimea after Moscow annexed the peninsula. [Reuters]

The leftist Smer, which has also adopted increasingly harsh rhetoric against Brussels, has taken the lead with 16.2 percent of the vote in Slovakia, followed closely by the centre-left opposition Hlas party, with 16 percent backing, according to a survey by the IPSOS polling agency whose findings were released on March 10.

Under the government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger, Slovakia has been a staunch supporter of its eastern neighbour Ukraine. It has been supplying Kyiv with arms and in March became the second NATO country after Poland to donate fighter jets to Ukraine. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Slovakia has also opened its border to tens of thousands of refugees escaping Russia's invasion. [AP]

However, the majority of Slovaks oppose weapons deliveries to Kyiv. A poll by the Globsec think-tank in December found that 39 percent of the public thought the US and NATO were responsible for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, one in five Slovaks openly aligns with the Kremlin's stance. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Fico, who has expressed openness to Russian President Vladimir Putin, has benefited from such sentiment.

“People appreciate our sovereign foreign policy, that we dare to say different things from the mainstream,” Fico, who has floated a potential alliance with the far-right in Slovakia, said on March 17. [Bloomberg]

President voices concerns

Without mentioning Fico directly, Slovak President Zuzana Caputova warned on March 27 that her country’s support for Ukraine could come under pressure during campaigning for the September early parliamentary elections.

“There is a growing gap between decisions made by the state based on our values and national interests, and the stance of citizens,” Caputova added. [Reuters]

She also said that Slovakia’s current political situation could resemble the end of the 1990s, when the nation missed the opportunity to join NATO due to concerns over then-Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar's authoritarian government, which was perceived as a security threat. [Reuters]

Slovakia finally became a member of the Western military alliance in 2004.

Senior European diplomats have also signalled they are concerned about Fico’s potential return to power. After meeting the Smer party leader in February, the British envoy to Slovakia, Nigel Baker, said that some Smer lawmakers had “repeatedly spread misinformation” about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The French ambassador to Bratislava also raised concerns over Smer’s foreign policy. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

PM forms new pro-Western party

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Heger announced on March 7 that he had formed a new pro-Western, centrist party. According to the IPSOS survey, the grouping is supported by 4.8 percent of voters, just under the 5 percent threshold needed to enter parliament.

Heger, 46, has pledged to keep Slovakia firmly anchored in the EU and tethered to its Western allies, adding that he would “help Ukraine on the path to its desired victory and peace”.

His new party, called the Democrats, is seeking to unify Slovakia’s centre-right before the parliamentary elections.

“I have my own vision of politics,” Heger wrote on his Facebook page on March 6. “I know that if I want to

fulfil it, I have to go my own way."

The move means that Heger is leaving the ruling Ordinary People's party (OLaNO) led by ex-Prime Minister Igor Matovic, whose personality clashes with a former coalition partner caused the downfall of Heger's administration. [AP]

Several members of Slovakia's caretaker government have previously said that Heger should remain prime minister until the September elections, even if he left OLaNO. [Bloomberg]

Key ministers jump ship

Four ministers from Heger's cabinet, including Foreign Minister Rastislav Kacer and Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad, have joined the new Democrats party. [Reuters]

Setting himself apart from conservative rivals, Heger said he wanted a country where all citizens could feel safe regardless of race, gender, faith and sexual orientation.

Heger has refused to collaborate with Fico's Smer, far-right nationalists or the Hlas party. He said Hlas is still too influenced by Smer, though it split from Smer on a more pro-Western platform in 2020. [Reuters]

Hlas leader Peter Pellegrini, a former prime minister, describes himself as pro-EU though some observers say his stance on mainstream European Union issues has been ambiguous. [DW] [Bloomberg]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Health minister quits after criticism

Slovakia's health minister has resigned after being criticised for delays in the country's post-coronavirus recovery plan, which was supposed to see the restructuring of care that hospitals provide patients. [Spectator] [Domov] [Euractiv]

Vladimir Lengvarsky of the governing centre-right OLaNO party announced at a government meeting on March 1 that he intended to quit.

He was cited a day later by the Spectator news outlet as saying: "I will no longer work under pressure in an environment that is harmful, full of political corruption and political inexperience." Lengvarsky also criticised

the government's proposed staff changes in the health ministry.

(jbn/pk)

Slovakia: Historic buildings burned down in UNESCO-listed town

MEPs have called on the European Commission to provide financial aid to the Slovak UNESCO-listed town of Banska Stiavnica after several buildings there were burned down in a fire. [SME] [Domov]

The Czech foreign minister tweeted that his country was ready to help neighbouring Slovakia after a mining museum, a restaurant and the old town's cultural centre were destroyed by the blaze on March 18. [Dennikn]

Hundreds of citizens formed a human chain to save exhibits, held in a nearby art gallery, from the fire. [Spectator] [Dennikn]

A police investigation is underway, but authorities believe that a short circuit was responsible.

Soldiers and firefighters from neighbouring towns arrived to extinguish the blaze, but the water further damaged the properties. [Dennikn]

United Nations cultural agency UNESCO listed Banska Stiavnica as a world heritage site in 1993 for its renaissance palaces and early Bronze Age gold and silver mines. [UNESCO] [Advisory Body Evaluation (ICOMOS)]

(jbn/pk)

Slovenia: Green light for first tranche of post-Covid funds

The European Commission has given the green light for Slovenia to be paid its first tranche of money – totalling EUR 50 million – from the EU's post-Covid recovery fund.

The Slovenian government drew up its post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Plan in 2021, focusing on green transition, sustainable growth and public health. Among its key aims, the plan aims to help reduce Slovenia's reliance on energy from fossil fuels

and also to assist the country in undergoing a digital transition. [European Commission]

Slovenia requested its first instalment of EUR 50 million in October. In total, the country is eligible to receive EUR 1.5 billion in grants from the EU's fund, formally called the Recovery and Resilience Facility. [Slovenian Government]

The programme makes available over EUR 720 billion to support European economies in a switch to greener policies as part of the bloc's NextGenerationEU initiative. [European Commission]

(pl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: New law on war crimes planned

Denmark is planning to introduce a new law on war crimes, a step that will end its position as one of the last European countries without such legislation. [The Local]

The Danish government has confirmed its support for a motion to this effect submitted to parliament by the opposition left-wing Socialist People's Party (SF). [The Local] [The Copenhagen Post]

Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard said that the "independent criminalisation of war crimes" would send an important message to the world and particularly to victims. [The Local]

A committee will be set up to look into how laws against war crimes can be formulated and added to the Danish criminal code, as well as to consider whether sentences for war crimes should be higher than those for murder and torture. [The Local] [The Copenhagen Post]

The introduction of such a law would, for example, allow Ukrainians to report war crimes by Russia to the Danish police, who would then be authorised to take action, The Copenhagen Post reported. Danish law does not currently give the country's police such jurisdiction.

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Far-right party faces uncertain future as new leader ousted

Denmark's far-right opposition New Right (Nye Borgerlige) party has been plunged into a crisis as its recently appointed leader, Lars Boje Mathiesen, was fired over a funds dispute.

The New Right's executive committee said that Mathiesen had demanded 350,000 kroner (EUR 47,000) from the grouping for a "personal branding campaign" which was not related to the party's interests.

In an email sent to members, party secretary Jesper Hammer wrote that Mathiesen had also asked for over 2.6 million kroner (EUR 350,000) to remain the leader of the grouping. Mathiesen had threatened to quit as party chief if the money was not transferred to his account, Hammer added. [The Local]

The dispute is the latest in a series of crises that have hit the New Right, which is known for its libertarian, anti-immigration, and EU-sceptic stance. [Politico]

Mathiesen took over as leader of the party only in February, replacing co-founder Pernille Vermund. This led to New Right MP Mikkel Bjorn defecting to the opposition conservative Danish People's Party, citing differences with Mathiesen. [Avisen]

After the country's November general election, MP Mette Thiesen resigned from the New Right and joined the Danish People's Party. [The Local]

Meanwhile, Henriette Ergemann was appointed as the new deputy leader of the New Right but resigned within two weeks due to controversy surrounding her

support for Covid-19 vaccine conspiracy theories on social media. [B.T.]

With Mathiesen's departure, the New Right's parliamentary representation has decreased from six to three MPs. The party has announced that it will be led by its executive committee until a new leader is appointed. [The Local]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: In world first, CO2 imported and stored underwater

Denmark has become the first country to import and store captured carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions beneath the seabed in a step to help reduce global warming. [Euronews]

The carbon capture and storage (CCS) project, called Greensand, is a joint venture between British chemical giant Ineos and German oil company Wintershall Dea.

The Danish government has provided EUR 26 million in public funding for the initiative, which aims to store up to eight million tonnes of CO2 a year in the North Sea by 2030. The captured emissions will be liquefied at the source, transported via ship or pipeline, and deposited in geological cavities or depleted oil and gas fields. [Euronews]

While around 30 carbon capture and storage projects are underway or in development in Europe, the Greensand initiative is unique in capturing carbon from distant sources. [The Local]

It has already seen CO2 emissions from Belgium started to be stored in the Ineos-operated Nini oil field in the Danish North Sea, at a depth of 1,800 metres below the seabed. [Offshore Technology]

Belgium last year became the first country to sign a bilateral agreement with Denmark for CO2 transport and offshore storage. [Reuters] More such agreements are expected with other European countries. [Associated Press]

Denmark itself plans to become carbon-neutral by 2045. Climate Minister Lars Aagaard said that the Greensand project would help the country reach its climate goals. [The Local]

2030 emissions target may be missed: experts

However, a report by the Danish Climate Council, an independent body of experts that advises the government, has warned that Denmark is at "significant risk" of missing a separate emissions target for 2030. The report added there were doubts about the capacity of the country's carbon capture and storage efforts to operate at the desired scale by that year.

Denmark has set a goal of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 70 percent by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, but the report said that present policies and measures were not enough to achieve this target. "There is currently not enough certainty that the government's plan will come true," said Peter Mollgaard, the council's chair. [The Local]

The Climate Council cited several reasons, including what it said was uncertainty surrounding planned reductions in emissions from agriculture.

The Climate Council proposed a number of measures to reduce emissions, including higher taxes on diesel, agriculture and industry, restoration of peatlands and wetlands, a passenger tax on air travel, and a tax on goods that cause deforestation.

Climate Minister Aagaard said that while the goal of cutting emissions by 70 percent was not easy to reach, he was "completely convinced" that the country would achieve its 2030 objective. [The Local]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Public holiday cancelled to boost defence spending

Denmark's parliament has voted to abolish Great Prayer Day, a public holiday observed since the 17th century, in an effort to raise money that will be used to increase military spending amid the war in Ukraine. [Reuters] [BBC]

Cancelling the holiday, which falls on the fourth Friday after Easter, will deliver an additional three billion kroner (EUR 402 million) that can be allocated to the defence budget, the government said. [BBC]

Opposition politicians, trade unions, and religious figures have opposed the decision. More than 50,000 protesters gathered outside the parliament in Copenhagen at the start of February to protest against the plan.

