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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of Europe in Review, in which we bring you a comprehensive overview of developments in politics, foreign relations, regional governance and security that are impacting the continent. Through detailed stories and news briefs, we strive to provide reporting that will help cultivate a better understanding of an increasingly complicated geopolitical landscape.

As usual, the pace of developments in April was astounding. Leaked classified documents from the US military have caused anger in Kyiv, and among other allies, after apparently indicating that American analysts are not holding their breath over a long-expected offensive by Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Ukrainian forces have been stubbornly defending what they still control of the devastated eastern city of Bakhmut in the face of Russian advances. The rest of the frontline in the conflict has been relatively quiet and battlefield gains have remained elusive for both sides in recent weeks. Meanwhile, the Russians appear ready and dug in to defend the territory they hold as they brace for the Ukrainians to counter-attack.

In this issue, we provide details on President Joe Biden's four-day trip to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland – a visit that the US media have described as "part homecoming, part diplomacy and part politics." We also report on how European nations have scrambled to rush their citizens to safety after violent clashes erupted in Sudan, amid fears that the fighting may push the African country into a protracted civil war.

In other developments, French President Emmanuel Macron, an ally of the US, has joined a growing list of leaders who want to dislodge the dollar as the currency of choice for international trade. A string of countries have increased calls to reduce the use of the greenback after Washington froze Russian dollar reserves due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, which heightened concerns about America's control over the global financial system.

We also bring you a thorough briefing on fresh developments in constitutional affairs, domestic politics, geopolitics, defence and human rights across Europe.

Kind wishes,

Glen Carey

Deputy Editor in Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Pentagon leaks cause anger as Ukraine clings on in Bakhmut

Leaked classified documents from the US military have caused anger in Kyiv after apparently indicating that American analysts are not holding their breath over a much-telegraphed offensive by Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian forces have been stubbornly defending what they still control of the devastated eastern city of Bakhmut amid Russian advances. The rest of the frontline in the conflict has been relatively quiet and battlefield gains have remained elusive for both sides in recent weeks.

At the same time, the Kremlin has stepped up its efforts to "Russify" the Ukrainian territories it has occupied. In the EU, the bloc's solidarity with Kyiv looked at risk when a dispute broke out between several Eastern European states and the European Commission over grain imports from Ukraine.

Candid analysis

Classified documents from the United States Department of Defence were leaked in early April and surfaced on social media. Though the leaks have caused consternation, they seem to contain little new or unexpected information about the conflict in Ukraine.

The documents, which largely come in the form of briefing papers intended for US defence staff, date from February 23 to March 1 and cover a variety of topics related to the war. They contain candid accounts and analysis of the positions that US allies have taken on the conflict.

They confirm that small numbers of NATO special operatives are in Ukraine, but do not detail what these

people are doing. While the documents discuss the military positioning and condition of both sides, their contents do not deviate much from information that is already public knowledge or from open expert analysis.

According to the documents, the US estimates that Ukraine has suffered around 130,000 casualties, while Russia has suffered over 200,000. Russian special forces, which have been heavily involved in the war since the February 2022 invasion, are said to have suffered particularly grievous losses. Analysis also highlights Ukraine's perennial ammunition and equipment shortages, together with difficulties in sufficiently training volunteers and conscripts.

The leaks have caused embarrassment and anger, particularly in Ukraine. The documents reveal that US analysts do not believe that any Ukrainian offensive is likely to result in the gains many expect.

Ukrainian officials have dismissed this, with one telling Politico Europe that US analysis can be discounted as it was "...arguing a year ago that we wouldn't be able to hold on in the face of a Russian invasion for more than a few days". The documents are light on detail about Ukrainian plans, which one military commander attributed to a deliberate policy by Kyiv of not sharing such information with its main international backer.

The source of the leaks is widely believed to be Jack Teixeira, a 21-year-old junior enlistee in the US air national guard, who has been charged under the US Espionage Act.

Bellingcat journalist Aric Toler demonstrated that the leaks first emerged, of all places, on a Discord forum named "Thug Shaker Central". Discord is a decentralised social media platform where users congregate on forums. The forum in question, which shut down before the leaks became mainstream knowledge, was a small community of around 20 active users interested in video games, team-based shooting games involving airguns, military surplus and "politically incorrect" memes.

The documents also circulated on pro-Russian Telegram channels. One slide was edited by Russian propagandists to exaggerate the number of Ukrainian casualties and lower the Russian numbers, and became popular among pro-Russian groups. The leaked documents are alleged to have been posted by Teixeira in January, and found their way across different social media platforms before being noticed by the mainstream in early April. [Bellingcat] [Guardian] [Associated Press] [POLITICO Europe]

[Euronews] [BBC News] [Deutsche Welle] [Al Jazeera] [Financial Times] [Polygon]

Fall of Bakhmut looks imminent

Despite Russian advances further into Bakhmut in April, the ruined city in the eastern Donbas region is yet to be captured. Ukrainian forces are continuing to fight for what remains of it, though their control is now limited to a couple of western segments.

Over the last month, Russian forces have tightened their grip over most of Bakhmut. The fighting consisted largely of small, close-quarters engagements, often over individual buildings. The battle has moved into Bakhmut's western half, causing further devastation as Ukrainian forces withdrew behind the city's central railway line.

Outside the city proper, Russian forces have been unable to cut off Ukrainian supply lines. While they have bombarded and harassed the two roads leading into western Bakhmut, they have been unable to overcome the Ukrainian positions defending the vital routes.

While the capture of Bakhmut seems imminent, there is gloom among some Russian leaders. Evgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group mercenary company, has again publicly castigated the Russian ministry of defence for not doing more to help his troops.

In a rant complaining of a lack of ammunition, Prigozhin said his mercenaries have "stacks of thousands of bodies that we put in coffins and send home" to Russia every day, and that withholding ammunition from Wagner was "treason".

The Wagner Group has fought in an assault role, attacking Ukrainian positions and often sustaining heavy casualties. Its efforts have been key to Russian advances in and around Bakhmut in recent months. Prigozhin may not be a reliable source, but his comments seem to support Western analysis that Moscow's recent advances in Bakhmut have gutted the Wagner Group's manpower and escalated a conflict between the mercenary outfit and the regular Russian armed forces. This conflict has played out openly on social media.

While Moscow's forces have been unable to achieve the dramatic victory promised by Prigozhin after Wagner helped to take the outlying town of Soledar in January, Russian soldiers have been able to steadily push the Ukrainian defenders out of Bakhmut. Though

this advance is slow, it is increasingly likely that the Russians will establish full control over the city in the coming weeks. [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [CNN] [Euronews] [RFE/RL] [RTÉ] [Wall Street Journal]

Grain glut problem for Brussels

A row erupted in the EU over imports of Ukrainian grain after protests by farmers in some eastern European states in recent weeks.

Early in the war, the EU set up what it calls "solidarity lanes" – corridors along which Ukraine can send grain through the bloc. Large quantities of Ukrainian agricultural produce have been held up in the country after the Russian invasion blocked Ukrainian ports from shipping across the Black Sea.

Grain exports are vital for Ukraine, which has suffered immense economic damage as a result of the war.

Farmers in Eastern Europe protested after the Ukrainian grain found its way onto their markets, lowering local prices and causing economic harm.

Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia imposed restrictions on Ukrainian imports in April, while Romania threatened to follow suit. Other EU states said that these moves undermined the bloc's single market and Europe's support for Ukraine, while some argued the restrictions were illegal. *(See separate story in this issue)*

The growing fire was snuffed out by the European Commission in late April, when negotiations resulted in an agreement. In exchange for lifting their blockade, the eastern EU members will receive financial support for their farmers as well as "safeguard measures" on certain agricultural products. [Euractiv] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Euronews] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Reuters] [Financial Times] [New York Times]

'Destroying Ukrainian statehood'

Moscow stepped up its efforts to integrate occupied territory in April with the passage of laws authorising the deportation of Ukrainians who refuse to adopt Russian passports and renounce Ukrainian citizenship – a move condemned by officials in Kyiv as a measure to "destroy Ukrainian statehood".

On April 27 and 28, Moscow introduced legislation intended to force Ukrainians living in Russian-occupied areas to officially adopt Russian citizenship. The legislation explicitly states that those who do not do so

will be considered foreigners and subject to deportation. Russia has also made it legal to deprive people in the occupied territories of citizenship for "discrediting" the country's armed forces – a broad charge that the Putin regime has wielded against its domestic critics.

Coming after deportations of Ukrainian children to Russia, which have earned President Vladimir Putin an arrest warrant from the International Court of Justice, the latest measures have been condemned as "genocidal" by Ukraine and its supporters. Hanna Malyar, the Ukrainian deputy defence minister, said that Russia intended to transform the "ethnic composition of the temporarily occupied territory within Ukraine" and "destroy Ukrainian statehood".

Without a Russian passport, people living in these territories are denied any support from the occupation governments. According to a US diplomat speaking last summer, Ukrainian refugees in such areas were put into filtration camps where their Ukrainian passports were confiscated – leaving many refugees with no option but to accept Russian citizenship or become stateless.

There is a precedent for this. Moscow began pressing separatist leaders in the Donbas to push Russian citizenship on people living in the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as early as 2020. Moscow has previously forced Russian citizenship on people living in the breakaway states of Transnistria in Moldova, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Russian passports issued in these regions have significantly limited international recognition. [RFE/RL] [Euractiv] [Moscow Times] [TIME] [Kyiv Independent] [Foreign Policy] [Hill] [POLITICO Europe] [Associated Press] [Vox] [BBC News] [Atlantic Council] [Kyiv Post] [New York Times]

(wb/pk)

EUROPE IN REVIEW'S OPINION:

Moscow's introduction of new citizenship laws underlines the Putin regime's determination to "Russify" occupied parts of Ukraine, its contempt of Ukrainian nationhood and human rights, and goes some way towards explaining Ukraine's determination to continue its resistance and liberate its territories, despite the costs. The new laws are the clearest sign yet that Russia wants Ukrainian land – but without Ukrainian citizens living on it.

Russian spy ships mapping sabotage targets in Baltic and North Sea, probe says

Russian spy ships in the North Sea and Baltic Sea are mapping critical infrastructure targets for potential sabotage operations, according to a joint investigation by public broadcasters in four Nordic countries. [DR] [CNN] [Guardian]

After tracking location data and radio traffic, the public broadcasters of Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway said they had found that the Russian ships, disguised as fishing and research vessels, have been using underwater surveillance equipment to map gas pipelines, data communication cables and offshore wind farms.

The investigation claims that the objective of the ships is to gather intelligence that could be used if a full-blown conflict breaks out between Russia and the West. [DR] [Guardian] [CNN]

'War of Shadows'

The broadcasters' inquiry, aired as a three-episode documentary entitled "The War of Shadows", concluded that around 50 boats were involved in such activities. [DR] [Yle] [AP News] [CNN]

According to Norwegian broadcaster NRK, Russian vessels have been observed sailing past locations including oil and gas fields, military training areas, airports, and deep-water quays. NRK also noted that the ships appeared to be following NATO exercises in the region. [NRK] [CNN]

The Russian research vessel Admiral Vladimirsky, which was tracked by the broadcasters, was found to be sailing with its transmitters turned off to avoid detection. The ship was observed sailing close to wind farms and navigating naval training zones used by the Swedish armed forces, according to the broadcasters. It was also seen to slow down near strategic points off the coast of Britain. [CNN] [DR] [Independent]

In a separate incident, a team from Denmark's public broadcaster DR said it had spotted a masked individual on the Admiral Vladimirsky wearing body armour and wielding an assault rifle. [CNN] [DR]

Moscow denies spying

Russia has denied spying. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov called the accusations "baseless". [AP] [CNN]

The broadcasters' report comes shortly after the release of official records by Denmark which show that the country's defence patrols took 112 photographs of Russian vessels off the Danish coast days before the Nord Stream pipeline blast in the Baltic Sea in September. The explosion damaged the pipeline, resulting in the emission of large quantities of gas. [Guardian]

"The Nord Stream gas pipeline explosion is a practical example of this kind of sabotage being possible," said Finnish Defence Minister Antti Kaikkonen. [Yle]

Of the Nordic countries, Denmark and Norway are founding members of NATO. Finland has recently joined the alliance, heightening tensions with Moscow. Sweden is also expected to join in the near future. [CNN] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg refrained from commenting on the results of the investigations but said that the alliance had intensified surveillance in the Baltic Sea and North Sea following the Nord Stream explosions. [AP]

(rs/pk)

France joins nations calling for de-dollarization

French President Emmanuel Macron, an ally of the US, has joined a growing list of countries that want to dislodge the dollar as the currency of choice for international trade.

All of Europe should focus on lowering its dependence on the "extraterritoriality of the US dollar," Macron said in an interview in April with Politico. His comments came less than a week after Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said there was "no reason" for his country to continue depending on the dollar. Macron's and Anwar's comments followed high-profile meetings with their Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. [Bloomberg] [Politico][Tendies]

Countries have increased their calls to reduce the use of the dollar in international trade after Washington froze Russian dollar reserves due to its invasion of Ukraine, which heightened concerns about Washington's control over the global financial system. [Tendies]

Among Western allies, France appears the most receptive to the idea. France's TotalEnergies completed

China's first yuan-settled LNG trade through the Shanghai Petroleum and Natural Gas Exchange. French economic daily La Tribune reported that TotalEnergies "simply explained that this unprecedented yuan transaction was 'a request from CNOOC' in a hydrocarbon market where purchases have long been settled in dollars." [Nasdaq][Tendies]

BRICS nations Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are also making efforts to deepen ties between member states' economies and financial markets, with a long-term goal of creating a common currency, according to South Africa's ambassador to the organisation, Anil Sooklal. In an interview with the Tass news agency, Sooklal said that the BRICS nations were working on increasing the use of their national currencies not only in trade but also in investments and other transactions. [MSN]

This step is seen as a prerequisite for creating a single BRICS currency. Different scenarios related to trade and currencies are currently being evaluated. The BRICS could create a "fundamentally new" common currency, Russian State Duma Deputy Speaker Alexander Babakov said. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [MSN]

Efforts to weaken the dollar's role in trade and as a foreign currency reserve have moved beyond rhetoric. China and Brazil reached an agreement in March to settle trades in one another's currencies. Saudi Arabia agreed the same month to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a China-led political, economic and security organisation designed to compete with similar Western organisations. [Tendies] [Barrons]

The greenback has fallen about 8.6 percent from a peak in September, as tracked by the WSJ Dollar Index, and is experiencing its worst start to the year since 2018. Investors are betting the US currency has further to fall as the Federal Reserve nears the end of its most aggressive programme of interest-rate increases since the 1980s. [WSJ]

Also weighing on the dollar: concerns over the banking system, a potential US debt default and expectations shared by many economists that the US will slip into recession in the coming months, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Dollar dominance

Efforts to displace the dollar may be overblown, despite efforts by the BRICS to do so and signs of a weakening US economy . About 65 percent of global

foreign exchange reserves are held in dollars; roughly half of all trade invoicing happens in dollars; about 45 percent of global debt is held in dollars; and about half of cross-border loans are issued in dollars. [MSN]

The US dollar is also the de facto currency for many countries in international debt markets. By the end of 2020, international dollar-denominated debt stood at USD 12 trillion. The rest of the world holds about USD 7.4 trillion in US treasury securities, according to the Carson Group. [Tendies]

The dollar remains a favoured asset in times of crisis, according to the Wall Street Journal. If a global recession became a real risk — if, for example, global banking strains worsened markedly — the greenback would likely rally, as happened in early 2020. [WSJ]

Economist Anas Alhajji, managing partner of Energy Outlook Advisors, pointed out that 60 percent of foreign exchange reserve transactions completed in the first quarter of 2022 were conducted using the dollar. Individually, the British pound, the Chinese yuan, and the Canadian and Australian dollar represent less than five percent of government reserves, according to Foreign Affairs. [Tendies] [Barrons]

“Yes, with the rise of the euro, Japan’s yen, and China’s yuan, the US dollar lost some ground, but here is the shocker: based on the most recent data from the International Monetary Fund, the US dollar’s share is where it was in 1995,” Alhajji said.

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Next elections will be in June 2024

Officials announced on April 14 that the country will be holding its next federal elections on June 9, 2024. The last federal parliamentary elections were held in 2019, which saw an increase in far-right support. The far-right Vlaams Belang party won 12 percent of seats, following 3.7 percent in 2014. In 2019, Vlaams Belang was second only to the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), which won the majority of seats, with 76 in total. [Politico][BrusselsTimes]

The left-wing Belgian Workers Party (PTB) announced in January that it expected to win more seats in the 2024 federal parliamentary elections than in 2019, labelling the N-VAs policies as "cold austerity." In 2019, the PTB won 8.6 percent of seats, ranking fifth, and more than doubling their seats since 2014. [BrusselsTimes]

Polls suggest that the region of Wallonia will predominantly vote for a left-wing government, Brussels a centre-left government and Flanders a strong separatist right-wing government. [BrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Parliament-commissioned report recommends extending maximum abortion period to 18-20 weeks

A group of medical, psychological and legal experts presented a report to Belgium's parliament on April 18 that recommended stretching the maximum abortion period from 14 weeks to between 18 and 20 weeks, as well as removing the existing six-day reflection period.

The report was commissioned by parliament on the request of the right-wing Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V) party after a bill to extend the maximum deadline failed due to CD&V and far-right Vlaams Belang opposition.

The proposed abortion amendments would require the support of all seven political parties in the ruling Vivaldi coalition – consisting of the liberal Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats party, the left-wing Socialist Party, the centre-left Vooruit party, the centre-right Reformist Movement, the right-wing CD&V, and the green Ecolo and Groen parties – to pass. [BrusslesTimes]

The CD&V announced the day before the report's release that the party was open to negotiating the maximum deadline of 14 weeks and shortening the reflection period to 48 hours. Fellow coalition members have since deemed this unsatisfactory, calling for the expert recommendations to be followed exactly. [CNE]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Study shows 112,000 undocumented migrants reside in the country

Vrije Universiteit Brussel released a report on April 12 estimating that 112,000 undocumented individuals reside in Belgium. This estimation is equivalent to the population in Bruges, the capital of West Flanders in the northwestern region of the country.

The university used statistical methods to estimate this number based on the number of deaths of undocumented persons in the country. [LeVif]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Water shortages expected this summer

Flemish daily newspaper De Standaard reported on April 2 that the country is at risk for water shortages this summer. This report comes after an uncharacteristically dry summer last year, which created a precipitation deficit.

As a result of climate change, precipitation patterns have changed to large, irregular bouts of rain that make the absorption of water by the soil more difficult. Climate patterns also show that the wetter months have seen far more rain than usual, and the drier months far less. This means that ordinary measures of how much rain is needed to get through the driest months are no longer accurate. [BrusselsTimes]

Belgium is not alone. France is already experiencing drought-like conditions; Spain's national meteorology agency announced on April 24 that the country can expect an historic heatwave this summer. [LeSoir] [RTBF]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Eight arrested in counterterrorism raids, court case ensues

Seven of eight suspects in a terrorism case appeared in court on April 3. Of the eight suspects, seven are Belgian nationals and one is Turkish.

The suspects were detained on March 27 in a coordinated police raid across Anvers, Brussels, Zaventem and Eupen. Two days later, authorities said that the arrests were part of a larger effort to undermine a planned terrorist attack.

The suspects are being charged with participating in group terrorist activity, conspiracy to participate in terrorist activity, and spreading information with the intention of inciting terrorist acts. Anvers mayor and president of the Alliance Neo Flamande party Bart de Wever were possible targets of the attackers. [LeMonde]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: More people entitled to higher medical reimbursements than 20 years ago

The number of people in Belgium who are entitled to an increased allowance – a medical reimbursement resulting in them paying less when visiting a general practitioner – has increased, but not every eligible person uses this status.

Anyone legally residing in Belgium is granted basic health insurance: a national fund pays back part of medical costs, leaving patients to pay a small fee after a doctor's visit. Households with the increased allowance status are eligible for higher reimbursements, reducing the amount paid by the patient to EUR 1. [BrusselsTimes]

Christian Mutuality (CM), one of Belgium's biggest health insurance funds, says that almost one in five Belgians are entitled to the increased allowance, an increase of 54 percent compared to 2002. The group of minors entitled to this status has also almost doubled. CM demands that parliament ensures that healthcare is as accessible to young people in low-income households.

"The gaps in the system must be closed. We aim to ensure that everyone entitled to the increased allowance is granted it so that the non-take-up group is reduced, otherwise the policy misses the mark," CM President Luc Van Gorp said. [BrusselsTimes]

[gt/gc]

Belgium needs to cut additional EUR 12 billion to meet EU deficit target

Belgium will need to cut spending by at least an additional EUR 12 billion to reduce its budget deficit below the European Union's mandated 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2026.

Belgium's committee known as the High Council of Finance forecasted the budget deficit. It conducted the analysis on behalf of the Federal Minister of Finance and the Minister of Budget. [ConseilSuperieurdesFinances][BrusselsTimes]

The required savings, equivalent to 2.1 percent of Belgium's current GDP, is based on various scenarios developed by the High Council of Finance, considering different economic growth projections and other factors. The scenario considered the least risky by the committee, focuses on concentrating most budgetary efforts in 2024, allowing for quicker stabilisation of the country's growing public debt. [BrusselsTimes]

[gt/gc]

Belgium: Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers monitors more cases against

Brussels

Cases against Belgium monitored by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers increased slightly in 2022, according to the committee's report on the supervision of the execution of judgments and decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). [BrusselsTimes]

By the end of 2022, Belgium still had 44 ECHR decisions to execute, compared to 37 in 2021 and 31 in 2020. Several cases were closed under sustained supervision, instead of standard supervision. Of the cases under sustained supervision, four have been pending for five years or more. [BrusselsTimes]

[gt/gc]

France: Minister causes controversy over Playboy photoshoot

French Minister for Social Economy Marlene Schiappa has been criticised for appearing on the cover of the April issue of Playboy France.

While the photoshoot is fully clothed many have condemned her decision to do the photoshoot believing it was inappropriate timing with the ongoing protests regarding President Emmanual Macron's pension reforms. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne told Schippia herself that it "was not at all appropriate, especially in the current period." [BBC]

The photoshoot will feature an interview alongside it discussing women's and gay rights. Schippia is an outspoken feminist and was a feminist author before beginning her career in politics. While serving as Equality Minister, Schiappa brought in legislation outlawing street harassment and catcalling. [BBC]

She has been caught up in controversy in the past after authoring a book in 2010 providing sex tips for overweight people, which critics argued reinforced harmful clichés. In 2017 she visited a "no-go area for women" in Paris where she was accused of staging the visit and downplaying the issue. [BBC][BBC]

Despite this, the editor of the French-language edition of Playboy defended Schiappa saying she was the most "Playboy compatible" of ministers in Macron's cabinet because of her outspoken support for women's rights. He also defended the magazine which has been criticised for many years to be objectifying women's bodies saying:

“Playboy is not a soft porn magazine but a 300-page quarterly ‘mook’ (a mix of a book and magazine) that is intellectual and on trend.” [BBC]

Schiappa also defended her decision to appear in the magazine posting on her Twitter "Defending the right of women to do what they want with their bodies: everywhere and all the time. In France, women are free. Whether it annoys the retrogrades and hypocrites or not.” [BBC].

(sm/gc)

France: Draft bill will be discussed about assisted dying

French President Emmanuel Macron has said a draft bill will be prepared this year determining whether assisted dying should be legalised. A group of randomly appointed French citizens have been discussing the topic since December and Macron said the bill would be founded on the group's work. [France24]

The group recently concluded their work with 76 percent of people saying they wanted to legalise some form of assistance to die. France’s national council of doctors said it opposes involving doctors in helping people to kill themselves. [France24]

Assisted suicide has been legal in Switzerland since the 1940s; euthanasia is also legal in Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Spain. Last year an Italian man, paralysed 12 years earlier in a traffic accident, died in Italy's first case of assisted suicide. [France24] [NHS]

Macron emphasised that on such a sensitive topic, consensus is important. [France24]

(sm/gc)

Germany’s military funding and supply gaps can’t be closed by 2030, Defence Minister says

Germany will be unable to close its existing gaps in funding and supplies in its military by 2030, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius told the weekly Welt am Sonntag newspaper in an interview published on March 29, as Europe’s largest economy takes steps to

improve the condition of its armed forces after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters] [DW]

“We all know that the existing gaps cannot be completely closed by 2030,” Pistorius said. “It will take years.” [Reuters]

Pistorius stated his highest priority is increasing the defence budget to reach the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation goal of 2 percent of gross domestic product. Germany spent about 1.5 percent in 2022. The military has been underfunded for decades and has further deteriorated after providing weapons to Ukraine as Kyiv tries to repel a Russian invasion, experts said. [DW]

Some members of the governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) are against an increased military budget. Every billion euros more for the military means budget cuts somewhere else, German Finance Minister Christian Lindner of the FDP said.

Germany has to increase military and defence spending nonetheless, Pistorius responded. “This trade-off isn't easy,” he added. [DW]

The German government said last year that it wanted to increase military spending after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and announced a EUR 100 billion special fund, which hasn’t been fully implemented yet. [DW]

There needs to be “more European responsibility for security and defence in Europe," especially if the United States would shift their focus to the Indo-Pacific region, Pistorius said.

(mb/gc)

Germany: Health care system dependent on migrant workers, experts say

The German health system would “face a collapse” without immigrant professionals, according to a report by the German Expert Council on Integration and Migration, an independent advisory council. Of the 4.2 million people working in the German health and care sector as a whole, around 690,000 are immigrant workers. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Germany: Former Chancellor Merkel receives highest order of merit

Former German Chancellor Angela Markel received Germany's highest order of merit on April 17 for her 16 years of leadership.

