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

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 6, June/2023

Brought to you by CPG

Supported by KAS

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of Europe in Review, in which we bring you detailed reporting and news briefs about politics, foreign relations, regional governance and security across the continent. With each monthly issue, we strive to provide comprehensive coverage that will cultivate a better understanding of an increasingly complicated geopolitical landscape in Europe.

Russian forces have finally seized the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut after months of brutal urban combat, but their ability to hold it remains far from certain as Kyiv gathers further support from the West, including the kind of advanced weaponry it has long sought. At the same time, acrimony erupted publicly between the Wagner mercenary group's leader and the ministry of defence in Moscow.

In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's victory in the second round of presidential elections solidifies his control over the country for another term. The election campaign was bitter, with personal insults and a death threat issued. Ankara also faces mounting pressure to drop its opposition to Sweden's NATO membership

bid, while America's top diplomat has said that "the time is now" for the Nordic country to join the alliance.

Meanwhile, the European Union is likely to avoid a recession, helped by lower energy prices across the bloc, with 1 percent growth forecast this year. However, Germany – the largest European economy – slid into a recession as households spent less on consumer items.

As usual, we also bring you a thorough briefing on fresh developments in constitutional affairs, geopolitics, defence and human rights across Europe.

Kind wishes,

Glen Carey

Deputy Editor in Chief

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

Main Sections

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

Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Bakhmut falls but Ukraine takes war into Russia, buoyed by pledge of hi-tech arms

The battered eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut has finally been captured, but Russian celebrations have been muted amid a growing war of words between the Wagner mercenary group's leader and the ministry of defence in Moscow. The war expanded to Russian soil, as pro-Ukrainian Russian volunteers crossed the Ukrainian border and raided Russia's Belgorod region, while Moscow experienced its first drone attacks.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's long-anticipated counteroffensive has yet to begin as the country gathers further support from the West, including cruise missiles and modern fighter jets.

Bakhmut captured amid dissent in Russian ranks

After nine months of gruelling combat, Russian forces have finally gained control over Bakhmut in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

The battle began in early August as Russian forces ran up against stern Ukrainian resistance. The city was at that time a prime target for Russia, which hoped to use the local rail links to supply a further offensive thrust into Ukrainian-controlled Donbas.

However, rather than seizing the city in a lightning offensive, Russian units advanced slowly for months at immense human cost, fighting on battlefields reminiscent of World War I. Bolstered by the Wagner mercenary group, Russia managed to push Ukrainians from the city's flanks, capturing the settlements of Soledar and Klishchiivka in January.

With the flanks opened, Ukrainian defence efforts became increasingly more costly and difficult to sustain. Over the first few months of 2023, Russian forces advanced through the city itself before finally achieving control of the entire urban area in late May.

While the city has fallen, the Battle of Bakhmut continues into its tenth month. Ukrainian forces have largely withdrawn from the ruined city to pre-prepared defensive lines to the west, but Kyiv claims that it still controls part of south-western Bakhmut and its forces have rolled back Russian advances on the flanks. The battle has been the bloodiest of the war in Ukraine and has left the city almost entirely devastated and depopulated. [Guardian] [Euractiv] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Euronews] [Institute for the Study of War]

Despite the city's capture, the mood among Russian leaders is far from celebratory.

Earlier in May, Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin once again caused controversy with his most scathing attack on the Russian Ministry of Defence to date. Telegram channels linked to the Wagner Group released a video on May 5 in which Prigozhin, using the pre-arranged corpses of dead Wagner fighters as a backdrop, directly accuses Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Russian military chief of staff Valery Gerasimov of failing to provide his men with the ammunition they need.

A close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prigozhin had made a similar complaint in February, where he also used corpses of Wagner fighters to make a gory statement against the Russian military's lack of support for his mercenaries.

Wagner played a key role in the capture of Bakhmut but will be replaced by regular Russian soldiers in the city in June. The battle appears to have decimated the mercenary group, with Prigozhin claiming the outfit has suffered 20,000 deaths in the war so far. [POLITICO Europe] [Associated Press] [Deutsche Welle] [BBC News] [Reuters] [Euronews] [CBS] [Guardian] [Atlantic Council]

Pro-Ukraine Russian volunteers take ground war to Russia

Pro-Ukrainian Russian opposition groups led a cross-border raid into the Russian region of Belgorod, in the largest attack on Russian soil since the invasion of Ukraine.

On May 22, a group of armed fighters equipped with Ukrainian vehicles and gear crossed the frontier and attacked the Gravyron border checkpoint, provoking the Belgorod local government to institute a state of emergency. The checkpoint was destroyed in the attack and the pro-Ukrainian Russian forces claim several border guards were killed.

While the raid was the largest attack inside Russia so far, the “partisans” deployed only a handful of vehicles and around 100 fighters. The group advanced through the villages of Kozinka and Gora-Podol before engaging Russian military units outside the town of Gravyron and withdrawing on May 23.

The volunteers were drawn from two units: the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) and the Freedom of Russia Legion (FRL). The former consists largely of volunteers from the far-right Russian opposition, while the latter is made up of former Russian soldiers.

The groups carried out a much smaller cross-border raid in March. Little is known about the losses sustained by both sides, which have presented wildly differing accounts. The Russian government claims dozens of vehicles were destroyed and over 70 Ukrainian soldiers were killed, and denies the involvement of Russian citizens. At a press conference, RVC leader Denis Kapustin said that his forces had sustained just two deaths in the raid.

The RVC and the FRL have vowed to carry out more attacks across the Ukrainian border. [Guardian] [Reuters] [Atlantic Council] [POLITICO Europe] [BBC News] [Associated Press] [Euractiv] [NBC] [Economist]

Drones descend on Moscow

Moscow suffered its first drone attacks in May, marking the first time the Russian capital has become a target.

On May 3, two drones exploded over the Kremlin, days before Russia’s scaled-down Victory Day Parade. Ukraine denied involvement in the attack, which made use of small machines of an unknown type.

Russia claimed to have shot down both and accused Ukraine of attempting to assassinate President Putin, a charge Kyiv denies. A much larger drone attack took place on the morning of May 30. Several drones of Ukrainian origin were spotted flying over Moscow.

While Russian officials claimed that there were only eight and that all were shot down, eyewitness accounts say that more than 25 machines were involved. Photographs from Moscow indicate that the drones damaged several properties around the city. Ukraine denied involvement in the strikes, but has expressed support for them.

For its part, Russia intensified its strikes against the Ukrainian capital in May, launching a myriad of missiles and drones. There is evidence that these attacks are

becoming less destructive as Ukraine continues to deploy Western anti-aircraft systems around the city.

One such system, the Patriot, allegedly downed several hypersonic "Kinzhal" missiles, one of the most advanced – and scarce – projectiles in Russia's arsenal. Ukraine appears to be intercepting the vast majority of Iranian-made "Shahed" suicide drones and casualties from the attacks are down. Moscow claimed to have destroyed a Patriot battery in one of its attacks, though its officials provided no evidence. Ukraine claimed that a Patriot system had indeed been damaged but was repaired and returned to service.

Cities nearer the frontline, such as Dnipro and Kharkiv, remain vulnerable to Russian strikes and suffer greater casualties than Ukraine's now well-protected capital. [Anadolu] [POLITICO Europe] [Euractiv] [BBC News] [Business Insider] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Guardian] [Euronews] [CNN]

Ukraine puts new Storm Shadow missiles to use

In May, Ukraine's allies helped to close key gaps in the country's arsenal – by providing long-range strike capability and agreeing to provide Western F-16 fighter jets. The war in Ukraine dominated the G7 summit, which was held from May 19 to 21 in Hiroshima, Japan, though the major investments were announced before the gathering itself.

The British government said on May 11 that it had transferred Storm Shadow cruise missiles to Ukraine. The Storm Shadow is a long-range cruise missile, which is launched from aircraft rather than ground-based platforms. Ukraine deployed the Storm Shadow for the first time against targets in Luhansk city in eastern Ukraine on May 13.

Ukraine claimed to have destroyed barracks used by Russian soldiers, while Russian officials stated the targets were civilian. Wreckage from the attacks confirmed the use of the Storm Shadow missiles, together with the ADM-160 MALD – a decoy missile which, to date, no country has admitted providing to Kyiv. Ukraine has since claimed to have used the missile against targets in the occupied southern cities of Mariupol and Melitopol in a series of strikes throughout mid to late May.

The Storm Shadow is also used by France, which has pledged to deliver an unknown amount to Ukraine. [POLITICO Europe] [BBC News] [Associated Press] [Euronews] [The Drive] [Business Insider]

Kyiv to finally have F-16s

Ukrainian Su-24 fighter-bombers have been the platform of choice for the Storm Shadow, though the weapon was designed to be launched from Western fighter jets like the Dassault Rafale or Panavia Tornado. However, Ukraine is finally getting the F-16 fighter jets it has been asking for.

The decision was made just before the G7 summit, which was attended by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and follows a months-long campaign by Ukrainian officials to reinforce their country's heavily outnumbered air force. Ukrainian officials say that they are unable to properly utilise Western munitions like the Storm Shadow and HARM anti-radar missile without modern Western jets.

Ukraine's small air force operates jets of Soviet origin, like the Mig-29 and Su-24. Experts argue that Russia continues to enjoy immense superiority in air-to-ground missile systems, which will continue to limit the effectiveness of the Ukrainian air force, regardless of the type of fighter jet it operates.

The jets donated by the West will also take several months to be deployed and will not see Ukrainian service until September at the earliest, as training and refurbishment are required. A large number of NATO countries operate the F-16, and Denmark, the UK, and the Netherlands have emerged as the leaders of a coalition to equip Ukraine with the warplanes. [POLITICO Europe] [BBC News] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [Forbes] [Economist]

Germany steps up military aid

Germany has also stepped in with its largest military aid package since the beginning of the Russian invasion. On May 13, with Zelensky in Berlin to meet Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Germany announced it would be sending EUR 2.7 billion worth of military equipment to Ukraine, including 30 Leopard 1 tanks, four IRIS-T anti-air missile systems, 15 Gepard anti-aircraft systems, and 20 Marder infantry fighting vehicles.

The package is a response to Ukraine's call for more armoured vehicles and anti-air defences as it prepares to launch counteroffensives against entrenched Russian forces.

Kyiv has amassed substantial amounts of equipment and trained entire new units in anticipation of renewed action against Russian forces. As spring comes to an end, Ukraine has yet to launch its counteroffensive, but there are signs of preparation.

Observers argue that Ukraine's attacks across the Russian border are attempts to stretch Russian forces wider. Writing for the Royal United Services Institute, a UK-based defence think-tank, Dr Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds argue that Russia's losses in 2022 have forced it to adopt a defensive posture.