However, the opposition did not have sufficient numbers in parliament to call for a referendum on the issue. [BBC]

Denmark is planning to meet NATO's defence spending target of 2 percent of GDP by 2030, three years ahead of its initial schedule.

According to the government, the majority of the additional EUR 602 million required to achieve the target will be financed through an increase in tax revenues resulting from scrapping the public holiday. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The government's move to hike defence spending comes amid increased geopolitical uncertainty in the wake of Moscow's war against Ukraine and the sabotage of two pipelines transporting gas from Russia to Germany through Danish waters in September. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Colours of Russian flag daubed on famous landmark

One of Denmark's most famous landmarks was defaced when the colours of the Russian flag were painted across its base, an act seen as a sign of support for Moscow amid its invasion of Ukraine.

Red, white and blue stripes were daubed on the statue of the Little Mermaid in the early hours of March 2. Police in Copenhagen have opened an investigation. [AP News] [Hurriyet]

The statue portrays the heroine from Danish poet and storyteller Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 famous fairy tale of the same name. Sculpted by Edvard Eriksen, it sits in the harbour of Langelinie in the Danish capital. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

(hl/pk)

Finland: Social Democrat PM narrowly beaten by the right in elections

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Social Democrats were defeated in parliamentary elections on April 2 after a tight three-way race from which the centre-right National Coalition Party emerged victorious, a result

that will likely bring about a power shift and a government with nationalist overtones.

The fight for control over Finland's 200-seat parliament saw the National Coalition Party win the biggest share of the vote to take 48 seats, followed by right-wing populist party The Finns, which sees the country's departure from the European Union – dubbed "Fixit" – as a long-term goal.

The Finns, campaigning on an anti-immigration ticket, garnered 46 seats. Marin's centre-left Social Democratic Party came third, obtaining 43.

All three parties were separated by less than one percent of the vote and all gained seats compared to the previous election in 2019. [Euronews]

Search for parliamentary majority

Marin's time as prime minister is expected to come to an end as National Coalition Party leader Petteri Orpo will get the first chance to form a governing coalition with a majority of over 100 parliamentary seats. [Reuters]

Conceding defeat in a speech to party members, Marin congratulated her opponents and said: "Democracy has spoken".

"We have gained support, we have gained more seats. That is an excellent achievement, even if we did not finish first today," she added. [Al Jazeera]

Marin, who came to power in 2019 as the world's youngest head of government, received international praise for her support of Ukraine, and for her role along with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto in her country's successful bid to become a member of NATO. [ABC] *(See separate story in this issue on Finland admitted to NATO)*

Although she remains one of Finland's most popular premiers, Marin was criticised domestically over claims of excessive public spending, and faced a backlash when video clips emerged of her partying in August 2022. [DW] [BBC]

Prior to the election, she pledged to curb Finland's debt, which rose from 64 to 73 percent of the country's GDP during her time in office.

Marin's defeat is the latest in a series of blows to the European left, and comes after a right-wing coalition in Sweden defeated a centre-left government in September. [Politico] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

Orpo has pledged to negotiate with all groups to obtain a majority. His National Coalition Party disagrees with Marin's Social Democrats on spending issues, but also has differences with The Finns party over immigration, the EU and climate policy.

'Openly racist'

Like all mainstream parties in the country, The Finns, led by Riikka Purra, backed the nation's NATO membership. The nationalist party campaigned on an anti-immigration platform and vowed to focus on crime, energy and climate policies if it came to power. [The Guardian] The Finns want to postpone Helsinki's target of carbon neutrality by 2035. [The Telegraph]

Contrary to Orpo, Marin said the Social Democrat Party would not join a ruling coalition with The Finns, whom she called "openly racist" at a debate in January. She said her party was open to the possibility of governing with the National Coalition. [Helsinki Times]

Orpo began negotiations to form a government on April 3, a process likely to take weeks, but one that should be complete before the country's midsummer holidays in June. [Euronews]

(qv/pk)

Finland: Strikes end as dockworkers approve deal

The Finnish Transport Workers Union has agreed a deal with port operators to end a stevedores' strike that closed the country's harbours for two weeks, halting foreign trade. [YLE]

The strike in the second half of February hit exports and imports via Finland's ten major ports, including Helsinki, Hamina-Kotka, Hanko, Rauma and Turku. It also slowed postal deliveries nationwide. [Insurance Marine News]

The Finnish Port Operators Association estimated that each day of the strike had cost over EUR 280 million in foreign trade. [Insurance Marine News]

An agreement between the two sides was reached on March 1 at the office of National Conciliator Anu Sajavaara. The deal will seedockworkers' wages rising 6.3 percent, and full-time employees receiving a one-time payment of EUR 1,100. [Port Technology International] [YLE]

(hl/pk)

Finland: Indigenous Sami to have greater say in climate policy

The Finnish government has adopted a decree to create a Sami Climate Council, aimed at incorporating indigenous knowledge and concerns into the country's climate policy. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Ministry of Environment]

The council, created under a new Climate Act, is an independent body that will include Sami experts on the environment and traditional knowledge. Among its tasks will be evaluating how Finland's climate policy affects the culture and the rights of the Sami people. [Finnish Ministry of Environment]

The Sami are Europe's only recognized indigenous group and live mainly in northern parts of Finland. [Europe Monthly January 2023] Their traditional way of life is closely linked to the Arctic environment, which makes them susceptible to climate change. [Helsinki Times]

Global warming "has very particular impacts on the Sami culture and traditional livelihood," said Maria Ohisalo, Finland's minister for the environment and climate change. "This is why it is an absolute necessity to integrate the knowledge of the indigenous Sami people strongly into decision-making concerning climate policy." [Finnish Ministry of Environment]

(rs/pk)

Norway: Greta Thunberg held at protest against wind farms on indigenous land

Norwegian police detained climate activist Greta Thunberg along with other protesters during a week of demonstrations in Oslo against two wind farms on the land of the indigenous Sami people.

The two facilities in the north of the country provide power to around 100,000 households, according to Norwegian officials. Sami people say that the farms affect their ability to carry out traditional reindeer herding practices. [Reuters] [Politico] [Deutsche Welle]

Norway's Supreme Court ruled in 2021 that the wind farms were violating the rights of the Sami after hearing arguments that the facilities produce loud

sounds, scaring away reindeer. [Reuters] [Politico] [Deutsche Welle]

However, the court gave no instructions on what should occur to the wind farms, and the government has made no moves to dismantle them. [Reuters] [Politico] [Deutsche Welle]

Protests against the two facilities started on February 26 in Oslo, with demonstrators – including Thunberg – blocking the entrances to government buildings. Thunberg said: "We want to make it very clear that it is the Norwegian state that is committing the real crime here, for violating human rights." Thunberg and other protesters were later released. [Reuters]

The demonstrations carried on until March 3, when Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store met with Sami activists. Store agreed that the rights of the Sami were being violated, but no concrete conclusion on the wind farms' future was announced. [AP News]

(ef/pk)

Norway: Six helicopters bought for naval and Arctic defence

Norway's defence minister, Bjoern Arild Gram, has announced that the country is spending around EUR 1.05 billion to buy six Lockheed Martin Seahawk helicopters, which will be used to patrol the country's seas and Arctic territories.

Norway has territorial waters of around two million square kilometres, which the Seahawks will be charged with monitoring during duties that include submarine detection amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Norway shares a border with Russia in the Arctic.

The helicopters "will strengthen our national control, the military's preparedness and our presence in the northern areas," Gram told a press conference on March 14, announcing the purchase.

Delivery of the Seahawks is expected to start in 2025, with the last of the machines likely to arrive in 2027. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

(ef/pk)

Norway: Profits soar for state-owned oil player amid war in Ukraine

Norwegian state-owned oil player Petoro reported that the country made a record EUR 47 billion in profits from its direct ownership of oil and gas licences in 2022 – more than double the total posted the previous year – amid an energy crisis fuelled by the war in Ukraine.

Petoro announced the 2022 figures on March 14. [Upstream] [Bloomberg]

Norway last year overtook Russia as the biggest gas supplier to Europe amid the conflict in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Norwegian natural gas now accounts for 30 percent of Europe's total gas consumption, after many countries turned away from Russian sources of energy. [Upstream] [Bloomberg]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Gov't wants to encourage migrants to resettle in home countries

Sweden's minority centre-right government, which is dependent on the far-right for support in parliament, has announced that it will allocate more funds to encourage migrants to resettle in their home countries. [Dagens Nyheter] [Euractiv]

Ludvig Aspling, the migration spokesman for the far-right Sweden Democrats, said the initiative "could involve education or paying for children to attend school" in their country of origin. Aspling emphasised that migrants should not be forced to return to their home countries. [Euractiv]

The Sweden Democrats, the second largest party in parliament, vocally oppose migration.

In the past 10 years, only 46 people have been granted money to leave Sweden, a figure that the government is hoping to increase. [Euractiv] [Dagens Nyheter]

The centre-left opposition Social Democrats party is against the government's new move. Referring to migrants, Social Democrat MEP Carina Ohlsson said: "These people have good reasons to stay and need protection in Sweden." [Euractiv]

Sweden's coalition government, which took power last October following general elections, has already imposed restrictions on immigration. It has raised the income requirement for foreigners seeking work visas

and introduced stricter biosecurity measures for undocumented immigrants. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Official from ruling party quits after complaint by female MEP

A senior official from the Christian Democrats, who are part of Sweden's ruling centre-right coalition, has quit after a female MEP filed a complaint to the police, alleging that he had tried to "claim the right to [her] body". [Goteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

The complaint was filed by Sara Skyttedal, a fellow member of the Christian Democrats. She claimed that the incident involving party secretary Johan Ingero took place during a party in a hotel room following the 2014 European Parliament elections. Ingero has denied wrongdoing.

Ebba Busch, the leader of the Christian Democrats, did not disclose why Ingero was stepping down from his role in the party in her announcement of the end of his tenure.

However, in a Facebook post made directly after his resignation announcement, Ingero confirmed that the reason for stepping down was the complaint against him. [Goteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

Ingero's resignation as party secretary comes after only five months in the role. He previously served as policy director for the Christian Democrats, in addition to being an advisor to Busch. [Goteborgs-Posten]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Eat local meat, agriculture minister urges

Sweden's agriculture minister has said that people who eat meat should buy home-grown animal products in order to help protect the environment. [Euractiv] [Dagens Nyheter]

Peter Kullgren said in an interview: "I think the primary thing is that as a consumer, an environmentally conscious consumer, choose Swedish meat as often as possible. It is very important."