Merkel received the Grand Cross from President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. As the country's first female leader, she served four terms as Germany's Chancellor, a total of 16 years, from 2005 until December 2021. [DW] [AP] [Reuters][Tagesschau]

The ceremony sparked criticism from several politicians as well as from Merkel's own party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Critics questioned whether her political legacy deserves the order of merit. [Tagesschau]

Vice-chair of the CDU, Carsten Linnemann, said that Merkel's big political achievements were "clear," but that she "also made mistakes, even blatant ones." [EURACTIV][Tagesschau]

There were "glaring mistakes" in Merkel's refugee policy, Linnemann said. Merkel didn't sufficiently protect Europe's borders during the 2015 refugee crisis, he said. Linnemann also criticised Merkel's role in the decision to phase out nuclear power. [Reuters] [EURACTIV]

Merkel "kept Europe together" during her time as Chancellor, Steinmeier said. She was also capable of recognizing her mistakes, he added. Merkel's achievements have been "recognized by many millions of citizens and worldwide," her former chief of staff, Peter Altmaier, said. [DW] [Reuters][Tagesschau]

Merkel is only the third person to receive the Grand Cross, following former chancellors Konrad Adenauer, the first leader of post-war West Germany, and Helmut Kohl, who played an important role during Germany's reunification. [EURACTIV][AP][Tagesschau]

(mb/gc)

Germany: 2,400 Russian asylum seekers in first three months of the year

Around 2,400 requests for asylum by Russian nationals were registered from January to March 2023, according to the Federal Office for Migration. Last year, Russian nationals made 2,328 requests for asylum. The increase in asylum applications was likely caused by

Russia's military mobilisation for its war in Ukraine, a spokesperson of the Federal Office for Migration said. Sixty-four percent of asylum requests in 2023 were from men.

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Government announces public forum to review country's military neutrality

Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheal Martin announced on April 5 that a National Consultative Forum on Ireland's international security policy will be held in three cities over four days in June. [Irish Times][Reuters] [Irish Examiner][The Journal][RTE]

Irish Times reported that advances in the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and investment plans for the Irish Defence Forces may have pushed for such a forum to be held. [Irish Times]

The forum's purpose is to generate discussions on the link between Ireland's foreign policy approach and national security, as well as to build public understanding. Topics of discussion will include: military neutrality, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, global strategic stability, international arms control, challenges posed by emerging threats and lessons from Ireland's membership of the United Nations (UN) Security Council in the 2021-2022 period. [Irish Examiner] [Irish Times] [The Journal] [RTE]

The forum will hear from defence, security and foreign policy experts, along with academics, civil society, political representatives and members of the public – who will be able to attend or submit written submissions online in advance. [Reuters] [Irish Times] [Irish Examiner]

Martin has said that there are no plans to change Ireland's policy on military neutrality, but the report on the forum's discussions – which will be written by independent chairperson Louise Richardson – could be used to inform future recommendations on international security policy. [Irish Times] [Reuters] [Irish Examiner] [The Journal] [RTE]

He was quoted by Reuters as saying: "Ireland's commitment to a rules-based international order and our traditional policy of military neutrality do not inure

us from the need to respond to this new reality." [Reuters]

The neutrality policy has its roots in the Second World War, when the then-prime minister, Eamon De Valera, argued that remaining neutral would prevent Ireland from becoming a pawn of the more powerful international players. It has since become an official policy, and remains widely supported. [Reuters]

During an European Union (EU) leaders' summit in Brussels, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said that despite Ireland's neutrality policy it is not becoming isolated in EU circles, particularly in terms of its lack of participation in NATO. He said that other countries understand Ireland's "particular sensitivities and culture and politics around" the policy, adding that he has "never for a second felt under pressure" from other leaders to change Ireland's stance on the topic. [The Journal] [The Journal]

(wd/gc)

Netherlands: Amsterdam sex workers protest new closing times

Sex workers in Amsterdam have criticised new policies that they believe could possibly undermine their income.

From the start of April, businesses in the Red-Light District will be subjected to earlier closing times. Among other policy changes, the government will create an erotic centre away from the main Red-Light District.

"In all the debates about the erotic centre and about sex workers in the city centre, I always make clear that the problems we have in the Red-Light Districts are not because of the sex workers," Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema said. "They are the result of over-tourism, crime, and other problems. But the situation in the city centre is becoming very problematic, and we have to find a solution." [NLTimes]

During a demonstration led by the sex workers, several highlighted how the new policies will affect their income, claiming it will cut it in half and that could lead them to resort to illegal work. The city of Amsterdam will tackle illegal prostitution by increasing supervision and enforcement of existing laws. [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Municipality decided against opening asylum-seeker centre to avoid polarisation

The Dutch Noord-Holland municipality of Wijdemeren decided against opening an asylum-seeker centre in the village of Nederhorst den Berg because of polarisation concerns.

The decision was taken following incidents that happened at the shelter for Ukrainian refugees. One of them involved a group of young people who heavily pushed a pregnant Ukrainian woman. [NLTimes]

The Netherlands will host another 47,500 refugees from Ukraine meaning that by the end of this year, more than 135,000 Ukrainians will reside in the Netherlands. [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Cabinet presents new national security strategy

The Dutch cabinet presented on April 3 a new strategy for national security to prepare for future threats against the country.

The strategy lays the foundation for a future in "which we are resilient and prepared for the threats of today and tomorrow," Ministers Dilan Yesilgoz (Justice and Security) and Wopke Hoekstra (Foreign Affairs) wrote in a letter to parliament. They said the urgency for this strategy was high.

The government is monitoring the implementation of the outlined strategy. The plan envisages close cooperation between the central government, the security regions and municipalities. In addition, a more secure nation "requires solid cooperation in Europe, in NATO, and worldwide," Hoekstra said. [NLTimes]

[gt/gc]

Netherlands: Asylum-seekers launch hunger strike against treatment

Twenty asylum seekers in a crisis shelter in the Netherlands went on hunger strike on April 10,

according to the regional security office of Zaanstreek-Waterland Security. The asylum seekers have contested the lengthy review procedure and delays at the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND). [NLTimes]

The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) and the IND are aware of the protests by residents.

"We will keep a close eye on whether they need care in the coming days," said the spokesperson for the security region. "The staff at the shelter are constantly talking to the residents. Questions and concerns are being heard." [NLTimes]

[gt/gc]

Netherlands: Government appeals against court ruling banning it from reducing Schiphol flights

The Dutch government will appeal a court ruling banning it from reducing the number of flights at Schiphol Airport from 500,000 to 460,000, Minister Mark Harbers of Infrastructure and Water Management said in a letter to parliament on April 11. [NLTimes] [NLTimes][TweedeKamer]

The court ruled in favour of airlines, who filed the lawsuit to block the reduction in flights because the government did not follow the proper European Union (EU) procedure. The government wants to reduce the number of flight movements at Schiphol to lower the noise pollution around the airport.

“By not doing so, the State is acting in violation of the EU Noise Ordinance,” Minister Harbers said, commenting on the ruling. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

[gt/gc]

Netherlands: Protests disrupt shareholders’ meeting ING headquarters

The ING bank shareholders' meeting was disrupted on April 24 due to protests by climate activists angered by the bank's fossil investments. At least one person was arrested over the course of the day. [NLTimes]

Demonstrators from Milieudefensie environmental group kept asking whether the bank will do everything it can to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 45 percent across the entire manufacturing chain by 2030. ING CEO Steven van Rijswijk said that the bank is adhering to the Paris climate goals and that major efforts are being made to reduce its own emissions.

The environmental group is considering filing a lawsuit against ING to force the bank to adopt a stricter climate policy in a previously successful suit against oil and gas group Shell. [NLTimes]

[gt/gc]

Switzerland: Voters may be shifting right in regional elections

Ahead of Swiss national elections in October, results from regional ballots in three of the 26 Swiss cantons in April showed largely right-wing gains. During the past 20 years, the Swiss have moved closer to conservative parties, favouring, among others, the SVP, a conservative party with roots in the farming community and present in government since 2008. [FDFA][Swissinfo]

Political analyst Michael Hermann told Swiss public television SRF that ahead of October's elections "things are going in a certain direction, and it looks rather rightwards." He said this could not only indicate a breaking of the "green wave" which saw the ecologist party make big gains four years ago, but that it could also mean "further movement in the political landscape before elections in autumn."

Elections in the country's biggest canton, Zurich, in February showed a similar picture, as did a recent survey by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SWI swissinfo.ch's parent company), which showed an ebbing of Green Party support, with otherwise relative stability.[Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Pension reform critics launch referendum campaign

Left-wing parties and trade unions in Switzerland have launched a signature-gathering campaign for a referendum against occupational pension reforms they say will mean paying more for less. [Swissinfo]

Swiss Trade Union Federation president Pierre-Yves Maillard said pensions are already falling and the reform is "outdated." It would penalise women again after voters came out in favour of raising the retirement age for women as part of state pension reform, he said.

The critics have until July 6 to collect the necessary 50,000 signatures to force a referendum against the occupational pension reforms. The minimum conversion rate at which saved capital is converted into a pension is to be reduced from 6.8 percent to 6 percent. This would mean that 12 percent of the pension pot would be lost. [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Majority of residents polled want limits on immigration

Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of Swiss residents want to limit immigration, according to a survey. [Tamedia]

Among the 50,000 residents surveyed, 93 percent of respondents leaning towards the right were in favour of imposing quotas on immigration compared to 70 percent of centrists and 51 percent of left-leaning residents.

The survey also saw respondents with a lower level of education and residents that have been living in the country for a very long time being sceptical about immigration. [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Attorney general to investigate UBS takeover of Credit Suisse

Authorities announced on April 2 an investigation to determine whether the emergency state-backed UBS-Credit Suisse takeover breached domestic criminal law. [TheGuardian]

The UBS takeover saw the country's largest bank buy-out its rival, Credit Suisse, in an attempt to prevent a wider financial meltdown. The merger was announced by Swiss authorities on March 19. [CPG]

The attorney general will look into possible breaches by government officials, regulators and executives at both banks. The office will also consider events

surrounding the merger that were reported in the media to determine any alleged indiscretions.

Neither UBS nor Credit Suisse have commented on allegations of criminal activity. [BBC]

The attorney general, Stefan Blattler, has already been in contact with national and regional authorities on the matter. [TheFinancialTimes]

The merger has been widely controversial. The country's lower house denounced the Federal Council-led take-over on April 11, expressing concerns that the deal has vastly altered the country's financial landscape, and voting to retrospectively reject the deal and the CHF 109 billion that the Federal Council guaranteed as part of the rescue. After a revote the next day, the rejection was confirmed by 103 to 71 votes, led by the socialist, conservative and green parties. [RTS] [BFM] [Reuters] [LeTemps]

The Federal Council confirmed on April 19 that the vote was purely symbolic, with no legal jurisdiction. [RTS]

Investors representing over CHF 4.5 billion of Credit Suisse AT1 bonds expropriated in the merger filed a case against the Swiss government on April 18 in the Federal Administrative Court in St Gallen. About 30 investors in Singapore are seeking to sue the Swiss government over what they say is an unfair wipeout of their bonds during the recent forced takeover of Credit Suisse. [Reuters] [TheStraitsTimes]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Federal Council announces plan to regulate Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter

The Federal Council announced on April 5 its intention to introduce a new law that would regulate major online platforms. The draft law is expected to increase the rights of Google, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter users. [LeTemps]

The announcement comes after the European Parliament passed the Digital Services Act package (DSA) in November. The DSA aims to protect digital users and ensure a level playing field for all businesses across the European Union. [EuropeanCommission]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Bern pledges CHF 66.3 million to Milan railway

Bern will help fund a rail freight terminal in the Milan region, providing CHF 66.3 million in aid, officials announced on April 13.

The CHF 66.3 million will come from a CHF 300 million parliamentary budget aimed at improving freight transport in the country between 2021 and 2024.

The railway is aimed at alleviating pressure on the country's roads as freight passes through the Alps. Once completed, the railway is expected to transport the freight of 150,000 trucks passing through the Alpine region each year.

Funding for foreign projects is typically only approved by the government if it is believed to serve Switzerland's policies and if it would not be built without the financial support of the country. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

United Kingdom: Think tank warns plans to scrap EU laws could undermine Northern Ireland deal

At the end of 2023, the United Kingdom will see thousands of laws expire as a result of the government's Retained EU Law Bill (REUL).

A government spokesman said: "The Retained EU Law Bill will not compromise the Windsor Framework, while still allowing us to seize the regulatory reform opportunities offered by Brexit." [BBC]

The Windsor Framework is a new deal which sets out Northern Ireland's trading rules post-Brexit. In 2019 it was agreed to keep Northern Ireland in the EU single market for goods however this made trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland more difficult and expensive and this is what the new Framework is hoping to resolve. [BBC]

The Centre for European Reform (CER) disputes the government's claim that the REUL Bill will not compromise the Framework, saying their analysis is that the REUL bill will effectively work against the Windsor Framework.

The report's author said: "The risk is that Northern Irish businesses, which default to EU production rules, could be undercut by lower standards from GB producers." He then went on to claim that to avoid issues UK ministers would have to preserve the laws that would create problems for the UK's internal market and that this goes against the whole premise of the Bill. [BBC]

It is said that the government is planning on putting legislation in place before the end of 2023 to prevent any issues the REUL would cause regarding the Windsor Framework. [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: Former Scottish First Minister's husband arrested in SNP finance investigation

Peter Murrell, the husband of former Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon, was arrested on April 5 regarding the Scottish National Party's (SNP) finances. Murrell was the party's chief executive from 1999 to March this year. A spokesperson for Sturgeon said she had "no prior knowledge" of the police's intentions. [BBC]

Police officers also carried out searches at several properties, including the homes of Murrell and Sturgeon as well as SNP headquarters. [BBC]

In July 2021, police started an investigation regarding SNP's finances after receiving complaints about how

GBP 600,000 in donations were raised for an independence campaign. Allegedly, the funds had been spent when there was not an independence referendum. [BBC]

In March of this year, Murrell was caught up in another controversy, resigning after taking responsibility for being misleading about party membership numbers, which had fallen from 104,000 two years ago to just over 72,000 currently. Murrell was released after 12 hours without charge "pending further investigation." [The Guardian][BBC]

An SNP spokesperson said: "Clearly it would not be appropriate to comment on any live police investigation, but the SNP have been cooperating fully with this investigation and will continue to do so." [BBC]

The SNP spokesperson added: "At its meeting on Saturday, the governing body of the SNP, the NEC, agreed to a review of governance and transparency – that will be taken forward in the coming weeks." [BBC]

(sm/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Moldova creates specialised agency to combat disinformation and propaganda

Moldova has formed a specialised government agency to combat disinformation and propaganda that will function alongside the Supreme Security Council (SSC), the country's President Maia Sandu said on ProTV on April 11. [Moldova Live]

The agency will "create more coherent and serious actions at the state level in combating disinformation and propaganda, similar to other countries in the European Union," Sandu said. "I believe that we must be more effective in combatting disinformation, and yes, we will take some measures in the near future to create a special structure to combat disinformation and propaganda," she said. [Radio Moldova]

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Government invites citizens to European Moldova National Assembly

Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean invited Moldovan citizens to attend the National Assembly for

European Moldova on May 21. Moldovan President Maia Sandu originally convened the event. [Moldova Live] [Twitter]

Several opposition parties announced their involvement in the upcoming national assembly meeting to discuss Moldova's European integration process.

Igor Dodon, former President of Moldova, criticised the assembly. "It has absolutely nothing to do with Moldova's national interest," he said. [Moldova 1]

Recean discussed the ongoing hybrid attacks against Moldova and the "criminals" who are creating a false perception of Moldova supporting the war in Ukraine.

"Despite the attacks, we are a peaceful people who know what we want and how to act, including against them. We want peace, and we are a people who know how to work and build Europe at home. I want everyone to have this orientation," Recean said.

(lc/gc)

Moldova: European Commission to disburse EUR 50 million for macroeconomic stability

The European Commission will disburse EUR 50 million to Moldova as part of its ongoing Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA), according to Siegfried Muresan, the chair of the Moldovan delegation to the European Parliament, on April 5. [Twitter]

The payment is the second instalment made under the EUR 150 million MFA program that aims to help Moldova offset the impact on its economy of Russia's war against Ukraine. The total of EUR 50 million consists of a EUR 10 million a grant, with the remaining EUR 40 million in loans. [European Commission]

The first instalment of the MFA program was disbursed in August 2022. Under the program Moldova strengthened public sector governance and made improvements on rule of law.

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Court increases prison sentence for fugitive opposition leader

A Moldovan oligarch, Ilan Shor, was sentenced to jail for 15 years on the grounds of his alleged role in a USD 1 billion bank theft case. The Court of Appeal ordered the confiscation of USD 290 million of his assets and doubled the 7.5-year sentence. [AP News] [Radio Free Europe]

Shor currently leads the pro-Russian Shor Party. He had already been convicted of fraud and money laundering connected to the 2014 bank theft case. Shor was detained in 2015 and put under house arrest. In 2019, he fled to Israel, his country of birth, to evade charges against him.

During his time in Israel, Shor was elected to the Moldovan parliament in 2019 and 2021. The Shor Party holds six seats in the 101 seat Moldovan parliament and organises protests against the country's pro-Western government. [Times of Israel]

(lc/gc)

Russia: Moscow bolsters defences on border after Finland enters NATO

Russia has strengthened its northwestern border defences after Finland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia's military has begun developing protection measures for the country's northwestern border in response to Finland's accession to NATO, Russian air defence forces commander and Russian Aerospace Forces deputy commander Andrey Demin told the Russian Defence Ministry's newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda on Monday.

"On April 5, Finland joined the NATO bloc. Sweden is preparing to enter the alliance. Given these conditions, [Russia's] anti-air defence troops are working out issues related to the defence of the state borders in the northwest of the country in accordance with the increased threat level," Demin said. He didn't specify what form these measures will take. [The Moscow Times] [Meduza]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Defence ministry extends prisoners military service

Russian prisoners who have been recruited by Russia's Defense Ministry since February 2023 are now signing contracts to serve the Russian military for 18 months, reports Olga Romanova, head of the NGO Russia Behind Bars, on Telegram. [Meduza]

Romanova said that she learned of the new practice in the Sverdlovsk and Yaroslavl regions. Until recently, Romanova noted, prisoners were signing up for six months of service. Romanova said the increase in contracts could mean the continuation of the war into 2024. [Meduza]

In March 2023, Wagner Group founder Evgeny Prigozhin announced that more than 5,000 former prisoners had been freed, since summer 2022, after fulfilling their contracts with his private military company. Prigozhin added that 0.31 percent of the prisoners who have returned to the Russian Federation committed new crimes within a month. He says that's "10–20 times less than standard indicators" recorded before the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine.

"Basically, people who commit crimes [inflict] varying degrees of injury on people who yoke themselves to the Kyiv regime and oppose the work of the special military operation. Therefore, I can say with confidence: we've lowered crime in Russia tenfold, and we've trained former prisoners better than they trained Pioneers and Little Octobrists during Soviet times," said Prigozhin. [Meduza]

(ava/gc)

Russia: US reporter Evan Gershkovich detained on charges of espionage

Russian special services arrested an American journalist on March 29 on charges of espionage, the first time in 40 years that a reporter has been charged with espionage.

Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter, was detained in Yekaterinburg, about 1,400 kilometres east of Moscow, by Federal Security Service (FSB) agents. He is being held in Moscow's Lefortovo prison and has been charged with spying. He could be sentenced to 20 years in jail.

The sentence was "the total prerogative of the special services," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "They were doing their job." He denied Putin's involvement in the decision. The Kremlin also justified

the arrest by saying the journalist was caught “red-handed” but did not provide any further explanation.

Gershkovich’s detention triggered denunciation from the US and its allies and marks another low in US-Russia relations, which quickly worsened since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Bloomberg]

“Journalism is not a crime,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement. “We condemn the Kremlin’s continued repression of independent voices in Russia, and its ongoing war against the truth.”

He then added: “The U.S. government will provide all appropriate support to Mr Gershkovich and his family. We call for the Russian Federation to immediately release Mr Gershkovich.” [US Embassy]

On April 11, during an annual Washington dinner, President Joe Biden called for the release of Gershkovich. On the same occasion, Biden met with Gershkovich’s family to show his support. [The Wall Street Journal]

Prisoner swap

Gershkovich’s lawyers are hoping for his release in a prisoner swap, according to sources familiar with the proceedings. An exchange would only be possible after the journalist is tried and sentenced. [Meduza]

US Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy said she “visited Wall Street Journal’s Evan Gershkovich today at Lefortovo Prison,” and that “he is in good health and remains strong.” [Twitter]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Putin visits occupied territories

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited occupied Russian territories in Ukraine on April 17 for the second time since sending troops across the border in large-scale invasion.

Putin visited the headquarters of the Dnepr group of troops of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and the headquarters of the Vostok National Guard in the Luhansk People's Republic. During the meetings, Putin was briefed on the military situation in the occupied territories. [Kremlin]

"It's important for me to hear your opinion on the situation, to listen to you and to exchange

information," Putin said during his conversation with officers in the Kherson region. [The Moscow Times]

Putin is trying to bolster morale among the Russian military, which has suffered significant casualties since invading in February 2022. More than 20,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in fighting in Ukraine since December, the US estimates. A further 80,000 have been wounded, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said, citing newly declassified intelligence. Half of the dead are from the Wagner mercenary company, who have been attacking the eastern Bakhmut city. [BBC]

The Ukrainian government, which is battling to maintain territory, criticised the visit.

"Putin's degradation is impressive," the adviser to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, Mykhailo Podolyak, said. "The world waited for his statement a year ago. Now they don't. There's no such political actor. There's only a 'special tour' of the mass murders author in the occupied and ruined territories to enjoy the crimes of his minions for the last time."

He accused Putin of visiting the scenes of Russian "crimes." [Twitter]

International implications

Putin illegally annexed the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk and Donetsk regions last September. He has rarely visited parts of Ukraine under Russian control while a great number of Western leaders have made their way to Ukraine to hold talks with President Zelenskiy.

On April 18, the G7 condemned the Russian plan to station shorter-range, so-called tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.

"Russia's irresponsible nuclear rhetoric and its threat to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus are unacceptable," said G7 Foreign Ministers in a communique. "Any use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons by Russia would be met with severe consequences." [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russian: Military court sentences soldier refusing to return to Ukraine

A Russian military court has sentenced Senior Lieutenant Dmitry Vasilets to two years and five months in prison because he refused to return to war after converting to Buddhism.

“After returning from vacation, in July last year, Vasilets refused to return to the war zone,” reported the Russian military ombudsman on Telegram. [Telegram]

Vasilets was sent to fight in Ukraine but was granted a leave after just five months when he went to visit the relatives of a deceased fellow soldier and converted to Buddhism. He was then ordered to go back to the front but refused to do so. [Meduza]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Moscow announces new strategy to counter Western dominance

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a new foreign policy strategy aimed at targeting Western dominance.

"The Russian Federation intends to eliminate the worldwide dominance of the United States and other unfriendly countries,” the new policy said. Russia has defined “unfriendly countries” as all of those that imposed sanctions on it after the invasion of Ukraine and that supported Ukraine militarily. [The Moscow Times]

Russia has no other option but to try to draw closer to China and India. The three-day visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping marked the beginning of a new era of strong relations between the two countries aligning together against the West. [The Moscow Times]

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Xi 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. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

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.

(ava/gc)

Russia: Putin creates fund to support soldiers fighting in Ukraine

Russian President Vladimir Putin created a fund to support soldiers fighting in Ukraine and their families.

"Our duty [...] is to bring targeted, personalised assistance to the families of fallen fighters, as well as veterans of the special military operation," Putin said. [The Moscow Times]

The plan comes during a period of social unease given by the delay in soldiers' salary payments affecting professional soldiers as well as the ones called up during Russia's partial military mobilisation. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Opposition politician Kara-Murza sentenced to 25 years in prison

A Moscow court has sentenced opposition politician Vladimir Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for spreading "disinformation" about the Russian army and for working with "undesirable" organisations. [Meduza]

"Twenty-five years is the highest score I could get for what I did, what I believe in as a citizen, as a patriot, as a politician," Murza said during the trial. US Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy called Murza's imprisonment "a symbol of weakness, not strength." [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Ukraine: Orthodox Church leader accused of justifying Russia's invasion

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church leader, Pavel Lebed, is suspected of violating the country's criminal code by justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine and "inciting national and religious hatred," Ukraine's security service (SBU) said on April 1. [Politico Europe] [Reuters] [BBC]

He "repeatedly insulted the religious feelings of Ukrainians, humiliated the views of believers of other denominations and tried to form hostile sentiments towards them" in his speeches, the SBU said. Lebed also "made statements that justified or denied the actions of the aggressor country," it said. [BBC] [Politico Europe]

Lebed denied the accusations at a court hearing on April 1. He has "never been on the side of aggression" and the case is "political," he said. He runs Ukraine's most important monastery, the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. [BBC] [Politico Europe]

The government has made efforts to evict Lebed and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the monastery, saying that Pavel's branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has too many strong ties to Moscow. The branch declared its independence in May 2022 but was previously under the control of the Russian clergy. [BBC]

The SBU raided the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra last year and arrested 61 Orthodox clerics who were allegedly part of "pro-Russian activities," they said. [BBC]

Moscow "is trying to use the church environment to promote its propaganda and split Ukrainian society," said SBU's leader Vasyl Malyuk. [Politico Europe]

Security Service seizes assets of Ukrainian Orthodox Church sponsor

Ukraine's security service on April 13 said they seized around EUR 87 billion of assets from billionaire Vadym Novynskyi, who is suspected of supporting Russia. Novynskyi is an ex-lawmaker and one of the richest persons in Ukraine, as well as a sponsor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The seized assets include ownership deeds to 40 Ukrainian enterprises and 30 natural gas wells, according to the SBU. Novynskyi denied the charges, a

representative of his said. Novynskyi is a “patriot” and supports the Ukrainian government, he said. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Government launches app for finding lost children

The Ukrainian government launched a mobile app on April 6 to help find children lost since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Around 19,544 children have been deported to Russia, according to a Ukrainian estimate. Moscow denies these claims. [Reuters]

The mobile app “Reunite Ukraine,” developed together with US tech company Find My Parent, is supposed to help reconnect families that have been separated. “If we find even one child in such a way or reunite one family, it will already be a victory,” the head of the Ukrainian National Police, Oleksander Fatsevych, said.

The app is free to download, easy to operate and has multiple identity security checks, Fatsevych said.