Russia has built formidable defences in southern Ukraine, guarded by rings of anti-drone and anti-air systems, and has made strides to improve its often-chaotic command and control practices. Ukraine faces a far different Russian army to the one that launched the invasion, and dislodging it from its positions will be difficult and costly.

However, Russia also faces a Ukrainian military with more experienced soldiers and more advanced capabilities than it had last year. [Irish Times] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Deutsche Welle] [Royal United Services Institute] [Financial Times] [CNN]

(wb/pk)

US presses re-elected Turkish leader to approve Swedish NATO bid

US President Joe Biden has pressed his newly re-elected Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan to drop his opposition to Sweden's NATO membership bid, while America's top diplomat has said that "the time is now" for the Nordic country to join the alliance.

Biden spoke to Erdogan in a call on May 29 to congratulate him on his victory in Turkey's presidential election the previous day. The US president said that Erdogan repeated Turkey's desire to buy advanced F-16 fighter jets from America.

"I spoke to Erdogan. I congratulated Erdogan. He still wants to work on something on the F-16s. I told him we wanted a deal with Sweden, so let's get that done. And so we'll be back in touch with one another," Biden told reporters at the White House. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

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

Finland officially became the 31st member of the Western alliance on April 4, days after Turkey and Hungary greenlighted its accession. Entry to the

military club requires the approval of all its members. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Stockholm's efforts to join the alliance, however, were jeopardised after tensions with Ankara escalated over protests in the Swedish capital in January during which a copy of the Koran was burned and an effigy of Erdogan was hanged. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Turkey has also accused Sweden of sheltering members of militant groups it deems to be "terrorists".

In time for NATO summit?

Many Western leaders want Ankara to approve Sweden's membership in time for NATO's annual summit, which takes place in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, from July 11 to 12. Key to that could be F-16s.

Sales of the American warplanes to Turkey have been blocked in the US Congress, where many lawmakers are unhappy about Erdogan's links with Moscow, his purchase of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system and his crackdown on internal dissent. [The New York Times]

"Ankara is likely to ratify Sweden's NATO membership this year, in return seeking to finalise F-16 purchases from the US," Emre Peker, from risk-analysis firm Eurasia Group, was cited by The New York Times as saying.

Former Pentagon official Evelyn Farkas told the newspaper: "If Sweden is not admitted as soon as possible, that will dilute our strong response to [Russian President] Vladimir Putin, our strong response to Russia's aggression, and Putin will take it as some kind of a victory." [The New York Times]

F-16s for Turkey 'as quickly as possible': Blinken

During a visit to Sweden, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on May 30: "From the perspective of the United States, the time is now to finalise Sweden's accession." [Al Jazeera]

While maintaining that the Biden administration does not view a deal with Turkey on F-16s and Sweden's NATO bid as interconnected, Blinken added that "both of these are vital, in our judgement, to European security." [Washington Post] [Associated Press]

"We believe that both should go forward as quickly as possible; that is to say Sweden's accession and moving forward on the F-16 package more broadly," he added. [Associated Press]

New anti-terror law

At a joint press conference with Blinken, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson highlighted Stockholm's efforts to address Turkish concerns about the handling of individuals Ankara considers to be terrorists.

Kristersson pointed to the implementation of a tougher anti-terror law on June 1 following an amendment to Sweden's constitution and the lifting of an unofficial embargo on arms sales to Turkey last year. [Washington Post]

"Sweden has not previously prohibited participation in a terrorist organisation. We will do this now," said Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom.

The broad scope of the anti-terrorism law, which also makes it illegal to arrange meetings or provide logistical or financial support for outlawed groups, has prompted worries in Sweden that it could limit fundamental rights such as freedom of speech. [Reuters]

(pk-rs)

Turkey: Erdogan solidifies presidential power after winning third term

Turkish President Erdogan was re-elected in run-off elections on May 28, after bitter campaigns involving personal insult and a death threat. More than 27 million citizens voted g for his third term elections, despite the country's constitution prohibiting a candidate from running for more than two presidential terms. [Hürriyet]

Erdogan won 52.14 percent of votes and his rival, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, won 47.89 percent of the votes with more than 25 million votes, according to election results. Erdogan ran on a campaign stressing stability, while Kilicdaroglu called for change. They both said they would fix the economy, which has suffered from hyperinflation at 44 percent in April, but they provided few details. [NTV]

Heading into the elections, Turks faced significant economic challenges, which are unlikely to go away with Erdogan's victory. Poorer households have suffered from rising prices because they have to spend a large part of their modest incomes on everyday necessities. According to April International Monetary Fund data, the expected gross domestic product growth is 2.7 percent. [MSN][IMF]

“For the economy, there is a lot of uncertainty,” Daron Acemoglu, professor at MIT, said on Twitter. “In the short run, some foreigners may see an Erdogan victory as good for stability (esp. compared to a contested outcome). But the continuation of current policies is concerning all around.”

Erdogan’s “policy of negative real interest rates, complete lack of independence of agencies and broader mismanagement will have mounting costs,” Acemoglu said on Twitter.

Celebratory gunfire

Before the results were finalised, supporters of Erdogan took to the streets to celebrate their victory with guns and flags. During his victory speech Erdogan said: “Today no one lost but everyone won. We are not angry towards anyone. It is time to unite.”

He later targeted Kılıcdaroglu. “You were saying if you wanted to take Selo vote for me. What did my citizens say? You can’t take Selo out of prison as you wanted.” Selo refers to Selahattin Demirtas, former chairman of People’s Democratic Party (HDP), who is in prison for the last six years due to alleged ties to terrorism. [Cumhuriyet]

The main opposition coalition Table of Six’s candidate Kilicdaroglu heads the largest party in the bloc, the Republican People’s Party (CHP). The coalition includes CHP, Good Party (IYIP), Felicity Party (SP), Democrat Party (DP), Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Future Party (GP).

Congratulations, Criticism

After the election results, world leaders sent congratulatory messages to Erdogan.

President of the European Union Commission Ursula von der Leyen said on Twitter: “I look forward to continue building the EU-Turkey relationship.” Leaders of the US, Russia, Azerbaijan, France and Germany sent out tweets about Erdogan’s victory.

Geert Wilders, the Chairman of Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, reacted to the results on Twitter:

“People are desperate and disappointed that Erdogan remains president and are furious that Turks abroad

-including the ones living in the Netherlands - determined the future of Turkey with their vote to Erdogan, while they do not live there themselves,” the far-right leader said. “I hope all the Turks in the

Netherlands who voted for the Islamofascist Erdogan will now pack their bags and move to Turkey." [Twitter]

First round

The first round of Turkish elections took place on May 14 with none of the presidential candidates winning a majority of votes. The Supreme Election Council (YSK) called for the second round of elections.

In the first round, Erdogan won 49.51 percent of the votes, his rival Kemal Kilicdaroglu 44.88 percent, ultra-nationalist candidate Sinan Ogan 5.17 percent and Muharrem Ince – who withdrew his candidacy three days before elections – 0.44 percent of votes. YSK said the voter turnout was 88.9 percent. [Gazete Duvar]

The May 14 elections hold a historical significance as being the first election Erdogan failed to reach a majority for the first time in his 21-year rule.

Twitter

Opposition parties accused Russia of interfering in the elections. Kılıcdaroglu called on Russia on Twitter, asking them to stop interfering with Turkish elections if Russia wants a political relationship with Turkey. Russia denied all allegations of interference even though Kılıcdaroglu confirmed that they have proof, without sharing the said proof to the public. [Euronews Turkish]

Twitter announced on May 13 that they will block some content ahead of the Turkish elections. "In response to the legal process and to ensure Twitter remains available to the people of Turkey, we have taken action to restrict access to some content in Turkey today," Twitter's Global Government Affairs account announced on May 13. [Forbes]

Although CEO of Twitter Elon Musk did not confirm who submitted the request, the Turkish government is known to slow down and/or block content to avoid disinformation. Previously the government slowed down access to Twitter during the February 6 earthquake, which was the main source of communication between people under rubble and volunteers. [Twitter]

Parliamentary elections

In the May 14 parliamentary elections, the Republic Alliance – a coalition of parties led by the ruling Justice and Development Party – won 323 parliamentary seats out of 600.

The HUDA-PAR coalition – an extremist Islamist party with alleged ties to terrorist organisation Hezbollah – gained three seats in parliament. The party agenda of HUDA-PAR contains clauses on banning premarital sex and changing the first four clauses of the Turkish constitution.

The People's Democratic Party (HDP) joined the election with Greens and Left Party (YSP) due to the ongoing judicial case from March 2021 alleged that the party has ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). HDP lost nearly two million votes. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Votes for YSP were awarded to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), an Erdogan ally, according to data obtained from YSK. The incident caused smaller parties in the Republic alliance to gain more seats. Despite this and party objections, YSK did not change any of the wrongly allocated seats. [VOA Türkiye]

Rallies

During the election campaign, Erdogan accused his rival Kilicdaroglu of being aligned with Kurdish terrorists and called for his supporters to defend the country if the election results were not in his favour. Erdogan showed a re-edited version of Kılıcdaroglu's official campaign video with images of terrorists showing support to Kılıcdaroglu's campaign.

"Yes, they were added to the original video but it won't change the truth," Erdogan said. [Euronews]

Devlet Bahceli, the leader of MHP openly threatened the Table of Six coalition, saying that "they will either get an aggravated life sentence or a bullet to their bodies" after the elections. In another rally, Bahceli mispronounced the word to shrug – in Turkish silkmek – with a profanity – sikmek – while referring to the US Biden administration during a speech. [Halk TV]

Erdogan attended a live broadcast organised by the pro-government media outlet A Haber; when the cameras were turned to Erdogan it appeared that he fell asleep. The cameras were instantly turned back to the presenter. During the rally process Erdogan was repeatedly seen struggling to walk and in need of assistance. [T24]

Kemal Kilicdaroglu

Kilicdaroglu was joined at rallies by the leaders of the Table of Six coalition as well as the mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavas, and the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu. The 74-year old candidate completed up to

three rallies in one day. Kilicdaroglu also recorded videos from his kitchen table to inform the public on his agendas.

During Imamoglu's rally in Erzurum on May 8, he was attacked on stage and many people were injured. Erzurum municipality in northeastern Turkey tried to block the rally from happening in the first place by placing hundreds of buses on the rally square. [NTV]

Babala TV on YouTube did a series of Q&A sessions with politicians before the election rallies started. The program is aimed to bring together politicians with opposing citizens to create a debate on politicians' policies. During the four-hour long program, Kılıcdaroglu answered questions on what he aimed to achieve as president and talked about the campaign Erdogan was following during the election process.