But Elin Roos, a professor at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, dismissed Kullgren's argument, saying: "The difference in climate impact between Swedish livestock production and production in the countries we import from is small, if it exists at all." [Euractiv]

The Swedish National Food Agency, meanwhile, has urged people to cut down on meat consumption, wherever such food comes from. A nutritionist at the agency said: "To protect both health and the climate, we need to eat differently than we do today. This is one of the major challenges of the future." [Euractiv]

Kullgren said he would not encourage Swedes to abandon meat or dairy products altogether. The government is working to increase domestic food production and to make it less vulnerable to crises. [Dagens Nyheter]

(ef/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Europe pursues energy diversification as it implements transition to renewables

European nations have continued to invest in projects that aim to diversify the region's sources of energy, including new wind farms, solar fields and oil and gas fields in the North Sea, North Africa and Mediterranean, as they seek to prevent supply shortages in the mid-term as they carry out their energy transition. [FT]

The Italian export credit agency, Servizi Assicurativi del Commercio Estero, announced in March plans to support international oil and gas exploration through 2026. In January, Italian oil giant ENI committed to EUR 8 billion in investment in offshore Libyan oil fields.

Germany has committed to massive infrastructure expansion to enable LNG imports from the US and the Middle East. The German Bundestag has approved a EUR 10 billion investment package to continue support for six new floating storage and regasification units, though "it is already clear now, that more cost increases will have to be added," according to a paper issued by the Economy Ministry. [Reuters] [Reuters]

Europe is moving ahead with its energy transition plans as it makes short and medium term adjustments to compensate for the loss of Russian oil and gas with natural gas import terminals and overseas oil and gas exploration and production investments.

The European Union parliament agreed on March 28 to ban the production of combustion engine vehicles in 2035, with a compromise sought by Germany to enable these vehicles to be produced if they utilise synthetic “e-fuels” derived from hydrogen. These fuels are so called drop-in fuels, which means that they can be blended with gasoline in any ratio. [WSJ] [EFuel Alliance] *(See separate story in this issue)*

Other European countries also announced projects that aim to diversify their energy sources.

The United Kingdom signalled plans for an expansion of government investment and support for wind, solar, and nuclear power projects on March 30. [Energy Live News]

The French parliament voted for significant expansion of the national nuclear power program on March 21 to build six new nuclear reactors at a cost of EUR 52 billion. Polish lawmakers voted on March 10 to relax restrictions on wind energy project construction in a move sought by the EU. [AP News]

The Czech energy transmission system operator (CEPS) announced March 1 that the country will require electricity imports from 2030 due to the phase outs of coal power plants which have made the country self-sufficient in terms of energy generation. [Reuters]

The Portuguese EDP energy company announced it is nearing completion of Europe’s largest floating solar park on March 13, two months after Spanish energy company Iberdrola announced completion of Europe’s largest ground based solar project. [WEF] [P-V Tech]

Collective agreement

Collectively, EU countries have agreed to increase the production of renewable energy in a provisional deal which sets out the bloc's path to achieve a 55 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by the end of the decade. The agreement, known as the Renewable Energy Directive, saw EU countries pledge on March 30 to nearly double their renewable energy output by 2030, raising it to represent 42.5 percent of the bloc's total energy consumption. [Euronews]

The deal also saw France and Germany reach a compromise over whether hydrogen produced using electricity generated by nuclear power should feature in the bloc's renewable targets.

France and other pro-nuclear EU countries have been pushing to include the low-carbon emitting energy source in the EU's climate targets. Germany, whose governing coalition includes a nuclear-sceptic Green party, had opposed the deal, alongside other EU members hostile to nuclear energy.

Berlin and Paris ultimately agreed to label nuclear hydrogen "low carbon" rather than "green," recognising nuclear energy as "neither green nor fossil," French MEP Pascal Canfin, who leads the European Parliament's Environment Committee, tweeted.

The EU is also striving to accelerate the energy transition outside the bloc, with member states agreeing on March 10 to push for a worldwide phase-out of fossil fuels at COP28, the UN climate summit is set to take place in Dubai this November. [Euronews]

Countries failed to agree on a phaseout of fossil fuels at the previous UN climate talks, COP27, after the intervention of countries like Saudi Arabia.

The move could be overshadowed by the United Arab Emirates' controversial decision to name the CEO of one of the world's largest oil companies as the president of the climate summit. [Euronews]

(rw-qv/gc)

EU plans to boost spending on green tech amid competition from China, US

The European Commission on March 16 unveiled a plan for larger investment into "clean" technology in the face of growing industrial competition from China and the United States.

The plan aims to enable European industries to produce more environmentally friendly technology. It includes the goal of producing 40 percent of green tech in the EU by 2030 amid the bloc's efforts to become a climate-neutral economy by 2050. The issue of whether to include nuclear power in the mix is still being debated.

The move is designed to enable the EU to avoid excessive reliance on imports from China or a reliance on one country for a specific product. It comes after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year led to rising energy costs and highlighted the EU's dependence on Russian gas.

The European Commission initiative also comes after Washington last year unveiled a USD 370 billion "buy American" subsidy programme for tax credits and clean energy subsidies to boost the US economy.

The EU executive's plan has been criticised for pursuing a "protectionist goal", but European Commission vice president Frans Timmermans said that the bloc "will continue to trade with [its] partners". He added: "Not everything will be made in Europe but more should be made in Europe." [France24] [VOA News/AFP] [AiR, No.12 March/2023, 3]

(aml/pk)

EU, Germany reach compromise on ban of combustion engine cars

The European Commission and Germany announced on March 25 that they had reached a deal after a dispute over plans to ban new combustion engine vehicles in the EU from 2035. The agreement carves out protection after that deadline for cars that use climate-neutral fuels. [France 24] [Euronews]

Legislation that will see the production of fossil fuel engines forbidden 12 years from now was approved by the European Parliament in February after more than two years of negotiations, and only required rubber stamping by EU member states. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

But Germany, joined by other EU countries like Italy, Poland and the Czech Republic, mounted last-minute opposition to the ban. Berlin wanted engines powered by so-called "green" fuels to be exempt.

After intense negotiations, the EU's climate chief, Frans Timmermans, announced on Twitter that "an

agreement with Germany on the future use of e-fuels in cars" had been reached. [DW]

Berlin's stance stemmed from opposition to the EU plans from the pro-business Free Democrats party, one of the members in Germany's governing coalition. Members of the party argued that the phase-out in its original form posed a risk of destroying the country's prized automaker industry, which could in the future offer an alternative to electric vehicles – combustion engine cars running on climate-neutral fuels. [The Guardian]

Synthetic fuels, also called e-fuels, are made using carbon dioxide or hydrogen captured from the atmosphere. Burning these fuels releases greenhouse gases, but e-fuel proponents argue that the emissions are offset by the carbon captured during the fuels' manufacturing process, hence making them "climate-neutral".

Critics say that producing e-fuels is expensive and energy-consuming, and that they cannot be manufactured on a large scale at the moment.

The deal between the European Commission and Germany was criticised by the environmental group Greenpeace, which said in a statement: "This lazy compromise undermines climate protection in transport, and it harms Europe." [The Guardian]

Dutch MEP Jan Huitema, who led efforts to draft the combustion engine ban, said bluntly: "E-fuels emit carbon dioxide from the tailpipe". [CNN]

(qv/pk)

EU works to develop robust cybersecurity policies

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is rapidly changing how the European Union (EU) sets cybersecurity policies as the bloc moves to combat an increasing risk of attack against its critical infrastructure.

European Commission and industry leaders said during a cybersecurity conference on March 23 in Brussels that Europe needed to implement higher security standards for critical infrastructure. The Forum Europe conference was organised in partnership with the European Cyber Security Organisation (ECSO).

The forum “explored Europe’s response to cyber security issues in a dynamically evolving global risk landscape and what the next steps for all actors of the ecosystem should be to create a safe and secure environment allowing Europe to leverage the tremendous socio-economic benefits offered by digital technologies,” it said. [ECS]

A cyber attack on March 20 against Italy’s Ferrari highlighted the ongoing threat against European businesses, and the need for the EU to respond to the persistent threat. The European Central Bank asked in March all major lenders in the eurozone to detail by next year how they would “respond to and recover from a successful cyber attack.” [WSJ][FT]

The ECB is in the process of designing a scenario involving a theoretical breach of the financial system’s cyber defences, which will be sent to all of the 111 banks it supervises to assess how they would react. Enria said it would have the results by the middle of next year.

Critical infrastructure owners and operators, such as the port of Rotterdam, are also researching how to upgrade their current defence measures by assessing leading public private cybersecurity information sharing programs, such as those established in the Port of Los Angeles, which withstands an estimated 40 million cyber attacks per month utilising advanced cybersecurity defences.

Rotterdam established its own program in 2021 with companies operating in the port, local law enforcement, and the Dutch National Cyber Security Center. Last year, an alleged Russian cyber attack temporarily disrupted operations at the leading European oil import port terminal complex of Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp. [FERM][WEF][LA] [WSJ]

NIS2

The EU passed the Directive on Network and Information Security Two (NIS2) in December 2022, updating the original 2016 directive, as it tries to improve its cyber defences. The new directive mandates that EU member states publish compliance measures by October 2024. [EU]

NIS2 also aims to establish a common baseline of cybersecurity, similar to that of the US National Institute of Standards Cybersecurity Framework. [CFW]

The new baseline will require significant changes for industry as they attempt to comply with new cyber incident reporting requirements and utilise new manufacturing standards under a secure by design model. New specified risk management standards are expected to increase cybersecurity, but they may also affect corporate autonomy and require expensive adjustment.

Businesses will be required to have a business continuity plan in case of cyber attack and implement risk management policies and cybersecurity upgrades to meet specified standards. Regulated business sectors, including energy, transport, banking, digital infrastructure, information and communications technology (ICT) service provision, healthcare, and others are specified.

EU-CyCLONe

The EU has also established the European Cyber Crises Liaison Organisation Network (EU-CyCLONe). It requires each member state to develop a national strategy to safeguard information systems, including the designation of cyber incident response teams.

The EU will also publish cybersecurity regulations for cloud service providers – including major international companies such as Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Oracle –, Domain Name Service (DNS) providers that administer internet websites, online managed service providers remotely managing information technology assets – such as famous hacking victim Solar Winds – and search engines themselves.

(rw/gc)

Portugal, Spain gain EU permission to extend gas price caps

Portugal and Spain have been granted permission by the European Union to extend caps on gas prices until the end of the year.

Spanish energy minister Teresa Ribera confirmed the news on March 28, telling reporters: “This tool allows us to keep protecting Spanish and Portuguese consumers.”