The police will control and verify personal profiles and act as an intermediary for communication on the app, helping them to collect more data in a secure way, said Fatsevych. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Kyiv works prevent military leaks

The Ukrainian government discussed options on how to prevent leaks of military information on April 7, after secret documents about North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and US support for Kyiv were published on social media sites. [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

The classified documents were supposedly posted on Twitter and Telegram, according to US officials, prompting a Pentagon investigation. The classified war documents detail secret American and NATO plans for building up the Ukrainian military ahead of a planned offensive against Russian troops. They were posted on social media channels, senior Biden administration officials said. [NYTimes]

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested a member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard in

connection with the leaking of the classified documents, according to US Attorney General Merrick Garland. The arrest of Jack Teixeira, 21, comes following a fast-moving search by the US government for the identity of the leaker who posted classified documents to a social media platform popular with video gamers. [CNN]

Military analysts said the documents appear to have been modified in certain parts from their original format, overstating American estimates of Ukrainian war dead and understating estimates of Russian troops killed. [New York Times]

The leaked documents were modified and included a "very large amount of fictitious information," a Ukrainian official said. They seem to overstate American estimates of Ukrainian war casualties and understate the number of Russian casualties. [EURACTIV] [New York Times]

A meeting of Ukrainian officials, attended by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, focused on "measures to prevent the leakage of information regarding the plans of the defence forces of Ukraine," the Ukrainian government said. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bosnian Serb leader says officials 'considering' decision to declare independence

The leader of Republika Srpska (RS) – one of the two political entities making up Bosnia and Herzegovina – Milorad Dodik said officials are seriously considering declaring independence. [Anadolu Agency]

''We are considering in the most serious terms to bring a decision to declare independence and secede Republika Srpska unless the property issue is solved,'' said Milorad Dodik. His comments came in a joint news conference after meeting Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Belgrade.

Dodik said events escalated after the repeal of a law this year that said immovable properties belong to the entities under the Dayton Agreement. The Law on Immovable Property, due to come into force on Tuesday, states that properties used by Republika Srpska institutions including agricultural land, forests and rivers, are the sole property of the entity, not the Bosnian state. [Balkan Insight]

''We want the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina to be honoured, and the Dayton Agreement, and the integrity of Bosnia. But also, the honouring of the rights undoubtedly given to the RS by the Constitution." Dodik stated that if the law on immovable property is repelled by the constitutional court, he will have legal grounds to separate RS from Bosnia Herzegovina.

Dodik has been repeatedly referring to RS as a state in every event he attended, and the separatist language he uses against people living in Bosnia Herzegovina and his words denying the 1995 genocide in Srebrenicac. [TRT Haber]

"We have come to a point where we can no longer delay this matter and our defence is that we are seriously considering the possibility of passing a decision on independence and secession of Republika Srpska,'' he said.

(lc/gc)

Greece: Internal polls shows Greece's major parties losing public support

An internal poll ahead of the May 21 elections, conducted by the ruling New Democracy (ND) party, showed its and the main opposition SYRIZA's public support slipping in most regions compared with polling numbers from 2019, a development that will likely lead to a second round of voting in July, Kathimerini reported on April 16.

Government officials believe ND has an advantage in security and economy-related issues but concede that recent events, such as the Tempe rail disaster and a wiretapping scandal, work in SYRIZA's favour. The socialist PASOK party posted modest gains in public support, Kathimerini reported, citing the poll. [Reuters]

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 lacked a clear majority, the second round of elections will be held in early July. Mitsotakis urged citizens to vote for his conservative ND party to form a single-party government. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

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. A new electoral system, setting the bar high on winning an absolute majority in the 300-seat parliament, means that the May 21 election is unlikely to be conclusive and a second round of voting in early July is expected. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Despite polls showing ND leading, SYRIZA officials are confident they can secure a victory, helping them pursue a "progressive coalition." The elections may result in protracted political manoeuvring and a runoff vote, with analysts speculating whether a protest vote or the government's narrative of stability will prevail. [Reuters]

[kg/gc]

Greece: Top judge quits in legal dispute over elections

A vice-president at Greece's Supreme Court resigned on April 10 after the government attempted to ban the far-right Greeks National Party from participating in the upcoming general elections on May 21. [AP News]

Judge Christos Tzanerikos submitted his resignation after the government introduced the supplementary draft legislation to the parliament that aimed to bar the Greeks National Party. Tzanerikos publicly objected to the amendment on the grounds that it allowed the government to directly interfere with legislation. [ABC News]

Critics have questioned the timing of the ban, its constitutionality and the government's interference in

the judiciary. Former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called for a "reasonable legislative position that does not violate the constitution and does not create the impression that justice is being manipulated." The Supreme Court will make a final ruling on the ban during a hearing on May 5, just ahead of the May 21 election. [politico]

The Greeks National Party was founded in 2021, by a jailed former lawmaker Ilias Kasidiaris, formerly from the extreme right Golden Dawn Party. The party appointed a new leader to try to bypass the ban, prompting the government to submit a new amendment, broadening the scope of the ban. It is also calling for a plenary session of the Supreme Court to consider the ban, instead of a regular session. [E-Kathimerini]

Tzanerikos publicly objected to the new amendment, describing it as government interference in the judiciary.

(lc-kg/gc)

Greece: Police arrest former office and special guard for selling drugs

A former police officer and a Hellenic Police special guard were arrested and later suspended on April 11 after allegedly selling drugs from a patrol vehicle. [E-Kathimerini]

The arrest came after an initial investigation, as a result of which four more were detained. The former police officer left the force in 2019 due to problematic behaviour and alleged involvement in drug trafficking since October 2022. The officer denied the allegations and told officers the drugs were bought for personal use. [Greek City Times]

Citizens' Protection Minister Takis Theodorikakos tweeted: "We defend the great work of the Greek police and its contribution to Greek society, but we remain unforgiving towards those who were caught committing crimes. The law is the law and it applies to everyone."

(lc/gc)

Greece: Government must do more to regulate private debt, former Economy

Minister says

Greece must do more to regulate private debt before it further undermines the health of the country's economy, former Economy Minister and University of Athens professor, Louka Katseli, said during an event held by the major opposition party SYRIZA-PS. [naftemporiki][naftemporiki][ieidiseis]

The regulation of debt has become a national necessity to avoid economic stagnation, Katseli said. Public and private debt, which have reached a cumulative EUR 700 billion, is a deeply political issue rather than technocratic, she said. [ieidiseis]

Katseli served as Minister of Economy, Competitiveness, and Shipping from 7 October 2009 to 7 September 2010. During her tenure, she introduced significant bills, including the Katseli Law (Law 3869/2010) on the settlement of debts of over-indebted individuals, as well as Law 3816/2010 on the restructuring of business and professional loans to credit institutions. [ethnos]

Her former party, PASOK-KINAL, would support such a proposal, Katseli said. There were challenges in implementing a sustainable debt regulation plan but with determined individuals and transparent interventions, the necessary conditions exist to do so, she said.

The International Monetary Fund has revised its forecast for the Greek economy this year to 2.6 percent growth, with the Greek economy expected to grow by 1.5 percent in 2024. These predictions could be in danger unless private debt is dealt with. [businessdaily]

(kg/gc)

Greece: Economy could benefit as EU moves to meet critical raw material demand

Greece is in a position to provide critical raw materials to the European Union (EU) after the bloc enacts regulations by the end of the year that will bolster supplies for green technologies and digital applications, a development that could expand the country's mining sector, strengthen the economy and create jobs in the process, according to local newspapers. [naftemporiki]

Rare earth metals and lithium are among the key materials, with demand projected to grow sixfold and twelvefold, respectively, by 2030. These materials are essential for various sectors, including defence, electronics and the rapidly growing electric vehicle (EV) market. Copper and aluminium, which are vital for EV components such as motors, batteries and charging stations, will also see a significant surge in demand over the coming decades. [politico]

The EU is heavily reliant on imports, making the region vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. Recent geopolitical crises have further highlighted the strategic dependencies of the bloc.

(kg/gc)

Montenegro: Long-standing leader defeated in elections

Montenegro's leader lost the presidential elections to a 36-year-old centrist and former economy minister, who declared his victory on April 2 after the presidential run-off.

Europe Now movement candidate Jakov Milatovic won the presidential election run-off on April 2 by a large margin, ousting the Democratic Party of Socialists' veteran leader Milo Djukanovic. This result marks a significant shift in the political landscape of Montenegro and could have long-lasting implications for the country's future relationship with the European Union (EU). [BBC][BalkanInsight]

Montenegrin Interior Minister Filip Adzic warned later that opposition protests could be organised in Cetinje during the inauguration of president Jakov Milatovic on May 20 and said that the ceremony should be held in the capital Podgorica instead. [BBC][BalkanInsight]

"A significant number of citizens in Cetinje do not approve of Milatovic's politics so he could have inconveniences during the inauguration," Adzic told a parliamentary defence and security committee hearing. [BalkanInsight]

According to the constitution, the state president's ceremonial inauguration must take place at a parliamentary session, which has previously been held in the old royal capital. The official residence of the president is also in Cetinje.

At the start of the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, Djukanovic became the youngest prime minister in

Europe at the age of 29. He later led Montenegro to independence from Serbia in 2006 and oversaw the country's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, a move that did not sit well with Russia. Under Djukanovic's leadership, Montenegro also began negotiations for EU membership.

In his acknowledgment of defeat on April 2, Djukanovic wished Milatovic success as the new president of Montenegro. While the role of president in Montenegro is mostly symbolic, the outcome of the election could benefit the winner's party in the parliamentary elections scheduled for June 11. [BBC] [BalkanInsight]

During his election campaign, Milatovic pledged to tackle corruption, enhance living standards and strengthen ties with the EU and Serbia. He received support from parties close to Serbia, Russia and the Orthodox Church. The victory marks a potential shift in Montenegro's relationship with these key players and could have significant implications for the country's future. [BBC]

Milatovic was minister of economic development in the so-called expert government that was formed after the Democratic Party of Socialists' defeat in the August 2020 parliamentary elections. [BalkanInsight]

(at/gc)

North Macedonian foreign minister urges EU membership

North Macedonia's Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani said on April 14 that embracing the European Union (EU) will help the development and unity of the country. The constitutional changes tied to the EU process offer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for North Macedonia to advance to the final stage before EU membership. [MIA][EU Accession Process]

Osmani warned that missing this opportunity could result in implementing the same constitutional changes a decade later, with half a million people leaving the country and diminished hope for a European future. He called on politicians to prioritise national interests over election victories. [MIA]

Osmani stressed the importance of sincere participation in the process of constitutional changes and warned against using the commission as an alibi to hinder progress. He also advocated for a proper

debate on the constitutional changes within the commission rather than in public.

Joining the EU consists of three stages: becoming an official candidate for membership, engaging in formal membership negotiations and finally joining the EU after completing negotiations and implementing the necessary reforms. [EU Accession Process]

(kg/gc)

Romania: Bucharest boosts air, naval forces

The Supreme Council of National Defence (CSAT) announced on April 11 its intention to boost its air defences.

The CSAT further specified that it aims to buy the latest generation U.S. F-35 fighter planes. [Reuters]

In that same week, Romania's Ministry of National Defence (MApN) submitted a request to parliament to procure combat submarines. The request specified that the MApN was hoping to procure new mine-hunting vessels and to modernise existing missile corvettes. The MApN did not specify the number of vessels to be bought.

Romania's submarine force, established during World War II, has been inactive for almost 20 years. The only body of water bordering Romania is the Black Sea, which means new submarines would be deployed into an area with a significant Russian naval presence and current war zone.

The decision to modernise naval forces will help Romania reach targets set by the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). [MaritimeExecutive]

The decisions by the CSAT and MApN to boost their respective forces come at a time when EU and NATO members have increased their defence budgets by 2.5 percent of gross domestic product in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Romania: World Bank lends EUR 60 million to alleviate rural pollution

The World Bank announced on April 6 that it had signed a loan agreement of EUR 60 million with Romanian Finance Minister Adrian Caciu.

The loan is intended to finance a project to reduce pollution in rural Romania. The Romania Rural Pollution Prevention and Reduction project will be implemented by the Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests over a five-year period.

The loan is expected to fully fund the project.

Romania is home to the European Union (EU)'s largest share of subsistence and semi-subsistence farmers, with 93 percent of the country's farmers operating smallholder farms. As a result, Romania is often excluded from EU funding in this regard. [SeeNews]

(sw/gc)

Serbia must do more to reforms its economy, IMF says

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) released a review of the Serbian economy on April 5. The IMF said that Serbia was resilient in the face of higher food and energy prices, lower energy production, drought and overall financial conditions in 2022, but reforms needed to maintain stability and growth.

As a result of the review, the IMF said that an EUR 2.4 billion stand-by deal, initially agreed upon in November 2022, remains on track. The IMF said that Serbia's economy outlook is dependent on geopolitical developments and trade-partner growth. [Yahoo Finance][Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Serbia: Chief of staff of Belgrade mayor allegedly offers rigged contract, BIRN reports

The chief of staff for Belgrade's mayor allegedly offered the Turkish company, Kentkart, a new deal in the public transport sector if it cancelled its existing contract, according to audio recordings obtained by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN).

Kentkart's Serbian partner, Sava Terzic, confirmed the offer by Nenad Milanovic. Terzic said it is not clear how

journalists acquired the voice recording of the meetings held in March 2023, but the recordings were authentic. Terzic also added that the offer was made more than once. [Balkan Insight]

Milanovic threatened representatives of Kentkart if they didn't cancel their existing contract, according to the audio recording. Representatives of Kentkart did not comply with the requests of Milanovic and declined the offer. Belgrade's mayor Aleksandar Sapic said he will file criminal charges against Milanovic and will start an investigation on the authenticity of the recordings. [N1]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan tries to ease concern about health after falling ill on live TV

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he fell ill during a live TV broadcast on April 25 because of a serious case of "stomach flu" due to intense election rallies. [BBC

Two days later, Erdogan tried to ease speculation about his health in a pre-recorded message. Turkey's Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca announced on April 27 that Erdogan's health was getting better and he had a case of "infectious gastroenteritis." [Bloomberg]

Erdogan's presidential rival and the leader of the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, tweeted: "I send my best wishes to President Erdogan."

Erdogan returned to his public appearances after three days of rest on April 29 and will continue his election campaign as scheduled. [NBC News]

Presidential campaign

Erdogan launched his presidential campaign on April 11 with a pledge to reduce inflation. Inflation will remain elevated through much of the year before slowing to 46.4 percent towards the end of 2023, according to Reuters on April 24. That compares to 50.5 percent inflation in March. Inflation is expected to decline to 28.8 percent by end-2024 and 19.3 percent by end-2025.

"We will bring inflation back down to single digits and definitely save our country from this problem," Erdogan told his supporters in the capital Ankara. [Reuters]

Before Erdogan's pledge, Turkey's central bank announced on April 7 new measures to reduce its dependency on the dollar. The central bank had been indicating recently that it may further strengthen its macroprudential policy set, given the persistent demand for hard currency and some pick up in both bond and loan yields, Tera Yatırım said in a note. [Daily Sabah]

The Turkish Lira lost 30 percent of its value against the American Dollar in 2022 and 44 percent compared to 2021. (USD 1= TRY 1) (EUR 1= TRY 21,29) [Daily Sabah]

Free natural gas

Erdogan promised free natural gas to households before the May 14 elections. Erdogan announced the news during the ceremony on Turkey's first natural gas delivery plant on April 20. Limitless natural gas usage will be free in every household, Erdogan said. The act is considered as the latest election propaganda Erdogan's administration is showcasing. [Reuters]

Natural gas reserves were first found in Turkey in 2020. The estimated amount of the reserves are 710 billion cubic metres.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Visual communication designer arrested due to anti-government stickers

A Turkish visual communication designer was detained on April 6 due to a sticker design that criticised inflation under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. [Twitter]

Designer Mahir Akkoyun created stickers that read "Did you find this item expensive? Thanks to Erdogan. Keep this in mind when you vote" and "This item is expensive because of us" with pictures of President Erdogan and the pro-nationalist party's (MHP) chairman Devlet Bahceli.

Akkoyun showcased his stickers on Twitter. "I designed these stickers to be attached to the products in the markets where people face inflation and the cost of living crisis the most," he said. [Cumhuriyet]

Akkoyun was released a day after his detention and published a press release on Twitter. "I have been previously called in to testify, been under investigation and got detained. This was not the first time and probably will not be the last time", he said.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Main opposition party alleges attack against provincial headquarters

The head of the main opposition party, Republican People's Party (CHP), announced on Twitter that there was a possible attack on their Istanbul provincial headquarters on April 6. [Sözcü]

CHP head Canan Kaftancioglu wrote on Twitter: "Around 05:00 a.m. an armed attack believed to be carried out against our party took place." Security guards at the building heard between six and seven gunshots, he added, but there were no traces of any bullets or damage to the building found during an investigation. [Twitter]

The governorship of Istanbul published a press release on the process of investigation. Three out of four suspects were detained but they denied their involvement in the attack.

(lc/gc)

Turkey launches its first amphibious assault ship

Turkey launched its first amphibious assault ship named TCG Anadolu on April 10 during a ceremony attended by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [Reuters]

"Turkish defence budget will surpass USD 75 million" Edogan said at the launch. TCG Anadolu is the first SIHA – unmanned combat aerial ship – that will allow the landing of UCAVs on its docks in the world, he said. [BBC Turkish]

The Chairman of Defense Industries Presidency, Ismail Demir, said that TCG Anadolu would carry unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), along with helicopters and armoured land vehicles. [Daily Sabah]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: First satellite launch into space

Turkey's first domestic and national observation satellite IMECE with sub-meter resolution was

successfully launched from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California on April 15. The satellite, which can take images from all over the world without geographical restrictions, will serve Turkey in many areas such as target detection and diagnosis, natural disasters, mapping and agricultural applications. The launch ceremony took place in the Turkish capital Ankara. The project was started in 2017 and expected to be in use for 5 years.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Police arrest 128 with alleged ties to Kurdish militia

Turkish police arrested 128 people as part of an ongoing anti-terror investigation initiated by Turkey's Diyarbakir Chief Public Prosecutor's Office. House raids were carried out by police in multiple eastern Turkish cities with majority Kurdish populations that have previously voted against the current government, including Diyarbakir, Batman and Sanliurfa on April 25. [BBC Turkish]

The operations came less than three weeks before the general and parliamentary elections; they were carried out mostly in Diyarbakir, a mainly Kurdish city in southeastern Turkey. Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) lawmaker Tayip Temel wrote on Twitter: "On the eve of elections, out of the fear of losing the power, they have resorted to detention operations again." [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italy adopts state of emergency amid surge in migration

Italy on April 11 announced a six-month state of emergency to help it deal with a spike in the number of migrants arriving in the country's south after crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa. [BBC] [AP News] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her governing hard-right Brothers of Italy party, which came to power after a decisive victory in September parliamentary elections, have pledged to curb mass immigration.

However, according to the interior ministry, around 31,000 migrants have arrived in Italy since January – up from some 8,000 for the same period in each of the two previous years. [AP News]

The state of emergency, which is backed by EUR 5 million in initial funding, will allow the authorities to repatriate those not entitled to stay in Italy faster, Reuters cited a government source as saying.

Civil Protection Minister Nello Musumeci said: "Let it be clear, we are not solving the problem. The solution can only depend on responsible intervention by the European Union." [Reuters] [BBC]

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]

According to Frontex, the EU's border agency, around 330,000 "irregular" crossings were detected at the bloc's external frontier last year, the highest figure since 2016.

In March, Meloni announced that her cabinet had approved new rules that could punish people

smugglers with up to 30 years in prison for any migrant deaths. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(km/pk)

Italy: Far-right PM marks liberation from fascism amid controversy

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on April 25 marked Italy's National Liberation Day, which commemorates the end of Nazi German occupation and fascism in 1945, in an atmosphere of controversy. [BBC]

Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party has post-fascist roots, was last year installed as the head of Italy's first hard-right government since World War II.

On April 20, Senate Speaker Ignazio La Russa, a co-founder of Brothers of Italy, caused a stir by saying that the Italian constitution lacks any reference to anti-fascism. Critics called on him to resign over the comments.

La Russa later clarified that he meant the word "anti-fascism" was not in the constitution, adding that he was not denying the anti-fascist spirit of the constitution. [AGI]

Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left opposition Democratic Party, responded by saying that "anti-fascism is in itself Italy's constitution." [BBC]

Meloni insisted in a letter to the Corriere della Sera newspaper that her Brothers of Italy party has long distanced itself from fascism. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Hard-right government cuts welfare benefits

Italy's hard-right government has approved more restrictive and targeted welfare and labour benefits. [ANSA]

The new rules given the green light by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Cabinet replace Italy's universal basic income (RdC) system that the premier has long criticised for being too generous. [Il Messaggero]

While all low-income families were guaranteed welfare benefits under the old system, a decree issued by

Meloni's Cabinet on May 1 – Labour Day – introduces state payouts for households facing employment difficulties due to the presence of disabled family members, children or people aged over 60.

The allowance will be a maximum of EUR 500 a month and may increase for families with disabled members. [Il Messaggero]

The decree also introduces a reduced unemployment benefit of up to EUR 350 a month for a maximum of one year for citizens aged 18 to 59 who are not in education or training.

The new rules oblige those who receive the benefit to accept job offers within 80 kilometres of their home for contracts of up to 12 months. For open-ended employment contracts, those who receive the government payout will have to accept job offers anywhere in Italy. [Il Messaggero]

The decree also introduces tax deductions for employers hiring people under 30 who neither study nor work. [IlSole24Ore]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Bill against English aims to ban foreign words in official documents

A new bill supported by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the governing, hard-right Brothers of Italy party, aims to ban foreign words from official documents and schools in a bid to protect the Italian language and prevent it from being "demeaned".

The proposed law has caused controversy and has been criticised even by prominent academics specialising in the Italian language. [Euronews]

Italy's first hard-right government since World War II was installed last year after Meloni's party won a decisive victory in September parliamentary elections, causing shivers among liberals in Europe. [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Under the new bill, proposed by Brothers of Italy lawmaker Fabio Rampelli, the use of English or other languages in official Italian documents and schools could result in a fine ranging from EUR 5,000 to EUR 100,000. University courses in a foreign language would be allowed only if they are designed for foreign students. [Euronews]

Rampelli said on Twitter: “The battle over using our language instead of English continues.”

Critics of the bill question whether it is tied to nostalgia for the former Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. The bill has yet to be discussed in parliament. [ANSA] [CBS]

(km/pk)

Italy: ChatGPT banned amid privacy fears

Italy has become the first Western country to ban advanced AI chatbot ChatGPT over privacy concerns. [BBC] [Reuters]

The Italian data protection authority has criticised the chatbot over its mass collection and storage of personal data. It also said the system “exposes minors to absolutely unsuitable answers compared to their degree of development and awareness”. [BBC] [Reuters]

However, Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, whose Lega party is part of the coalition government, criticised the measure. He said on Instagram: “I find the decision of the privacy watchdog that forced ChatGPT to prevent access from Italy disproportionate.” [cointelegraph] [ANSA]

American start-up OpenAI, which created ChatGPT, told the BBC that it complied with privacy laws.

Launched in November 2022, ChatGPT has been used by millions, with its advanced artificial intelligence allowing it to answer questions in a human-like manner. Concerns are growing that such systems could threaten jobs and spread misinformation. [BBC] [Reuters]

Shortly before Italy’s ban, tech business magnate Elon Musk called for AI systems like ChatGPT to be suspended worldwide, amid fears that the race to develop them has grown out of control. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, the Spanish Data Protection Agency (AEPD) announced on April 9 that it was opening an investigation into ChatGPT over a possible breach of data protection rules. The agency cited concerns over young users having access to such technology. [Euronews] [El Pais][La Vanguardia]

(iy/pk)

Italy: Births drop to all-time low as population dwindles

Births in Italy have hit a record low, with national statistics bureau ISTAT announcing on April 7 that the figure dropped to below 400,000 last year – the lowest since the country's unification in 1861.

The number of children being born has declined for 14 years in a row in the country, which now has only seven births per 12 deaths.

Population decline is a widely discussed issue in Italy, with Giorgia Meloni tweeting last year, before she became prime minister: "If we continue this way, we will have a society without children, which will collapse." [Reuters] [ANSA] [FT] [Euractiv]

After she took over as the country's first woman premier in September, Meloni, who leads the ruling hard-right Brothers of Italy party, created a ministry to address the natality issue.

Italy's national statistics bureau said that a major factor in declining birth rates is "the reduction… of the female population in the 15-49 age group conventionally considered reproductive." [ANSA]

The statistics bureau predicts the country's population could shrink to 47.7 million in 2070 from its current 59 million mark unless major changes occur. [Reuters] [FT]

(iy/pk)

Italy: Anti-drought measures approved amid water crisis

Italy's government on April 6 approved a string of measures aimed at counteracting the worst drought the country has faced in 70 years.

On top of the drought problems, a recent report by the Italian National Statistical Institute revealed that in 2020 the country wasted over 40 percent of its water due to leaks in pipes.

Under a new decree, the government has set up the post of a special national commissioner, who will be charged with overseeing efforts to tackle the water crisis, and created simplified procedures to build

infrastructure carrying water supplies and desalination plants. [EURACTIV] [ANSA]

A number of environmental groups, including WWF Italy, criticised the government decree for focusing on infrastructure issues and mitigation measures instead of the drought's root causes. "Creating new reservoirs along watercourses cannot be the appropriate response," the groups said in a statement. [Euractiv]

On April 14, Italy's national association for land reclamation, irrigation and land improvements (ANBI) announced it was awarding EUR 880 million in grants through the country's National Recovery and Resilience Plan for upgrading infrastructure related to water supplies. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Top court upholds acquittals over alleged mafia-state collusion

Italy's highest court on April 27 upheld acquittals in a high-profile case which saw senior officials accused of colluding with gangsters in order to halt a series of bombings and assassinations by the mafia. [Reuters]

The defendants, including former senator Marcello Dell'Utri, a close ally of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and three retired gendarmerie officers, had been accused of striking a deal with Sicilian mobsters to stop killings by gangsters in the early 1990s. [ANSA]

Prosecutors brought the defendants to trial on suspicion that they had initiated discussions with mobsters in 1992 after prominent anti-mafia judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife and three bodyguards were assassinated by a bomb placed under a motorway. [Reuters]

Two months later, magistrate Paolo Borsellino was killed. Prosecutors believed he had discovered and opposed these negotiations. [Reuters]

The bombings intensified in 1992 with attacks on political, cultural and civilian targets. The bombings abruptly ended in 1993. [Reuters]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Anarchist ends hunger strike as court opens way for reduced sentence

Jailed Italian anarchist leader Alfredo Cospito on April 19 said he had stopped a six-month hunger strike that he undertook in protest at being held under a tough detention regime.