Table of Six did not organise rallies for the second round of elections. Instead, Kilicdaroglu sent a nation-wide text message urging citizens to vote. His later texts were banned by the Information Technologies and Communications Institutions (BTK). CEO of Turkcell Murat Erkan confirmed the ban and said: "We were obliged to follow BTK's rulings, otherwise we would have committed a crime." [Gazete Duvar]

Sinan Ogan

Sinan Ogan, presidential candidate of ATA coalition, won 5.17 percent of the votes. The candidate was a former member of MHP and later transferred to nationalist, pro-Kemalist Victory Party (Zafer Partisi). Sinan Ogan, who previously stated he will never support Erdogan, asked his supporters to vote for Erdogan in the second round of elections after attending meetings with Kilicdaroglu and Erdogan. [Sözcü]

After Ogan's declaration, member parties of ATA coalition Felicity Party (SP) and Victory Party (ZP) announced the dissolution of the coalition and declared their support to Kemal Kilicdaroglu, cutting all ties with Sinan Ogan. [BBC]

During the first round of election rallies, Ogan announced that he will not be able to organise rallies due to insufficient funds. To support him, the leader of ZP, Umit Ozdag, sold his personal car and items from his rosary collection. Similarly, Kilicdaroglu pledged TRY 52,000 () to Ogan's campaign. [Diken]

The presidential candidate of the Homeland Party, Muharrem Ince, withdrew his candidacy three days before the May 14 elections. "I don't want them to

blame me when they lose the elections," he said referring to the main opposition led by Kılıcdaroglu. [BBC]

Formerly, Ince was the presidential candidate of the main opposition party, People's Republican Party (CHP), in 2018. After his defeat against President Erdogan, Ince resigned from RPP (CHP) and founded the Homeland Party. Ince announced his party's neutrality in the second round of elections. [CNN Türk]

(lc/gc)

EU economic growth forecast slightly higher this year, EC says

The European Union (EU) economic outlook for this year has improved slightly as energy prices decline across the bloc, according to the European Commission (EC) Spring Economic Outlook released May 15. [EC]

The EU's economy is forecast to grow by 1 percent in 2023, compared to the previous forecast of .08, the EC said in the report. Economic growth will increase to 1.7 percent next year, the EC said. [EC]

"The EU weathered the energy crisis well thanks to the rapid diversification of supply and a sizable fall in consumption," the EC said. "As the EU approaches the gas-refilling season, gas storage levels are at comfortable levels and risks of shortages during next winter have considerably abated." [EC]

Reflecting this, natural gas storage is on track for overfilling by mid summer at a record 56 percent full in April and 66 percent full at the end of May. This means Europe will not have enough room to store imported gas by the end of the summer and should be well positioned for winter 2023-24. [GIE] [Reuters][Reuters EUR Gas INV]

Norway, whose pipeline exports to Europe were already significant prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is now Europe's largest natural gas supplier after the demise of Russian imports in 2022, and is currently courting energy companies to expand production further in its Arctic Barents Sea coastal economic zone. [CNBC]

Principally the U.S., but also Canada, Australia, and the Middle East have largely replaced Russian natural gas through an expansive increase in liquified natural gas (LNG) exports to Europe, which are set to increase in

future years as exporters bring new capacity online. [WSJ]

Monthly LNG imports to Europe increased from approximately 10 to 25 percent of total gas imports in 2021 to over 55 percent in 2022, while Russian pipeline gas dropped from over 40 percent to under 5 percent.

The significant increase in new supply has led energy traders to express concern that natural gas prices could decrease below zero for the first time since 2006. [Bloomberg]

Despite the improvement in energy supplies, "inflation keeps eroding the purchasing power of consumers," the EC said. Following the fall in the last quarter of 2022, private consumption is expected to have weakened again in the first quarter of this year. [EC]

Overall, private consumption growth in the EU in 2023 is projected at 0.5 percent. As inflation loosens its grip on households' budgets, private consumption is set to rebound to 1.8 percent in 2024. The household saving rate is projected to decrease in the EU from 13.2 percent in 2022 to 12.8 percent in 2024, in line with its long-term average.

(rw/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Union leader criticises draft law restricting freedom of speech

President of the General Labour Federation of Belgium, Thierry Bodson, condemned a draft law proposed by the country's justice ministry, stating that the bill poses a "danger to the right to freedom of opinion," Le Soir reported on May 15. [BrusselsTimes] [LeSoir]

The legislation proposed by Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne restricts the ability of certain convicted criminals to engage in peaceful protests. It recommends severe penalties – including a potential three-year ban from participating in public protests – for individuals convicted of committing certain proscribed acts during demonstrations or public events. [BrusselsTimes]

Bodson, the leader of one of Belgium's largest trade unions, said the law constitutes "a mere fig leaf" behind which the Federal Government will be able to further restrict workers' rights. [LeSoir]

"The acts for which this sentence could be pronounced are not just serious acts," Bodson said. He suggests that the bill further highlights the fact that Belgium's leaders "place the freedom of trade above social rights." [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Young asylum seekers in Belgium may be given the chance to volunteer

Young asylum seekers in Belgium, aged between 18 and 25, may be given the chance to volunteer for six months at one of the 800 member organisations of Platform for Citizen Service, State Secretary for Asylum and Migration Nicole de Moor announced on May 8. [BrusselsTimes]

The Platform for Citizen Service promotes citizenship and personal growth among young people through voluntary engagement, training and personal counselling. "Through this, young people develop language and social skills, build self-confidence and a network, and acquire skills essential for their personal and professional development," Serafine Vanschoenwinkel of the Platform for Citizen Service said. [Platformforcitizenservice]

Such an initiative had originally taken place on a small scale in Wallonia and Brussels. The new cooperation agreement extends that cooperation to many more centres. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Seven arrested for planning terrorist attack

The federal prosecutor's office announced on May 4 the arrest of seven on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack. [ABC]

Most of the suspects are of Chechan origin, three of which are Belgian nationals.

The suspects had allegedly discussed plans for an attack, but had not yet decided on a specific target – although there was mention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation building.[Reuters]

The seven suspects are believed to have ties to the Islamic State. [LeMonde]

This comes the day before an Iraqi national was arrested in connection with suspected war crimes committed in Bagdad. The suspect has been a resident of Belgium since 2015. [LeFigaro]

(sw)

Belgium: Children from former colonies with Belgian heritage will get birth certificates

Justice Minister Vincent van Quickenborne announced on May 8 that mixed-race children born to Belgian parents in the country's former colonies in Africa will now be able to obtain a Belgian birth certificate without any fees.

During the colonial period, the Belgian state removed children of part-European descent away from their African mothers, placing them in institutions and foster families with no birth certificates. The children have lived in legal uncertainty ever since.

The Public Prosecutor's Office has identified Article 138bis of the Judicial Code as the legal route to intervene and issue birth certificates retroactively. The article allows the office to intervene in the name of public order. [BrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Demonstrators criticise government plans to curb protests

Almost 20,000 Belgian workers demonstrated in Brussels on May 22 against "attacks on the right to strike" after the federal government announced its intention to go ahead with a new law banning some protests. [BrusselsTimes] [Euronews]

Demonstrators criticised recent judicial decisions that will force protesters to lift their blockades in front of Belgian supermarket chain Delhaize. The company recently decided to turn the 128 Belgian stores that it manages directly into franchises, triggering three-month long protests. [BrusselsTimes] [Euronews]

Protesters affirmed their solidarity with the staff at Delhaize and reiterated fears that the franchise model might spread further in Belgium's retail scene. Protesters said that by franchising the shops, the company is practising "disguised" social dumping. [BrusselsTimes] [Euronews]

Olivier Lecomte, permanent secretary at the General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium, told Euronews that the government's proposed law could perpetuate these types of practices against picketing. "Between protesting and blocking a company in the context of discontent – and breaking it – is totally different," he said. [BrusselsTimes] [Euronews]

Corinne Sachot, a caregiver who took part in the protests said that she is simply exercising her right to strike. "We are not here to vandalise. We are here to claim our rights. It's not the same thing," she told Euronews. [BrusselsTimes] [Euronews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Right-wing party calls to abolish dual nationalities

A Belgian right-wing nationalist party, New Flemish Alliance, said on May 15 that the party wants to abolish dual nationalities.

This was in response to data released showing that 72 percent of Turkish Belgians voted for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, making Erdogan more popular in Belgium than in Turkey.

This year, there were 135,000 Turks eligible to vote in Belgium. [TheBrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: New package of military aid for Ukraine

Belgium is preparing a new military aid package for Ukraine, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced on May 4, after a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte in The Hague. [BrusselsTimes] [Belga]

“Belgium is in the process of preparing a new military aid package,” De Croo said at a press conference with Zelensky and Rutte at the Casthuis, the residence of the Dutch prime minister in The Hague. “For such processes, practical obstacles often arise, but I can assure that there is no doubt in Belgian minds and hearts about the need to continue to support Ukraine,” he added. [BrusselsTimes] [Belga]

The Belgian Prime Minister did not go into the details of the aid, but it is certain to be military equipment to replenish Ukrainian reserves. In the March budget adjustment, Belgium is also working on the billions of euros of Russian assets frozen on its territory (the figure of €180 billion has been cited) to support Ukraine. [BrusselsTimes] [Belga]

Belgium is seeking to work out a legal framework with the European Commission to play “a leading role” in the allocation of Russian money for Ukraine’s war effort and reconstruction.

On May 12, the Belgian government approved a new military and humanitarian assistance package of EUR 92 million for Ukraine. As announced, the funds were taken from the tax revenues received from Russian financial assets frozen in Belgium. [militarnyi] [bnn]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Environmental organisations hold biodiversity march

Environmental organisations held a biodiversity march in Brussels on May 21 to celebrate the International Day for Biodiversity. Around 300 people took part in the march. [BrusselsTimes]

Organisers are calling for a broader definition of ecocide to be included in Belgian legislation. While Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne included

ecocide as a crime in the new penal code last year, it still has to be advised by the Council of State and decided upon by the parliament's deliberation. [BrusselsTimes]

"The government's definition of ecocide is very limited. It is only about deliberate damage, but the major ecocides in the world are rather a result of a lack of precaution," said Ruth-Marie Henckes, biodiversity expert at Greenpeace. [BrusselsTimes]

[gt/gc]

Belgium to deploy 1,000 more troops overseas

Belgium will increase the number of troops deployed overseas by 1,000 between May and July. Before the decision, the European country had roughly 250 troops overseas.

The additional deployments will be to fulfil Belgium's North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) obligations since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The majority will reinforce NATOs Eastern flank in Romania and the German-led brigade in Lithuania. [BrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

France: Top constitutional authority rejects push for referendum on pension reform

France's top constitutional authority rejected an attempt by opposition lawmakers to undo a controversial pension reform that President Emmanuel Macron enacted in April. [France24]

The council assessed whether the reform would meet the legal requirements for a referendum and concluded that it did not. The reforms, which sparked violent protests, raised the retirement age by two years to 64. [France24]

The legislation does not address a required "reform regarding social policy," the council said. They judged that it did not "satisfy conditions" set out in the French Constitution, the council said. [France24]

If the council had judged that it did meet the requirements, then supporters would have had nine

months to collect signatures from at least 10 percent of French voters. This would not have necessarily led to a referendum, as this would have only been done if it wasn't debated by lawmakers.