The cap will keep gas prices at an average of EUR 55 per megawatt-hour to EUR 65 per megawatt-hour across the two countries. [Reuters] [La Vanguardia]

The governments in Madrid and Lisbon will continue to make up the difference between the cap and market prices, which increased massively after the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly November 2022] [Euro News]

Originally due to expire on May 31, the caps will now last until December 31, although Ribera has previously said she wanted to keep the scheme until the end of 2024. [Reuters] [La Vanguardia]

Named the Iberian mechanism, the system has been in place since spring 2022. [Europe Monthly November 2022] [Euronews]

(iy/pk)

Tri-State Train line deepens European rail integration

The Three-State Train, a direct train line between the three European cities of Liege, Maastricht and Aachen, will start running once an hour from December 2023, increasing train route integration between Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

"With this tri-state train, travelling across borders is even easier," Belgian Minister for Mobility Georges Gilkinet said in a statement after signing a declaration of intent for the project. He also said that the project is an example of European rail integration, as it aggregates different operators and policy levels, making rail appealing to travellers as a valid and green alternative to short-haul flights. [BrusselsTimes] [BNN]

A train line already runs between Liege and Maastricht once an hour, while a train will travel between Maastricht and Germany twice an hour from the start of 2023. The connection between the Netherlands and Germany started in 2019, but the line was not extended to Belgium because authorities imposed additional conditions, such as trains being equipped with a European safety system. [BrusselsTimes]

In 2023, Belgian SNCB, Dutch NS and German Arriva, the countries' national train lines, jointly said that it was possible to operate the line financially and technically. The trains have been converted so that they could also run on the Belgian tracks. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

EU urged to take greater role on Cyprus' future

The recently elected president of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, has told the heads of European Union institutions that he is determined to restart negotiations on the future of his country, this time with a more active role by the EU in the process.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded the island after a brief Greek-inspired coup. Turkish Cypriots later declared independence in the northern part of the country. Greek Cypriots control two-thirds of the island.

Over the years, there have been various unsuccessful attempts to reunite the island, the most recent in 2017. [Cyprus Mail].

Christodoulides, who took office on February 28, said that "the goal of recommencing the talks on the basis of a jointly agreed upon framework is a common goal." [Simerini]

During a visit to Brussels on March 24, Christodoulides discussed his intentions with EU leaders including European Commission chief Ursula Von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel, as well as leaders of the bloc's member states.

He said that EU member countries, as well as the bloc's institutions, needed to support his proposal. [Cyprus Mail] [Simerini] [CNA]

(kg/pk)

NATO, Moldova launch joint programme for professional development

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Moldova launched a joint professional development program for the country's civil servants and institutions in the security and defence sectors. The program is sponsored by NATO member states Czech Republic, Germany, Luxemburg, Poland, Slovakia and the United Kingdom. [NATO]

The program was launched at the request of Moldova. It includes training and internships to help individuals develop themselves in the sectors. [Eurasia Business Today]

Michaela Simakova, the new Head of NATO Liaison in the Republic of Moldova told reporters that the

program represents a new milestone in Moldova-NATO relations. “The program is demand driven and tailored to meet the needs and requirements of the Moldovan authorities,” Simakova said. [EU Monitoring]

(lc/gc)

Russia agrees to extend Black Sea grain initiative

Russia has agreed to extend the United Nations-sponsored the Black Sea Grain Initiative for 60 more days following talks with the United Nations (UN), according to a statement by the Russian government. [The Moscow Times]

The grain export deal has helped ease the global food crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February last year. The invasion saw Ukraine's Black Sea ports blocked by warships until a deal signed in July allowed for the safe passage of exports of critical grain supplies. The initial 120-day agreement was extended in November. [UN]

The Kremlin had cast doubt on whether it would agree to a fresh extension, claiming that a twin deal on Russian exports was not being respected. Moscow said it wanted to see "tangible progress" on a parallel agreement on Russian exports before the deal comes up for renewal again.

Moscow wants to see "deeds, not words" in upholding this second part of the package, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said after concluding the talks with top UN officials in Geneva.

Vershinin led the Russian delegation in talks with UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths and Rebeca Grynspan, head of the UN's trade and development agency UNCTAD.

(ava/gc)

Slovakia, Poland donate MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine

Slovakia and Poland have become the first two NATO countries to announce they are handing over fighter jets in response to Kyiv’s requests for warplanes, which Ukraine has been seeking after securing high-end battle tanks from Western allies.

Poland said on March 16 that it would supply four of its Soviet-designed MiG-29s to Kyiv, to be followed by further planes. A day later, Slovakia approved sending Ukraine 13 jets of the same type.

The warplanes will be used as additional aircraft and to provide spare parts for Ukraine's existing MiG fleet, but they fall short of Kyiv's demand for more advanced Western jets such as American-made F16s or British Typhoons. [FT] [Guardian]

Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger said his government was "on the right side of history" as he announced the decision to transfer the MiGs to help strengthen Kyiv's air defences.

"We're giving these MiGs to Ukraine so that it can protect civilians against the many bombs that fall on their houses and which are the reason why people are dying in Ukraine," added Heger. [Guardian] [The Defense Post]

He said that Bratislava would also supply part of its Kub air defence system to Ukraine. [BBC]

'Antiquated' systems

Yuriy Ignat, a spokesman for Ukraine's air force, said that the Soviet-era MiGs would bolster his country's capabilities, but added that they were "not an effective weapon against the weapons of terror" because of their "antiquated" missile and radar system. [FT]

Most NATO member countries have so far been reluctant to donate fighter jets for fear that this would be seen as a direct confrontation with Russia. Moscow has repeatedly accused NATO of being an aggressor by proxy in the Ukraine conflict. [BBC]

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on March 17 that the Slovak and Polish governments' decision to hand over planes was another example of NATO members "raising the level of their direct involvement in the conflict." [AP]

Peskov said the promised warplanes would not affect the outcome of Moscow's "special military operation" but would "bring additional woes for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people." [AP]

Heated debate

Whether to dispatch warplanes to Ukraine has been a topic of heated debate since last year.

In early March, Slovakia and Poland had signalled their willingness to deliver MiG-29 jets, but only as part of an

international “coalition” of Western countries.

Meanwhile, key Western powers have been reluctant to send fighter jets, saying it would take years to train Ukraine pilots and establish supply chains needed to maintain such machines. [Guardian]

The US ruled out handing modern warplanes to Ukraine, adding that Warsaw and Bratislava’s move would not change its mind, that sending jets would be too costly and that these would take too long to reach the battlefield. [FT]

The British government also declined Ukraine’s request for modern fighters but offered to provide air cover for eastern European allies willing to send jets to Ukraine. [Guardian]

Reimbursement

Slovakia will receive compensation of EUR 200 million from the EU in exchange for giving its MiG-29s to Ukraine. [AP] [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad said on March 22 that the US had offered Bratislava a hefty discount on 12 new military helicopters by way of compensation.

Slovakia would have to pay EUR 315 million (USD 340 million) for the Bell AH-1Z attack helicopters in a package worth around USD 1 billion, with the rest of the money covered by US foreign military financing. [Aljazeera]

Strong opposition

Heger’s decision to donate MiG-29 planes was taken amid heightened tension in Slovak domestic politics, with some members of parliament strongly against the idea.

Opposition lawmakers and even some members of the ruling coalition questioned the Slovak caretaker government’s power to make such an important decision without parliament’s approval. [Reuters] [FT]

The government’s decision provides “perfect ammunition for part of the radical opposition in Slovakia to go the streets”, according to Milan Nic, a senior fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations. [FT]

“For Poland, this is a fairly consensual decision while in Slovakia it has been exactly the opposite,” Nic said, adding that the move comes at a “very fragile moment”

for the whole “pro-western and pro-Ukraine camp” in Slovakia. [FT]

Populist Robert Fico, whose leftist opposition Smer party is leading in opinion polls ahead of Slovakia’s September early parliamentary elections, opposes military support for Ukraine and has voiced scepticism over the EU’s sanctions on Russia. The former three-time prime minister has criticised Heger’s decision, threatening to sue. [AP]

(yl/pk)

Ukrainian refugees face difficulties in EU

Ukrainian refugees are experiencing difficulties in their European Union (EU) host countries, with a third of them saying they want to return to their country, a report by the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) shows. [EURACTIV] [Politico Europe]

Ukrainian refugees experience financial difficulties, health issues, a lack of access to healthcare and problems finding employment, especially due to language barriers, the FRA said in the report. Half of the respondents older than 16 years said they have financial concerns and difficulty getting medical or psychological support. [Politico Europe] [FRA]

The war in Ukraine “has evoked the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War,” FRA director, Michael O’Flaherty, said. Measures provided by the EU host countries were “short-term fixes” and “we are fast approaching a state of long-term emergency,” he said. [EURACTIV]

The report is based on an open online survey with 14,685 respondents, carried out in the ten EU countries of Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Italy, Spain and Estonia.

Eligible respondents had to be at least 12 years old, Ukrainian citizens or residents and have arrived in their host country shortly before or after February 24, 2022. Women make up 91 percent of the respondents, as a martial law forbade most Ukrainian men between ages 18 and 60 to travel abroad. [FRA]

According to data from the UN Refugee Agency, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees fled to another European country since the beginning of the war, and about 4.8 million have applied to a temporary protection scheme in a EU country. [Politico Europe]

(mb/gc)

Visegrad Group urges joint effort with West against illegal migration

The interior ministers of four central and eastern European countries have called for greater collaboration with western nations to curb illegal migration.

The Visegrad Four (V4) group – a regional cooperation platform that brings together Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary – urged cooperation between so-called transit and destination countries.

"Many migrants who come here illegally do not want to stay on the territory of the V4 countries, they want to continue to Western countries," said Slovak Interior Minister Roman Mikulec. [Euractiv]

According to Frontex, the EU's border agency, around 330,000 "irregular" crossings were detected at the bloc's external border last year, the highest figure since 2016. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Mikulec also demanded clear guidelines from the EU's executive on handling Syrian and Afghan migrants, who he said "are non-returnable according to the current European rules". [Rtv]

At the same time, Mikulec urged the European Commission to reimburse V4 countries for expenses incurred in safeguarding the border of Europe's visa-free Schengen zone. [Euractiv]

The issue of migration has been a flashpoint in debates in the EU, especially the question of which member states will take migrants in and whether to use European Union funds to build more fences and walls on the bloc's external border.

EU leaders decided at a special summit in February to tighten the bloc's borders to prevent unwanted migrants arriving from the Middle East, Asia and Africa, a decision that was criticised for being inhumane and neglecting labour market gaps. [Reuters]

Czech interior ministry figures reveal that in 2022, of the illegal migrants arriving in the country, almost 21,000 were Syrians seeking to travel to Western Europe, and only 50 of these applied for asylum in the Czech Republic. [Schengen visa]

(yl/pk)

EU-led donors pledge EUR 7 billion to help earthquake recovery in Turkey and Syria

International donors at a conference in Brussels on March 20 pledged to provide EUR 7 billion in assistance after earthquakes devastated Turkey and Syria. Turkey will receive EUR 6.5 billion of the aid, with the remaining going to Syria. [NTV]

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Prime Minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson, opened the conference. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan joined the meeting virtually. [BBC Turkish]

Among the donations, the World Bank – EUR 1.78 billion – and the Council of Europe Development Bank – EUR 1.5 billion – pledged the most. During the video call President Erdogan said that the estimated amount for reconstruction due to the earthquake was EUR 96.5 billion. [Cumhuriyet]

(lc/gc)

Switzerland: Yemen government, Houthis sign prisoner exchange agreement in Geneva

The government of Yemen and Houthi rebels agreed on March 20 in Geneva to release about 900 prisoners after a ten-day-long meeting hosted by the Swiss government and facilitated by the United Nations and International Committee of the Red Cross. [Swissinfo] [Aljazeera]

(ava/gc)

World leaders struggle to unite on principles at Biden's democracy summit

Leaders of 120 nations invited to a "Summit for Democracy" convened by US President Joe Biden struggled to unite behind a declaration backing democratic principles and condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

During the gathering between March 28 and 30, Biden announced USD 690 million over the next two years in funding to support free elections and media, to fight

corruption and to bolster democracy around the world. The funding, part of the "Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal", requires the approval of the US Congress. [US Department of State]

Only 73 countries endorsed a summit declaration on commitments to democratic principles. Meanwhile, 12 of the nations that signed the document rejected parts of the text. Armenia, Bulgaria and Poland were among those that disassociated from some paragraphs.