Cospito's announcement came a day after the Italian Constitutional Court ruled in favour of a sentence review.

Cospito was in 2012 sentenced to 10 years for kneecapping the head of Italian nuclear power company Ansaldo Nucleare. Later his sentence was increased after he was convicted of bombing a barracks used by the Carabinieri, the Italian national gendarmerie. [ANSA]

Italian embassies in Germany, Greece, Spain and Bolivia have been targeted by anarchists protesting against Cospito's detention. [IlSole24Ore] Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani ordered security to be heightened in Italian consular and embassy offices. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Cospito is being held under Italy's severe "41-bis" prison regime, which is used in cases of crimes including terrorism. The regime was in 2019 criticised by the European Court of Human Rights. [ANSA] [LaStampa]

Amnesty International in January issued an appeal calling on the Italian authorities to ensure that Cospito's rights were respected. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Two tons of cocaine found floating off Sicilian coast

Italian authorities recovered two tons of cocaine floating in the sea off the southern island of Sicily on April 17, one of the largest such drug discoveries made in the country. [ANSA]

The drugs, which were wrapped in protective plastic, are estimated to be worth around EUR 400 million. [AP News]

Investigators suspect that the 70 bundles containing over 1,600 packets of cocaine were dropped off by a cargo ship so that another vessel could collect the drugs and take them to land.

According to a report by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, global cocaine production is at its

highest level on record, and the use of cargo ships and fishing boats is becoming increasingly popular to smuggle the drug into Europe. [Euronews]

According to the Italian authorities, cocaine seizures off the coast of the country have increased since 2020.

(km/pk)

Italy: Killing of psychiatrist sparks calls for better mental healthcare

The murder of a psychiatrist, allegedly by a former patient, in the central Italian city of Pisa on April 23 has sparked calls to improve the country's mental healthcare services.

Dr. Barbara Capovani was hit on the head with a metal bar after leaving work. The same day, police investigating the attack arrested a 35-year-old man. The incident is one in a series of assaults on Italian hospital staff in recent months. [Corriere]

Emi Bondi, president of the Italian Society of Psychiatry, said: "We are not able to defend ourselves against violence, and we have to sound the alarm regarding the safety of doctors and other medical staff in psychiatry departments and in hospital facilities in general." [ANSA]

Italy's health minister, Orazio Schillaci, called a meeting to discuss mental healthcare reforms. In a statement, Schillaci said: "We must work so that what happened to Barbara Capovani doesn't happen again." [AP News]

(km/pk)

Portugal: Pensions to be hiked after criticism of government

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa on April 17 announced a 3.57 percent increase in pensions from July amid criticism over the rising cost of living. [Publico] [Reuters]

Portugal's socialist government in October suspended the system for updating pensions in 2023, under which such pay-outs were linked to inflation and economic growth. Instead, pensioners received a special extra payment. [EFE]

This signalled a cut in pensions for 2024 since the base figure used to calculate the value of pay-outs for the following year would have been lower at the end of 2023. [EFE]

Costa said that, with the new hike, pensioners would pay-outs at the same level that would have resulted from the law that was suspended in October. [Reuters]

"There was higher-than-expected economic growth, a more accentuated reduction in public debt, a greater volume of employment than expected", he added. [EFE]

More than a million pensioners in Portugal receive less than EUR 500 per month. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: Gov't scraps controversial immigration agency

Portugal's socialist government on April 6 approved the scrapping of the country's SEF immigration agency, which has been compromised by scandals, and the creation of a new body, the Portuguese Agency for Minorities, Migration and Asylum (AMPA). [Reuters]

The Portuguese parliament had already approved the abolition of the SEF after three of its officers were sentenced to prison in May 2021 over the murder of a Ukrainian while in the service's custody at Lisbon airport. [Reuters]

The government said the new AMPA agency will take over duties such as the reception of immigrants, while duties like border checks and human traffic investigations will be handed over to police units. [Republica Portuguesa]

Migrant rights groups have expressed concern over tasking police units that were in the past accused of racist abuse with monitoring borders. [Reuters]

AMPA is expected to become fully operational in six months. [Republica Portuguesa]

(msa/pk)

Portugal: NGO sues TikTok for EUR 1.12 billion

A Portugal-based consumer protection group is suing Chinese social media app TikTok for EUR 1.12 billion over child safety concerns.

The non-profit group, called lus Omnibus, claims that TikTok has allowed children under 13 to sign up for the app without parental consent and has not implemented sufficient measures to protect them.

Omnibus released a statement saying: "TikTok profits from children under the age of 13, taking advantage of their particular vulnerability." The group called on Lisbon courts to "put an end to the unlawful conduct". [Reuters] [LUSA]

The EU and a slew of European countries have recently banned or restricted the use of TikTok on official devices amid concerns that China could use the app, which is owned by Beijing-based company ByteDance, to harvest users' data. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

TikTok told the Portuguese newspaper Publico that protecting its users was of "utmost importance".

Omnibus claims the app, which is built around short video content, exposes children to "dangers to their moral, psychological and physical integrity and to their safety and health, as well as to the intimacy of their private and family life". [Reuters] [LUSA]

On top of child protection concerns, lawmakers and regulators in a string of countries are concerned that TikTok 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. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(iy/pk)

Spain: PM apologises over loophole in sexual consent law

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has apologised over a loophole in a recent sexual violence law which has led to early releases or reduced sentences for hundreds of offenders. [Reuters] [El Correo]

Spain passed an "Only Yes Is Yes" consent law last October after public anger at a notorious "wolf pack" gang rape of an 18-year-old girl in 2016. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

Five men were initially found guilty of sexually abusing, but not raping, the woman because she could not prove that she hadn't consented.

The change in the law was supposed to help resolve cases where perpetrators have been convicted only of the lesser crime of sexual abuse because their victims were too scared to resist. [Reuters] [El Correo]

But because the new law has a lower minimum sentence, it has allowed some offenders convicted before the legislation was introduced to secure an early release or a reduced sentence. Between last October and the end of March 2023, sentences in 978 cases have been cut and 104 prisoners have been released early. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

Sanchez apologised to sexual abuse victims in an interview with the El Correo newspaper on April 16. He said: "Some of these releases or reviews are not final, they can still be appealed. But, in any case, there has been an undesired effect that we have to resolve."

He added: "If we have to apologise to the victims, I apologise to the victims." [Reuters] [The Guardian]

The issue has divided the country's ruling coalition, with Sanchez's Spanish Socialist Workers Party in favour of reforming the recent law, but its partner in government, Unidas Podemos, resisting such a move. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

(iy/pk)

Spain: Government plans to make housing more affordable

Spain's socialist-led government on April 18 approved a plan to make around 50,000 apartments available for rent amid increases in the cost of housing.

If approved by parliament, the move would also impose a three percent cap on rises in apartment rental prices next year and restrict further hikes in the future.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who heads the governing left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), said: "It is a major problem because housing in Spain is a constitutional right, but not a real one." [El Pais]

Sanchez also promised to increase the supply of public housing, but did not say when this would be done.

The right-wing opposition People's Party (PP), which governs a number of regions and cities in Spain including the capital, Madrid, claims that the housing plan interferes with the free market. [AP News]

Meanwhile, the president of Spanish employers' association CEOE, Antonio Garamendi, said the government plan would not solve the problem of rising rent prices but would "provoke the opposite of what is intended." [Reuters]

In Spain, just 16 percent of young people live independently, compared to the European average of 32 percent.

(km/pk)

Spain: Fascist leader exhumed as nation struggles with painful history

The body of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of Spain's fascist Falange movement, was on April 24 exhumed from a Madrid mausoleum which is to be converted into a memorial to the victims of the country's bloody 1936-1939 civil war.

Rivera, whose fascist movement supported former dictator General Francisco Franco, was executed in 1936 by Spanish left-wing Republicans after being charged with conspiracy against the republic and military insurrection. [AP News]

Since his death, Rivera's body has been exhumed four times. [BBC]

The latest move comes after the Spanish parliament last year passed a law which aims to remember Franco's victims by investigating cases of human rights violations during his 1939-1975 dictatorship, while also banning organisations that still publicly support his regime, and searching for those who went missing in the Spanish Civil War. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Three people were arrested for public disorder after the authorities tried to hold back around 150 supporters of the Falange movement giving the fascist salute and singing the Falangist hymn outside a Madrid cemetery where Rivera's remains were taken to be reburied.

Welcoming the exhumation of Rivera, Presidency Minister Felix Bolanos said: "No person or ideology that

evokes the dictatorship should be honoured or extolled there." [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: As fires sweep through Asturias, official blames arsonists

Dozens of fires ravaged swathes of Spain's northern Asturias region at the end of March and the beginning of April, with authorities suspecting that many of the blazes were caused by arsonists.

Adrian Barbon, the head of the regional government in Asturias and member of the governing left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers Party, wrote on Twitter: "We have faced an emergency that could have caused hundreds of deaths." He added that the blazes were the "work of terrorists and criminals". [France 24]

In the past, intentional fires have been linked to animal breeders seeking to acquire more land for cattle grazing. In 2017, Asturias revoked a law that banned cattle from grazing in fire-damaged forest areas. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said that if the people behind the latest fires are identified, their actions "will not go unpunished." [La Vanguardia] Arson is punishable with up to 20 years in prison in Spain.

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 earlier in March. Sanchez said that the blaze was "proof of the climate emergency that humanity is living through." [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(km/pk)

Spain: Police dismantle cocaine 'mega lab'

Police in Spain have raided a cocaine "mega lab" capable of producing 200kg of the drug a day and believed to be the largest ever discovered in Europe.

Spanish police, alongside their Portuguese and Colombian counterparts, arrested 18 people and seized 1,300kg of cocaine base paste from the lab in the north-west region of Galicia. [The Guardian] [ABC]

Spanish police said after the raid on April 14: “The mega-laboratory, located in the Pontevedra province, never paused its activities, with its ‘cooks’ working in shifts 24 hours a day to transform the base paste into cocaine hydrochloride ready for consumption”.

Inquiries began last October, when police discovered a gang based in the Canary Islands with links to Columbian drug suppliers.

“Subsequent investigations revealed that the Spanish citizens involved were working with two powerful criminal organisations – one Colombian and one Mexican – that had come together to finance a laboratory,” police said. [The Guardian] [ABC]

(iy/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Left-wing opposition loses support amid leadership race

Austria’s left-wing opposition Social Democrat Party (SPO) has dropped to third place in an opinion poll as it holds a leadership race ahead of parliamentary elections next autumn.

The SPO has lost two percentage points and is now on 23 percent, according to a monthly survey by pollster Unique Research published on April 15. It has been overtaken by the governing conservative Austrian People’s Party (OVP), which is on 25 percent. [Kurier] [Der Standard]

Still leading in the polls is the far-right opposition Freedom Party, which has benefited from public

discontent at how the government – comprising the OVP and the Greens – has tackled issues like migration and inflation.

The SPO is due to hold an internal election to choose a new leader on June 3. [Euractiv]

Communists make big gains locally

Meanwhile, the KPOplus opposition communist party has made its biggest gains in any local election since World War II.

KPOplus secured 11.7 percent of the vote in Salzburg state elections on April 23, up from the 0.4 percent it won there five years ago, to finish in fourth place overall.

The party's lead candidate, Kay-Michael Dankl, said the result showed that KPOplus had "managed to convince those who no longer know who to vote for". [Der Standard] [Kurier]

The Austrian People's Party secured first place with about 30 percent of the vote – down from the 37.8 percent it won in the 2018 Salzburg elections. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

The far-right opposition Freedom Party (FPO) gained seven percentage points in Salzburg compared to the last such ballot and finished second overall with 25 percent of the vote. This underlines the party's increasing popularity across the country as it makes a push for Austria's 2024 federal elections. [Euractiv] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Far-right MPs walk out in protest during Zelensky speech

Austrian MPs from the far-right opposition Freedom Party (FPO) walked out of parliament during a speech by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, claiming that it violated their country's neutrality. [Reuters] [BBC]

Zelensky was addressing Austrian lawmakers via a video call on March 30, thanking the government in Vienna for providing humanitarian aid, when 30 FPO members left the chamber in protest. [Reuters] [BBC]

FPO leader Herbert Kickl had previously warned that his party would protest against the call, saying in a

statement on March 28: “It is sad that the FPO is the only party in parliament that takes our ever-lasting neutrality seriously, thereby also standing up for peace.” [Reuters] [BBC]

The FPO has long opposed any Austrian involvement in the war in Ukraine, calling the latter a “corrupt state”. The far-right party has close links to Russia. In 2016 it signed an agreement with United Russia, President Vladimir Putin’s party, to organise regular consultations and joint seminars. [New Statesman] [BBC]

MPs who exited parliament left placards on their desks saying either “space for neutrality” or “space for peace”. Austria has previously said it cannot help Ukraine militarily but that it supports Kyiv politically. [Reuters] [BBC]

Support for the FPO has dramatically increased over the last couple of years. Meanwhile, the handling of issues like immigration and inflation by Austria’s coalition government – which comprises conservatives and greens – has sparked public anger. This has helped Kickl’s party move ahead of its rivals in opinion polls as Austria prepares for parliamentary elections next year. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Poverty on the rise, statistics show

Poverty levels have sharply increased across Austria, new figures from the federal statistical office indicate. [Der Standard] [Statistik]

The figures, released by Statistics Austria on April 21, showed that around 201,000 people lived in poverty throughout 2022, an increase of about 41,000 compared to 2021. [Der Standard] [Statistik]

The statistics office also calculated that 17 percent of the country’s population is at risk of poverty or exclusion, including over 350,000 children and young people. [Der Standard] [Statistik]

Poverty levels have been impacted by the lasting effects of Covid pandemic lockdowns and recent rises in inflation. [Der Standard] [Statistik]

Social Affairs Minister Johannes Rauch said he believes Austria is on the road to recovery from inflation,

adding: “We are on the right track with our relief efforts”. [Der Standard] [Statistik]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Defence ministry to spend EUR 3.8 bn by 2026

The Croatian ministry of defence has announced that it plans to spend EUR 3.8 billion in total in the five-year period until 2026 on arms, ammunition and military equipment amid Russia’s war on Ukraine. [N1] [Jutranji]

News outlet Jutarnji List reported that this will be the largest outlay on defence since Croatia’s war of independence in the early 1990s.

EUR 223 million of the money will be made up of military aid donations from the European Union and the United States, with the rest coming directly from the Croatian government, the defence ministry said. [N1] [Jutranji]

The government no longer sees the military as an expense but as a need, and commanders have been told to specify what they require with no regard to cost, Jutarnji List commented. [N1] [Jutranji]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: EUR 900m cash injection for state energy company

The Croatian government has announced that state-owned energy company HEP will be given a cash injection of EUR 900 million. [N1] [Euractiv]

The money is to include what Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic described as a EUR 400 million “shareholder loan”, with the rest paid directly by the government. [N1] [Euractiv]

Economy Minister Davor Filipovic said: “This is being done to allow citizens to keep paying some of the lowest electricity prices in the EU.” [N1] [Euractiv]

HEP, a 100 percent state-owned company responsible for electricity generation, transmission and distribution in the country, may have suffered heavy losses in the second half of last year due to the government’s price

cap on energy bills for households and vulnerable groups, according to Croatian media. [N1]

Because the cash injection is a form of direct state aid, Plenkovic said that his government is in talks with the European Commission to make sure that EU rules are not violated. [N1] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Gov't makes extra EUR 1.2 bn available for earthquake reconstruction

The Croatian government has announced that an extra EUR 1.2 billion is to be made available for reconstruction after earthquakes that hit the country in 2020.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic announced the news on April 6. The money is to come from the country's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. [Hina] [N1]

Croatia has spent hundreds of millions on rebuilding since two earthquakes destroyed hundreds of buildings in the capital Zagreb and the central town of Petrinja. [The Guardian] [BBC]

The country has also received help from the EU Solidarity Fund, from which it has so far absorbed EUR 700 million out of the EUR 1 billion allocated to it. Plenkovic said that Croatia would use the remainder of these funds by the end of June.

(iy/pk)

Czech Republic: Thousands rally to protest at high inflation

Thousands of Czechs rallied in Prague's central square on April 16, calling on the pro-Western government to resign over the country's soaring inflation and high energy prices.

The protest, named "Czechia against poverty", was organised by a new political group called PRO, which has blamed Prime Minister Petr Fiala's centre-right cabinet for rising costs of living and for the energy crisis since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Some protesters at the demonstration signed a petition calling for the Czech Republic to withdraw from NATO.

The leader of PRO, lawyer Jindrich Rajchl, held a similar demonstration at Prague's Wenceslas Square in March under an "against poverty" banner. Protesters at that event demanded an end to the country's military support for Ukraine. [France24] [AP News]

Like many other European nations, the Czech Republic has been suffering from soaring inflation, which slowed slightly to 15 percent in March from a three-decade high of 17.5 percent in January. The Czech central bank expects it to fall to below 10 percent in the second half of the year. [AP News] [Bloomberg]

At the latest rally, protesters and PRO also criticised the government for hurting freedom of speech, demanding that it stop taking action to reduce fake news and misinformation.

Although Rajchl has denied that his group is a pro-Russia party, he has condemned the Czech government's pro-western stance on Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. He has called Czech Defence Minister Jana Cernochova, a pro-Ukraine advocate, "the biggest security risk for our country." [Reuters] [Apnews]

At the PRO's anti-government rally in March, some demonstrators were seen carrying bags with the letter "Z", a symbol used by Russian troops who have invaded Ukraine. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

The Czech Republic, an EU and NATO member state of 10.5 million people, has staunchly supported Ukraine since the outbreak of the war, providing military support and hosting some 500,000 refugees.

A recent survey by pollster Kantar found that the popularity of the five-party Czech government is on the decline, while the opposition ANO grouping of populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis has a commanding lead over Fiala's centre-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS).

The poll showed that ANO was backed by 29.5 percent of voters while the ODS was supported by 21.5 percent. [Brno Daily]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: New bill requires 2% of GDP to go on defence every year

The lower house of the Czech parliament on April 21 passed a bill under which every state budget from next

year will have to allocate at least 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to defence. [Reuters] [Radio Prague]

The move will see Prague meeting a NATO-agreed goal of spending 2 percent of national wealth on defence. The target was agreed in 2014, right after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, a move that most of the world condemned as illegal.

Under its 2023 budget, the Czech Republic will spend 1.52 percent of its economic output on defence.

The hike in military spending from next year may challenge the centre-right government's goal of cutting the 2024 budget deficit by 70 billion crowns from this year's planned 295 billion crowns. [Reuters]

The new bill is set to take effect in July, though it must first be approved by the upper house of parliament and signed by the president. [Radio Prague]

The Czech Republic, an EU and NATO member country of 10.5 million people, has speeded up the modernisation of its armed forces after supplying hundreds of pieces of heavy machinery, including 89 tanks, to Ukraine. [Aljazeera] [AP News]

In March, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg urged nations in the military alliance to accelerate their defence spending, as only seven out of 30 members met the 2-percent-of-GDP financing commitment—one fewer than in 2021, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv]

The US, which has pledged the most financial support to Ukraine, has been complaining that several of its European allies do not contribute enough. [BBC] [AP News]

(yl/pk)

Hungary: President vetoes contested anti-LGBT law

Hungary's president on April 22 vetoed a new law that allows citizens to anonymously inform the authorities about same-sex couples raising children. [Politico]

President Katalin Novak, a conservative, said in a letter to the Hungarian parliament that the controversial measure "does not strengthen but rather weakens the protection of fundamental values". [Telex]

Prime Minister Viktor Orban's right-wing government, which positions itself as a champion of traditional Christian values, has been strongly criticised by rights groups and has come into conflict with the European Union, which accuses Budapest of discriminating against the LGBT community.

Hungarian MPs on April 11 adopted legislation whose main purpose is to protect whistleblowers who disclose abuses in the public and private sectors. But the law also has a section on protecting "the Hungarian way of life".

Under the law, Hungarian citizens can file a complaint with state and local government bodies against those who "challenge the constitutionally recognised role of marriage and the family" as well as those who "call into question (...) the development of children and their right to an identity according to their sex at birth". [Bloomberg]

Hungary's constitution defines marriage as a union "between one man and one woman" and specifies that "the mother is a woman, the father is a man".

While Novak's veto is a rare rebuke for Orban, the Hungarian parliament – dominated by right-wingers and conservatives – can override her decision. [Bloomberg]

Orban's government effectively banned same-sex couples from adopting children in 2020, while top Hungarian officials have pledged to combat "gender propaganda". [BBC] [Daily News Hungary]

In mid-2022, the European Commission took Budapest to the Court of Justice of the European Union – the bloc's top court – over a Hungarian law deemed by Brussels to be anti-LGBT. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

That law, whose stated purpose is to fight paedophilia, bans making available to minors content portraying homosexuality or transsexuality. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Fifteen EU countries and the European Parliament have joined the lawsuit against Hungary. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(msa/pk)

Poland: Opposition leader urges mass turnout in anti-government rally

The leader of the Polish opposition has called for thousands to take part in an anti-government rally on June 4 ahead of crunch parliamentary elections in the autumn. [TVN24] [Interia] [Polsat] [Wyborcza]

Donald Tusk, a former prime minister and the head of the largest opposition party, the centrist Civic Platform (PO), said that all Poles should march in the capital, Warsaw, for a "democratic, European Poland." Tusk added that the goal of the rally was to stand against "rising prices, theft, and lies." [Wyborcza] [TVN24]

Poland has for the last eight years been ruled by the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Opposition politicians say the government has undermined the rule of law, brought the country into conflict with the EU, turned the public television broadcaster into a propaganda machine, eroded women's rights, parachuted supporters into lucrative jobs and, recently, failed to tackle surging inflation.

Law and Justice dismisses the charges, arguing that it has improved the lives of ordinary Poles and helped many escape poverty while defending the country's Christian heritage against encroaching Western liberalism. It presents itself as "a good government for hard times".

Symbolic date

The scheduled date of Tusk's planned march falls on the 34th anniversary of the first partially free parliamentary elections in Poland after World War II, a vote that heralded the end of decades of communism marked by authoritarianism and corruption. [Polsat]

Tusk's call for citizens to take to the streets comes after the Polish parliament on April 14 passed a resolution to set up a commission tasked with investigating alleged Russian influence on governments in Warsaw between 2007 and 2022.

Critics of the planned commission claim that it is an attempt by the Law and Justice party to target its opponents. [Polsat] [Wyborcza]

Meanwhile, observers say the June rally is an opportunity for the opposition to demonstrate unity before approaching parliamentary elections that will decide whether the country's ruling nationalists spend another four years in power. [Wyborcza]

In Poland's 2015 elections, Law and Justice loudly opposed the influx of Syrian refugees to the EU, while in 2019 it made anti-LGBT rhetoric its rallying cry.

Analysts say that it is now trying to find new issues to rally voters around. [Euronews]

Looking for hot-button issues

Law and Justice "are definitely trying to find a new hot-button issue to latch on to and mobilise their base," said Adam Leszczynski, a sociologist at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. [Euronews]

On April 25, prosecutors in Poland – who are controlled by a Law and Justice ally – began investigating Tusk for alleged abuses of power during his time as prime minister. Critics say the move is an attempt to discredit the man who is seen as Law and Justice's main election threat. [Euronews]

"The current investigation against Tusk is largely a baseless witch hunt… they want to use the re-launched investigation to smear him and present him as working against Polish interests," Leszczynski said. [Euronews]

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. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The opposition Civic Coalition, which is headed by Tusk's Civic Platform party, has the support of around 26 percent of voters, according to polls. [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Central bank chief refuses to quit after bribery conviction

The head of Slovakia's central bank has rebuffed Prime Minister Eduard Heger's call for him to resign after a bribery conviction.

Heger said it was "unacceptable" for Peter Kazimir to lead the central bank. [AP News] Slovakia's President Zuzana Caputova has also called on Kazimir to quit. The central bank chief has insisted that he is innocent.

Kazimir is also a member of the European Central Bank's Governing Council, which is responsible for setting interest rates and monetary policy for the 20 countries using the single European currency.

Slovakia's Special Criminal Court on April 3 ordered Kazimir to pay a fine of EUR 100,000 or serve two years in jail. [Politico]

There was no full trial, and the verdict was based on evidence submitted during an investigation. [AP News] [DW]

Kazimir said: "I have committed no crime and I have no doubt that I will defend myself before the judge at the main hearing or before the courts of appeal in Slovakia or in Europe." [Reuters]

Anti-corruption drive

Kazimir was convicted in a bribery case dating back to his time as finance minister between 2012 and 2019 in the government led by populist Robert Fico's leftist Smer party, which was later ejected by voters who supported the anti-corruption centre-right Ordinary People's party (OLaNO) in 2020 parliamentary elections. [DW]

Since then, a number of senior officials, oligarchs, former politicians and prosecutors have been charged with corruption, especially related to allegations of public procurement and VAT fraud. [Politico] [AP News]

In October 2021, Kazimir was accused of handing a bribe of EUR 48,000 to a former Slovak tax administration chief, Frantisek Imrecze, in 2017 to influence evaluations of certain companies' requests for VAT refunds. [Politico] [DW]

The accusations against Kazimir were dropped in June 2022 because they were based solely on Imrecze's testimony. But Slovak police later revived the charge. [Politico]

Should the conviction stand, it could cost Kazimir his position, which he has held since 2019. [DW]

Under Slovak law, central bank governors can be dismissed if they fail to maintain a clean criminal record. Meanwhile, members of the European Central Bank's Governing Council can be removed if they have been found guilty of serious misconduct. [Reuters]

Political, business elites probed

The charge against Kazimir was part of a broader series of investigations aimed at uncovering corruption among Slovakia's political and business elites following the murder of young investigative journalist Jan Kuciak in 2018.

Police connected Kuciak's death with an investigation he had been carrying out into corruption, which uncovered alleged links between the Italian mafia and individuals close to Prime Minister Robert Fico. A scandal following Kuciak's killing triggered mass protests and led to Fico's resignation in 2018 and the defeat of his SMER party in parliamentary elections in 2020. [BBC] [FT]

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark to exit controversial international energy treaty

Denmark has announced plans to exit an international energy treaty that has been criticised for hindering efforts to move away from polluting fossil fuels. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Denmark's move comes as the EU as a whole considers a joint exit from the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) after France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain decided to pull out of the agreement in 2022. Italy left the treaty in 2016. [Reuters]

The ECT, an agreement from 1994 that has been signed by over 50 countries, has been criticised in recent years for hampering a global transition to renewable energy. The treaty, which aims to secure energy supplies, protects firms investing in the energy sector, allowing them to apply for compensation if they are forced to close plants powered by fossil fuels.