Macron's government would have to choose between sending the topic for debate in Parliament or waiting six months for a referendum. [France24]

Macron continues to defend the controversial reform which led hundreds of thousands of people to the streets of France in protest, stating that reform is necessary to keep the pension system afloat as the population ages. [France24]

(sm/gc)

France: Macron commemorates end of WWII amid tensions

French President Emmanuel Macron led the traditional ceremony on Paris' Champs-Elysees, commemorating the day that marked the end of World War II in Europe in 1945. Flanked by Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, Macron laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe monument. [France24]

Police banned gatherings around the area of the ceremony in the French capital, and in Lyon, where the president travelled later in the day, to limit disruptions amid ongoing opposition to Macron and his contested pension reforms.

Large-scale strikes and protests were held throughout the country in response to the government's pension reforms. The French government forced through its pension system reform plan that would raise the retirement age by two years, extending the contribution period. [Europe in Review April/2023]

Trade unions, left-wing parties and the far-right National Rally have opposed the reform. They claim the pension reform overturns social achievements and discriminates against certain workers, notably women, and jobs requiring physical labour. They argue that the reform will also have a negative impact on youth unemployment. [Europe in Review April/2023]

(sm/gc)

Germany: Economy slides into recession

The largest economy in Europe, Germany, slid into recession for the past two quarters as households cut spending in response to sharply higher prices for energy and food, according to the country's national statistics agency Destatis. [Destatis][WSJ]

Gross domestic product was 0.3 percent lower in the three months through March than in the final quarter of last year, according to the German statistics agency. It had previously estimated that the economy flatlined in the first quarter, having contracted by 0.5 percent in the final quarter. [WSJ]

"The persistence of high price increases continued to be a burden on the German economy at the start of the year," Destatis said in a May 25 press release. "This was particularly reflected in household final consumption expenditure, which was down 1.2 percent in the first quarter of 2023 after adjustment for price, seasonal and calendar variations." [Destatis] [WSJ]

Households spent less on food and beverages, clothing and footwear, and on furnishings in the first quarter of 2023 than in the previous quarter, Germany's statistics agency said. "Households purchased fewer new cars, which is likely attributable, in part, to the discontinuation of grants for plug-in hybrids and the reduction of grants for electric vehicles at the start of 2023."

The mild economic contraction is much more positive than was forecasted in the middle of 2022, and has not caused turmoil in German politics. A decision by the Green Party to introduce a bill to tax all German households on future carbon output above a certain threshold and to ban new gas boilers starting in 2024 has passed.

Gas boilers

The Free Democratic Party (FDP) blocked the bill when introduced by their Green Party coalition partner on May 23 by refusing to allow it to be placed on the legislative agenda. This delays summer adjournment for the Bundestag. [FT]

Dubbed the "heat hammer" by the German press, the bill will effectively force German homeowners to abandon the natural gas heaters they are accustomed to over time as upgrades and maintenance will be curtailed under the ban. Gas heaters will be forbidden in new homes and no new heaters can be sold after December 31, 2023, according to the legislation as currently written. About 70 percent of Germans

oppose the ban, according to a poll by Civey on behalf of leading German newspaper Die Zeit. [FT]

While it may be consistent with the party platform and EU climate policy goals, the decision by the Green Party to attempt a veritable gas boiler ban for all German households has upended energy policy and domestic politics in Germany.

A mild recession – portrayed by the current German government as a positive economic outcome after the dire predictions of many pessimistic prognosticators in 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine – is instead overshadowed by energy policy induced political turmoil, which may jeopardise the government itself.

(rw/gc)

Germany: State Secretary resigns amid cronyism allegations

A senior German official stepped down from his post amid allegations of cronyism on May 17 after supporting a friend for a position in government and allocating funds to a relative.

State Secretary Patrick Graichen, a senior aide to Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, allegedly named the current government think-tank chief Michael Schaefer as the best candidate for a government position without disclosing their close relationship. He also approved funding an environmental NGO with his sister Verena Graichen as a board member – up to EUR 600,000. [EURACTIV] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

Habeck, who is also Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, said that Graichen "has made himself too vulnerable" and that it was "one mistake too many." Habeck asked on May 17 for Graichen to be "put into temporary retirement." [EURACTIV]

Graichen, a member of the Greens, held the office of State Secretary since the formation of the governing coalition of Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and Liberals (FDP) in 2021. Before that, he was chief of the energy policy think-tank Agora Energiewende. [EURACTIV]

Philipp Nimmermann, also a member of the Green party, has been named the new energy State Secretary, said the Economy and Climate Ministry on May 22. Nimmermann was previously a member of the

Economy Ministry in the federal state of Hesse. [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

(mb/gc),

Germany: Government introduces draft law for new citizenship rules

The German government on May 19 announced a draft law to reform citizenship rules that may make it easier for immigrants to receive a German passport or keep a dual citizenship as Berlin tries to make Europe's largest economy more attractive for skilled workers to fill shortages on the labour market. [DW] [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

The new law would allow for immigrants living in Germany to apply for citizenship after five years instead of the current eight years. Children born in Germany with at least one parent living for five years or longer in the country will automatically receive German citizenship. [Tagesschau] [DW]

The draft law also allows dual citizenship, lifting a decades-long ban. [DW]

The conservative opposition party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) criticised the planned reform, saying that it would encourage illegal immigration. "German citizenship is something very precious, and one should treat it very carefully," said Friedrich Merz, leader of the CDU. [DW] [Reuters]

Alexander Throm of the CDU warned that the new law risks naturalising people too quickly before they are integrated enough. "Integration needs time," he said. [ZDF]

(mb/gc)

Ireland: Increased sentences for assaults on police

The Irish government has agreed to increase prison sentences from seven to 12 years for assaulting or obstructing national police service officers. This will apply to all emergency service workers, including hospital staff, soldiers, the fire brigade, as well as the police. [RTÉ] [Irish Legal News]

Attacks on Ireland's police force, known as the Garda Síochána or Guardians of Peace, have increased by 17

percent since 2021. The increased sentences are intended to show solidarity with both workers and the communities they serve.

Simon Harris, Ireland's Minister for Justice, described the attacks as "inexcusable," showing "flagrant disregard for the rule of law." [Breaking News Ireland] [RTÉ]

The rise in violence towards Gardaí aligns with recent global trends, particularly in England and the US, which have also seen a sharp increase in police officer attacks. However, while confidence in the police has steadily fallen to 49 percent in England and 45 percent in the US, Irish attitudes towards the Gardaí are largely positive.

With 91 percent of Irish citizens trusting their police force, the prevalence of attacks highlights the nuanced relationship between the Gardaí and the public. [The Independent] [Forbes] [An Garda Síochána]

(ew/gc)

Ireland: 300 asylum seekers to be housed in Galway office block

At least 300 men seeking international protection are set to be accommodated in a former office block in Galway, West Ireland. The 62-room property is located at Ballybrit Business Park, four kilometres north of Galway's city centre. [The Irish Times]

The contract for the office block to serve as emergency housing for the next two years is still being negotiated. Residents are to receive a weekly allowance of EUR 38.80.

Galway is already home to 4,200 refugees living in state-provided housing, 3,500 of which are from Ukraine, following Russia's invasion in February 2022. [RTÉ] [Galway Bay FM]

Repurposed office blocks are becoming a popular solution to Ireland's refugee influx due to the country's ongoing housing crisis, with similar projects undertaken in the capital of Dublin. The Irish civil service predicts a potential 180,000 refugees in the country by the end of 2023, with Integration Minister Roderic O'Gorman calling for more available buildings to be used for refugee housing. [BBC] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

(ew/gc)

Netherlands: Data Protection Authority summons foreign ministry for using profiling software

The Dutch Data Protection Authority has summoned Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra to defend the Ministry's use of profiling software that allegedly uses algorithms that encourage discrimination when assessing visa applications, NRC reported on May 2. [NLTimes] [NRC]

The profiling software relates to the 90-day Schengen visas that are mandatory for all non-European Union residents who want to visit the Netherlands. To assess their eligibility for a visa, Foreign Affairs officials use the Information Supported Decision Making algorithm, based on the applicant's nationality, gender, age, and place of application. [NLTimes] [NRC]

Last year, the Ministry's data protection officer Niels Westerlaken urged the Ministry to immediately stop "profiling visa applicants" with this algorithm, warning that it could quickly lead to discrimination. He pointed out that the algorithm automatically labels all young men from Suriname for intensive assessment. The Ministry ignored the advice, according to the NRC. [NLTimes] [NRC]

[gt/gc]

Netherlands: Immigration office calls for changes to migration policy

The Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation office (IND) said it will advocate for "fundamentally different choices in migration policy" in a report released on May 23. [NLTimes]

The IND wants to make long-term agreements with the Ministry of Justice and Security, to determine at least five years ahead how many applications the IND will process. The IND pointed to judges setting higher requirements for the substantiation of rejections and the misuse of the family reunification procedure as a justification for proposed changes. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch nationals lose their citizenship due to terrorism

The Netherlands has permanently withdrawn 20 Dutch citizenships due to their convictions of terrorist crimes or in the interest of national security, Minister Dilan Yesilgoz said in a letter to parliament on May 15. [NLTimes]

The government has decided to withdraw additional Dutch citizenships, but the Council of State is still considering the decision. Yesilgoz said that for some of those convicted of terrorism who are now definitely no longer Dutch, it is not yet possible to let them leave the country voluntarily or forcibly. [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Government works with agricultural organisation for more sustainable food

The Dutch cabinet is seeking an agreement with agricultural organisations regarding proposals to make agriculture in the Netherlands fully sustainable in the future, RTL Nieuws reported on May 16. [RTLNieuws]

Among the main proposals, all products in Dutch supermarkets would soon have to meet a new "sustainability standard," which will increase prices, and force all imported products to meet the new standards. Farmers will be compensated and will also become responsible for nature management. [RTLNieuws]

No nitrogen agreements are expected to be included in any agricultural agreement. These depend on the negotiations in the new provinces and the elaboration of the cabinet. [RTLNieuws]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Environment group organises week-long protests

Extinction Rebellion, an environmental group, has organised in the Netherlands a week-long demonstration consisting of a walk from Arnhem to the Hague along the A12 highway between May 21 and May 27 to protest against government subsidies to the fossil industry.