India and Israel opted out of a part concerning human rights abusers' accountability and the importance of the International Criminal Court. [Reuters]

The summit was co-hosted with the governments of the Netherlands, Costa Rica, South Korea and Zambia, and focused on defending democracy against authoritarianism and promoting human rights. [US Department of State]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who attended the meeting, asked for more weapons to help fight the Russian troops that have invaded his country and dismissed calls for a negotiated settlement of the conflict without preconditions.

"We should get rid of the illusion that compromising with evil can give something to freedom, and enemies of democracy must lose," Zelensky said. [El País]

As in the previous such summit, held in 2021, Hungary and Turkey were left off the invitation list. Hungary was the only EU member to be shunned. [Euractiv] Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have long been accused of creeping authoritarianism.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lichtenstein were invited to the event for the first time. [El País]

(msa/pk)

Spain and Portugal attend Ibero-American Summit

The leaders of Spain and Portugal travelled to the Dominican Republic for the 28th Ibero-American summit on March 24 and 25, a meeting aimed at strengthening ties between 22 Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries.

The main points of discussion during the gathering in the Dominican capital, Santo Domingo, included an

environmental charter, digitalisation, food security and financial architecture. [EFE]

Spain's King Felipe VI, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, as well as Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa were present.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who also attended the summit, said that with Spain set to assume the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in July, this year would be "key" for relations between Brussels and Latin America. [El País]

The countries gathered in the Dominican Republic agreed on a declaration that called for "comprehensive, just and lasting peace across the world based on the principles of the UN charter." There was no specific mention of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Publico]

Borrell, however, did mention the war, calling Moscow's announcement that it would station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus "another sign of the Belarusian regime's collaboration with Russia". [EFE]

(msa/pk)

EU, South Korea agree to work together more closely

The EU and South Korea agreed to increase collaboration on regional and international issues, such as climate change and tensions with North Korea, during a series of meetings on March 8 in Brussels.

The two sides, which are marking 60 years of bilateral diplomatic relations, welcomed what they said was the ongoing strengthening of ties, including a free trade agreement signed in 2011.

Topics discussed during meetings between EU and South Korean officials in the Belgian capital included economic security, supply chain cooperation, climate change, energy and digital partnership.

Both sides welcomed what they described as progress in discussing the scope of a comprehensive EU-South Korea Green Partnership on climate goals.

The strengthening of the WTO multilateral trade system, the war in Ukraine, security in the Indo-Pacific region, human rights and development were also part of the agenda of the talks in Brussels.

The next such meeting between the two sides will take place in Seoul in 2024. [European Union External Action] [AiR, No.11, March/2023, 2]

(aml/pk)

EU, Thailand resuming talks on free trade deal

The EU and Thailand confirmed on March 15 that they would resume negotiations on a free trade agreement. Trade talks between the two sides began in 2013 but were put on hold a month after a military coup in Thailand in May 2014.

After Thailand began making moves toward democracy, the EU responded by incrementally re-engaging with Bangkok. The European Union said that the two sides would begin trade negotiations later this year and planned to close a deal in two years.

The EU is the second largest destination for Thailand's outbound capital, while the European bloc is the third largest investor in Thailand, accounting for 10 percent of the country's foreign direct investment.

The EU is looking to implement its values-based policies by increasing its engagement with Thai industries that promote sustainability, for instance through the use of renewable energy and electric vehicles, and by strengthening labour protection in the country.

If a deal is struck, Thailand – the second largest economy in Southeast Asia – would be the third ASEAN nation after Singapore and Vietnam to establish a free trade agreement with the EU.

As well as seeking to lower barriers to trade in goods and services between the two parties, the EU is seeking to diversify its investment and economic relations with Asia away from China as geopolitical risks rise and as Brussels increasingly views Beijing as a competitor.

Political analysts say Brussels is increasingly wary of China's growing influence, prompting the EU to build stronger bilateral relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific. [European Commission] [The Diplomat] [AiR, No.12, March/2023, 3]

(aml/pk)

Japanese PM visits Kyiv in show of support for Ukraine, pledges aid for Poland

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made an unannounced visit to Kyiv on March 21 to meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky in a show of support for Ukraine as it battles against Russian invaders.

Kishida's trip was designed to "directly convey solidarity and unwavering support for Ukraine" and "resolutely reject Russia's aggression against Ukraine", Japan's foreign ministry said in a statement. [DW] [Radio Free Europe] [CNN] [AP] [Euronews] [Reuters]

Kishida is the first Japanese post-war leader to enter a war zone. Zelensky said the two men held "productive talks". [France24] [AP] [Euronews] [DW] [Radio Free Europe]

Kishida's trip to Ukraine coincided with a visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Moscow for talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. *(See separate story in this issue)* [DW] [Reuters] [Radio Free Europe] [Bloomberg]

Japanese news outlet Kyodo News reported that Kishida also visited the town of Bucha outside Kyiv, where – according to Ukrainian officials – hundreds of civilians were killed last year by Moscow's forces, and which has since become a symbol of Russian atrocities. [Euronews] [AP] [DW] [Radio Free Europe] [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

"I'm outraged by the cruelty," Kishida was quoted as saying. [Euronews]

Japan's post-war constitution does not allow it to send military aid. However, Kishida told a press conference that Tokyo would continue to support Ukraine "with the greatest effort to regain peace". [Radio Free Europe]

Japan has contributed over USD 7 billion in humanitarian aid to Kyiv and accepted over 2,000 Ukrainian refugees, despite its strict immigration policies. It has also joined Western allies in imposing sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. [AP] [Radio Free Europe] [DW] [Euronews] [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Kishida invited Zelensky to attend a G7 summit which Japan will host in Hiroshima this May. The Ukrainian president confirmed that he would join via an online link. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Aid for Warsaw

After Kyiv, Kishida travelled to the Polish capital, where he announced that Tokyo would provide Warsaw with financial development aid in recognition of the "increasing burden on Poland due to the prolonged invasion of Ukraine". [AP] [Radio Poland][Euractiv] [Aljazeera]

Kishida met his Polish counterpart, Mateusz Morawiecki, on March 22. Kishida pledged to supply Warsaw with help to "vigorously build up" projects that support Kyiv. [Radio Poland] [AP] [Aljazeera] [Euractiv]

Poland became the main destination for millions of Ukrainians fleeing their country after it was invaded by Russia in February last year. Many later moved on to other countries or returned to Ukraine, but over a million are estimated to remain in Poland. [Notes from Poland]

Meanwhile, Warsaw has been one of the largest donors of military aid to Ukraine.

On bilateral issues, the Polish and Japanese premiers talked about expanding economic cooperation, particularly in the field of energy generation. Kishida also met with Polish President Andrzej Duda in Warsaw. [AP] [Aljazeera] [Radio Poland]

Kishida said that Japan, which holds the rotating presidency of the G7 this year, would use its position to work on uniting the international community in support of Ukraine. [Radio Poland] [AP]

(wd/pk)

Hungary urged to lift veto on EU-ACP treaty

Parliamentarians from the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of nations have urged Hungary to lift its veto on a new legal framework for European Union relations with 79 countries. [Euractiv]

The agreement is to be the successor to the Cotonou Agreement, which governs economic and political relations between the EU and ACP countries and is set to expire at the end of June.

"With one EU member state still refusing to accept the new agreement, we call on the EU Council (...) to not spare any efforts to quickly sign the new agreement," two co-presidents of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary

Assembly, Carlos Zorrinho and Ana Rita Sithole, said on March 3. [Euractiv]

Budapest has been blocking the treaty, finalised last December but still to be ratified, because it opposes its provisions on migration and gender. [Bloomberg]

“The direction is clear: yes to economic cooperation, no to migration,” Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto wrote on Facebook in November. [The Budapest Times]

Hungary’s nationalist government obstructed high-profile international initiatives multiple times last year. It delayed financial aid for Ukraine, an OECD proposal for a global minimum corporate tax and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO. [Europe Monthly January 2023] [Euractiv]

(msa/pk)

French President Emmanuel Macron visits Africa

French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to Africa, where he visited the Congolese capital Brazzaville on March 3 after visiting Angola and Gabon. He also visited the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The main reason for Macron’s visits to the African countries is to build economic partnerships. In Angola, he announced that he aims to build a "made-in-Africa strategy." [France 24]

Anti-French sentiment runs high in some former African colonies as the continent becomes a renewed diplomatic battleground, with Russian and Chinese influence growing. Macron said the era of French interference in Africa had ended and there was no desire to return to the past. [France 24]

"The age of Francafrique is well over," Macron said in Gabon's capital Libreville, referring to the post-colonisation strategy of supporting authoritarian leaders to defend French interests.

(gc/gm)

Belgium pledges 240 military trucks to Ukraine

The Belgian Ministry of Defence pledged on March 16 to provide 240 military trucks to Ukraine to help the country's war effort against Russia.

The trucks, a mixture of cargo, lifting and breakdown vehicles, were received by the Ukrainian army the following week. The Swedish-made trucks are part of Belgium's 400-strong reserve of Volvo military trucks, dating back to 1992.

While the trucks are in good condition, there are concerns that Belgium chose these trucks to pass off old and dated military equipment to Ukraine. This is not the first time these accusations have risen. In May 2022, FPS Public Health tried to ship supplies about to expire to the war-torn country. [BrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

Czech, Polish presidents discuss more aid for Ukraine

Newly instated Czech President Petr Pavel and his Polish counterpart, Andrzej Duda, have discussed additional aid for Ukraine as it battles Russia's invasion.

Pavel, a former NATO general, came to Poland on March 16 on his second foreign visit as head of state. His first official trip was to Slovakia. [AP] [TVP] [Notes from Poland]

In Warsaw, Pavel and Duda talked about regional security ahead of a NATO summit that will be held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in July.

The two leaders also discussed developing a Polish-Czech gas pipeline system, boosting rail and road infrastructure, and future cultural exchange and education opportunities.

Pavel said that relations between the Czech Republic and neighbouring Poland have "probably never been at such an excellent level." [AP] [Notes from Poland] [TVP]

Pavel has urged allies to provide Ukraine with more weapons. Poland, meanwhile, has been one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters amid the Russian invasion.