The Netherlands, for instance, was sued by two German companies over its legislation to phase out coal. [Reuters] [EU Observer]

“As the Energy Charter Treaty looks now, it creates unnecessary uncertainty about the green transition,” Lars Aagaard, Denmark’s minister of climate, energy and supply, said in a statement.

(rs/pk)

Denmark: World’s first Power-to-X tender launched

The Danish Energy Agency has invited bids for the world’s first Power-to-X tender, offering EUR 167.7 million in state support for the production of green hydrogen. [Offshore Energy]

Power-to-X is a technology that uses renewable energy sources to power the process of electrolysis. The process splits water into hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen can then be converted into fuel or used to generate electricity. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

The tender is part of Denmark’s efforts to curb carbon emissions and promote green energy. The country has committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 70 percent by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. [Offshore Energy] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

It has also set a target of achieving between four and six gigawatts of electrolysis capacity by 2030. [Offshore Energy] [Baltic Wind]

The tender was approved for state aid by the European Commission in February. [Offshore Energy] [European Commission] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Work permit rules eased amid labour shortage

Denmark has changed its work permit rules amid a labour shortage, making it easier for skilled foreign staff from non-EU nations to take up a job in the Nordic country.

The new rules, which came into effect on April 1, have been revised for several programmes related to work

permits. [The Local]

Under the Pay Limit Scheme, non-EU nationals can receive work permits if they are offered a wage above a certain amount by a Danish employer. With the new rules, the wage requirement has been reduced from 448,000 kroner (EUR 39,400) to 375,000 kroner (EUR 32,800) per year. [The Local] [Schengen Visa Info] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Meanwhile, the Fast-Track scheme allows some Danish firms to quickly employ foreign nationals with special qualifications. Companies with 10 employees can now register for the scheme, as opposed to those with a minimum of 20 employees previously. [The Local] [Njord Law]

Foreign graduates of Danish universities with vocational, bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D degrees can apply for a so-called establishment card, which allows them to stay in Denmark for two years to search for jobs. The revised rules extend the job-seeking period to three years. [The Local] [Schengen Visa Info]

The moves come in response to requests from Danish companies for work permit regulations to be relaxed as the country faces a lack of labour. According to a survey by the Lederne management union, one in four companies in Denmark are reliant on foreign staff to keep running. [The Local] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Eight accused of manipulating power prices

Danish police have arrested eight employees of an energy trading company on suspicion of large-scale market price manipulation. [Bloomberg] [DR]

The suspects, executives and traders in the company, are believed to have made illegal profits amounting to a "three-digit million sum" in Danish krone, according to a statement issued by police on April 19.

"We have a strong suspicion that the employees have obtained illegal profits through market manipulation," said Sasha Nielsen, a deputy police inspector at Denmark's National Unit for Serious Crime (NSK).

According to Brian Vad Mathiesen, a professor of energy and planning at Denmark's Aalborg University,

this is the biggest known energy fraud case in the country's history. [CPH post]

Police carried out searches at multiple locations as a part of an investigation. Officers did not identify the company or the people involved in the case.

The arrests follow another recent case in which a Danish power company was reported to the police for suspected insider trading. [Bloomberg]

(rs/pk)

Finland: PM-designate seeks to form governing coalition with far-right

Finland's prime minister-designate announced on April 27 that he would seek to form a centre-right government drawn from a coalition including the far-right and eurosceptic Finns Party.

Petteri Orpo, who leads the centre-right National Coalition Party, had pledged to negotiate with all groups after he won parliamentary elections at the beginning of April. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

He said he had chosen the Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party of Finland for coalition talks.

"We have big challenges and we must make difficult decisions," Orpo said at a news conference, adding that his cabinet would need to make budget cuts and enact a host of reforms. [Al Jazeera]

Major differences

If the coalition negotiations succeed, Orpo would lead a 109-seat majority in Finland's 200-seat parliament. However, the four parties that would form such a governing alliance have major differences, especially over immigration, climate, EU policy and ways to reduce public debt.

The Finns Party in particular, which finished second in the elections after campaigning on an anti-immigration ticket, is expected to clash with Orpo's National Coalition Party, which is in favour of new arrivals to boost Finland's labour market. [Politico]

Rikka Purra, who leads the Finns Party, acknowledged the differences between the two groupings but said she was committed to forming a government.

Caretaker PM

Finland's outgoing prime minister, Sanna Marin, handed in her resignation after her Social Democrats finished third in the elections, behind the National Coalition Party and The Finns. Her government continues in a caretaker capacity until a new administration can be formed. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Bloomberg] [Yle]

Marin also announced that she would be stepping down as the head of the Social Democrats. She will be replaced at the party's congress in September. [Politico]

Marin, who will serve as an ordinary lawmaker in the new parliament, said she was worried about a right-of-centre governing coalition cutting social and healthcare services. [Reuters]

Negotiations to form a new government began on May 2. Orpo said he hoped the process would be completed by June. [Yle]

The coalition planned by Orpo would mark a historic shift – the first time in over 100 years that a government has been formed with groupings other than National Coalition Party, the Social Democrats or the Centre Party. [Euractiv]

(qv/pk)

Finland: Europe's most powerful nuclear reactor starts operation

Finland's new nuclear reactor, the largest and most powerful in Europe, has started regular electricity production after 14 years of delays, delivering a boost to the country's energy security and its efforts to meet climate goals.

The Olkiluoto 3 reactor, which has a capacity of 1,600 megawatts, finally started regular output on April 16 after being connected to the Finnish national power grid in March. Teollisuuden Voima (TVO), the operator of the reactor, said on Twitter: "Olkiluoto 3 is now ready".

According to the operator, the unit is set to meet 14 percent of Finland's electricity requirements, thus reducing the need for imports from neighbouring Sweden and Norway. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

At a time when European countries have reduced their reliance on oil and gas supplies from Russia, the activation of Olkiluoto 3 will help Finland improve its energy security and achieve its carbon neutrality objectives.

"The production of Olkiluoto 3 stabilises the price of electricity and plays an important role in the Finnish green transition," said TVO President and CEO Jarmo Tanhua in a statement.

'Clean' domestic power

The company added that "the electricity production volume of Europe's largest nuclear power plant unit is a significant addition to clean, domestic production."

Work on building the reactor began in 2005 and was initially intended to be completed in four years. However, a string of technological challenges and lawsuits prolonged the construction period by 14 years.

Olkiluoto 3 is the first new such installation in Western Europe in over 15 years and the first new-generation European Pressurized Reactor (EPR) facility to become operational on the continent. It was jointly developed by French multinational Areva and German group Siemens. [Associated Press] [WSJ]

Nuclear power continues to be a controversial issue in Europe, primarily due to safety concerns. The launch of the Finnish reactor was announced hours after Germany switched off its final three nuclear plants. [Le Monde]

'Cornerstone' of energy policy

Finland now operates five nuclear reactors in two power plants located along the Baltic Sea coast. Together, these account for more than 40 percent of the country's total electricity demand.

The conservative National Coalition Party (NCP), which won parliamentary elections in Finland on April 2, aims to increase the proportion of energy sourced from nuclear power.

The party's leader, Petteri Orpo, who is expected to become the new prime minister, said during the election campaign that the incoming administration must make nuclear power "the cornerstone of the government's energy policy." [Associated Press] *(See separate story in this issue)*

(rs/pk)

Finland: EU climate obligations may not be met, report warns

Finland may fail to meet its EU climate obligations if it does not reduce logging, according to a new report by an environmental research body.

The report by the Finnish Environment Institute (Syke) has warned that if tree felling – which hit record levels in recent years – is not controlled, the country's forests will become a source of carbon emissions instead of acting as a "carbon sink". [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

Forests absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, which helps to mitigate emissions and limit climate change.

The EU's LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry) regulation has set goals to preserve carbon sinks by 2030. Member countries are obliged to ensure that any emissions caused by land use are fully offset by the removal of an equal amount of CO2. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Targeted cyber attacks on the rise, says agency

Cyber attacks targeting government agencies and operators of critical infrastructure have been increasing in Finland in recent months, according to the country's transport and communications agency, Traficom. [Helsinki Times]

There has also been a surge in politically or socially motivated "hacktivism" over the last year, the agency said in a statement, which did not provide any figures. [Helsinki Times]

However, Traficom and the Finnish Security Intelligence Service (SUPO) said that a large-scale cyber-attack affecting the country's entire population was improbable. [Helsinki Times]

According to a report by SUPO in March, Russia has increased cyber espionage in Finland to compensate for a shortage of human intelligence. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Norway: Permits granted to explore offshore CO2 storage

The Norwegian ministry of petroleum and energy has awarded two licences for companies to explore the possibility of storing captured carbon dioxide in the North Sea.

One of the permits has been given to Norwegian company Aker BP and the other to Germany-based Wintershall Dea. [Upstream] [Reuters]

The projects, if implemented, would see CO2 from industrial sites across Europe transferred and injected into storage sites under the seabed in Norwegian waters. [Upstream] [Reuters]

Wintershall Dea is already working with Norway's state-backed oil and gas company Equinor on a 900 km carbon dioxide pipeline. [Upstream]

Denmark, meanwhile, has become the first country to import and store CO2 emissions beneath the seabed in a step to help reduce global warming. The carbon capture and storage (CCS) project, called Greensand, is a joint venture between Wintershall Dea and British chemical giant Ineos. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

'Green alliance' with EU

Meanwhile, Norway has agreed to form a "green alliance" with the European Union in order to help both parties attain their climate and clean energy goals.

The deal aims to increase carbon capture and storage and strengthen environmental protection. Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store also promised that his country would provide 30 gigawatts of offshore wind power by 2040. [European Commission] [Bloomberg] [Euractiv] [Upstream]

The agreement was inked by Store and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who said it was important to improve the continent's energy infrastructure because of the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on oil and gas supplies. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv] [Upstream]

(ef/pk)

Norway: Mass strike ends as pay hike agreed

An estimated 25,000 workers from LO, the largest labour union group in Norway, and YS, a smaller union, went on strike from April 17 until April 20 following a breakdown in contract and payment negotiations.

The strikers included workers from the construction, manufacturing, hospitality and transport sectors. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [Euronews]

Peggy Hessen Foelsvik, the leader of LO, said the union had been demanding "increased purchasing power for all its members and a boost for the low-paid." [Euronews]

The unions also criticised pay increases for managers, which they claimed came at the expense of workers. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [Euronews]

After four days of industrial action, the two unions secured pay raises of 5.2 percent for their members – 185,000 and 16,000 workers respectively. LO and YS had threatened to increase the number of staff on strike to 38,500 on April 21 if their demands were not met. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The pay hike slightly exceeds the expected increase in the cost of living due to inflation, estimated at 4.9 percent in Norway for the year. The country has a centralised bargaining system, meaning members of other unions which did not strike will see similar pay increases as well. [Reuters]

(ef/pk)

Norway: Worker sues state wealth fund for gender discrimination

A worker at a central bank unit which manages Norway's sovereign wealth fund – one of the world's largest investors – is suing her employers for gender discrimination, arguing she was paid less than her male counterparts for equivalent work.

Elisabeth Bull Daae, the head of trading analytics at Norges Bank Investment Management, is seeking EUR 1.38 million in damages from the firm, where she still works. She also alleges that the investment company required her, and not her male counterparts, to perform menial tasks like tidying the office. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Bull Daae also argues that an 18-month office romance which required her reassignment to a different job contributed to a hostile work environment. Norges

Bank Investment Management denies all the allegations.

Norway's EUR 1.28 trillion sovereign wealth fund requires firms that it invests in to have gender equality on their boards. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Far-right threatens to destabilise ruling coalition over EU migration plan

The far-right party whose support is vital for Sweden's governing coalition is threatening to upend the balance of power over a proposal, backed by the European Parliament, for dealing with rising migration to the continent. [Euractiv] [Dagens Nyheter] [Goteborgs-Posten]

The proposed new migration policy was spearheaded by MEP Tomas Tobe of Sweden's governing Moderate Party, to which Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson belongs. The plan aims to hasten the return of migrants who enter the EU illegally, but also stipulates that countries may have to take in relocated migrants from other EU nations.

The proposed policy was passed by the European Parliament on April 20 by a margin of 420 to 130 and now heads to the Council of the European Union, of which Sweden currently holds the rotating presidency. [Politico]

Irked at mandatory relocation

The far-right Sweden Democrats are unhappy with what they see as overreach by the European Parliament and with the mandatory relocation clause of the proposed new policy.

The party's migration spokesperson said that the Sweden Democrats would not allow the EU to dictate the number of migrants allowed into the country. Party leader Jimmie Akesson said in a Facebook post: "Migration policy should be decided in Sweden – not by bureaucrats in Brussels." [Euractiv] [Dagens Nyheter] [Goteborgs-Posten]

In parliamentary elections last September, the Sweden Democrats came second, receiving 20.4 percent of the vote. The far-right party then entered into a confidence-and-supply agreement with the ruling Moderates, Christian Democrats and Liberals.

The Sweden Democrats are not officially in the centre-right government and do not have any ministerial positions, but without their cooperation, Kristersson would not have a majority in parliament. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

Pushing back against migration

The Sweden Democrats have been leveraging their position to push for numerous changes to the country's immigration system. They have pressed for a raised income threshold for migrants applying for work visas, increased surveillance of undocumented migrants, advertising campaigns abroad to deter migration into Sweden, and a payment scheme to provide money for migrants to resettle in their home nations. [Europe Monthly January 2023] [Europe Monthly March 2023] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

If the Sweden Democrats withdraw their support for their country's governing coalition, it would leave the ruling centre-right parties reliant on support from centre and centre-left groupings to push legislation through. [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, the new migration plan has passed the European Parliament but still needs the approval of the Council of the European Union. The Swedish minister for migration, Maria Malmer Stenegard, said that her country's governing coalition is looking to tighten restrictions on migration both at home and in the proposed European-level policy in response to the Sweden Democrats' objections. [Goteborgs-Posten] [Dagens Nyheter]

Sweden holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union until the end of June. [Euractiv]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Police make terrorism arrests connected to Koran-burning

Swedish security services arrested five men on April 4 on suspicion that they were planning a terrorist attack in retaliation for the burning of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, during an earlier protest in Stockholm.

The five were detained in raids in the towns of Eskilstuna and Strangnas, west of the capital. Police said the men had been under surveillance and were allegedly in the early stages of planning an attack.

Officers added that no terrorist attack was imminent. [Le Monde] [Euronews] [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters]

Susanna Trehorning, the deputy head of counterterrorism at SAPO, the Swedish security service, said: "The security service often needs to intervene at an early stage to avert a threat. We cannot wait for a crime to be completed before we act." [Euronews]

In January, a far-right politician burned a copy of the Koran outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm in protest at negotiations between Sweden and Turkey as the former attempts to join NATO.

The incident was condemned by Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson as well as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Swedish police imposed a ban on future such protests. However, the ban was overturned by the Swedish Administrative Court as unconstitutional. The court deemed that the ban infringed on protestors' freedom of speech. [Deutsche Welle]

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Public radio abandons Twitter

Public broadcaster Swedish Radio announced on April 18 that it would no longer be active on Twitter, saying that staff cuts at the social media site could hit the platform's ability to deal with fake accounts, bots, disinformation and hate speech. [AP News] [Reuters]

Swedish Radio is the first major European public broadcaster to abandon Twitter. It cited a study showing that only an estimated seven percent of Swedes use the platform daily.

"The audience has simply chosen other places to be. And therefore Sveriges Radio now chooses to deactivate or delete [its] last remaining accounts," said Christian Gillinger, head of social media at the Swedish broadcaster. [Reuters]

He added that a reduction in Twitter's workforce "may in the long run affect the company's capacity to handle, for example, fake accounts, bots and disinformation but also hate messages and threats."

Swedish Radio's decision follows similar moves by public broadcasters like the Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation and America's National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting Service.

(ef/pk)

Sweden: Government accused of failings on climate policy

Sweden is falling behind on its promises to curb greenhouse gas emissions, according to an annual report by an independent scientific body that advises the government.

The Swedish Climate Policy Council warned that emissions could increase in Sweden for the first time in two decades unless recently adopted policies are reversed. These include reduced investment in infrastructure for green transport. [EuroNews] [Le Monde] [Euractiv]

The council's report is critical of Sweden's governing coalition, which comprises three conservative parties that are reliant on the far-right Sweden Democrats for a majority in parliament. The Sweden Democrats have in the past denied the existence of climate change. [EuroNews] [Le Monde] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

Environment Minister Romina Pourmokhtari pushed back on the report's assertions, saying: "The measures that we decide on during this mandate will be long-term investments that lead to reduced emissions." [Euractiv]

Since taking power in October, the centre-right government has overseen an increase in wind power production in Sweden. [EuroNews] [Le Monde] [Euractiv]

The country has set a goal for its energy sector to be based on 100 percent renewable power by 2040, and to reach net zero climate emissions by 2045.

(ef/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

15 countries join EU case against Hungary's 'anti-LGBT' law

Fifteen EU countries and the European Parliament have joined a lawsuit by the bloc's executive against Hungary's right-wing government over a law deemed by Brussels to be anti-LGBT. [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Euronews] [Politico]

Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden applied to join the case as third parties before a deadline for such a move expired on April 6.

The European Commission referred Budapest to the Court of Justice of the European Union – the bloc's top court – in mid-2022 over the Hungarian Child Protection Act, a year after 18 EU states had signed a statement calling on Brussels to take legal action. [Europe Monthly August 2022]

The Hungarian law, whose stated purpose is to fight paedophilia, is deemed by the Commission to infringe the EU charter of fundamental rights and several European Union rules because it bans making available to minors content portraying homosexuality or transsexuality. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Budapest stands by the law and blames EU member states for giving in to "gender propaganda from Brussels and overseas", government spokesperson Zoltan Kovacs said in a tweet on April 7.

"We will not back down on our Child Protection Act. We will submit new measures to parliament in the autumn, making Hungary the country with the strictest child protection legislation in Europe," Kovacs added.

The Court of Justice of the European Union has in the past ruled that a number of measures introduced by Hungary's nationalist government are unlawful. These

included the “Stop Soros” law, which made it illegal to help immigrants claim asylum, and a law deemed to infringe on academic freedom.

Hungary’s president on April 22 vetoed a new law passed by the parliament in Budapest that allows citizens to anonymously inform the authorities about same-sex couples raising children. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(msa/pk)

Top rights watchdog calls for ECHR judgements to be implemented

The head of Europe’s top human rights watchdog has called for “increased political will” in nations across the continent to implement judgements by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The Secretary General of the 46-nation Council of Europe, Marija Pejcinovic Buric, said that “complying with court rulings is essential to the rule of law”.

The latest annual report by the rights watchdog on the execution of ECHR judgments showed that by the end of 2022, more than 6,000 verdicts had yet to be fully implemented by Council of Europe member states.

According to the report, 38 percent of these cases concerned Russia, which was excluded from the Council of Europe on March 16, 2022, due to its invasion of Ukraine.

Russia stopped being a party to the European Convention of Human Rights half a year later, but under international law it is still obliged to implement rulings by the European Court of Human Rights. [Council of Europe]

(aml/pk)

European energy prices remain stable in April

Energy prices largely remained stable across Europe in April after the continent moved to diversify its energy supplies away from Russia after Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Claudio Descalzi, the CEO of Italian oil and gas major ENI, stated in an interview with La Stampa on April 29

that he expected no energy price shocks this year, claiming: “Dependence on Moscow is behind us, in 2023 gas prices are under control.” [LS]

Russian gas had been largely replaced by new pipeline imports from North Africa and liquified natural gas (LNG) imports from the US, Descalzi said. Chinese demand would play a critical role in determining global oil and gas prices in 2023, and this demand had not yet fully recovered from pre-Covid-19 levels, he said. [Reuters]

Gasoline prices rose a tenth of a percent across Europe while diesel prices fell an approximately equivalent amount. Despite two French liquified natural gas terminals being shut for repairs, prices did not rise and UK storage remained at an unseasonal high. [Bloomberg][GP][Bloomberg]

Despite the stable energy prices, international consulting firm McKinsey predicted in an April report that energy prices will remain high for the next two years at least. To offset the prices, McKinsey said European companies with significant energy needs, such as manufacturers, should consider separate long term energy contracts, known as power purchase agreements (PPPs). [McKinsey]

PPPs would lock in current higher long-term prices, but they would shield companies from market volatility and the possibility of even higher future prices, as was the case during record price swings in August 2022.

EU launches corporate group gas purchasing platform

The European Union (EU) launched a corporate gas group gas purchasing platform on 25 April. The EU will act as global matchmaker through a market making platform, but will not buy gas for commercial firms. Eighty companies, including leading Polish oil and gas firm PKN Orlen have confirmed participation. [FT] [Reuters]

Companies must register by May 2 in order to participate. Companies can specify pipeline gas or liquified natural gas (LNG). The policy goal of this EU measure is to supply 15 percent of EU gas storage needs, focusing on industry, which has been hard hit by energy price spikes following the curtailment of Russian natural gas supplies subsequent to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

(rw/gc)

BRIEFING: Finland's accession brings firepower, strategic benefits for NATO

Finland's accession to NATO on April 4 sees the alliance gaining a modern and well-equipped military force, while the Nordic country's strategic geographical position means that Russia would find it riskier to carry out any aggression in north-eastern Europe. [WSJ] [Washington Post] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year led to a massive shift in public opinion in Finland which, following years of non-alignment, rapidly came to see NATO membership as vital for national security. [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace] [Al Jazeera]

Finland's accession will offer the country – which shares a 1,340 km border with Russia – protection under the Western alliance's core Article 5 principle, which states that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. [Washington Post] [CBS News].

According to John R. Deni, an associate fellow at the NATO Defence College in Italy, Finland has brought more military capability to the alliance than any other member since 1982, when Spain joined the organisation. [WSJ]

Reserve of citizen soldiers

Despite having a relatively small active-duty force of around 30,000 troops, Finland benefits from a large reserve of citizen soldiers. Every young Finnish man is required to complete military service, allowing the country to mobilise 280,000 troops, equipped with some of the most advanced artillery and tanks in the world. [WSJ]

Finland also has strategic geographical importance for NATO and could complicate any potential aggression by Moscow against the Baltic states. [WSJ]

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which are all part of NATO, have long feared they could be cut off from other members of the alliance if Moscow took over the Suwalki Gap, a barely-100 km stretch of land between Russia's westernmost region of Kaliningrad and Russia's ally Belarus. [WSJ] [Politico]

With Helsinki now part of the Western alliance, Moscow would have to consider the possibility of NATO forces coming to the aid of the Baltic states by moving through Finland as well as trying to push through the Suwalki Gap.

"In this way, Finland's membership dramatically bolsters deterrence in Europe, making it clear to Moscow that any aggression directed against the Baltics is unlikely to succeed," Deni said in an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Modern hardware

Finland also possesses the largest artillery force in Western Europe, with more firepower than the combined militaries of Poland, Germany, Norway, and Sweden, according to a report by the Wilson Center, a US think tank. [Foreign Policy]

Helsinki meets NATO's target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defence and uses equipment that is compatible with NATO systems. Finland plans to deploy F-35 fighter jets by 2025, replacing its current fleet of American-designed F/A-18 Hornets. Helsinki's defence expenditure jumped by a massive 36 percent last year after the purchase of the F-35 warplanes from the US, the highest increase among all European nations. [Independent]

Finland is also one of a few countries to possess the joint air-to-surface standoff missile, or JASSM, which allows its fighter jets to conduct armour-piercing strikes. The Nordic nation has also announced plans to acquire the Israeli-made David's Sling advanced air defence system. *(See separate story in this issue)* [Insider] [Foreign Policy]

Before being admitted, Finland had chosen to work closely with NATO and to integrate militarily with neighbouring Sweden, whose efforts to join the alliance have been held up by Turkey and Hungary. [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace] [Al Jazeera]

"Joining NATO is good for Finland, it is good for Nordic security, and it is good for NATO as a whole," said the alliance's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. "Finland brings substantial and highly capable forces, expertise in national resilience, and years of experience working side by side with NATO allies." [US Department of Defence]

Russia has warned of "counter-measures" in response to Finland joining NATO, with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu citing an increased risk of the Ukraine conflict escalating. The Russian foreign ministry said that Finland's decision to drop non-alignment was a "dangerous historical mistake" that would harm relations with Moscow. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Austria extends border controls with Hungary, Slovenia

Austria has announced plans to extend controls at its borders with Hungary and Slovenia by another six months in order to prevent illegal immigration. [Reuters] [Der Standard]

The move was announced by Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner on April 11. The border checks were set to expire on May 11. [Reuters] [Der Standard]

Karner said it was "necessary to consistently step on the asylum brakes in order to prevent asylum abuse". [Der Standard] [schengenvisainfo]

Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia are all members of the Schengen Area, the world's largest passport-free zone, which is intended to allow the unrestricted movement of people between 27 European countries.

However, Austria is one of seven nations that the European Commission has allowed to continue border checks. [Der Standard] [schengenvisainfo]

Austria introduced controls at its frontiers with Hungary and Slovenia in September 2015 in a bid to prevent the mass migration movements of the time. [Der Standard] [schengenvisainfo]

According to Frontex, the EU's border agency, around 330,000 "irregular" crossings were detected at the bloc's external frontier last year, the highest figure since 2016. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

EU leaders agreed in February to take tougher measures against the 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]

(iy/pk)

Belgium: NATO foreign ministers meet in Brussels, discuss the China-Russia threat

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) foreign ministers met in Brussels on April 6. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg highlighted the importance of NATO members supporting one another and strengthening their alliance given increasing Russia-

China ties. The ministers also discussed China's increasingly aggressive action in the Indo-Pacific. [NTD]

(sw/gc)

Belgium hosts second annual North Sea Summit

The Belgian town of Ostend hosted the second annual North Sea Summit on April 24. The first summit was held in 2022 in Esbjerg, Denmark, with Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands also in attendance. This year, the four countries were joined by France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway and the UK.