Under the slogan “this is what democracy looks like” the movement said on its Twitter account that 6,000 people took part in the demonstration. Among them were 130 environmental groups, 80 musicians, and 100 scientists. During the protest, more than 1,500 people were arrested and authorities used water cannons. [Twitter]

Extinction Rebellion has blocked the A12 highway seven times already. Following the last blockade on March 11, the municipality urged the activists to protest at a different location, stating that blocking highways is both dangerous and illegal. [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Efforts to increase import low-emission vehicles ineffective

Switzerland’s effort to increase low-emission vehicle imports by imposing stiffer penalties on cars and vans have had little impact, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) said in a report.[Swissinfo]

Individually calculated emission ceilings are set for imported vehicles, it explained. If the value is exceeded, a penalty is imposed. The penalty amounts paid have risen sharply since 2018, totalling EUR 28 million in 2021.

Some of the penalties have been counterproductive, including leading to an increase in heavier vehicles being imported, the government said in the report. “Moreover, there is a lack of effective and necessary incentives aimed at consumers,” it said.

The government recommended that the measures should be supplemented with consumer incentives, such as “one-off registration fees or emissions-based increases in motor vehicle tax.” [Government]

In 2020, vehicles accounted for 40 percent of CO2 emissions in Switzerland, the report disclosed. This led to the imposition of ceilings on imported cars and vans. [Swissinfo]

The report noted that Switzerland had set the level of penalty in line with that of the European Union, “which at least means that the Swiss market is not more attractive than its European neighbours to importers of high-emission vehicles.” [Swissinfo]

But it also means that the measure has only a limited impact on demand. The SFAO found that the

associated penalty is too low. “Owing to the high purchasing power in Switzerland compared to other countries, importers are able to pass the penalty on to the consumer,” it said.

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Inflation decreases

The Federal Office of Statistics released data on May 5 that showed a slowing in inflation.

Inflation slowed from 2.9 percent year on year in March to 2.6 percent year on year in April. Inflation for imported products decelerated significantly, while products made domestically saw little change. That same day, FitchRatings affirmed Switzerland’s AAA status. [LeFigaro]

“Switzerland's 'AAA' ratings reflect a high value-added economy, with income and governance indicators above the median level of its rated peers,” Fitch said. “A record of prudent economic and fiscal policy making lends support to macroeconomic stability and low government debt levels. The large banking sector (assets 5x GDP) is a long-standing contingent liability for the sovereign and challenges to the sector have increased.”

The Stable Outlook reflects Fitch's view that risk of sector-wide spillovers from the UBS-Credit Suisse (CS) takeover will be limited, with no material deterioration in the sovereign's balance sheet.

“The government-facilitated acquisition of CS by UBS helped prevent a disorderly default of a globally systemically important bank and a crisis in the Swiss banking sector, but it has highlighted how the sector represents a large contingent liability for the sovereign despite the too-big-to-fail regulation in place.”

Unemployment

At the end of the first quarter of 2023, total employment was 2.2 percent higher than a year earlier and 0.6 percent higher than at the end of 2022. Companies in Switzerland reported a total of 7,100 (+5.9 percent) more vacancies than a year earlier and the employment outlook indicator remained positive. [LeNews]

The number of jobs has grown in every quarter since the end of the second quarter of 2020. Since 30 June

2020 the number of Swiss jobs has grown by a total of 5.7 percent.

Regions with the greatest growth over this period were the Lake Geneva Region (+7.3 percent), Eastern Switzerland (+7.2 percent) and Central Switzerland (+6.9 percent). Slower growth was experienced in Ticino (+5.8 percent), Zurich (+5.4 percent), Mittelland (+4.4 percent) and North-Western Switzerland (+3.2 percent). [LeNews]

Since the end of the second quarter 2020, the number of women working (+6.6 percent) has increased more than the number of men (+4.8 percent). [LeNews]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: First canton bans conversion therapies

The Swiss cantonal parliament of Neuchatel passed a law banning conversion therapies on May 2. Neuchatel is the first of the country's 26 cantons to do so.

Under the new legislation, it will be illegal to provide treatments to change sexual orientation. Inciting someone to seek out these treatments will also be illegal. No cantonal statistics are available, however, 14,000 people nationally are estimated to have undergone a variation of conversion therapy.

Conversion therapies are already illegal in neighbouring Germany and France. [SwissInfo]

(sw)

Switzerland: Local voting rights for non-residents rejected

The Zurich parliament on May 22 voted against a proposal by city officials to grant local voting rights to non-Swiss passport holders in Switzerland's most populous canton.

The initiative would have allowed municipalities to decide themselves whether to introduce voting rights for foreigners at the communal level. But opponents argued that foreigners should first obtain the right to vote for elections at all levels via the naturalisation process. [Swissinfo]

Already in 2021 the inability of the foreign community to vote raised concerns. Of Switzerland's 8.7 million resident population, around 35 percent are not allowed to vote at a national level. [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Climate activists protest at Geneva airport

Climate activists protested at the Geneva airport on May 23 near the runway of Europe's biggest private jet fair, suspending air traffic for one hour. Dozens of climate activists wore bright yellow vests and sat below private jets on display for the European Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition (EBACE), Europe's biggest private jet fair. [Swissinfo]

Over 100 activists from environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace, Stay Grounded Network, and Scientist Rebellion took part in the protest calling for a ban on private jets. [Twitter]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland holds largest military drill in three decades

The Swiss Armed forces held their largest military drill in three decades on May 4. A total of 4,000 troops repelled a fictional enemy across four cantons over a nine-day period. The soldiers tossed grenades and fired live ammunition.

Most of the troops involved were civilians taking part in the country's mandatory military service. While the drills, named LUX23, were planned in 2021 prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, officials said that the war in Ukraine made the drills all the more relevant. [Reuters]

Switzerland has remained militarily neutral towards the war in Ukraine so far, only imposing economic sanctions on Russia. [VOA]

(sw/gc)

United Kingdom: Conservative Party loses more than 1,000 councillors in local

election

The British Conservative Party lost 48 councils and more than 1000 councillors across England during local council elections on May 5.[BBC]

Prime Minister and Conservative leader Rishi Sunak admitted the results were “disappointing”, stating he did not detect "a massive groundswell of movement towards the Labour Party or excitement for its agenda." [BBC]

Following the May 5 elections, the Labour Party, the second largest party in the British Parliament, became the biggest party in local government for the first time in 21 years. Labour Party leader, Sir Keir Starmer, subsequently said his party was on course to win the next national general election in 2024.

Other smaller parties benefited from the Conservative Party’s losses. The Liberal Democrats won 12 councils and gained 405 new councillors. The Green Party gained 241 seats and won control of its first ever English council. [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: International students lose right to bring families

The British government has announced that international students will lose the right to bring family members to the United Kingdom unless they are studying a postgraduate research course. This new rule is set to be introduced for students beginning their studies from January 2024, with the government seeking to further curb immigration. [Sky News] [BBC]

In 2022, more than 135,000 visas were granted to international students’ dependents, compared to 16,000 in 2019. This increase of almost 800 percent has been deemed an “unexpected rise” by Home Secretary Suella Braverman, though the director of Universities UK International says the policy could have a “disproportionate impact on women and students from certain countries.”

Almost half of the visas granted in 2022 were to Nigerian dependents at 60,923, with more first-year students coming to the UK from Nigeria and India than the whole European Union. [Sky News] [BBC] [The Guardian] [Times Higher Education]

The policy has divided Conservative cabinet members, with Braverman clashing with Education Secretary Gillian Keegan and Chancellor Jeremy Hunt, who have highlighted the economic benefits of international students in the UK's labour force. [Sky News] [The Independent]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: King Charles is coronated

King Charles and Queen Camilla were crowned on May 6th in a historic event watched by people all over the world. [BBC]

The event began at around 10 a.m. when the King started his journey to Westminster Abbey in the horse-drawn Diamond Jubilee State Coach, passing thousands of people and members of the British armed forces. [BBC]

The ceremony itself was around two hours long and was watched by millions on the television. Heads of state from 90 countries attended, including French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. US First Lady Jill Biden also attended, as well as Ukrainian First Lady Olene Zelenska. [BBC}

American singer Katy Perry and British actress Emma Thompson were among the celebrities who attended. [BBC]

The Duke of Sussex also attended, sitting two rows behind brother Prince William. This was the first time the two had been seen together since Harry released his controversial memoir, Spare. Prince Harry left for the US very soon after the ceremony. [BBC]

The coronation itself emphasised the importance of service with the King saying: "I come not to be served, but to serve." [BBC]

At one point, the King was screened away from the public and anointed with holy oils by the Archbishop of Canterbury. This was done in private as it "has historically been regarded as a moment between the Sovereign and God." [BBC]

While a large majority of the public was out on the streets in support of the coronation, arrests were made by the police following protests from anti-monarchist groups. London's police authority, the

Metropolitan Police, said they arrested 52 people for public order offences. However these arrests have caused controversy with the Director of Human Rights Watch UK saying: "The reports of people being arrested for peacefully protesting the coronation are incredibly alarming." [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: Prince Harry loses legal battle for special police protection

Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, has been denied permission to fund his own police protection while visiting the United Kingdom. The decision was announced on May 23 after the Duke and Duchess stepped down from their roles as working royals and relocated to the United States in 2020. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

The Duke was seeking to challenge the government's rejection of his offer to pay for police protection. The High Court has denied the Duke's request.

While the Duke's lawyers argued that people can pay for private security during events like football matches, the government felt that granting the Duke's request would set an "uncomfortable precedent" where wealthy elites could "buy" police. [Forbes]

Shortly before the decision was announced, the Duke and Duchess experienced a "near catastrophic" paparazzi car chase in New York, with the Duke expressing concerns over his security after his mother, Princess Diana, died in a car chase in 1997. The Duke is currently involved in multiple legal cases at the High Court, suing three British tabloids for phone hacking and privacy violations. [The Guardian] [Forbes] [CNN] [The New York Times]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Climate change protesters storm Shell AGM in London

Climate change activists disrupted the annual general assembly of Shell, a global energy and petrochemical giant, in London on May 23. Around 100 activists delayed the meeting by an hour, with some attempting to access the stage amidst cries of "go to hell, Shell." [The Guardian] [Reuters]

Protesters came from movements including Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace, as well as Quakers for Climate Justice. Shell has played a large role in the current climate crisis, ranked as the 7th-biggest global emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs). [Evening Standard] [Climate Accountability Institute] [BBC]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Public health care service faces 35,000 cases of sexual misconduct during five-year period

More than 35,000 cases of sexual misconduct and sexual violence were recorded from 2017 to 2022 on National Health Service (NHS) premises. Investigations carried out by The Guardian and the British Medical Journal found that at least one in five incidents involved inappropriate physical contact, including rape. [BBC] [Evening Standard]

At 58 percent, most cases involved patients abusing staff, but the investigation discovered that less than one in 10 NHS trusts have specific policies to deal with sexual abuse, and are no longer required to report abuse of staff to a central database. Data also revealed that over 4,000 NHS staff were accused of misconduct, such as rape, stalking and harassment, but just 576 have faced disciplinary action. [Evening Standard] [Wales Online]

The findings suggest a worrying lack of protection for both NHS patients and staff – many women feel that the NHS is showing a "reluctance to suspend perpetrators due to overall staff shortages," according to a senior legal officer at the Rights of Women helpline, Deeba Syed. [Phys.org] [The Guardian]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Welsh party has a culture of bullying and misogyny

A report into Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru has stated the party needs to "detoxify a culture of harassment, bullying and misogyny," saying that "too many instances of bad behaviour" were tolerated. [BBC]

Party leader Adam Price first stated that he would not resign as he did not want to abdicate his responsibility.