Pavel was sworn in as president on March 9, succeeding Milos Zeman, who was in favour of close ties with Moscow. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February last year, Zeman backed Kyiv and admitted

that his pro-Kremlin stance had been a mistake. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(wd/pk)

Finland starts to build fence on border with Russia

Finland has started constructing a 200-kilometre fence along its eastern border with Russia amid tensions over the war in Ukraine. [BBC] [Sky News]

Finnish border guards said the fence was needed because of a "changed security environment" and to prevent "illegal entry". The border guards did not explicitly mention Russia, with which Finland shares a 1,340 km frontier – the longest of any EU country.

In September, thousands of Russians began fleeing to Finland to escape conscription after President Vladimir Putin ordered the mobilisation of reserve forces to fight in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

The same month, the Finnish government banned tourists from Russia from entering the country, citing security concerns. [Associated Press]

In October, Finland's main parties reached consensus on building a fence along parts of the border with Russia. [Guardian] At present, the frontier is primarily secured by wooden fences, mainly designed to prevent livestock from crossing. [BBC]

The construction of the barrier is starting from Imatra in the south-eastern part of Finland. The fence will be three metres tall and equipped with surveillance systems in some sections.

Rather than covering the entire length of the frontier, the fence will be built in "riskier areas" like crossing points, according to Finnishborder guards. Construction is expected to take three to four years.

Human rights concerns

Finland's border measures were criticised by Amnesty International in its annual report. The human rights organisation said the barrier could prevent asylum seekers from accessing Finnish territory to apply for international protection and that this could result in forced returns.

That, in turn, would violate the principle of "non-refoulement", Amnesty said, referring to a measure in

international human rights law which protects individuals against being returned to a country where they may be tortured, punished or harmed [Helsinki Times][Amnesty International]

(rs/pk)

King Charles addresses German parliament in first overseas visit as monarch

King Charles III visited the German cities of Berlin and Hamburg on a three-day trip to Germany from March 29 to March 31, marking his first overseas visit since becoming the British monarch in September. [Reuters] [DW]

King Charles addressed the German parliament on March 30, becoming the first monarch to speak before German lawmakers. In hisspeech, he mentioned the British-German connection, the continuous support of Ukraine in the war against Russia by both countries and climate change issues. [Euronews] [DW] [Tagesschau]

The king also attended a forum on sustainability and visited a centre for Ukrainian refugees together with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. He met with soldiers from a German-British engineer battalion near Berlin before going to Hamburg on March 31.

Left Party members from the opposition criticised the king's speech in parliament.

It's "absurd" to have a king speak in parliament, Ates Gurpinar, deputy to the Left Party chief. Martin Schirdewan, co-leader of the Left Party, said, "it's not appropriate for the highest democratic body to bow before a monarch." [Politico Europe] [DW] [Tagesschau]

President Steinmeier had a different opinion. King Charles visiting Germany for his first foreign trip as monarch is "an important signal for German-British relations," he said. The ultimate decision on state visits is made by the British parliament. [DW] [Reuters]

The king was originally scheduled to visit France beforehand, but the trip was cancelled due to ongoing protests against the government's pension reforms. [DW] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Kosovo and Serbia tentatively agree on EU normalisation plan

Kosovo and Serbia have reached a tentative agreement on implementing a European sponsored plan to normalise relations between the two countries. [Al Jazeera]

The stated agreement came after 12 hours of talks held between Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksander Vucic on March 18 in the North Macedonian town of Ohrid. Both Kurti and Vucic held separate meetings with the European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Josep Borrell before a three-way meeting. [Al Jazeera].

"We have a deal," EU's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell tweeted on March 19. "Kosovo and Serbia have agreed on the Implementation Annex of the Agreement on the path to normalisation of relations. The parties have fully committed to honour all articles of the agreement and implement their respective expediently and in good faith." [Al Jazeera].

The agreement includes "practical steps on what has to be done, when, by who and how," Borrell said during a press conference. [Al Jazeera]

In a separate press conference, Kurti said: "This is a de facto recognition between Kosovo and Serbia." [Reuters]

The two leaders agreed upon the wording of an 11-point plan mediated by the EU in February. But Serbian President Vucic had said that "he will not sign anything" because the plan contains clauses regarding the recognition of Kosovo as a state and Kosovo's membership to the United Nations. [AP News][Balkan Insight]

Vucic has been criticised by domestic parties and the political opposition about the normalisation of ties with Kosovo. He pushed back against accusations of treason by opposition parties. [Euractiv]

"Why do you think I didn't sign anything, which they said I was going to sign?," he said.

Groups of Serbian nationalists and Orthodox Christians marched in Belgrade on March 5 to protest the Western plan aimed at neutralising relations between Serbia and Kosovo; the groups mainly consisted of pro-Russian Serbs. [Reuters]

(jn-lc/gc)

Dutch army to train Ukrainians in the Netherlands

The Netherland's Commander of the Armed Forces, Onno Eichelsheim, said that Ukrainian soldiers will be trained by the Dutch army.

A year after the Russian invasion, the need to support Ukraine remains "as great as ever," Dutch Defense Minister, Kajsa Ollongren, said [NL Times]

(ava/gc)

Dutch foreign minister travels to Ukraine for start of war crimes consultation group

Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra visited Ukraine for the new war crimes consultation group.

"The murders, the sexual violence, the attacks on civilian infrastructure, the systematic kidnapping of Ukrainian children," Hoekstra said. "All war crimes and crimes against humanity must be investigated and punished according to international standards." [NL Times]

Hoekstra said that the support for Ukraine is leading to difficulties for all Dutch citizens in that it is driving up prices of food and fuel. [DutchNews]

(ava/gc)

Serbian president doesn't rule out sanctions against Russia

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic signalled a possible change in Belgrade's stance on sanctions against Russia in his appearance in Serbia's Happy TV on March 9.

Vucic said: "I don't swear by flowers and honey, as the song says, that we won't do something, nor can I swear, because that would be irresponsible. But the firmness of our position is such that we have not had to do that so far." [Balkan Insight]

He added that “due to everything that happened in the 1990s” – referring to NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 allegedly over the conflict in Kosovo – Serbia took a stance on sanctions that was “rational, serious and difficult to preserve.” [Balkan Insight]

Maria Zakharova, a spokesperson from the Russian Foreign Ministry, said Serbia is under Western pressure to impose sanctions. “Some strange position: America puts pressure on Serbia, and the Serbian minister calls for an action against Russia," Zakharova wrote on the Telegram app on March 13. [Reuters]

Russia, a traditional Slavic and Orthodox Christian ally, has backed Belgrade in its opposition to the 2008 independence of Kosovo, Serbia's former Albanian-majority southern province. Pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia runs high. Rade Basta, Serbia's Economy Minister from the ranks of a co-ruling alliance of the Socialist Party and United Serbia, said Belgrade was paying "a high price" for its refusal to join an international embargo against Russia. [Reuters]

Serbia voted for a United Nations (UN) resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in March 2022, and in April voted for the exclusion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Serbia also voted in October 2022 for the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia’s attempt to annex four regions of Ukraine. [Balkan Insight]

Serbia wants to join the European Union (EU), its main investor and trade partner, but it must first normalise ties with Kosovo in EU-sponsored talks and align foreign policies with those of the West, including joining sanctions against Russia. Serbia is entirely dependent on gas imports from Russia, although it has started to diversify its energy supplies. Belgrade also maintained military cooperation with Russia which was brought to a halt following its invasion of Ukraine a year ago. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Spanish prime minister visits Dublin

Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez, was welcomed in Dublin by his Irish counterpart, Leo Varadkar, on March 2. [gov.ie] [Irish Examiner]

Varadkar briefed Sanchez on the Windsor Framework – the agreement reached between the UK and European Union – and other political developments in Northern Ireland, as well as discussed the invasion of Ukraine,

the Single Market, energy, and priorities for Spain's presidential term in the Council of the European Union, which it will assume in the second half of 2023. [gov.ie] [Irish Examiner]

(wd)

Switzerland continues to express reluctance to export weapons to be used in Ukraine war

Swiss officials have continued to express their concerns about requests made by Germany and the Czech Republic to buy Leopard tanks from Switzerland in order to replace tanks already exported to Ukraine by the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. [Swissinfo]

"Allowing the re-export of Swiss war materiel towards Ukraine would mean giving up impartiality and infringing Swiss law," Economics Minister Guy Parmelin said. Switzerland rejected requests made by Denmark, Spain, Germany, and the Czech Republic to buy Swiss tanks for Ukrainian forces. [Swissinfo]

Parliament has tried to ease the restrictions on the export of tanks to EU neighbours. Switzerland's strict neutrality forbids the transfer of war material to countries at war. Germany reassured Switzerland that the tanks would not be re-exported to Ukraine. [Swissinfo]

Around 3,000 protestors have come out against Switzerland's export of war materiel and sanctions to Russia.

"Swiss weapons must not be used in wars," Swiss President Alain Berset said. After the protests, Berset said it is necessary to refocus on Switzerland's principle of neutrality. [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Germany: Chancellor Scholz criticises Israel's justice reform plans

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met on March 16 in Berlin, where they discussed justice reform plans in Israel that are causing social unrest in the Middle

Eastern nation. [EURACTIV] [Reuters] [DW] [Politico Europe] [Tagesschau]

While Germany's partnership with Israel is important for historical and geopolitical reasons, Scholz said he doesn't approve of the plans by Netanyahu's governing coalition for a planned judicial overhaul and is watching with "great concern." [EURACTIV] [Politico Europe]

"Our wish is that our value partner Israel remains a liberal democracy," Scholz said, adding that Germany wouldn't want to interfere with the country's domestic policy. He hopes that a compromise, as presented by Israeli President Isaac Herzog on March 15, is still possible. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

Criticism of his planned justice reform is "absurd," Netanyahu said. "Democracy in Israel is strong and alive, we will not deviate an inch from it," he added. [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

The planned justice reform will increase the power of Israel's government in appointing judges to the Supreme Court and allow lawmakers to override decisions by the court, a move that is said to remove an important check from the political system in Israel. [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

Israel has no constitution and currently operates under a relatively unique system under "basic laws" which enable the Supreme Court to pass judgement on laws passed by the Israeli parliament, or Knesset, at their own discretion. [WSJ] Supporters of reform claim the new measures are intended to reign in an activist court overruling laws passed by elected officials with excessive frequency.

The Israeli population has protested against the reform. Herzog has warned the Israeli government of the possibility of a civil war, saying that "the abyss is within touching distance." [Reuters] [Politico Europe]

Other topics during the meeting included stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and Germany's wish to buy an Israeli made anti-ballistic missile defence system. [Reuters]

Scholz and Netanyahu jointly visited Berlin's Gleis 17, or track 17, from where more than 50,000 Jews were deported by train to Nazi concentration camps between 1941 and 1945. [Reuters]

The sombre ceremony, where they observed a silence and laid wreaths, contrasted with the eruption of new protests in Israel. Flag-waving demonstrators marched

through the streets and disrupted traffic, and overnight protesters painted a symbolic red line along roads to the Supreme Court.