The countries discussed developing green energy in the North Sea, Atlantic Ocean and the Irish and Celtic Seas. The focus was on deploying offshore wind strategies and developing an offshore electricity grid. The energy ministers in attendance pledged to quadruple their offshore wind energy capacity by 2030. [Reuters] [Politico]

The Netherlands will work more closely with Belgium, Norway, and the United Kingdom to better protect vital infrastructure such as wind farms, gas pipelines, and internet cables in the North Sea against sabotage or espionage. [NLTimes]

The four countries are expanding their offshore security cooperation in response to intelligence warnings about Russian espionage and possible sabotage plans in the North Sea. According to the military intelligence service MIVD, Russia is trying to map "what the Dutch energy supply looks like" to see how they can sabotage it.

The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Denmark already signed on to a proposal last year in Esbjerg, Denmark, to build more offshore wind farms. The coalition has now expanded to include Ireland, France and Luxembourg in the EU, plus the United Kingdom and Norway. [NLTimes] [NLTimes]

[gt-sw/gc]

EU reaches deal with eastern members over Ukraine grain ban

The European Commission announced on April 28 that it will ban the import of cheap Ukrainian grain and seeds to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria and

Romania under a deal with the five eastern EU member states, though transit will be allowed. [Euronews]

The deal comes two weeks after Poland, quickly followed by its regional neighbours Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria, introduced their own temporary bans on imports and transit of Ukrainian agricultural products.

Farmers angry

Those moves came in response to an outcry by farmers who feared their livelihoods were threatened by Ukrainian grain entering national markets. [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian]

After Russia's invasion in February last year, Ukrainian agricultural produce – which was previously shipped via the Black Sea – was allowed to transit customs-free through neighbouring EU countries.

The goods are meant to be temporarily stored in those countries before being exported to the Middle East and Africa, but are instead being sold in the EU, lowering prices. [Notes From Poland]

EU trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis announced the new deal on Twitter. He said that in exchange for the retraction of all unilateral measures imposed by Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria, the European Commission would ban imports of Ukrainian wheat, maize, rapeseed and sunflower seed to those countries and Romania. Such products will only be allowed to transit through the five nations. The EU bans are set to expire on June 5 but can be renewed.

The deal includes a EUR 100 million fund for farmers hit by market distortions in the five eastern EU member states, and a pledge from the Commission to investigate extending its bans to other commodities, such as eggs and meat. [FT] [Reuters]

Limits to solidarity?

The deal was welcomed by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, ending a two-week struggle with the European Commission which Politico called "a mockery of EU support for Ukraine". Warsaw's initial unilateral ban on Ukrainian farm products had been criticised by other EU members, Brussels and Kyiv. [BBC] [CNBC] [Politico] [Notes From Poland]

Prior to the deal being announced, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Twitter he had expressed "deep concerns" about the national bans in a phone

conversation with European Council President Charles Michel.

Poland, which has been one of Kyiv's staunchest supporters as Ukraine battles invading Russian troops, will hold parliamentary elections later this year. The Polish ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice party is largely dependent on votes from rural areas.

Parliamentary elections are also expected to be held in Slovakia this year.

(qv/pk)

Europe's Air Safety centre predicts Ukrainian airspace to be restricted until 2029

The airspace over Ukraine is likely to be restricted until 2029, the European Organization for the Safety of Air Navigation (Eurocontrol) said in their seven-year forecast for 2023 to 2029. The redirected routes planes flew from March 2022 to January 2023 could remain as late as 2029, due to ongoing military action and restrictions on flights, Eurocontrol predicted in the report.

Restrictions affect not only Ukrainian civil aviation but also neighbouring countries, according to Eurocontrol's data. The Baltic and northern European states are also impacted by the loss of overflights from Asia.

Ukraine's air traffic enterprise (UkSATSE) criticised the reports, saying that Eurocontrol "does not generate or use military forecasts, analytics, or assumptions to create its own forecasts."Ukrainian airspace will reopen as soon as the war ends, UkSATSE said.

The prediction will be updated with data in case of new factors like the end of the war, said Eurocontrol. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Polish, Italian presidents urge ongoing support for Ukraine

The West should continue to support Kyiv for as long as it needs amid Ukraine's fight against the Russian invasion, the presidents of Poland and Italy have said after holding talks in Warsaw.

The appeal came during a visit by Italian President Sergio Mattarella to Poland from April 17 to 19.

At a joint press conference, Duda said that calls have recently been voiced internationally for "a halt to support for Ukraine."

He told reporters: "If Ukraine stops receiving support, Russia is going to win this war, which will be merely the first step in its efforts to extend its power over the nations in this part of Europe." [Polish Radio]

Mattarella said Ukraine should be helped "as long as needed." He added that he agreed with Duda that if Ukraine were left "to the mercy of Russia," Moscow could attack other countries. [TVP World]

Duda said that both Poland and Italy wanted Ukraine to become part of the European Union "as soon as possible". [TVP World]

The two presidents also discussed economic cooperation between their countries, migration, and NATO's upcoming summit in Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital.

(ab/pk)

Russia presides over UN Security Council in April

Russia presided over the UN Security Council in April despite criticism following the country's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Twitter]

Sergiy Kyslytsya, Ukraine's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, called the event "a mockery of international diplomacy" while others called it "a bad joke." [Meduza] [Twitter]

The rotation of the presidency happens every month, however, the presiding country does not have any special power or influence over the decision-making. [Meduza]

(ava/gc)

Romania: Chair of NATO Military Committee visits Bucharest

The Chair of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, visited

Bucharest between April 11 and 14.

The country's Chief of Defence, General Daniel Petrescu, extended the invite. Bauer met with the Defence Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and a Presidential Advisor on National Security, as well as visited the NATO Multinational Battle Group headquarters and visited NATO troops in the central region of Cincu and southwestern region of Constanta. [NATO]

This comes after the European Council President, Charles Michel, visited Bucharest for his first official meeting with President Klaus Iohannis in three and a half years. Iohannis appealed to Michel in the hopes that the European Union (EU) would implement stricter sanctions against pro-Russian entities and individuals looking to derail a key Romanian ally's EU accession, namely that of Moldova.

The increased number of visits by NATO and EU leaders to Romania represents a broader concern regarding Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Romania has become particularly relevant geopolitically, with a shared border of around 600 kilometres with Ukraine. [CEPA]

(sw/gc)

Spain vows to back push for greater EU role in resolving Cyprus conflict

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has pledged support for a push by the new president of Cyprus to increase EU involvement in attempts to restart long-stalled peace negotiations on the island. [AFP/Barron's]

During a visit to Cyprus on April 4, Sanchez said that during Spain's presidency of the European Council in the second half of this year, Madrid would "support the search for a lasting and just solution based on UN resolutions and the principles of international law, and based on a bizonal, bicommunal federation that ensures safety, peace, and prosperity for people." [Cyprus-Mail]

Cyprus' President Nikos Christodoulides, who took office in February, briefed Sanchez on his proposal for increased EU engagement in the Cyprus peace process.

Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar, an ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has called on the international community to recognize the existence of

two separate states on the island, in opposition to the stance taken by Christodoulides. [Financial Mirror]

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded the island after a brief Greek-inspired coup. Greek Cypriots control two-thirds of the territory, while Turkish Cypriots control the northern part. Despite numerous attempts, reunification negotiations have been unsuccessful, most recently in 2017.

Baby steps urged

A recent report by the Crisis Group, an NGO and think tank based in Brussels which specialises in international conflict prevention and resolution, said that reunification in the short term seems unattainable in Cyprus, but that small steps can be taken towards reconciliation and regional stability.

The report identified seven key issues, including a widening split over sovereignty, tensions over hydrocarbons, and Ankara's assertive role in Northern Cyprus. [Cyprus Mail].

Rather than focusing on a comprehensive solution, the Crisis Group report advises pursuing more modest objectives, such as facilitating trade and enhancing cooperation within the island. It said that these incremental steps could build momentum towards a more united Cyprus.

(kg/pk)

Switzerland joins protest at informal UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine

Switzerland joined other Western countries in a protest against an informal United Nations (UN) Security Council meeting on Ukraine by sending low-level diplomats on April 5.

Before the meeting, Switzerland was one of 50 countries to release a joint statement accusing Russia of abusing its position as a permanent UN Security Council member to spread disinformation regarding the forced abductions and deportations of Ukrainian children.

Switzerland's ambassador to the UN in New York did not attend and was replaced by a lower-level diplomat, who was quoted by Swiss public radio station SRF as saying Russia had convened the meeting to "spread disinformation and twist facts."

The US and the United Kingdom blocked the UN from outside broadcasting of the scheduled speech by Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova. As soon as Lvova-Belova commenced her virtual speech, the US, UK, Malta and Albania all left the room.

This comes after the International Criminal Court issued a warrant of arrest in March for Lvova-Belova and Russian President Vladimir Putin for their involvement in the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Ukraine: United Nations extends inquiry into war crimes

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council decided to extend their investigation of possible war crimes on April 4 in Geneva, as a result of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Twenty six countries voted in favour of extending the mandate for a year, two countries voted against and 17 abstained. The UN Human Rights Council doesn't have legally binding powers but their decisions can encourage investigations to gather proof to be presented in front of courts. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Turkey, Syria, Iran and Russia hold two rounds of talks in Moscow

Two meetings between Turkey, Syria, Iran and Russia took place in Moscow on April 3-4 and April 25, after being delayed from March due to technical reasons at Russia's request. [Daily Sabah]

In the first meeting, Turkey was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Burak Akcapar, Syria by Deputy Foreign Minister Eymen Susan, Russia by Special Envoy for the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov and Iran by Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Asgar Haci. The content of the meeting included security issues as well as the future of the normalisation process and political relations. [T24][BBC Turkish]

Defence ministers and heads of intelligence services from the respective countries attended the second meeting on April 25. Turkey was represented by defence minister Hulusi Akar and head of the national

intelligence organisation (MIT) Hakan Fidan. [Anadolu Agency]

According to Syrian news agency SANA, the topic of the Turkish army's status in northern Syria was discussed. After the meeting, Akar told reporters: "We shared our aims to voluntary return of our Syrian brothers and sisters that we have been hosting." [Sözcü]

(lc/gc)

United Kingdom joins Asia's trade club

The United Kingdom has agreed to join The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a trade agreement between 11 nations: Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Canada, Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Peru and Chile.

The UK is the first non-founding country to join since the founding of the trade pact in 2018. The UK will be the second largest economy in the group following Japan and will take the collective worth of the group to GBP 11 trillion. [BBC]

Other than Australia, New Zealand, Brunei and Malaysia, the UK already had trade deals with the group's members, carried over from the European Union (EU) after Brexit. The UK has since made deals with Australia and New Zealand, leaving only Brunei and Malaysia that the island nation does not have a pre-existing trade deal with. [BBC]

The main reward for joining is greater access to each other's markets and a pledge to eliminate import charges and tariffs or reduce them by 95 percent, excluding sensitive domestic areas that need protection such as Japan's rice farming industry.

However, it is thought that joining the CPTPP will only bring a reasonably small financial reward with the government estimating a gain of around 0.08 percent of GDP over 10 years. This seems especially small when comparing it to the estimated 4 percent loss of UK income from leaving the EU. [BBC]

Unlike the EU, the CPTPP is not a single market or customs union, as a result of which group members are not held to identical standards and regulations. This has led some to be concerned as to how the UK intends to proceed with issues such as environmental and animal welfare. For example, the CPTPP is planning to lower tariffs on imports of Malaysian palm

oil, widely understood as a significant contributor to deforestation. [BBC]

While there are already many benefits to joining the trade group, the biggest rewards would come if other countries join. China and Taiwan are considering it, however, the best-case scenario would be if the US decided to join – reversing the decision made by President Trump not to do so – as America is a massive importer of British products, buying double the UK exports of the current CPTPP countries combined. [BBC]

However, for now, joining the CPTPP is seen as a post-Brexit win with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak saying the deal demonstrated the "real economic benefits of our post-Brexit freedoms." [BBC]

(sm/gc)

Forum on Middle Corridor developments held in the Kazakhstan embassy in Bucharest

The Kazakhstan embassy in Bucharest hosted a forum on April 8 to discuss developments in the Middle Corridor, an initiative that seeks to connect Turkey to China via Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea.

The forum was jointly organised by Constanta Port Business Association and the embassy, with businesses, transport company representatives and government officials from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Romania in attendance. The Middle Corridor is a loosely defined trade route that spans the Central Asian steppe, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus mountains. It links China and the markets of East Asia with Georgia, Turkey and European markets. [FPRI]

The corridor's major components include the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and the Trans-Caucasus Trade and Transit Corridor. For its advocates, the Middle Corridor will breathe new life into the ancient Silk Road. [FPRI]

The development and implementation of the trade route crossing the Caspian Sea and Caucasus mountains was the focus of the forum. Other points of discussion included how best to attract investments to the route's infrastructure and the simplification of customs procedures.

The trade route has become particularly important geopolitically as a crossing between East and West since Russian and Iranian sanctions have made the Middle Corridor the only feasible route by which trade between Europe and Asia can take place. [AzerNews]

(sw/gc)

World Health Organization declares Azerbaijan and Tajikistan malaria-free by the

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared Azerbaijan and Tajikistan malaria-free after a persistent and lengthy effort to eradicate the disease from their territories. [WHO]

According to WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the people and governments of these countries have put in considerable effort to eliminate malaria, and their achievement demonstrates that with proper resources and political commitment, eradicating malaria is achievable. He expressed hope that other nations can learn from their experience. [WHO]

When a country successfully interrupts indigenous malaria transmission by Anopheles mosquitoes nationwide for at least three consecutive years and has the capacity to prevent the re-establishment of transmission, the WHO grants the country a certification of malaria elimination, recognizing their malaria-free status. Azerbaijan and Tajikistan achieved this certification by detecting their last cases of locally transmitted Plasmodium vivax malaria in 2012 and 2014, respectively. [WHO]

With this certification, a total of 41 countries and 1 territory have been recognized as malaria-free by the WHO, including 21 countries in the European region. Malaria control efforts in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan included investments and public health policies that enabled the governments to eliminate the disease and maintain a malaria-free status. Both countries utilise national electronic malaria surveillance systems for nearly real-time detection of cases and interventions like mosquito-eating fish and water management measures to control malaria vectors. [WHO]

(at/gc)

Europe rushes to evacuate citizens after fighting erupts in Sudan

European nations joined other countries who scrambled to rush their citizens to safety after violent clashes erupted in Sudan, fighting that may push the African country into a protracted civil war.

Fighting between the military and the well-armed Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group on April 15 triggered a humanitarian crisis and has killed hundreds of people. It has left millions of Sudanese without access to basic services and has trapped many in their homes. Thousands of foreign diplomats, aid workers, students and their families found themselves stuck in a war zone. [AlArabiya]

A power struggle erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and a collection of paramilitary forces led by the former warlord Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and subsequent failed attempts to transition to a democratic and civilian-led government, in-fighting has been on the rise. [CNN] [TheGuardian]

Thousands of civilians have been wounded in the clashes and thousands have left their homes. Hassan Faraz, who was waiting in Port Sudan to board a ship headed for Saudi Arabia, told Reuters news agency: "I was hoping that while I'm here things would be resolved and that there would be some kind of reconciliation, or some kind of peace settlement, according to *RFI*. [AllAfrica.com]

Mediators from across the world have struggled to persuade either side to observe ceasefires. A bloc of east African nations put forward an initiative for the two sides to hold talks. Burhan on Friday ruled out negotiations with Hamdan Dagalo Dagalo, accusing him of orchestrating a rebellion against the state.

At least two convoys involved in evacuations were attacked, including one carrying Qatari embassy staff, and another carrying French citizens. France and Germany said they had evacuated around 700 people, without giving a breakdown of their nationalities. Jordan had previously said four planes carrying 343 people, including Jordanian nationals and residents of Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Germany, had departed Sudan. [AlArabiya]

The Swiss foreign ministry announced on April 23 via Twitter that the country would close its embassy in the capital, Khartoum, and confirmed that embassy staff and their families were successfully evacuated via

Ethiopia and Djibouti with the help of French forces. Dutch citizens in Sudan should prepare for a "prolonged stay in the country" and therefore take stock of their food supplies and other necessary resources, wrote the Dutch Embassy in the capital on April 16. [NLTimes] [Twitter][Twitter]

Contacting citizens

According to a spokesperson, the Dutch embassy has been in contact with about 50 Dutch citizens, who were urged to keep their relatives, family members and friends informed of their situation. [NLTimes]

The main airport has been at the centre of fighting and artillery barrages have made movement unsafe in and out of one of Africa's largest cities. Diplomats have been targeted in attacks, and at least five aid workers killed. A convoy of about 65 vehicles carrying some 700 international United Nations, NGO and embassy staff, alongside their dependents, drove from Khartoum to Port Sudan on April 23 as part of the evacuations, a diplomatic source said. [AlArabiya]

Several countries sent military planes from Djibouti to fly people out from the capital, while other operations took people by convoy to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, which is about 800 kilometres (500 miles) by road from Khartoum. From there some have boarded ships to Saudi Arabia. Indonesia said so far more than 500 of its citizens had been evacuated to the port, and were awaiting transport to Jeddah, across the Red Sea.

More than 1,000 European Union (EU) citizens were evacuated from Sudan during the weekend of April 22-23, the bloc's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told journalists. Borrell noted that 21 diplomats from the EU's mission in Khartoum were repatriated, with the EU ambassador having been moved outside the capital, elsewhere in Sudan. An EU official told AFP that there were an estimated 1,500 citizens from the bloc in Khartoum. [AlArabiya]

"It has been a complex operation and it has been a successful operation," Borrell said.

WFP restarts

The World Food Program (WFP) said in a statement on May 1 that it has lifted its suspension of operations in Sudan, as the fighting threatens food security for millions. The WFP said distribution of food is expected to commence in the states of Gedaref, Gezira, Kassala and White Nile in the coming days to provide the life-saving assistance that many so desperately need. [VOA]

The agency said, “We will take utmost care to ensure the safety of all our staff and partners as we rush to meet the growing needs of the most vulnerable.”

The WFP suspended operations when three staff members were killed on the first day of the conflict between Sudan’s army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The WFP noted that more than 15 million people faced severe food insecurity in Sudan before the conflict began, and said it expects the number “to grow significantly as the fighting continues.”

(gt-gc)

Czech president promises more ammunition for Ukraine

Czech President Petr Pavel, who in late April became the first head of state to visit Ukrainian troops in the east of the country since Russia’s invasion, has announced that Prague will work to increase the supply of ammunition for Kyiv.

After returning from an April 28-30 visit to Ukraine with his Slovak counterpart, Zuzana Caputova, Pavel said that Ukraine was facing a shortage of ammunition to launch a counter-offensive against invading Russian forces. [Radio Prague]

Pavel said that Czech defence companies would work with their Ukrainian counterparts on six major projects, including the production of ammunition, small arms, and F/A-259 aircraft, as well as the repair and modernisation of Soviet-era T-64 and T-72 tanks. [euromaidanpress]

Pavel, a retired NATO general and a former head of the Czech armed forces, met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv on April 28.

Pavel also visited the central-eastern city of Dnipro – the first head of state to make a trip to the area since Russia invaded Ukraine last year, Czech officials said. [Radio Prague] [Expats]

Pavel said in a Twitter post on April 29 that Prague would open a consulate in Dnipro to provide assistance needed to rebuild the war-torn area. [Pravda]

The Czech president also promised to push the EU to start accession talks with Ukraine by the end of this year. [CNN]

(yl/pk)

German company takes legal action against Albania for controversial port project

German company EMS Shipping and Trading has initiated legal proceedings against the Albanian government in the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) Court of Arbitration, located in Washington. [Euractiv]

The lawsuit pertains to a concession granted to the company to operate a terminal at the Port of Durres, which is slated for a renovation worth billions of euros. The company sent a letter of complaint to the Albanian government, the German diplomatic representation in Albania and the European Union delegation, before filing the lawsuit on April 7. [Euractiv]

The company has had the right to operate the East Terminal of the port for ship loading and unloading since 2013. However, due to plans to develop the port, the company needs to relocate to the new port in Porto Romano. The German company is concerned because the new port has not been built yet, which means the future of their business operations is uncertain.

Albania has faced several arbitration cases recently, including a EUR 110 million lawsuit with Italian businessman Francesco Bechetti and a EUR 40 million ruling in favour of a road construction company called Aktor. Prime Minister Edi Rama has expressed his intention to withdraw from a treaty that safeguards foreign investors from government arbitrariness, a treaty signed by 160 countries.

During a press conference, Rama stated that they are considering leaving the jurisdiction of arbitration courts altogether due to the scandalous nature of recent events. The treaty in question is linked to the ICSID, the same court where the German company filed its complaint. If Albania departs from the treaty, foreign investors could face the risk of asset seizure by the state without any legal recourse in the court. [Euractiv]

(at/gc)

German Chancellor visits Romania, pledges support for Bucharest's accession to Schengen area

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Bucharest on April 3 to discuss Black Sea security with President Klaus Iohannis and Moldovan President Maia Sandu. [DW]

Iohannis called for an increased North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) presence in the Black Sea. This was later stressed at the Romanian-hosted trilateral meeting on Black Sea security held on April 13 where the foreign ministers of Romania, Ukraine and Moldova issued a joint statement pledging support to one another as they work towards European Union (EU) and NATO membership in the face of the Russian invasion. [AP] [AT] [Reuters]

Also present at the April 3 meeting, Sandu pledged Moldova's support for NATO, calling for help to undermine alleged Russian-led destabilisation tactics in the country. Scholz pledged support for Moldovan accession to the EU and Romania accession to the Schengen area. [DW]

Scholz's show of support for Romanian accession to the Schengen area comes as SchengenVisaInfo released data on April 10 showing that exclusion from the zone costs Romanian road carriers EUR 2.4 billion annually.

(sw/gc)

Hungary signs new energy deals with Russia amid Ukraine war

Despite the war in Ukraine, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto on April 11 signed new deals for supplies of Russian energy – a move that was quickly slammed by a top official in Kyiv as support for Moscow's war crimes. [Politico] [AP]

The deal inked in Moscow means Budapest will be able to import natural gas beyond the quantities agreed in a previous 15-year contract with Russian state energy giant Gazprom. [AP]

Szijjarto also secured crude supplies through the Druzhba pipeline via Ukraine, along with a renewed financing agreement for Hungary's Paks nuclear power plant. [Bloomberg]

"The security of Hungary's energy supply requires uninterrupted transportation of gas, oil and nuclear fuel," Szijjarto told a press conference. "To meet these three conditions, Hungarian-Russian energy cooperation must be uninterrupted. It has nothing to do with political preferences." [Politico]

The deals underline Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Budapest's schism with the European Union mainstream over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Orban has fiercely opposed the EU's sanctions on Moscow.

Oleg Ustenko, an economic adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, told Politico that buying more gas from Russia means "giving them more capacity to escalate the war".

"You have to be completely blind not to see what kinds of crimes you are sponsoring", he added.

(msa/pk)

Hungarian, Serbian leaders attend military parade in Belgrade

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic observed a military parade in Belgrade on April 22. [Independent]

"Serbian-Hungarian relations are at the highest level in the history of our countries," Vucic wrote on Instagram. He greeted Orban by saying "to once again welcome a great friend of Serbia." Both Serbia and Hungary have maintained their political and economic ties with Russia since February 2022 despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [AP News]

(lc/gc)

Italian judges under fire after suspect wanted by US flees to Russia

Italy's justice minister on April 19 launched disciplinary action against judges who allowed a fugitive Russian businessman wanted by America to be kept under house arrest instead of in jail.

Businessman Artem Uss, who is wanted on charges including smuggling military technology from the US to Russia, fled Italy and returned to his home country. US

authorities have also accused Uss of smuggling oil from embargoed Venezuela to Russia and China.

Officials in Italy had agreed to extradite Uss to America on March 21, just two days before he absconded.

Italian Justice Minister Carlo Nordio has accused the judges in the case of negligence in evaluating circumstances that indicated a high risk of escape.

Authorities in Italy had told the US that, under Italian law, house arrests are equal to prison detainment. [ANSA] [ANSA]

Back at home in Russia, Uss told reporters that he had fled due to the "clear political bias" of Italian courts, which he said were likely to "cave in" under pressure from the US.

Italian news outlets have speculated that Russian intelligence agencies had a hand in Uss' escape. [AP News]

(ps/pk)

Kosovo and Serbia hold talks on establishing Serb municipalities in northern Kosovo

Kosovo and Serbia have established the Joint Monitoring committee to oversee the normalisation process between the two countries as a prerequisite of the verbal agreement that was reached on March 18, in Ohrid, North Macedonia.

Representatives of both countries met in Brussels on April 4 to discuss the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority municipalities in northern Kosovo as a result of the normalisation process between the two countries. [Balkan Insight]

In the meeting, Serbia was represented by the Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, Petar Petkovic, and Kosovo by Deputy Prime Minister Besnik Bislimi. The representatives discussed the establishment of Serb-municipalities at a technical level.

After the meeting, Petkovic said: "today is the first time we discussed the most concrete steps for the formation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities." The next bilateral meeting is expected to take place between Serbia President Aleksander Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti in May.

Prior to the bilateral meeting, Vucic said on April 3 that normalising relations with Kosovo was unrealistic. He added during an appearance on Serbia's Pink TV that normalisation talks would be "torturous" and that he is not optimistic about the process. [Anadolu Agency]

(lc/gc)

Kosovo Serbs refuse to participate in local elections

Ethnic Serbs living in northern Kosovo didn't turn out in larger numbers in local elections on April 23, with only 1,567 citizens, or about 3.47 percent of the registered voters, casting their votes. Serbian President Aleksander Vucic said on April 7 that they would not participate in the elections. [Reuters] [Balkan Insight]

Four towns in northern Kosovo do not recognize Kosovo's authority and see Belgrade as the sole authority. The elections, which were initially planned to take place in December 2022, were postponed due to unrest in the region and the closing of border crossings by ethnic Serbs. [Daily Sabah]

During a national assembly meeting on April 6, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti urged ethnic Serbs to vote in elections.

"Political pluralism and above all the right of the Serbian community to vote freely and without interference is essential," he said. "Anyone who continues to violate this fundamental right has nothing to expect but our institutions to respond with the force of law."