He accepted the 82 recommendations given and apologised to everyone who experienced or witnessed the unacceptable behaviour.

Price admitted the highly critical report had "harmed and tarnished" the party. However, only a few weeks after saying this he stood down from the position, triggering a leadership election in the party. [BBC]

The Prosiect Pawb (Everyone's Project) report said "inaction over many years, from those with positions of power to challenge bad behaviour has made a bad situation even worse." [BBC]

The review started looking into complaints about the party's internal culture in December and found that most discrimination was based on gender, stating that the party has to “make Plaid truly and visibly welcoming to women."[BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: Sinn Fein becomes biggest party in Northern Ireland's local government

Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein has overtaken the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as the biggest party in Northern Ireland’s local government elections for the first time, winning 144 of the 462 council seats available. This is an increase of 39. The DUP numbers stayed unchanged at 122 seats. [Bloomberg]

This continues Sinn Fein’s positive run after it became the biggest party in the Northern Ireland Stormont Assembly last year. This was also a first for an Irish nationalist and pro-reunification party in Northern Irish history. [Bloomberg]

Sinn Fein’s success has increased the pressure on the DUP to stop its refusal to take part in Northern Ireland’s power-sharing agreement. The DUP began its boycott to protest an agreement made between the UK and European Union (EU) to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland as per the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP believes such an arrangement would undermine Northern Ireland’s place in the UK as it is still able to have a part in the EU single market in current conditions. [Bloomberg]

This may all signify a great change in Northern Irish politics as Sinn Fein’s support increases. The party which wishes to see a united Ireland is already the most popular in the Northern Irish Assembly and is

now the most popular in the Republic of Ireland. [Bloomberg]

(sm/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: Opposition activist pardoned

Opposition activist Roman Protasevich was pardoned by Belarus two years after his arrest in May 2021. [Belta]

In a video released by Belta, the state news agency, Protasevich expressed his gratitude to the country and personally to the president for such a decision. “I am very happy. I am overwhelmed. I cannot even formulate a thought,” he said. [Belta]

Protasevich was the editor of the Nexta Telegram channel, which published videos and information about the mass protests across Belarus during the summer of 2020 against President Lukashenko following his controversial election victory. [The New York Times] [BBC]

A Belarusian court sentenced Roman Protasevich to eight years in prison. According to Belta, Protasevich was sentenced on charges which included “committing acts of terrorism, slandering the president, and spreading knowingly fraudulent information about Belarus.” [Belta]

President Lukashenko signed Protasevich’s pardon on May 16. [Belta]

(ag/gc)

Belarus: Trade restrictions spur economic decline

Deputy Prime Minister of Belarus Nikolai Snopkov identified three factors that have hampered economic growth in late 2022 and early 2023. [Belta]

According to Snopkov, trade restrictions imposed by Western countries drove the decline of exports. [Belta]

To compensate for the export losses, Snopkov has stated that more than 80 percent of exports have been redirected to friendly countries. In addition, Belarus has also restricted food exports and banned the withdrawal of technological equipment to protect its own market. [Belta]

Legal frameworks have been put into place by an ad hoc government committee that has adopted 1,000 pinpoint and industry wide decisions.

The goal of these decisions is to ensure the smooth operation of business and the maintenance of export levels, said Nikolai Snopkov. [Belta]

(ef/gc)

Estonia: Marriage equality bill sent for first reading

The legal affairs committee of the Estonian parliament decided to send a marriage equality bill for first reading at a plenary sitting on May 22. The bill would give same sex couples the right to jointly adopt children. [Postimees][Postimees]

The deadline for amendments to the bill was set for June 5. If passed, the bill would enter into force on January 1, 2024. [Postimees]

(ag/gc)

Latvia: Foreign minister becomes new president

Lativan Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics was elected as the next president of Latvia. Rinkevics, who served as the country's Foreign Minister since 2011, ran

alongside entrepreneur Uldis Piilens and diaspora activist Elina Pinto. [Reuters] [LSM]

The elections were held openly, meaning that the ballot paper contains the first and last name of each member of the Latvian parliament, known as the Saeima. The vote of each member was made public immediately after the election results. [LSM]

This was the second open election in Latvia's history [LSM]

Rinkevics received 52 votes out of the 100-member Saeima, which is one more vote than the absolute majority needed to win. [AP]

Rinkevics will serve as the country's president for the next four years. His inauguration is due for July 8. [LSM] [AP]

[ag/gc]

Lithuania: Largest party in ruling coalition seeks snap elections amid expenses scandal

The leader of the ruling party in Lithuania, The Homeland Union Lithuanian Christian Democrats, said that the party's leadership were discussing "the resignation of the government and early parliamentary elections." [LRT]

On the possible resignation of the entire cabinet of Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte, there could be such a decision, party leader Gabrielius Landsbergis, who is also the Minister of Foreign Affairs, said. " I don't rule out any decision." [LRT]

There have been calls for the resignation of the Education Minister Jurgita Siugzdinienė amid allegations that she failed to submit receipts for expenses to the value of EUR 13,800 that she claimed between 2019 and 2020. Siugzdinienė handed in her resignation on May 18, although the Prime Minister has not accepted it yet.[Reuters][LRT][LRT]

According to the Baltic Times, the board of the Liberals' Movement party, allied with the Homeland Union, agreed that the cabinet should undergo a vote of confidence in the parliament – or Seimas – but that snap elections would not solve the problem. [Baltic Times]

“We see it as an attempt to turn individual cases into collective responsibility and lay the blame on the Seimas,” Eugenijus Gentvilas, a member of the board, said. [Baltic Times]

The next national election in Lithuania is scheduled for October 2024. [Reuters]

(ag/gc)

Georgia: President refuses to use Georgian Airways after resumption of flights to Russia

Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili decided to boycott Georgian Airways, a privately owned airline, due to their recent resumption of commercial flights to Russia. [Bloomberg][TASS][AeroTime]

Zourabichvili criticised the airline's actions and stated that she will avoid using their services as long as they are under the control of individuals motivated solely by financial gain. [Bloomberg][TASS][AeroTime]

Despite calls from the United States and the European Union (EU) for Georgia to uphold sanctions against Russia following the Ukrainian invasion, some other Georgian officials welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to restore air transport links between the two countries. [Bloomberg][TASS] [AeroTime]

The revival of commercial flights between Russia and Georgia has triggered anti-Russian protests within Georgia, raising concerns that the improving relations could jeopardise the country's aspirations to join the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. [Bloomberg][TASS][AeroTime]

On May 19, Russia's first commercial flight in four years arrived in Georgia, while a Georgian Airways plane landed in Moscow on May 20, as confirmed by Nino Tsivtsivadze, the spokesperson for Tbilisi airport. Zourabichvili also addressed reports about a wedding organised by the family members of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the Kvareli Lake resort in eastern Georgia. [Bloomberg][TASS][AeroTime]

She clarified that the wedding party would not be taking place in Georgia and revealed that the family had already left the country after completing the marriage registration. [Bloomberg]

Protests opposing the resort's decision to host the wedding occurred outside Kvareli Lake, leading to the detention of approximately 16 protesters, according to statements from activists and the police.

TASS, Russia's news agency, reported that Tamaz Gaiashvili, the founder of Georgian Airways, had banned the airline's president from utilising their services in response to her boycott statement. Gaiashvili referred to President Zourabichvili as "persona non grata" and declared that the ban would remain in place until she offered an apology to the Georgian people.

While some Georgian officials welcomed the resumption of flights, demonstrating their willingness to improve relations with Russia, other Georgians oppose any reconciliation and advocate for stronger ties with the EU. President Zourabichvili, whose role is primarily ceremonial, has expressed concerns that deepening ties with Russia could jeopardise Georgia's future prospects of EU membership. [Reuters]

(at/gc)

Moldova: Thousands rally in support of government's EU membership

Tens of thousands of Moldovans rallied on May 21 in the capital of Chisinau in support of Moldova's European Union (EU) membership. The rally was organised by the government under President Maia Sandu's initiative. [Reuters]

The rally opened with the Moldovan national anthem, after which participants chanted "European Moldova" and waved EU flags. According to police, more than 75,000 people were present at the rally. [Al-Jazeera]

Sandu told the crowds that Moldova aims for full EU-membership by 2030. "We came to say loudly, confidently and proudly that Moldovans are Europeans," she said.

Sandu was joined by the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola.

"I came here today to stand with you and Maia Sandu and to bring one message to you: Europa este Moldova, Moldova este Europa," she told the crowds. [European Parliament News]

Ilan Shor, the leader of pro-Russian Shor Party, called on his supporters via video link at anti-government

protests in different cities for a referendum to change Moldova's foreign policy. Shor, an exiled businessman was sentenced to 15 years in prison in April due to his 2014 involvement in USD 1 billion theft from Moldovan banks. [Euro News]

(lc/gc)

Russia: Putin increases penalties for treason

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed on April 28 new laws that will amend the Russian Criminal Code to increase penalties for treason, terrorism, and aiding the work of international organisations in which Russia is not a member. [RIA]

Putin amended Article 275 on High Treason. The new law prescribes life imprisonment for cases of espionage – defined as the "issuance to foreigners of information constituting a state secret, going over to the side of the enemy or providing financial, logistical, consulting or other assistance in activities directed against Russia.". [Government]

The sentence for the organisation of sabotage was raised from 15 to 20 years imprisonment, according to the government document. Sentences for acts of international terrorism were increased from 10 to 12 years imprisonment, without actually defining what international terrorism constitutes.

Russia says such laws are required to protect the country from a potential invasion from Ukraine or other Western forces. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russia: New Deputy Defence minister appointed to run logistics

Russia appointed on April 30 Alexey Kuzmenkov as the new Deputy Minister of Defence responsible for logistics, after Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev was dismissed from the post.

"Kuzmenkov was appointed to the position of Deputy Defence Minister of the Russian Federation, responsible for the logistical support of the Armed Forces," the Russian Defence Ministry said in a statement. The statement does not mention the

reason behind the dismissal of the former Deputy Minister of Defence Mizintsev. [The Moscow Times]

In the early months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year, Mizintsev organised the siege of the Ukrainian city of Mariupol, gaining the nickname "the butcher of Mariupol." According to Ukrainian sources, his dismissal related to his reputation and the Western sanctions imposed on him. [Meduza] [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Critics abroad might show signs of poisoning

At least four Russian people residing abroad have allegedly experienced symptoms of possible poisoning or have experienced home intrusions by unknown persons potentially affiliated with the Russian special services, according to the independent Russian media outlet specialising in investigative journalism Agentstvo.