(mb/gc)

Denmark lifts ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia, UAE

Denmark on March 9 lifted a ban imposed five years ago on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. [The Cradle]

Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen said the decision to allow such exports to resume had been made under his country's new foreign policy doctrine – which, he added, demands "pragmatic realism". [Turdef]

Denmark's ban had been put into place in response to the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The 2018 killing of Khashoggi by Saudi agents inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul caused global condemnation. [AA]

Rasmussen said: "We must find a balance that ensures that the Danish defence industry has the same opportunities to participate in international competition, create jobs and development as others – and at the same time stand guard over some basic principles." [AA]

He added that security assessments would be carried out annually to stop arms produced by Denmark from being used against a nation's own population or in conflicts where "the countries in question engage inappropriately." [anews/Anadolu Agency]

Speaking to Danish newspaper Politiken, Rasmussen said: "The perfect world is a world that didn't need weapons at all. Now we live in the real world." [The Cradle]

(hl/pk)

Romania: President Iohannis visits UAE, discusses increased collaboration and ties

Romania President Klaus Iohannis met with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) President His Highness Sheikh

Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on March 20 in Abu Dhabi.

The heads of state announced a number of memoranda of understanding in the renewable energy, technology, cybersecurity and education sectors. They also discussed further collaboration in trade, sustainability, food security and economy.

Iohannis described the UAE as a role model for sustainable development in the region, stressing that the Arab nation will be hosting the 2023 COP28. [GulfNews]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland to pledge aid package to Yemen

Switzerland will donate EUR 14.5 million to support the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN World Food Programme for Yemen.

Around 4.5 million people were forced out of their homes by the humanitarian crisis. The donation will target water, food, security and the protection of civilians. [Swissinfo]

“Yemeni women, men and children expect nothing less than our full commitment. This is our collective responsibility,” Federal Councillor, Ignazio Cassis, said. [FDFA]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland to ease sanctions on Syria

The Swiss government will ease sanctions on Syria following earthquakes in order to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. The aim of the Swiss government is to make it “easier for humanitarian actors active in Syria to establish the business relationships necessary for their work." [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Scholz and Biden discuss war in Ukraine possible sanctions on Russia, China

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and US President Joe Biden met on March 3 in Washington, where the two leaders discussed the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia and China. [EURACTIV] [Reuters] [AP]

The allies have to support Ukraine "as long as it takes and as long as is necessary," Scholz said. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

They also considered what steps should be taken if China provided Russia with weapons. If Beijing does provide arms to Moscow, Washington wants to impose additional sanctions. China would cross an "absolute red line" if the country would provide Russia with weapons, Reuters reported, citing an unidentified European Union official. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Sunak to invite Biden to Northern Ireland for Good Friday Agreement anniversary celebrations

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak confirmed that he will formally invite United States President Joe Biden to Northern Ireland to officially mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).

The GFA was signed in 1998, ending the Troubles in Northern Ireland (NI), an ethno-nationalist war resulting in 3,532 deaths and over 47,000 injuries.

On his way to California, Sunak described the event as a "very important milestone" to celebrate, and hoped the President would "be able to make it." Biden is a public supporter of the GFA and had previously warned that peace in Northern Ireland should remain irrespective of Brexit complications.

NI's Brexit deal, known as the Northern Ireland Protocol, has caused controversy in the province, resulting in the Democratic Unionist Party boycotting the NI Assembly in protest of NI's removal from the UK internal market. A new agreement between the UK and European Union, called the Windsor Framework, was reached in February with the aim of solving issues arising from the protocol. [BBC News Northern Ireland]

(cl/gc)

Moldova: US pledges support to protect country against destabilisation plans

The United States accused Russia on March 10 of planning to destabilise Moldova's pro-European Union administration and pledged support to fight off any destabilisation attempts. [Reuters]

US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby addressed developments regarding US-Moldova relations in a press conference held on March 10. John Kirby told reporters: "We believe Russia is pursuing options to weaken the Moldovan government, probably with the eventual goal of seeing a more Russian friendly administration in the capital."

A secret document drafted by Russia's security service, the FSB, was found on March 17 which details destabilisation plans for Moldova. The plans include supporting pro-Russian groups in the country, utilising the Orthodox church and cutting off supplies on natural gas. [CNN]

John Kirby also added that the US pledged USD 300 million additional assistance to Moldova, to help strengthen the energy industry and decrease its dependency on Russian energy resources. Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US, through the United States Agency for International Development, has provided Moldova with USD 265 million. [AP News]

(lc/gc)

First US garrison on NATO's eastern flank opens in Poland

The United States has opened its first army garrison on NATO's eastern flank, with the permanent base in Poland marking an upgrading of America's military presence in the region amid Russia's war against Ukraine. [AP] [gov.pl] [Notes from Poland] [RP]

The move had been announced by US President Joe Biden at last year's NATO summit in Madrid. Fearful of Russia, its giant neighbour to the east, Poland has been lobbying Washington for a permanent presence of US troops for years. [AP] [gov.pl] [Notes from Poland] [RP]

At the formal inauguration of the garrison – named Camp Kosciuszko – in the western city of Poznan on March 21, Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak

hailed “a historic moment”, and said that the upgrading of the American military presence in his country was “good news for the security of Poland and of NATO’s eastern flank”. [AP] [gov.pl] [Notes from Poland]

The garrison will consist of 140 civilian and 13 military employees, and will support the more than 10,000 American troops stationed in Poland. [AP] [RP] [Notes from Poland]

It is the eighth US army garrison in Europe – there are already five in Germany, one in Italy, and one in Belgium. The number of US troops in Europe has now reached over 100,000. [gov.pl] [AP] [RP] [Notes from Poland]

(wd/pk)

Spain asks US to start clean-up of 1966 H-bomb accident site

The Spanish government announced on March 6 that it has asked the United States to begin the clean-up of a site contaminated by an accident involving American hydrogen bombs in 1966.

The incident took place at the height of the Cold War, when the US kept planes carrying nuclear weapons close to the Soviet border at all times. On January 17, 1966, an American B-52 bomber collided with a refuelling aircraft above the village of Palomares in south-eastern Spain.

The accident, which killed seven crew members, saw four hydrogen bombs released. None of them exploded, but two plutonium-filled detonators went off, spreading radioactive plutonium around the crash site, affecting nearly 50,000 cubic metres of land. [El Pais]

The collision over Palomares is one of the worst nuclear weapons accidents in history. [Boston University]

The site was partially cleaned up after the incident. In 2015, Spain and America signed a statement of intent to negotiate the full restoration of the Palomares site, including the disposal of contaminated soil in the US. However, no final agreement was signed. [The Guardian]

Spain’s foreign ministry said that details of Madrid’s new request for a clean-up would not be released until the US had officially replied. [AP News]

(km/pk)

Belarus president visits China and praises Xi's peace plan

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping vowed to "deepen cooperation" in several sectors and called for an "early return to peace in Ukraine" during a meeting in Beijing on March 1. [CNN] [AiR No. 10, March/2023, 1]

Lukashenko, a close ally of Russia, said his country "fully supports" the peace plan Beijing presented on February 18, which emphasised China's neutrality and calls for dialogue. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Xi, who has long refused to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, said during the meeting that countries "should stop politicising" the world economy and "do things that will aid a ceasefire." [AFP] [BBC]

"The China-Belarus friendship is unbreakably strong," Chinese state media Xinhua reported, citing Xi. "China and Belarus are the joint guarantors of international justice", he added. [Politico]

While Belarus has actively supported Moscow's aggression by letting Russian troops traverse its territory during the war, China has recently rejected claims by US officials that it was considering providing weapons to Moscow. [AFP] [DW]

Unlike Belarus, Western leaders have largely dismissed Beijing's peace plan. [The Guardian]

North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in February that China "does not have much credibility." The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that Beijing had "taken sides by signing an unlimited friendship right before Russia's invasion of Ukraine started." [The Guardian] [Euronews]

Lukashenko has been the first European head of state to visit China since Xi secured his third term last October. [AiR No. 43, October/2022, 4]

(msa/gc)

British Royal Air Force protests recruitment of former pilots by Beijing

Britain's Royal Air Force chief said that China's recruitment of former Royal Air Force pilots to train the Chinese military was an "unacceptable" move.

Australian and British intelligence agencies warned pilots against accepting work offers from Beijing. Britain even proposed a law to make it an offence for a former military pilot to serve in a foreign military after he has been warned by British intelligence agencies to stop. Australia is also tightening their regulations.

A former US marine pilot currently faces extradition from Australia with charges after allegedly training Chinese military pilots. Australia's intelligence chief recently said that former military pilots who turn to working for authoritarian regimes are "more 'top tools' than 'top guns'". [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [AiR, No.10, March/2023, 1]

(aml/gc)

Czech Speaker vows to stand with Taiwan during trip condemned by China

The Speaker of the Czech parliament affirmed solidarity with Taiwan during a visit to the island amid pressure on Taipei from Beijing to accept Chinese sovereignty.

During a five-day trip that was condemned by China, the Czech Republic's Marketa Pekarova Adamova told the parliament in Taipei: "I guarantee you we are with you now – we will continue to be with you." [Reuters]

Pekarova Adamova and her Taiwanese counterpart You Si-kun signed a joint statement of solidarity on March 29. You said that by inking the declaration, the two countries were signalling that they stood against China and Russia's "axis of evil". [Focus Taiwan] [Denik N] [BRNO Daily]

Beijing, which claims Taiwan as its territory under its "One China Policy", had warned the Czech Speaker in February not to visit the island. China also condemned Czech President Petr Pavel for holding phone talks with his Taiwanese counterpart Tsai Ing-Wen in January. [European Interest] [ABC News] [Europe Monthly March 2023] [Dennikn] [China Mission] [BBC]

On March 28, Pavel said that he was open to meeting Tsai Ing-Wen in an unofficial setting such as an international conference. He added that a Czech presidential visit to Taiwan could spark economic

sanctions from China, the world's second largest economy. [Taiwan News]

In order to avoid provoking Beijing, few European countries officially interact with Taiwan at the top diplomatic level.

Pekarova Adamova was accompanied on her March 25-30 trip by 150 Czech business owners and security officials. [Taiwan News]

During the visit, she signed an agreement between a Taiwanese government-funded think tank and the Czech Republic's Institute of International Relations, as well as a memorandum between national museums and technology-focused universities in the two countries. [Focus Taiwan] [RTI]

(jbn/pk)

Finland aims to reduce trade reliance on China

Finland is seeking to reduce its economic dependence on China amid concern at the impact of a potential disruption in imports. [Yle]

Nina Vaskunlahti, Under-Secretary of State for International Trade at the Finnish foreign ministry, said that the country needed a detailed analysis of China's influence on its economy. [Yle]

A report published by the foreign ministry in Helsinki estimates that China provides almost half the mobile phones and two-thirds of the laptops used in Finland. Moreover, Finland heavily relies on China for imports of monitors, mobile phone parts, electric cars and motorcycles.