Despite the Kosovo Serbs' refusal to participate in the elections, the election commission put voting containers on the borders on April 23. The European Union criticised the low turnout in the elections, saying that they offered no "long-term solutions." [Anadolu Agency] [Reuters]

Vucic praised the election boycott. It was "a peaceful political uprising against their occupiers," he said. [AP News]

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Border police denies Russian delegations' entrance, declares embassy

staff persona non grata

A Russian delegation led by the head of the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov, was denied entry to Moldova on April 17 by border police on the grounds of possibility of interfering in the country's internal affairs. [Balkan Insight]

After the denial of entry, the government summoned the Russian Ambassador on April 19 to declare the embassy staff persona non grata, government press secretary Daniel Voda said. Russian Ambassador Oleg Vasnetsov told reporters they did not receive an explanation of the act and added: "We consider these actions to be unfriendly steps towards our country." [Reuters]

As a countermove, Russia announced on April 25 that it banned three Moldovan members of parliament (MPs) from the ruling party and the Interior Minister from entering the country. The authorities in Moscow banned Interior Minister Ana Revenco and three deputies of the Action and Solidarity Party, PAS, Oazu Nantoi, Olesea Stamate and Lilian Carp. All four banned Moldovan politicians said they did not intend to go to Russia under Putin's regime. [Balkan Insight]

The Russian delegation had aimed to campaign for a candidate, Viktor Petrov, running for governor in the upcoming elections on April 30 in the country's pro-Russian region Gagauzia. The decision to bar the Russian delegation was welcomed by Andrian Cheptonar, MP from the ruling PAS party.

"It's illegal for politicians and artists and priests from an aggressor and terrorist country to campaign here," he wrote on Facebook.

Minnikhanov posted a video on social media saying his delegation has been labelled as "undesirable." He said the people of Tatarstan and Gagauzia, both home to Turkic peoples, were "brothers." [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Netherlands' King receives Macron

Dutch King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima received on April 11 President Emmanuel Macron in Amsterdam who then met with the presidents of the Senate and of the lower house of Parliament. [NLTimes]

The next day, on his visit to the Hague, Macron held a speech on the future of Europe but was interrupted by a man shouting: “Sorry to interrupt you, Mr President. Where has French democracy gone?” followed by two other activists holding a slogan reading: “president of violence and hypocrisy.”

The police arrested one of the activists shortly after and removed the other from the hall.

(ava/gc)

Netherlands discusses ties with Ukraine

On an official visit to Kyiv, Dutch Finance Minister Sigrid Kaag held talks with her Ukrainian counterpart Sergii Marchenko and the Minister of Economic Affairs Petrashko Ihor over the need for the Netherlands to provide more financial support to Ukraine and the need for the two countries to strengthen their relationship. [Twitter]

Minister Kaag called for “a view of the future: to determine together how to fill in Ukraine’s recovery,” believing that the money spent on aid sent to Ukraine will not only help the country recover from these difficult times but also support future investments in the economy. [NLTimes]

The Netherlands has invested EUR 1.2 billion in military equipment to support Ukraine and the Cabinet intends to be more transparent about it. "In addition, transparency about deliveries of military equipment effectively sends a signal to both Ukraine and Russia,” Defense Minister Kajsa Ollongren said.

Until now, the Netherlands has supplied 441 vehicles, including 4-ton trucks, 21 bridges and 143 drones. [NLTimes]

Through the World Bank, the Netherlands will also provide EUR 100 million to finance farms in Ukraine through the coming winter.

(ava/gc)

Norway, Sweden expel suspected Russian spies from embassies

Norway has expelled 15 Russian diplomats and embassy staff suspected of spying, while Sweden has

ejected five similarly positioned individuals after probes by security services in the two Nordic nations.

The suspects expelled by Norway constitute around a third of the Russian embassy staff in Oslo. Meanwhile, Sweden's domestic security agency has previously said that "every third Russian diplomat in Sweden is an intelligence officer." [AP News]

According to Norway's state security service, the PST, the alleged Russian intelligence officers worked on trade and general ambassadorial issues. One of them is suspected of attempting to buy advanced technology. [AP News][Reuters]

The expulsions from Norway took place on April 13 and from Sweden on April 25. [Reuters] [AP News]

In a tit-for-tat move, Russia expelled 10 Norwegian diplomats from Moscow. Regarding Oslo's actions, the Russian foreign ministry said: "This hostile step further aggravated the situation in our bilateral relations, which are already at a critically low level." [Moscow Times] [Reuters]

In 2022, Norway and Sweden each expelled three Russians from their respective embassies. [Reuters] [Euronews]

(ef/pk)

Slovakia suspects Russian technicians of sabotaging MiG-29 jets for Ukraine

MiG-29 fighter jets donated by Bratislava to Ukraine cannot undertake combat missions because Russian technicians tampered with their engines, Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad has claimed.

Nad said defective parts in the Soviet-designed warplanes were found in engines that were inspected by Russian technicians who worked at the Sliac air force base in Slovakia until last year. [Euractiv]

"They were able to fly, but that doesn't mean they were also capable of combat," said Nad. [Euractiv]

Slovak Air Force General Lubomir Svoboda said the Russian technicians had been stationed in Slovakia under a long-term deal with Moscow because they possessed "greater know-how" of Soviet-era aircraft. [Telegraph]

Ukrainian pilots flew four Slovak MiG-29s to Ukraine with the help of the Slovak air force in March, while another nine were handed over to Kyiv in mid-April. [AP News]

The Russian embassy in Slovakia said that Bratislava's decision to deliver fighter jets to Ukraine had led to "an unpredictable and dangerous escalation of the conflict", and warned that "the initiators of the decisions" would be held responsible. [Euractiv]

Ukraine has been asking its allies to provide more advanced Western fighter jets like US-made F-16s or British Typhoons to replace its ageing fleet of Soviet MiG and Sukhoi planes. But key Western powers have declined the request, arguing that it would take years to train Ukraine pilots and establish supply chains to maintain such machines. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Slovakia in March became the second NATO country after Poland to respond to Ukraine's appeal for warplanes, which Kyiv has been seeking after securing high-end battle tanks from Western allies. Bratislava will receive compensation of EUR 200 million from the EU and a hefty discount on US-designed military helicopters in exchange for giving its MiG-29s to Ukraine. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Meanwhile, Slovakia's pro-Western government has been criticised for its decision to donate the MiGs. Populist Robert Fico, whose leftist opposition Smer party is topping opinion polls ahead of early parliamentary elections in September, threatened to sue the government for making such an important decision without parliament's approval.

(yl/pk)

Slovakia plans to boost shell production fivefold in support of Ukraine

Slovakia's defence minister has said his country plans to ramp up the production of 155 mm artillery rounds fivefold to meet Kyiv's call for more shells as it fights invading Russian forces.

Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad, who accompanied Prime Minister Eduard Heger on a visit to Kyiv on March 31, said that Slovakia could manufacture as many as 150,000 shells per year if it receives financial and material support from the EU. [European Conservative]

“We are taking measures to be able to quintuple the production of 155mm ammunition in our factories,” Nad added. [Balkan insight]

Western and Ukrainian leaders have warned that Kyiv is using up shells much faster than its allies can currently produce such ammunition. [Reuters]

Nad said that two major Slovak military companies at present have the capacity to produce 30,000 rounds of 155 mm ammunition in total per year, while Ukraine is firing at least 4,000 shells a day. [European Conservative] [AP]

Slovakia plans to increase ammunition production in two phases, the first of which will begin on January 1, 2024, meaning that Ukraine will not be able to make use of such shells for its widely expected counter-offensive this spring. [Euractiv]

A significant expansion of Slovakia’s ammunition production would require financial support from the EU to help upgrade the country’s infrastructure, machinery and level of automation. [European Conservative]

“The European Defence Fund, the European Investment Bank, and the search for resources directly in the EU budget are being considered. The Slovak government is discussing with the [European] Commission how to use this option for our industry,” said Nad.

Defence and foreign ministers from 17 EU countries and Norway in March agreed on a EUR 2 billion plan to send 1 million artillery rounds to Ukraine over the next 12 months and to replenish their own stockpiles. [BBC] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Slovakia is set to hold early parliamentary elections in September. In the run-up to the ballot, 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 the grouping could undermine EU and NATO unity on Russia. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Slovakia and Poland in March became the first two NATO countries to announce they are handing over MiG-29 fighter jets in response to Kyiv’s requests for warplanes, which Ukraine has been seeking after securing high-end battle tanks from Western allies. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(yl/pk)

Switzerland: Bern pledges additional CHF 1.5 billion to Ukraine

Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis announced on April 13 that the government intends on providing at least an additional CHF 1.5 billion in aid to Ukraine by 2028.

These funds are in addition to the CHF 300 million already earmarked for the 2023-2024 period, as well as in addition to ambulances, fire engines and firefighting equipment donated by various cantonal governments.

The Foreign Ministry added that this aid forms part of the international cooperation strategy for the 2025-2028 period regarding the reconstruction of Ukraine. The strategy was established at the Lugano Conference last July, which was held in the southeastern region of Switzerland. [SwissInfo]

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) program aimed at bolstering Ukraine's economy announced the next day, on April 14, that Switzerland, in conjunction with the Netherlands, committed an additional USD 53 million toward supporting Ukraine's private sector. Switzerland's funds will go towards supporting small-scale farmers. [KyivIndependent]

These financial contributions come at a time where Switzerland has been heavily criticised regarding the support it has provided to Ukraine in light of Russia's illegal invasion. A letter signed by the G7 and European Union ambassadors in Bern – representing their respective organisations – criticised Swiss privacy laws, citing loopholes that are allowing Russians to hide billions of francs in offshore assets. The letter, dated April 5, implored the Swiss government to better ensure compliance with the sanctions regime and to avoid becoming a safe haven for Russian oligarchs. [FinancialTimes]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Bern indicts former Gambian minister for crimes against humanity

Switzerland's attorney general filed an indictment on April 18 against the former Gambian interior minister, Ousman Sonko, for crimes against humanity.

The country's Federal Criminal Court will hear the case, the date of which is still to be determined. This will be

the second crimes against humanity trial to be held in Switzerland.

Sonko is accused of supporting, participating in and failing to prevent systematic attacks that were part of a repressive security forces-led campaign against opponents of the Jammeh regime.

After his decade serving as interior minister came to end in 2016, along with the overthrow of the Jammeh dictatorship, Sonko sought asylum in Switzerland. In January 2017, he was arrested under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

Sonko's lawyer has disputed the charges, highlighting that some of the alleged crimes occurred before articles on crimes against humanity came into force in the Swiss Criminal Code. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland and UK sign declaration of intent to strengthen European security

The Swiss Defence Minister Viola Amherd and UK Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace signed a declaration of intent on April 20 in London after a series of talks regarding European security, the consequences of the Russo-Ukrainian war and increasing cooperation between the two countries on security matters.

While nonbinding, the declaration formalised future security talks and outlined areas of potential cooperation, such as military training and technology. This latest declaration is one of many between the two countries in the past 12 months as the UK seeks to strengthen ties with another non-European Union member post-Brexit. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Turkey's Foreign Ministry summons Danish envoy over attacks on Turkish flag and Quran

Turkey summoned the Danish ambassador in Ankara to express condemnation regarding attacks and protests that happened on April 14 over the Turkish flag and the Quran, the Turkish foreign ministry said in a statement. [Reuters]

“It is unacceptable to allow these vile attacks under the guise of freedom of expression,” the foreign ministry said in the statement. [Anadolu Agency]

“We will undoubtedly continue our efforts in bilateral and multilateral platforms against this vile attack and similar hate crimes, which are clear examples of Islamophobia and xenophobia that have increased alarmingly in Europe recently,” the ministry. [Reuters]

The protests are linked to a far-right anti-Muslim group called “Payrioterne Gar Live.” The group conducted similar protests on March 24 and 31 in front of the Turkish embassy in Copenhagen.

Far-right Danish politician Rasmus Paludan committed a similar act under protection of Swedish and Danish police on the grounds of freedom of expression in February. [Anadolu Agency]

(lc/gc)

Turkish and Greek defence ministers meet in signs of easing tensions

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and Greece’s Nikos Panagiotopoulos toured areas of Turkey devastated by a powerful earthquake in early February during a rare visit by the Greek official. The visit is part of efforts to reduce tensions over long-standing disputes, including maritime boundaries and drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean. [APnews]

“I hope that as two civilised countries, Turkey and Greece can solve these problems within the framework of good neighbourly relations ... through peaceful means and methods and amid mutual respect and dialogue,” Akar told reporters. The last Greek defence minister visit to Turkey occurred in 2002. [greekreporter][APnews]

Greece was among the first countries to offer help to Turkey following the earthquake, with the outpouring of support leading to a de-escalation of tensions. Turkey for its part, offered its condolences and support following a deadly train crash in northern Greece. Panagiotopoulo reiterated Greece's commitment to support Turkey in dealing with the disaster's long-term consequences.

Akar and Panagiotopoulos toured the disaster areas by helicopter and visited a hospital and temporary accommodations for those displaced by the earthquakes. The Greek defence minister

acknowledged the scale of destruction and the rebuilding efforts underway.

Both ministers expressed a desire to establish stability in bilateral relations, with Akar emphasising the importance of maintaining the positive atmosphere and keeping dialogue open. Panagiotopoulos agreed, stating that tragedies like earthquakes put the existing issues between Greece and Turkey into perspective and can serve as a catalyst for reducing tensions. [APnews]

Panagiotopoulos said: "The symbolic message that comes from tragedies and natural disasters of this scale go far beyond any disagreement and differences that we may have. They may act as a lever to reduce tension and create the circumstances to facilitate better communication between the two sides."

(kg/gc)

Ukraine's Zelensky visits Poland to cement unity against Russia

President Volodymyr Zelensky made an official visit to Poland on April 5, aiming to strengthen ties with Warsaw and thank it for staunchly supporting Kyiv during Russia's war on Ukraine. [Euronews] [CNN] [RTE] [Reuters] [Notes from Poland] [TVP]

Zelensky met with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and signed a document outlining plans to jointly manufacture 125mm calibre tank shells to aid the military effort against Moscow. [Euronews] [PAP]

A further three documents were signed by the pair outlining plans for Ukraine to purchase Polish hardware and ammunition. Polish government spokesperson Piotr Muller said this included 150 Polish-produced Rosomak armoured vehicles, 100 Polish-made surface-to-air missiles for the hand-held Piorun launcher system, and several Rak mortar modules. [RTE] [TVP] [Reuters]

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov and Polish Development and Technology Minister Waldemar Buda, who also attended the meeting, signed a memorandum on the planned involvement of Polish companies in the post-war rebuilding of Ukraine. Broadcaster Euronews reported this would provide work for hundreds of Polish companies. [RTE] [Euronews]

At a joint press conference with Zelensky, Polish President Andrzej Duda said that Warsaw was preparing to hand Ukraine another six Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets "relatively quickly". Poland had already promised Ukraine eight such machines. [Europe Monthly April 2023].

Duda added that after Poland receives new FA-50 and F-35 aircraft, it will be possible to send its "entire remaining fleet" of MiG-29s to Ukraine if necessary. [Euronews] [RTE] [Notes from Poland] [TVP]

More security guarantees for Kyiv?

Duda said Poland was pressing for additional security guarantees for Kyiv as Ukraine seeks to join NATO, although he did not provide details.

The Financial Times earlier this year reported that Kyiv wanted guarantees that would effectively bind leading NATO powers such as the United States, Britain and France into providing military assistance in any future attack on Ukraine.

The Polish and Ukrainian presidents also broached difficult historical topics, including the Volhynia massacres during World War II, during which Ukrainian nationalists killed tens of thousands of ethnic Polish civilians. Duda said that he and his Ukrainian counterpart "want to build a policy of honest, reliable memory". Zelensky said he hoped that "all historical issues will be resolved". [Notes from Poland] [Euronews]

Show of solidarity

A public address outside the Royal Castle in Warsaw drew a crowd of flag-waving Poles and Ukrainians. The two presidents stressed their unity amid Moscow's war against Kyiv, with Zelensky saying: "Arm in arm, united in freedom and spirit, we will bring victory together."

He also thanked Poles for taking in Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. Well over a million remain in Poland, according to estimates by the government in Warsaw. [PAP] [Euronews] [CNN]

Duda described Zelensky as "a hero of the free world", and said that Ukraine "has the right to decide its own sovereignty and the conditions for peace talks". [Euronews] [RTE]

Poland – which has long been fearful of Russia, its giant neighbour to the east – remembers its time as a Soviet satellite as a painful period in history. It has been playing a key role in encouraging Western

political and military support for Kyiv, and was the first NATO country to offer Ukraine MiG-29 warplanes. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Euronews] [CNN]

Zelensky's visit highlighted what Euronews described as Poland's rising role in a new international security order emerging as a result of Russia's war on Ukraine. Morawiecki said that the trip was "extremely important because we are shaping the picture of Europe for the future".

Since Moscow's troops invaded Ukraine in February last year, Warsaw has launched a major armament drive, buying tanks and other equipment from US and South Korean manufacturers, while America has stepped up its military presence in Poland. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Euronews] [CNN]

Award for Ukrainian president

While in Warsaw, Zelensky received Poland's highest and oldest civilian distinction – the Order of the White Eagle – for his services to Polish-Ukrainian relations. Duda, who presented him with the order, described Zelensky as a "model of state and national leadership". Zelensky, meanwhile, praised the "historic relations... and historic strength between our countries". [PAP] [Euronews] [CNN] [Reuters]

The head of Duda's foreign policy office, Marcin Przydacz, pointed out that the visit was announced in advance – rather than being undertaken with the highest level of secrecy – and it was the first time since the outbreak of the war that Zelensky and his First Lady, Olena Zelenska, travelled abroad together. [Euronews] [RTE] [TVP]

Zelensky's two past trips to Poland – in February 2023 and December 2022 – occurred as he was travelling through the country on his way to Britain and the US. [Notes from Poland] [CNN]

Tackling grain glut

The latest visit took place at a time when a large influx of Ukrainian grain into Poland has caused local prices to fall, sparking protests by Polish farmers. The grain is meant to be temporarily stored in the country before being sent on to the Middle East and North Africa.

However, farmers have said it is entering the Polish market and threatening their livelihoods. Poland's agriculture minister, Henryk Kowalczyk, resigned on April 5 after the European Commission decided to extend duty-free imports for Ukrainian grain until next June. Morawiecki and Zelensky said they had reached a

deal to resolve the problem. [Euronews] [RTE] [Reuters] [First News]

(wd/pk)

Pope says Vatican involved in Ukraine peace mission

Pope Francis has said the Vatican is involved in a peace mission to end the war in Ukraine.

"The mission is in the course now, but it is not yet public. When it is public, I will reveal it," Francis told reporters on April 30 as he was returning to Rome from a three-day trip to Hungary. [CNN]

In early April, the pontiff said that a papal visit to Kyiv was "on the table" after he was invited by Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and the city's mayor, Vitali Klitschko. [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, during his visit to Hungary on April 28, the pope warned against "adolescent belligerence" and called for the recovery of the "European spirit" amid the war in Ukraine. [AFP] [Le Monde]

"It seems that politics serves more to stir up emotions rather than to resolve problems as the maturity attained after the horrors of the war gives way to regression towards a kind of adolescent belligerence," the pontiff said.

He added: "At this historical juncture, Europe is crucial... It is called to take up its proper role, which is to unite those far apart." [DW]

On the first day of his trip to Budapest, Pope Francis met with right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has been criticised in the West for his friendly ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and for his hardline anti-immigration policies.

Some analysts said the pontiff's visit to Hungary benefited Orban because it drew attention to the central European country. [AFP]

The pope himself drew criticism when, in an interview published last June, he said that moves by NATO may have "somehow either provoked or not prevented" the war in Ukraine. [Politico]

But the same month he also implicitly accused Moscow of "armed conquest, expansionism and imperialism". [Reuters]

During his visit to Budapest, the pontiff spoke out in favour of migrants being accepted. Orban, meanwhile, has said in the past he would not allow Hungary to be transformed into an “immigrant country”. [AP] [Reuters]

On the second day of his trip, Pope Francis met war refugees who fled across the border to Hungary, which has a 135 kilometre frontier with Ukraine, and thanked Budapest for welcoming them. [The Guardian]

(msa/pk)

Azerbaijan arrests suspects in connection to recent shooting of MP critical of Iran

Four people were arrested by Azerbaijani officials on April 3 in connection with the recent shooting and injury of Fazil Mustafa, a member of parliament who had been vocal in his criticism of neighbouring Iran.

Azerbaijani state security services deemed the incident a “terror attack” and Mustafa has been receiving medical treatment while recuperating in a hospital since the incident. Azerbaijan has also put forward the possibility of Iranian involvement in the attempted assassination of an anti-Tehran Azerbaijani lawmaker. [Reuters]

On April 6, Azerbaijan announced that it would expel four Iranian diplomats for engaging in "provocative actions" that have contributed to the recent decline in relations between the two neighbouring nations. The tensions have been exacerbated in recent months, with the opening of an Azerbaijani embassy in Israel being a significant flashpoint. Azerbaijan's foreign ministry has expressed strong disapproval of Iran's recent conduct towards Azerbaijan and summoned its ambassador.

The ministry declared the four Iranian diplomats as persona non grata, giving them 48 hours to leave the country.

The foreign ministers of Iran and Azerbaijan recently had two phone calls on April 8 to discuss the issues and misunderstandings between their two countries, following the expulsion of four Iranian diplomats by Baku over what it called "provocative actions."

The Iran state media reported that in the phone calls between Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Jeyhun Bayramov, the two sides talked about the

problems and misunderstandings that exist between them, as well as potential solutions.

They also emphasised the importance of good neighbourliness and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. One of the issues that caused the dispute was Azerbaijan's suggestion that Iran may have been involved in the attempted assassination of an anti-Tehran Azerbaijani lawmaker, which Tehran denied. [Reuters]

A power struggle erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and a collection of paramilitary forces led by the former warlord Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and subsequent failed attempts to transition to a democratic and civilian-led government, in-fighting has been on the rise. [CNN] [TheGuardian]

Thousands of civilians have been wounded in the clashes and thousands have left their homes. Hassan Faraz, who was waiting in Port Sudan to board a ship headed for Saudi Arabia, told Reuters news agency: "I was hoping that while I'm here things would be resolved and that there would be some kind of reconciliation, or some kind of peace settlement, according to *RFI*. [AllAfrica.com]

Mediators from across the world have struggled to persuade either side to observe ceasefires. A bloc of east African nations put forward an initiative for the two sides to hold talks. Burhan on Friday ruled out negotiations with Hamdan Dagalo Dagalo, accusing him of orchestrating a rebellion against the state.

(at/gc)

Finland to buy Israeli air defence system

Finland has said it plans to purchase an advanced air defence system from Israel for EUR 316 million. The Nordic country announced the move a day after it officially joined NATO. [Defense News] [Insider]

The David's Sling system has been jointly developed by Israeli defence technology company Rafael and US aerospace and defence contractor Raytheon. It is designed to intercept missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and aircraft. [Defense News]

The deal will see Israel offering the system to another country for the first time. The sale will need to be approved by the United States. [Insider]

The hardware will “significantly” expand the range of Finland’s ground-based air defence capabilities, the Finnish defence ministry said in a statement. Defence Minister Antti Kaikkonen added that the David’s Sling system would provide Finland with a new capability to intercept high-altitude targets.

Amid Russia’s war on Ukraine, Kaikkonen said the acquisition was part of Finland’s efforts to develop its defences in a “new security environment.” [Finnish Ministry of Defence] [Defense News]

(rs/pk)

Italy lifts embargo on arms sales to UAE

The Italian government announced on April 17 that it has lifted an embargo on weapons sales to the United Arab Emirates. [Reuters] [ANSA]

The decision came after the UAE halted its military involvement in the Yemen conflict and began to help the war-torn country with stabilisation and reconstruction investments. [Reuters] [ANSA]

A civil war broke out in Yemen in 2014, with Iranian-backed Houthi rebels fighting the government, which was supported by a coalition of Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and including the UAE. The conflict has led to the deaths of thousands and one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises. [CFR]

Italy had banned the sale of missiles to the UAE and Saudi Arabia in 2021, saying that Rome was committed to helping restore peace and protecting human rights in Yemen. [Reuters] [ANSA]

Italy has already loosened other restrictions on arms exports to ease diplomatic tensions after the missile ban sparked anger in the UAE, which asked Italy to remove its aircraft and staff from the Al Minhad air base. [Reuters]

(iy/pk)

Belgium: Brussels requests Iran repatriate jailed aid worker

Brussels made an official request on April 18 to repatriate Olivier Vandecasteele, an imprisoned aid worker, from Tehran. The Belgian aid worker has been in prison since February 24, 2022. He was sentenced to

40 years in prison and 74 lashes after he was convicted of espionage. [RTBF]

Telephone conversations between Vandecasteele and his family have revealed that he is being held in inhumane conditions, as a result of which his health is rapidly deteriorating. Brussels was unable to make an official request for repatriation prior to the Constitutional Court's rejection of appeals to annul the treaty that facilitates prisoner exchanges between Brussels and Tehran on April 18. [RTBF] [ParisMatch]

Negotiations between Prime Minister Alexander de Croo and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi culminated in a prisoner exchange agreement that same week, allowing Vandecasteele to return to Belgium while Assadolah Assadi is to be released and returned to Iran. Assadi was sentenced to 20 years in prison relating to acts of terrorism. [LeSoir]

(sw/gc)

Greece signs USD 400 million deal with Israel on purchasing anti-tank missiles

Greece signed an agreement with Israel to spend EUR 364 million on Spike anti-tank missiles, Israel's Defense Ministry said on April 10. [Reuters]

Israeli Defense Ministry Director-General Major General Eyal Zamir and Greece's Director of Defense Investments and Armaments Vice Admiral Aristeidis Alexopulos signed the agreement. The Greek ministry announced after the agreement was signed that the missiles will come in three different configurations. [Daily Sabah]

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis initially approved the agreement during a session of the Greek National Security Council on March 29. The Spike is an anti-tank missile produced by Israel's state-owned Rafael and used by many European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation member states. [The Times of Israel]

(lc/gc)

Turkey closes its airspace to northern Iraq

Turkey closed its airspace on April 5 to aircrafts travelling to and from the northern Iraqi city of

Sulaymaniyah due to the increasing activities of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). [Reuters]

The announcement was made by Foreign Ministry spokesman Tanju Bilic. Turkish airspace will remain closed until July 3 for Turkish authorities to conclude a security review, he said. [The Washington Post]

The decision was made after two helicopters crashed in northern Iraqi airspace, killing Kurdish militants on board. The incident made Turkish authorities aware of PKK's possession of helicopters. The PKK resistance group of Kurdish separatists is condemned as a foreign terrorist organisation by the U.S. and much of the European Union. [The National News]

(lc/gc)

Turkey receives Egyptian foreign minister as bilateral ties improve

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry visited Turkey on April 13 to improve bilateral ties between the two countries in a meeting with his Turkish counterpart, after which they held a joint press conference briefing the press.