Two journalists writing about Russia – a former US ambassador and an activist – were the alleged targets. The last cases were registered in April. [Telegram]

After a Berlin conference organised by Russian Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, two women – one an unnamed journalist and the other the director of the NGO Free Russia Foundation Natalia Arno – had symptoms of poisoning. [Reuters]

After returning to her residence in the United States, Arno sought medical treatment and reported the case to the FBI which allegedly launched an investigation.

Some sources found similarities between Arno's incident and the one involving former US Ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst a few months before Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The doctors who treated Herbst, however, could not conclude that the former diplomat was poisoned. [Meduza]

Khodorkovsky spent 10 years in custody for tax evasion and theft after funding opposition parties. After asking for clemency because of his mother's serious illness, the fierce critic of the Kremlin was freed suddenly after being given a pardon by President Vladimir Putin. He was flown to Germany where he announced he would stay out of politics and would not return to Russia unless he was sure he could leave again. [BBC]

Meanwhile, Bulgarian journalist Christo Grozev said his hotel room in Montenegro was broken into during a conference in the summer of 2022, suspecting Russian surveillance. His phone was missing after the break-in but Grozev refused to provide further details.

These cases suggest that in spite of Russia's political schism from the West, the country is still actively operating outside of its borders. [The Moscow Times]

German police opened an investigation into the suspected poisoning of two Russians living in exile in the country, authorities said on May 21. [Reuters] [DW] [Reuters][DW]

(ava-mb/gc)

Russian: Government arrests scientists on charges of treason

Russia has arrested three scientists who have worked on hypersonic missile development during the past year, according to an open letter published by the S.A. Khristianovich Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ITPM SB RAS).

Anatoly Alexandrovich Maslov, Alexander Nikolaevich Shiplyuk and Valery Ivanovich Zvegintsev are being held in custody on treason charges for speaking at conferences abroad, publishing articles in popular journals and participating in international scientific projects. [The Moscow Times]

"Our colleagues have always remained faithful to the interests of the country," the institute said in the open letter. "We just don't understand how to continue to do our job." The ITPM SB RAS staff criticised the imprisonment of their colleagues, reiterating that sharing scientific knowledge with international fellows is a step needed for high-quality scientific activity. [ITPM SB RAS]

A St. Petersburg city court will open the criminal case against Maslov, 76, on June 1, one year after his imprisonment in Novosibirsk and transfer to the Lefortovo prison in Moscow.

Maslov's lawyer Olga Dinze said that "the situation is extremely difficult" given that in April the Russian Parliament increased sentencing for treason from 20 years to life imprisonment. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Pro-Kremlin writer injured in car accident blamed on Ukraine

The Russian interior ministry announced that a car explosion on May 8 in the Nizhny Novgorod region – some 400 kilometres east of Moscow – injured the prominent pro-Kremlin writer and Russian nationalist Zakhar Prilepin, killing another.

At the time of the blast, 47-year-old Prilepin, Russia's best-known novelist, was travelling with his family. According to emergency services he suffered injuries on his leg. [The Moscow Times]

"Responsibility for this and other terrorist acts lies not only with the Ukrainian authorities, but with their Western patrons, in the first place, the United States," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. [The Moscow Times][Reuters]

The incident comes after a series of attacks and sabotage on Russian territory that authorities blame on Ukraine and its Western allies.

In August 2022, a car bombing killed Daria Dugina, the daughter of an influential Russian political theorist often referred to as "Putin's brain." In April 2023, an explosion in a cafe in St. Petersburg killed Vladlen Tatarsky, a popular military blogger. [CBS]

In response to the accusations, the Ukrainian SBU Security Service issued a statement denying the involvement in the bombing that injured Prilepin. Instead, senior adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, Mykhailo Podolyak believes that "this is all a staged performance [...] aimed at domestic audiences." [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Ukrainian "spy" sentenced to 16 years imprisonment

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said on May 23 that a Russian court sentenced Andriy Petkevich, a Ukrainian citizen, to 16 years imprisonment on charges of espionage against Russian defence sector companies.

"The Tula Regional Court's verdict against Ukrainian citizen Andrey Petkevich has taken effect. He was found guilty of committing a crime punishable under

Article 276 of the Russian Criminal Code. The court sentenced him to 16 years in a maximum-security penal colony," according to the FSB. [Tass]

The FSB detained Petkevich, 43, in the Tula region before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2021. He has been accused of seeking out secret information about small arms development at the instruction of Ukraine's intelligence services. The judge found Petkevich guilty of attempting to recruit spies among Russian defence ministry employees with access to state secrets.

The statement made by the FSB does not specify whether Petkevich pleaded guilty or not guilty. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Court rules to deport German citizen on charges of LGBT propaganda

A Russian court ruled on May 2 that a German national will be deported from the country and fined EUR 1,720 for promoting LGBT propaganda. [RIA]

Alexander Daniel Roth "promoted non-traditional sexual relations and preferences, which was expressed in the imposition of information on another person about non-traditional sexual attitudes and preferences that arouse interest in such a relationship," the City Court of Yelizovsky said in a statement. [Court of the Kamchatka territory]

The ruling comes at a time of strong restrictions on the expression of LGBT relationships and lifestyle with the expansion of the "gay propaganda" law allowing Russia to expel anyone violating the new rules. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Wagner Group starts pulling troops out of Bakhmut

The Wagner mercenary group has started withdrawing its forces from the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut after suffering thousands of casualties in its bid to retake the city in what is considered the longest and bloodiest battle since the Russian invasion in February last year.

The Wagner group – composed mainly of convicts recruited from Russian prisons – suffered heavy losses

in the months-long battle for the city. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the group, said that 20,000 of its fighters had died in Bakhmut.

He vowed to transfer control of the city to the Russian army by 1 June, but said his forces would return if the Russian regular army proved unable to manage the situation. [BBC]

Prior to the decision to withdraw his forces, Prigozhin said on May 7 that he received a promise of more ammunition from the Russian army. "They promised to give us all the ammunition and armaments we need to continue the operations," Prigozhin said. [The Moscow Times]

On May 5, Prigozhin threatened to leave his position due to the lack of ammunition. The announcement came in the form of a video which showed about 30 dead men, some covered in blood.

“You sit there, bastards, in expensive clubs,” Prigozhin said. “You think you’re the masters of this life and that you have the right to dispose of their lives.” [The Moscow Times]

Wagner-Kremlin rivalry

Tensions between the Wagner group and the conventional Russian army reached their apex during the battle of Bakhmut. Prigozhin accused the Russian army of taking credit for victories won by Wagner fighters and of slowing down the Wagner units' advances in Ukraine. [The Moscow Times]

The rivalry between the two defence bodies was already visible in January when the ministry claimed the capture of the Ukrainian town of Soledar without making mention of Wagner's role in the fighting.

"Everyone is fighting for their country,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to the criticism. “So this is how it should be viewed.” [Reuters]

Evacuation

Separately, Russia ordered the evacuation of families from the Russian-held frontline areas in southern Ukraine on May 5 due to an increase in shelling from the Ukrainian side.

“In the past few days, the enemy has stepped up shelling of settlements close to the front line,” said Yevgeny Balitsky, the Russian-installed head of the Zaporizhzhya region. “I have therefore made a decision to evacuate first of all children and parents, elderly

people, disabled people and hospital patients." [The Moscow Times]

For months Ukraine has been preparing a counter-offensive against the Russian invasion. The sabotage attacks and long-distance strikes may be an indicator that the offensive is imminent. [Kyiv Post]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Moscow scales back Victory Day celebrations due to security threats

Russia scaled back its annual Victory Day celebrations on May 9 due to heightened security threats following attacks on railroads, oil facilities and the Kremlin.

May 9 marked the 78th anniversary of the Russian victory over Nazi Germany in World War II in a battle known as The Great Patriotic War. The Soviet Union lost 27 million people at the battle. Victory Day is one of Russia's most important public holidays.

Under Putin's rule, the celebrations have served to project Russian hard power, reaffirming its status as a powerful country and to contemporarily link the defeat of fascism to the war in Ukraine, aiming to assert that the nation is supposedly always on the right side of history. [Reuters]

Due to an increase in attacks on Russian territory, this year the government decided to scale down the celebrations. [The Moscow Times]

Attack on the Kremlin

Russia accused Ukraine on May 3 of carrying out a drone attack in an attempt to kill President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin. Ukrainian officials denied the allegations and instead warned this could be an attempt at justifying an escalation in hostilities.

Videos circulating on social media showed two drones approaching the Kremlin. One of the drones hit the dome of the building that houses Putin's office, causing an eruption of flames. The second drone exploded in the same spot.

"We are not attacking either Putin or Moscow, we are fighting on our own territory, we are defending our villages and cities. We do not have enough weapons even for that," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in response to the accusations. [The Washington Post]

Russian Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, said that "Russia will respond to Ukraine's act of terrorism in the form of an attempted drone attack on the Kremlin when it deems it necessary." [TASS]

Putin's speech

On Victory Day, Putin addressed his domestic audience, attacking the West and claiming that Russia's future depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

"Civilization again finds itself at a decisive, critical moment. A real war has again been launched against our motherland," Putin said. "There is nothing more important now than your military work. Today, the security of our country depends on you. The future of our statehood and our people depends on you." [The Moscow Times] [TASS]

Despite security concerns the President attended a slimmed-down military parade in Moscow's Red Square to mark Victory Day and was joined by seven leaders of former Soviet republics, including Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Economy shrinks 1.9% in first quarter

The Russian economy shrank 1.9 percent in the first quarter of 2023, driven by continued European sanctions and the war in Ukraine.

The new wave of sanctions by the European Union on Russian petroleum products, in addition to the reduction of profits from natural gas exports are major contributors to the economic contraction. [Moscow Times]

The finance ministry of Russia has stated that these metrics have caused the budget deficit to deepen, reaching 3.4 trillion rubles (USD 42.3 billion) between January and April 2023. This exceeds the Finance Ministry's 2.9 trillion rubles (USD 36.2 billion) target deficit by a significant margin. [Moscow Times]

In spite of this, Rosstat, the Russian statistics agency, reports that the agricultural and construction sectors have been performing well during the first quarter of 2023.