The report emphasises the need to reduce risks and increase preparedness in an unpredictable geopolitical environment. [Helsinki Times]

A recent study by the Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies which analyses current and economic developments in China and Russia said that Finnish trade and electronics companies would be greatly impacted if imports from China were disrupted. [Euractiv]

(rs/pk)

France, India conduct joint military exercise

The French and Indian militaries conducted a two-day joint exercise in Kerala, India from March 7-8. The exercise was the first time both countries engaged in this format, focused on enhancing interoperability, joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. [The Economic Times] [AA] [AiR, No.10, March/2023, 1]

(aml/gc)

German Chancellor Scholz meets Modi in Delhi

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi on February 26. This was the chancellor's first visit to the country since assuming his position in December last year.

The talks between the two leaders covered bilateral cooperation in trade, renewable energy, green hydrogen, biofuels and security cooperation. Special attention was given to the economic relations between India and Germany, with Modi and Scholz meeting the top CEOs of both nations to discuss progress in sectors such as digital transformation, FinTech, IT and Telecom. [Narendra Modi, Twitter]

Scholz and Modi reportedly also discussed signing a free trade agreement between India and the European Union, with the intent of increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific as well as countering China's growing influence in the region. [Reuters]

In relation to the Ukraine conflict, Modi stressed India's insistence on resolving the issue through dialogue and diplomacy, remarking that India would be willing to join "any peace process" to solve the Ukraine crisis, and endeavoured to attempt the same under India's presidency of the G20. Scholz tweeted his support for this statement and reiterated working closely with India to end the war. [Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz, Twitter] [The Hindu] [AiR, No.9, February/2023, 4]

(aml/gc)

German education minister visits Taiwan

German Education Minister Bettina Stark-Watzinger of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) visited Taiwan from

March 21-22, marking the first time a cabinet member has visited the Asian country in decades.

Together with Taiwanese representatives, Stark-Watzinger signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation with Taipei in the fields of science, research and education. Stark-Watzinger said that this agreement "stands for enhancing cooperation on the basis of the democratic values of transparency, openness, reciprocity and scientific freedom." [Reuters 1]

China's foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin called on Germany to stop its "vile conduct" and to stop "associating and interacting with Taiwan independence separatist forces." Beijing accused Germany of using the Taiwan issue to interfere in China's internal affairs. [Reuters 1]

The German government emphasised that the issue of Taiwan's sovereignty was not the focus of the trip, and that Berlin maintains its "One China" policy. Stark-Watzinger did not meet with President Tsai Ing-wen as this would irritate China too much [Channel News Asia]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz warned China on March 18 not to use force to change Taiwan's status. His government is currently developing a new China strategy to reduce Germany's dependence on China, a crucial export market for Germany. [Reuters 2] [AiR, No.12 March/2023, 3]

(aml/gc)

Italian court turns down China extradition request after key ECHR ruling

Italy's Supreme Court of Appeal has turned down a request by Beijing to extradite a Chinese citizen, the first such decision in the EU since the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that there is a "general situation of violence" in China's penitentiary system. [ECHR, Liu v. Poland][Safeguard Defenders 1]

The decision by the Supreme Court on March 1 overturned a decision by a lower Italian court. According to the NGO Safeguard Defenders, the case involves the "former CEO of a well-known Chinese company, wanted for alleged economic crimes". [Safeguard Defenders 2]

The Italian court's decision implements the principle of "non-refoulement" established by an ECHR decision in October, which prohibits European states from

extraditing or deporting a person to a country where they could be at risk of torture or other inhumane treatment. [Decode39] ECHR, Liu v. Poland [Giurisprudenza Penale, in Italian] [AiR, No.10, March/2023, 1]

Safeguard Defenders said late last year that the ECHR decision was a landmark ruling which would "most likely mean European countries will find it near impossible to extradite suspects to China."

(aml/pk)

Italy, India partner up on defence and energy

Italy and India have announced plans to become strategic partners and to cooperate on defence and energy, marking a turnaround in bilateral relations that were stalled for a decade over an alleged corruption scandal. [Bloomberg]

In her first trip to Asia as prime minister, Italy's Giorgia Meloni – who came to power after snap elections last year – visited New Delhi on March 2 and 3 for talks with her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

The Indian leader said in a tweet that the pair had discussed boosting cooperation across sectors including defence, commerce, IT, renewable energy and green hydrogen, with the talks also taking in semiconductors and start-ups. [Narendra Modi]

Military ties between Italy and India were damaged in 2013, when the head of Italian defence giant Finmeccanica was arrested amid a probe into bribes allegedly paid by the firm to Indian officials to land a USD 670 million helicopter deal.

The case sparked parallel probes in India, which banned the purchase of defence products from Italy. The Finmeccanica boss was found guilty by an Italian court in 2016, but the decision was overturned and he was acquitted by an appeal court in 2018. India lifted its ban only last year. [AiR, No.10, March/2023, 1]

(aml/pk)

Russian call for UN probe into Nord Stream blast backed by China

China has backed Russia's call to speed up the United Nations investigation of the explosion of the Nord Stream natural gas pipeline on September 26, causing a significant gas leakage in the Baltic Sea.

On February 21, Moscow presented a request to the UN Security Council for an independent investigation on the matter of Nord Stream's gas leakage. Russia claimed that there was "proof that explosives had been planted" near the pipeline during a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation exercise in the summer of 2022, referring to a recent US news report claiming Washington was directly involved in the alleged sabotage of the gas pipelines Nord Stream 1 and 2.

Russia said it has "no trust" in the ongoing inquiries of Denmark, Germany and Sweden, doubting their integrity and transparency, whereas building on the authoritative and representative nature of the UN.

On February 22, Beijing joined Russia, calling for the UN to conduct what they called an objective, impartial and professional investigation. They did note, however, that it may be difficult for the UN to collect evidence and to hold relevant parties accountable, as "the Security Council needs to show the principle of collective decision-making process in which the US and other countries may vote against an investigation."

Nord Stream is a twin pipeline system that has the capacity to transport up to 55 billion cubic metres of natural gas to Europe and is considered one of the major transnational energy arteries, linking Russia to Germany since 2011.

UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and former US Ambassador to the UN, Rosemary di Carlo, called on all parties to avoid growing tensions in the region in order to facilitate ongoing investigations. [Global Times] [Rosemary Di Carlovia Twitter] [UN News] [Xinhua net] [AiR, No.9, February/2023, 4]

(aml/gc)

Russia plans to ease visa regime for India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, other countries

Russia is working on easing visa procedures for six countries, including India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. It is also preparing intergovernmental agreements on visa-free travel with 11 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Haiti, Zambia, Kuwait, and

Mexico. This was announced by Russian news agency TASS on March 4, naming Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Ivanov as the source. [TASS] [Nikkei Asia] [AiR, No.11, March/2023, 2]

(aml/gc)

Russia and China plan on cooperating on currency

China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang signalled his country's intention to work with Russia to establish a "safe and credible currency." He made his comment after being asked on the side-lines of the National People's Congress whether China and Russia would abandon the USD or the Euro in their trade.

Chinese trade is now conducted in yuan, not dollars, and Putin called for trade between Russia and countries importing Russian commodities in Africa, Asia and Latin America be conducted in yuan during Xi's recent trip to Moscow. [Geopoliticaleconomy]

The statement comes as China's energy, trade and financial ties with Russia expanded amid Western sanctions imposed on Moscow. Meanwhile, the US has threatened to impose restrictions on Beijing if it supplies financial and military aid to Russia.

China-Russia trade, paid either in roubles or yuan, stood at a record high of USD 190 billion in 2022, an increase of 30 percent compared to 2021. Russia already made de-dollarization a priority in 2014 in response to Western sanctions for annexing Crimea. [South China Morning Post] [Atlantic Council] [AiR, No.11, March/2023, 2]

(aml/gc)

Romania: Bucharest to accept 17,000 economic migrants

An eight-member consular mission arrived in Dhaka on March 5, starting its sixth-month stay in the Bangladeshi capital. The mission was tasked with processing a backlog of over 17,000 work permits, which Romania's consular services in New Delhi have been unable to keep up with.

A similar mission was sent for a three-month period in 2022.

The influx of work permit applications from Bangladeshis looking to relocate to Romania is a result of a recruitment program that started with the opening of the Bangladeshi embassy in Bucharest in 2020. Workers in the construction, restaurant, logistics, factory, and ship-building sectors have been recruited to help Romania keep up with its development goals.

In 2020, around 500 workers relocated to Romania, in 2021 the number rose to 2,500, and in 2022 14,500 Bangladeshi workers migrated to Romania, drawn by the prospect of permanent residency after four years of working. [The Daily Star]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: New Delhi summons Swiss ambassador over anti-India protests in Geneva

India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned Swiss ambassador, Ralf Heckner, on March 5 in protest against posters and banners critical of India that were displayed in the main offices of the United Nations and Human Rights Council in Geneva. [TheNational]

The MEA called the posters "malicious" and "unfounded." Heckner responded stating that the posters occupied a public space and did not reflect the official position of the Swiss government.

The posters in question were raising awareness on the problems of child marriage and violence against religious minorities, implicating the state in the latter. [HinduTimes]

(sw/gc)

Austria to send anti people-smuggling experts to Morocco amid rise in asylum seekers

Austria will send experts in combating people-smuggling to Morocco under a deal between the two countries struck amid a sharp rise in asylum seekers from the North African country. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

The move was agreed during a trip by Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer to Rabat on February 28 to

meet with Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner said after meeting his Moroccan counterpart Abdelouafi Laftit: "We must continue to step on the asylum brakes by fighting asylum abuse… This also requires close and direct cooperation with the countries of origin". [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

The number of Moroccans seeking asylum in Austria has shot up recently, with over 1,300 applying in January compared to over 1,800 in the whole of 2021. Nearly 30 percent of all asylum applications in Austria in the first month of this year were from Morocco. [Der Standard] [Euractiv] [aida]

The interior ministry in Vienna said in a statement that some 90 percent of people from Morocco who apply for asylum in Austria "end up in the clutches of the brutal smuggling mafia". [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

As well as Austria deploying experts in combating people-smuggling to Morocco, police officers from the two countries will undergo joint training. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Belgium's King Phillippe visits South Africa for renewable energy project

Belgium's King Phillippe met with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa to discuss the two nations joint, co-funded research project on sustainable electricity storage in South Africa. The project, part of Belgium's mission to develop and grow research in clean energy, aims to develop renewable energy as a solution to South Africa's rolling electricity blackouts problem created by the country's ageing electricity infrastructure. [Brussels Times]

King Phillippe took the opportunity to appeal to Ramaphosa, asking him to officially condemn Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. So far, Pretoria has taken a neutral stance, refraining from speaking out against Moscow. [Africa News]

(sw/gc)

Team:

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