“We are taking concrete steps to raise representation to the level of embassies,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said at the conference. “In the coming period, we will inform you with a joint statement.” [Anadolu Agency]

The ministers discussed issues concerning political, economic and cultural problems in the region. Shoukry said both sides agreed on a “specific time frame” to raise diplomatic ties. “We agreed to continue this rapid pace of contact and communication which benefits us,” Shoukry said. [Anadolu Agency]

The normalisation process of Turkey-Egypt relations officially started with Cavusoglu’s visit to Egypt in March. The meeting was the first held between ministers after 10 years of political problems. [BBC Turkish]

(lc/gc)

Ukrainian, Iraqi Foreign Ministers discuss war support and closer ties

Ukrainian and Iraqi Foreign Ministers, Dmytro Kuleba and Fuad Hussein, respectively, met on April 17 in Baghdad, to discuss Iraqi support during the war. [AP] [Reuters]

Ukraine hopes to strengthen and "reinvent Ukrainian-Iraqi relations," Kuleba said. Kuleba was the first Ukrainian official to visit Iraq since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022 and the first Ukrainian Foreign Minister to visit in 11 years. [AP]

Iraq's Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said his country would support a ceasefire and the start of negotiations. He gave the same message to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during a visit in February, Hussein said. Iraq wants "to be a part of the solution," he added. [Reuters]

Hussein offered Iraq to mediate between Ukraine and Russia in possible peace talks, saying that Iraq "has experience in communication with countries that have tension between them" and "is ready to be in service of peace." [AP]

Iraq had hosted several rounds of peace talks between Iran and Saudi-Arabia.

Kuleba declined the offer of mediation, adding that though Iraq is a "country that is capable of building bridges," Ukraine would not participate in any peace talks unless Russia withdraws from the Ukrainian territory. [AP] [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Sanctions on Russian bank in Budapest worsen Hungary-US ties

Hungary's relations with the US have worsened after Washington announced a package of measures against Moscow that included sanctions on a Budapest-based Russian bank branded by the White House as "an opaque Kremlin platform". [Reuters] [DW]

The US on April 12 imposed sanctions on three top officials of the International Investment Bank (IIB), two of them Russian nationals and one Hungarian. [Reuters]

'Threat to security'

"The presence of this opaque Kremlin platform in the heart of Hungary threatens the security and sovereignty of the Hungarian people, their European

neighbours, and their NATO allies," the US ambassador to Budapest, David Pressman, said after the announcement. [Reuters]

Russia is the main shareholder of the IIB, which was once a development bank for the communist eastern bloc, while Hungary was the second largest. [Reuters]

After Moscow invaded Ukraine, countries including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia backed out from the IIB. The day after the US sanctions were imposed on the bank, the Hungarian Economic Ministry announced that Budapest was withdrawing from the institution. [DW]

Reprimand for NATO ally

Budapest is an ally of the US within NATO but right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has friendly ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Washington has criticised those links and has also repeatedly spoken out against the state of democracy in Hungary.

Orban has fiercely opposed EU sanctions on Moscow and, unlike regional neighbours Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, has not supplied weapons to Ukraine.

The measures against the IIB are the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine last year that the US has officially sanctioned an entity based in Hungary. [DW]

Shortly before the announcement of the American move, the Hungarian prime minister's chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, said that the US had "not given up trying to squeeze [Hungary] into the pro-war position" over the conflict in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian premier described the US under the Joe Biden administration as one of the "top three adversaries" of Orban's governing right-wing Fidesz party, according to a purported leaked US document that was posted online in March *(See separate story on this issue).* [The Washington Post] [Politico]

(msa/pk)

Biden visits Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

US President Joe Biden made a four-day trip to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland which the

Independent, quoting US media, reported as being "part homecoming, part diplomacy and part politics." [Independent]

Biden arrived in Northern Ireland on April 11, where British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak welcomed him, and the pair held private talks. [RTE]

The visit coincided with the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which in 1998 gave legislative and executive powers from the UK Parliament to the Northern Ireland Assembly – Northern Ireland's Assembly, the legislature. It marked the end of the decades-long conflict between the pro-republican Catholic and unionist Protestant communities in the North, known as the Troubles, which led to over 3,500 deaths. [Independent] [AP] [Reuters] [gov.uk] [BBC] [CNN]

While in the North, he met with political leaders at the newly opened Ulster University Belfast campus. Afterwards, he gave a speech where he expressed hope that the country would "leave violence behind and bring the power sharing devolved government back to Stormont," whilst recognising that the decision lay with the North's politicians. [BBC] [Irish Times] [Reuters] [RTE]

This statement was made in light of Northern Ireland's government being frozen for over a year due to the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) boycott of the parliament in Stormont over its opposition to post-Brexit trade arrangements. [Irish Times] [CNN] [BBC]

Speaking at the university, he also highlighted the "incredible economic opportunity" that "sustained peace" could bring. [Irish Times]

The DUP's leader, Jeffrey Donaldson, welcomed the visit, but said "it doesn't change the political dynamic in Northern Ireland." [Irish Times]

Republic of Ireland- homecoming

Biden spent April 12 just north of Co Dublin in Co Louth – the town from which his mother's family came from prior to his great-grandfather, James Finnegan, emigrating to America as a child in the late 1840s – where he visited Carlingford Castle with Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister Micheal Martin. As he looked out over Carlingford Bay – which empties into the Irish Sea – he said: "It feels like I'm coming home." He also made a trip to the town of Dundalk to meet distant relatives. [Irish Times] [AP] [CNN] [BBC][BBC] [The Guardian]

The next day, after holding talks with his Irish counterpart Michael D Higgins in the Irish president's home – Aras an Uachtarain – he planted an oak tree to mark his visit, signed the visitor's book, and rang the Bell of Peace – erected in 2008 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. [BBC]

A bilateral meeting was held between Biden and Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, where they discussed US-Irish ties, climate action and Northern Ireland. The pair later praised each other's leadership regarding the war in Ukraine during a public talk. [RTE] [The Journal]

The main event of April 13 was Biden's address to both houses of the Irish Parliament in Leinster House, being the fourth American president to do so. He spoke about his Irish heritage, supporting peace in the North, and global issues like the war in Ukraine. He praised the relationship between the US and Ireland, describing it as "a partnership for the ages" and promising "a future poised for unlimited shared possibilities."

He also stressed the shared values of both nations, saying: "no matter what party we belong to, our values are the same. It's about honesty, dignity, justice, and you all have every ingredient to make it work." Several dignitaries, including former president of Ireland Mary McAleese and a number of former Irish prime ministers, were present. [RTE] [BBC] [The Guardian] [BBC] [CNN]

The day ended with a state function organised in Dublin Castle by Varadkar, where Biden was the guest of honour. Current and retired politicians and public servants were in attendance. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Biden's last day featured what Irish Examiner reported as a "once-in-a-generation event," as he addressed 27,000 people in Ballina, Co Mayo – the southernmost county in Ireland, another town where his ancestors hail from. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Irish Examiner] [BBC] [The Journal] [The Guardian] [BBC]

Earlier in the day, he toured the Catholic shrine at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Knock, and had a "real reunion" with Frank O'Grady, the priest who gave the last rites to his son, Beau Biden, when the latter passed away from brain cancer in 2015. [Irish Examiner] [BBC] [The Journal] [The Guardian] [BBC]

The last time Biden visited Ireland was near the end of his term as vice president in 2016. [AP]

Quoting an Irish security source, the Independent reported that Biden's trip was the "biggest security

operation An Garda Síochána has ever been involved in in the history of the State". It cost over EUR 50 million and around 300 American secret service agents travelled to Ireland to bolster the president's protection. [Independent]

Response to the visit

Talking to BBC Radio 4 on April 11, former prime minister of the UK Tony Blair – one of the signatories of the Good Friday Agreement – said the visit was "significant." He emphasised the importance of using the "American influence on the process with care and with sensitivity," here referring to Biden underscoring Northern Ireland's "commitment to preserving peace and encouraging prosperity." [Independent]

Speaking on RTE's Morning Ireland programme, Martin said the visit "captures that very special relationship with this president, and indeed with the American people in terms of a shared past." [The Journal]

Some British publications criticised the president's visit, with foreign policy analyst Nile Gardiner writing an opinion piece for the Telegraph in which he wrote that Biden's "insulting decision to prioritise Ireland over the UK on his visit to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement should have come as no surprise." The former first minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, was quoted by the Independent as saying that Biden "hates the UK." [Independent]

Senior director for Europe at the US National Security Council, Amanda Sloat, has said statements of Biden being anti-British are "simply untrue," adding that "President Biden obviously is a very proud Irish-American, he is proud of those Irish roots, but he is also a strong supporter of our bilateral partnership with the UK." [Independent]

(wd/gc)

Polish PM calls for strategic partnership with US

Poland's prime minister has called for a strategic partnership with the US, saying that close ties between Washington and Warsaw are "the best vaccine against Russian imperialism."

"This proposal is being met with huge acceptance from the other side," Poland's Mateusz Morawiecki told reporters after holding talks with US Vice President Kamala Harris in Washington on April 11.

Morawiecki added: “Washington realises that the US has few allies in Europe who are as close to them as Poland.” [Polish Radio] [PAP]

Warsaw – which sees the US as the key guarantor of its security – has for years warned against the imperial ambitions of its eastern neighbour Russia, and has been one of Kyiv’s strongest backers after Moscow’s troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Since then, Poland has hiked its defence spending to one of the highest levels in NATO and splashed out millions on military hardware, with many of its arms contracts going to US companies.

Morawiecki’s call for closer ties with Washington stands in contrast with the position of French President Emmanuel Macron, who has called for Europe’s “strategic autonomy” to be strengthened.

In a recent interview with Politico, Macron attempted to create distance from the US in any future confrontation with China over Taiwan, saying that Europe must resist pressure to become “America’s follower”.

(pk)

Polish small reactors project may get USD 4bn from US agencies

Two US financial institutions have signalled they could lend USD 4 billion in total to a project by Polish energy giant PKN Orlen aimed at building and deploying the first small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) in Poland.

On April 17, the US agencies signed a nonbinding statement that they are willing to consider financing the initiative. [Export-Import Bank of the United States] [Notes from Poland]

The project is a collaboration between Poland’s PKN Orlen and chemicals company Synthos, and American-Japanese alliance GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy, which is hoping to develop around 20 BWRX-300 small reactors. [Nuclear Engineering International]

The financial institutions that have signed a so-called letter of interest are the Export-Import Bank of the United States, pledging a potential USD 3 billion, and the US International Development Finance Corporation, promising a potential USD 1 billion. [Export-Import Bank of the United States]

Poland's PKN Orlen and Synthos aim to deploy the country's first SMRs by 2030 as part of the nation's plans to develop nuclear power in an effort to cut its carbon emissions and gradually phase out polluting coal.

Orlen chief executive Daniel Obajtek told reporters: "We will present a total of 20 locations by the end of the year." [Reuters]

The US ambassador to Warsaw, Mark Brzezinski, was cited by the Business Insider Polska news outlet as saying that Poland needed "new energy solutions" to protect itself from Russian influence, to meet climate commitments and to drive economic development. [Notes from Poland]

The SMR project is in line with Warsaw's ambitious new goal to produce around three-quarters of the country's electricity from zero-emissions sources, including 51 percent from renewables and 23 percent from nuclear, by 2040.

Poland currently does not have any nuclear power plants and 70 percent of its power is generated from coal, the highest figure in Europe. [Notes from Poland]

(ab/pk)

PM hopeful in Slovakia urged by US envoy not to 'appease' Putin

The US ambassador to Slovakia has warned ex-premier Robert Fico, who is eyeing a return to power in parliamentary elections this September, that aligning with Russian President Vladimir Putin would be like "appeasement offered to Hitler."

The admonition by Gautam Rana, the American envoy to Bratislava, came on April 24 after he met Fico to discuss Slovakia's potential future foreign policy.

"Aligning with Putin is appeasement, no different than the appeasement offered to Hitler," Rana said in a statement on Facebook after the meeting. "It did not work with Hitler then, and it will not work with Putin today."

Fico, 58, the leader of the leftist opposition Smer party, has been outspoken against military backing for Kyiv and has called the EU's support of Ukraine a "suicidal mission". [France24/AFP]

Fico said that Bratislava, under his leadership, would not support Ukraine's bid to join NATO because that would mean "the beginning of World War III". [Bloomberg]

Fico's Smer party in March took the lead in an opinion poll, raising fears that if the grouping wins Slovakia's September early parliamentary elections it will undermine EU and NATO unity on Russia. [Europe Monthly March 2023] [Reuters]

A survey by pollster NMS for the SME news website released on April 6 showed that Smer remained the most popular party in Slovakia, backed by 22.4 percent of voters. [Domov.sme]

(yl/pk)

Spain and Brazil pledge to boost EU-LatAm links

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva pledged on April 26 to boost cooperation between the EU and Latin America.

During a visit by Lula to Spain, Sanchez said during a joint press conference that there would be an "extraordinary opportunity" for relations between Brussels and Latin America when Madrid assumes the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of this year. [Europapress]

"Spain celebrates the return of Brazil to the international scene, as a key partner to face global challenges," added Sanchez, a left-winger. [La Moncloa]

Lula, also a leftist, made a political comeback in an October presidential election to beat his rival Jair Bolsonaro, marking the end of Brazil's most right-wing government in decades. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

The Spanish presidency of the EU, starting in July, will coincide with Brazil's rotating presidency of the Mercosur South American trade bloc, which includes Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. [EFE]

Lula and Sanchez aim to make progress towards a long-delayed EU-Mercosur trade deal. Negotiations were completed in 2019 after two decades of talks but ratification stalled, mostly because of concerns over the deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon. [AP]

Brazil's former president, Bolsonaro, removed protection measures in the rainforest and deforestation surged during his term in office. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

(msa/pk)

Turkey may receive EUR 235.5 million in US F-16 fighter jet equipment

US President Joe Biden's administration notified Congress on April 17 of the planned sale of F-16 fighter jet equipment to Turkey in a deal valued at EUR 235.5 million. The deal is part of the modernization package for Turkey. [Reuters]

"Turkey is a longstanding and valued NATO ally," a State Department spokesman said. The notification to the Congress was made after Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and if the package is approved it will be the first major sale to Turkey that Congress has approved in years. [Daily Sabah]

Congress opposed the F-16 sales to Turkey and the chairperson of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Bob Menendez, reiterated his opposition to F-16 sales.

"Turkey has not done enough to be awarded this way,"he said. He added he will continue to be against the sale due to President Erdogan's belligerent behaviour against Greece. [E-Kathimerini]

(lc/gc)

Ukraine slams Brazil's president for suggesting Kyiv is jointly to blame for war

Kyiv has criticised Brazilian left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva after he suggested that Ukraine as well as Russia is to blame for the war between the two countries.

Brazil has steered a careful course during the conflict, refusing either to impose sanctions on Moscow or provide Kyiv with weapons. [Euronews]

Lula said during a visit to Abu Dhabi on April 16 that the decision to start the war was "made by two countries". He added that European nations and the United States should stop supplying Kyiv with

weapons, accusing them of prolonging the conflict. [Reuters] [Aljazeera]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the day after that he was "grateful to our Brazilian friends for their excellent understanding of the situation". [DW]

The Ukrainian government criticised Lula for treating "the victim and the aggressor" the same way. [Aljazeera]

During an official visit to Portugal, the Brazilian president toned down his rhetoric, saying in Lisbon on April 24: "I have never equalled the two countries because I know what an invasion is and I know what the integrity of territory is." [Euronews]

Lula reiterated his proposal for a negotiated settlement to the conflict through the creation of a "G20 for peace", in which countries such as China, India and Indonesia would be key players. [France 24] [CNN]

Portuguese far-right lawmakers from the Chega party protested during Lula's visit to the parliament in Lisbon on April 25, holding up Ukrainian flags and signs saying: "A thief's place is in jail". [Euronews]

The MPs were referring to Lula's imprisonment for bribery in 2018, later ruled unlawful by Brazil's supreme court. Lula has long protested his innocence and argued that the case against him was politically motivated. [The Guardian]

Lula made a political comeback in an October 30 presidential election to beat Jair Bolsonaro, marking the end of Brazil's most right-wing government in decades. [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Portugal's conservative president, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, said that Lisbon took a "different position" to Brasilia on the Ukraine conflict, adding: "We think that for a road to peace to become a possibility, Ukraine must first have the right to respond to the invasion." [Le Monde]

(msa/pk)

Czech Republic to designate China, Russia as security threats

The Czech Republic will formally class China and Russia as national security threats in two of its major strategic plans for the first time.

In the past, Prague had merely suggested that one of its biggest security threats was “instability and regional conflicts in the Euro-Atlantic area”, saying in its Security Strategy from 2015 that “some” countries disregarded international law, threatened to resort to military force and were developing “hybrid warfare” strategies in pursuit of their interests.

The update to the Czech Security Strategy and to the nation's Defence Strategy reflects President Petr Pavel’s view that Beijing is not yet an enemy but “definitely not a friend” – a marked shift from his predecessor Milos Zeman’s ambition to make the Czech Republic China’s “gateway to Europe”. [Bloomberg]

Czech Deputy Defence Minister Jan Jires said that the change in policy was not surprising, given that NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, a comprehensive security plan, also identifies increasing threats posed by Russia and China. [expats]

While Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is the key issue highlighted in the NATO strategy, the document also says that Beijing’s growing military ambition and its “coercive policies” threaten the Western bloc’s “interests, security and values”. [NATO]

Jires said: “Now we will only transpose NATO’s new Strategic Concept into national strategic documents in the sphere of defence and security.” [expats]

The centre-right Czech government, which took office in 2021, has pledged to strengthen ties with democratic allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including Taiwan, while stressing the importance of supporting Ukraine. [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

EU's garment industry plan for Myanmar criticised by rights groups

A new EU initiative backed by global fashion brands to boost Myanmar’s clothing production has been criticised by rights activists.

Labour rights advocates argue that the EUR 3 million project legitimises the country’s military regime without benefiting workers.

Since a 2021 coup in Myanmar, workers there have lost their right to freedom of association while trade unions have faced suppression.

Many international clothing companies have ceased operations in Myanmar amid concerns over their ability to maintain acceptable labour standards under the military regime. [Myanmar Now] [AiR, No.16, April/2023, 3]

(aml/pk)

EU aims to help Thailand with sustainable development

An EU delegation on April 5 met with Thai officials to discuss ways in which the southeast Asian country can meet the standards of the Western European bloc's new regulation on products that do not cause deforestation.

The regulation comes into force later this year. The rule aims to ensure that EU citizens consume or use only products that do not contribute to global deforestation or forest degradation. The EU is especially concerned about how wood, cattle, cocoa, coffee, palm oil, soy and rubber are produced.

Thai officials expect the regulation to impact their country's agricultural exports, including the rubber products it sends to the EU.

The meeting focused on capacity building in Thailand's private sector, particularly among smallholder farms, to meet the standards of the EU's new regulation. [Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Twitter] [AiR, No.16, April/2023, 3]

(aml/pk)

Rights concerns voiced in Portugal shrugged off by Macau leader

The head of Macau's government, Ho Iat Seng, has insisted that a deal including commitments on human rights which resulted in Portugal transferring the sovereignty of the city to China almost 25 years ago has been "scrupulously fulfilled". [Lusa]

Ho, appointed by Chinese authorities in 2019 after an election in which he was the sole candidate, was responding to claims that authoritarianism is growing in Macau.

His comments came on April 18 as he was on his way to Lisbon for talks with top officials.

Last year, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning "violations of fundamental freedoms" in Macau and Hong Kong.

Macau, a former Portuguese colony, was returned to China in 1999. Twelve years earlier, Lisbon and Beijing signed a declaration providing for fundamental rights to be enshrined in Macau's basic law.

Isabel Santos, a Portuguese member of the European Parliament, said on April 16 in an interview with the Lusa news agency that her country had an "inalienable responsibility" for Macau and "must question the situation of human rights" there. [Portugal Resident]

The socialist MEP said that in recent years Macau has seen "the disqualification of pro-democracy candidates, [and] the complete and total ban of the vigils that were held for many years in memory of the victims of the [1989] Tiananmen massacre." [Lusa]

"The administrative transfer [of Macau's sovereignty to China] was made under conditions, and I remember well... Portugal's commitment to defending those conditions," she added. [Lusa]

(msa/pk)

Portugal's PM seeks South Korean investment in semiconductors, renewables

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa travelled to South Korea on April 11, aiming to attract investment from Seoul in sectors such as semiconductors and renewables. [Lusa]

On his two-day trip, Costa met his South Korean counterpart Han Duck-soo and visited several multinational corporations.

At SK Hynix, the third largest semiconductor manufacturer in the world, Costa said he wanted "to attract foreign direct investment, namely South Korean... to produce in Europe what Europe needs". [Republica Portuguesa]

"There is a need to diversify the production chains of some essential goods and today semiconductors are fundamental for everything," he added. [Republica Portuguesa]

Nearly 80 percent of suppliers to European firms operating in the semiconductor industry are from

outside the EU. [European Parliament]

Costa also visited the Hanwha company, one of South Korea's leading multinationals in the field of renewable energy, and announced that Lisbon planned to launch an offshore wind power auction later this year. [Lusa]

During Costa's trip, Portuguese and South Korean government officials signed an agreement to set up partnerships in third countries aimed at fostering sustainable development. [Republica Portuguesa]

"Cooperation activities will cover areas such as education, healthcare and digitalisation", says the document. [Lusa]

(msa/pk)

Spanish PM urges China's Xi to speak with Ukraine's Zelensky

On a visit to Beijing, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez urged Chinese leader Xi Jinping to speak with President Volodymyr Zelensky and learn about Kyiv's proposals for ending the conflict in Ukraine.

Sanchez told reporters after talks with Xi on March 31 that Spain backed Zelensky's demand to restore Ukraine's territory to what it was before Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. [Al Jazeera]

In February, China published its own 12-point proposed solution to the war in Ukraine that included a ceasefire. The plan was met with criticism in Europe for not explicitly stating that the aggressor in the conflict was Russia.

However, Sanchez praised the Chinese plan's "complete and categorical rejection of not only the use but even the threat to use nuclear weapons". [Al Jazeera]

According to Chinese state media outlet Xinhua, Xi blamed a "bloc mentality" for causing the conflict in Ukraine, and said that Beijing and the EU should be partners in addressing global challenges. "Extreme sanctions and pressure should be done away with," Xi said during the talks with Sachez. [Politico]

Sanchez also discussed Spain's trade relations with China. He announced that, in a move partially correcting the massive trade imbalance between the two countries, Beijing had approved the import of almonds and persimmons from Spain and that by 2025

it would take 40 percent of Spanish almond production.

Sanchez also encouraged Chinese authorities to make it easier for Spanish companies to do business in China. [AA]

His visit to Beijing came a few days before French President Emmanuel Macron and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to China for talks with Xi on April 5-8. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(aml/pk)

Protests in Switzerland over the misrepresentation of Dalai Lama

Hundreds in Zurich responded to the calls of the Swiss-Tibetan community on April 21 to protest the misrepresentation of the Dalai Lama in the media. The protest was in response to a video of the Dalai Lama that had been circulated in the media in the three weeks prior.

The video showed the Dalai Lama hugging and kissing a young boy on the mouth at a student event in northern India on February 28. The video shows the Dalai Lama asking the boy to suck his tongue. The video sparked accusations of paedophilia in the media. As a result, the 87-year-old has apologised to the boy's family and the public.

The Tibetan diaspora has since expressed outrage at the misrepresentation of the Dalai Lama, clarifying that his behaviour followed cultural norms, explaining that sticking out one's tongue is a greeting and sign of respect. [LeTemps]

Similar protests have taken place in the US, Australia and India. [RadioFreeAsia]

(sw/gc)

Vatican says China appointed new bishop without pope's approval

The Vatican has said that a decision by a religious body in China to appoint a new bishop for Shanghai, the largest Roman Catholic diocese in that country, was taken unilaterally in violation of a deal between the Holy See and Beijing.

The move by the Council of Chinese Bishops, a body controlled by China's Communist Party but not recognised by the Holy See, is the second of its kind recently.

At the end of November, a bishop was appointed in the south-eastern province of Jiangxi, also without prior consultation with the Vatican. [AiR No. 48, November/2022, 5]

A deal between the Vatican and Beijing in 2018 gave the Chinese government more authority in the appointment of Catholic bishops.

While the exact details of the agreement have never been made public, it reportedly allows the government in Beijing to nominate bishops in China, but stipulates that the pope needs to either approve or veto candidates. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera] [The Catholic World Report] [AiR, No.15, April/2023, 2]

(aml/pk)

Italian PM announces aid for East Africa, aiming to cut migrant flow

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has announced a plan to offer aid and investment to East Africa, a move aiming to counteract a spike in migrants heading to Europe across the Mediterranean and to intensify partnerships in the energy sector. [amp.today] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Meloni unveiled the initiative on February 14 during a two-day trip to Ethiopia. The plan will include efforts to improve bilateral relations with African countries and aims to increase Italy's presence in the region. [Adnkronos] [ANSA] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Meloni told reporters that a stable Ethiopia – a transit country on migration routes – would play a pivotal role in East Africa. [ANSA]

She added that Italy was preparing its plan in partnership with African countries and listening to their suggestions. She promised that the initiative's results would outweigh the effort it requires. [PALAZZO CHIGI]

The plan is to be officially presented in October during an Italy-Africa intergovernmental conference.

Earlier in the month, Meloni and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed a EUR 140 million

economic aid package for Ethiopia on April 6. [GOVERNO]

On April 11, Italy announced a six-month state of emergency to help it deal with a surge in the number of migrants arriving in the country's south after crossing the Mediterranean from Africa. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(ps/pk)

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