Experts have noted that if this trajectory continues, the Russian public sector's deficit could reach up to 4 percent of GDP, double the 2 percent target set by the Finance Ministry. [Moscow Times]

The Russian unemployment rate has remained low at 3.5 percent, which could be an indication of current and future labour shortages. Russia has been dealing with a demographic crisis for years, which has only been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine occupying much of the young male labour force, alongside diminished economic growth. [Rosstat]

(ef/gc)

Ukraine: Large-scale corruption in Supreme Court

Ukraine's anti-corruption authorities exposed "large-scale" corruption in the country's Supreme Court, they announced on May 15. [DW] [Reuters]

They uncovered "a scheme to obtain undue advantages by the leadership and judges of the Supreme Court," said the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) on social media. [DW]

Authorities detained Vsevolod Kniaziev, the President of the Ukrainian Supreme Court. According to Ukrainian media, he accepted around EUR 2.76 million in bribes. Other judges of the Court were also being investigated. [DW] [Reuters]

The Supreme Court held a vote of no confidence on May 16, releasing Kniaziev of his powers by a majority vote. Dmytro Luspenyk, the longest serving judge in the Court, will hold the administrative powers until a new President is elected. [Ukrainian Supreme Court]

This is the most high-profile case of corruption in Ukrainian agencies, said NABU chief Semen Kryvonos. Ukraine is trying to fight back against corruption to meet the requirements to start European Union membership negotiations. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Kyiv moves day of remembrance of World War II victory, shifting away from

Soviet past

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky symbolically moved the day that his country marked the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II to May 8, a shift from the country's connection to the former Soviet Union. The country previously commemorated the victory on May 9 alongside Russia and other former Soviet republics. [Reuters] [DW]

Ukraine had first moved the commemoration in 2015 following Russia's annexation of Crimea, but never made the shift official. "It is on May 8 that most nations of the world remember the greatness of the victory over the Nazis," Zelensky said.

Ukraine will instead celebrate Europe Day on May 9. Ukraine hopes to join the European Union in the coming years.

In a speech, Zelensky compared Russia to Nazi Germany, saying that the "old evil" had returned in the form of a "modern Russia." [Reuters]

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the date May 9 will remain "sacred" for many people in Ukraine. Spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, said that Zelensky was a "traitor," who was "worse than an enemy" and that he had betrayed the memories of the Ukrainians who died in the war. [Reuters]

Nazi Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945. Due to time differences, Russia celebrates the victory on May 9.

(mb/gc)

Ukraine: Prosecutors detain Odessa Mayor

Ukrainian anti-corruption prosecutors detained Odesa Mayor Gennadiy Trukhanov on May 4 on allegations of embezzlement. [Reuters] [Kyiv Post]

Trukhanov, who has been under investigation for embezzlement since 2017, will be detained for 60 days because he couldn't pay bail of around EUR 764,730, prosecutors said. He is accused of allegedly embezzling about EUR 2.3 million.

The Ukrainian government plans to continue fighting against corruption to meet the required policy standards for accession to the European Union.

(mb/gc)

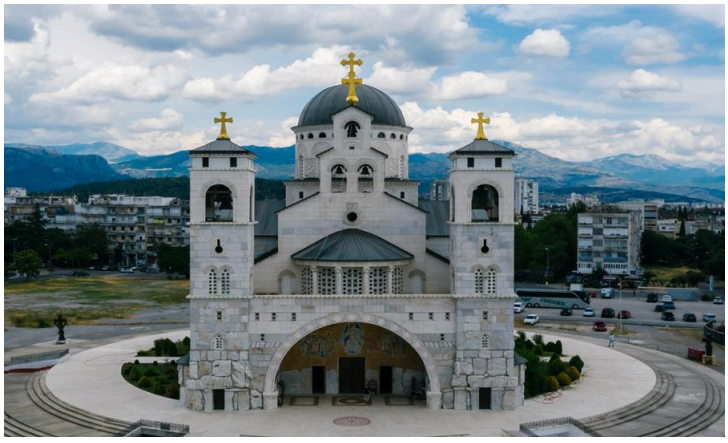
Ukraine: Companies look for business abroad as economy suffers due to war

The Ukrainian economy has suffered because of the ongoing war against Russia, declining by a third in 2022, the biggest annual fall since the country's independence from the Soviet Union.

Ukrainian companies, especially in the consumer and services sectors, have started looking for new markets and possibilities in other countries, with many choosing to enter the Polish market. Of all companies opened in Poland in September 2022, 8.5 percent had Ukrainian capital, according to the Polish Economic Institute think-tank. In January 2022, the number was 0.8 percent. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe



Albania: Government moves to establish a domestic arbitration court

Albania's legislature has proposed a law to establish a local court dedicated to resolving commercial disputes on May 18 after the country's Prime Minister, Edi Rama, expressed the possibility of Albania withdrawing from the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) based in Washington.

The ICSID recently ruled in favour of Italian businessman Francesco Becchetti, who claimed political persecution in Albania and was awarded approximately EUR 110 million in compensation. [BalkanInsight]

The draft law presented by Justice Minister Ulsi Manja aims to provide a more efficient mechanism for businesses to resolve disputes among themselves or with institutions. By offering a swift and formalised alternative, the proposed law intends to fulfil obligations arising from commercial disputes while eliminating informalities. Additionally, it is expected to promote investments in the country. [BalkanInsight]

According to the draft law, local arbitration would only be applicable if two businesses have previously agreed to it as a method of dispute resolution, thus bypassing domestic courts or international arbitration. The proposed legislation also outlines certain circumstances where Albania may choose not to implement ICSID decisions. These include cases where disputes cannot be resolved through Albanian legislation or when enforcing the ICSID ruling would contradict public order. [BalkanInsight]

Erida Skendaj, the head of the Helsinki Committee in Albania, expressed concerns that leaving the ICSID could jeopardise foreign investments in the country.

Skendaj emphasised the potential negative impact on businesses that adhere to international standards, leading to reduced competition for strategic investments and public concessions. She suggested that any decision to withdraw from the ICSID should involve consultation with relevant stakeholders. [BalkanInsight]

Business organisations in Albania have also voiced their opposition to leaving the ICSID, highlighting the adverse effects on the business climate and the likelihood of deterring foreign investment. Reports indicate that Albania currently has ten ongoing cases before the ICSID, where businesses have sued the state, along with other ICSID decisions that Albania has yet to implement. [BalkanInsight]

(at/gc)

Greece: Ruling New Democracy Party unable to form new government after election victory

The result of Greece's parliamentary elections on May 21 showed that Prime Minister Mitsotakis' centre-right New Democracy party won the majority of the votes, but due to the newly adopted proportional representation system, the party is unable to form a single-party government. [BBC]

The New Democracy party, gaining 146 seats out of 300 in the Hellenic parliament, was only five seats short from a single-party government. Mitsotakis referred to the election results as a "political earthquake" during his victory speech and called his supporters to speed up the process during the possible second round of elections.

The leader of the main opposition party SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, congratulated the prime minister on his party's victory and offered a coalition, which Mitsotakis rejected. Tsipras said SYRIZA's performance in the elections was "extremely negative" after a 20 percent drop in votes compared to previous elections. The Tsipras-led SYRIZA party was in power between 2015 to 2019. [CNN]

Before the adaptation of the proportional representation system, 41 percent of votes would have been enough to form a single-party government. Under the new system, President Katerina Sakellaropoulou will offer Mitsotakis a mandate to form a coalition giving the New Democracy party three days to form a government. If the New Democracy party fails to do so, the same will be asked from Tsipras's SYRIZA party. If or when all parties fail to form a government in their three-day periods, the country will face a second round of elections at the end of June.

According to the results of the first round of elections, the New Democracy party holds 146 seats, SYRIZA party 71, PASOK party 41, Greek Solution party 16, and finally the Communist party 10 seats. The MeRA25 party failed to keep their previous 9 seats and was unable to enter the Hellenic parliament.

(lc/gc)

Greece retains position as worst EU Country for press Freedom; North Macedonia improves

Greece has retained its position as the worst European Union country for press freedoms, ranking 107th globally in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Factors contributing to this ranking include government interference in

media, abusive lawsuits, insufficient legal protections and the unsolved 2021 murder of crime reporter Giorgos Karaivaz. [RSF]

Greece criticised RSF as "unreliable" following the report. In 2022, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis described the rankings as "crap." [greekcitytimes]

The RSF report showed that Greece improved by one place compared to last year, but its overall score decreased slightly from 55.5 to 55.2 out of 100. In contrast, countries such as Norway, Ireland, Denmark, and Sweden topped the list with scores ranging from 88 to over 95.

With Greece heading into elections next summer, the European Parliament's PEGA Committee rapporteur, Sophie in 't Veld, emphasised the need to address press freedom issues before the elections, ensuring a free and fair democratic process.[politico]

North Macedonia press freedoms improve

North Macedonia's former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev commended the nation's progress in press freedom, following the country's rise to 38th out of 180 in the RSF index[RSF]. This notable improvement is a testament to the strides taken since the Social Democrats' ascension to power in 2017, Zaev said. [MIA]

"Media freedom, a value we tirelessly fought for, has been on a steady rise for the seventh consecutive year," Zaev posted on his Facebook page. He lauded the media workers, authorities, and the public for their unwavering commitment to upholding freedom and democracy. [MIA]

However, despite this progress, the RSF report sheds light on persisting obstacles facing the nation's media landscape. These include misinformation, political pressures, and a declining public trust in the media. The report also draws attention to challenges in aligning the country's media laws with European Union standards, a goal North Macedonia is striving to achieve. [RSF]

In spite of these challenges, Zaev said: "The commitment to freedom and democracy will bring a permanent change in society. [MIA]

(kg/gc)

Montenegro: Political alliance dissolves after 11 years

Montenegrin political alliance The Democratic Front (DF) announced on May 14 its dissolution 11 years after the three leaders, Andrija Mandic, Milan Knezevic, and Nebojsa Medojevic established the party. They stated that they are parting ways amicably and will continue their political efforts individually [EuropeanWesternBalkans][CDM[BalkanInsight]

The DF, which has pro-Russian and pro-Serbian leanings, is the largest coalition in the Montenegrin parliament and played a significant role in ousting the Milo Djukanovic-led pro-European Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in 2020 after three decades of rule. [EuropeanWesternBalkans][CDM[BalkanInsight]

Mandic stated that the DF's decision reflects their shared objective of achieving reconciliation in Montenegro. The leaders acknowledged their contribution to removing Djukanovic and the DPS from power, including Djukanovic's loss in the presidential election, where the DF-backed candidate Jakov Milatovic emerged victorious.

The leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the reform efforts of the previous two governments. Knezevic noted that despite the defeat of Djukanovic's regime, its legacy still persists even three years after the change in government. [EuropeanWesternBalkans] [CDM[BalkanInsight]

Medojevic announced that his Movement for Changes will participate independently in the upcoming elections scheduled for June 11. Meanwhile, Mandic and Knezevic are expected to run together, but it remains uncertain under what name or alliance. [EuropeanWesternBalkans]

The DF had three key foreign policy objectives that directly juxtapose that of DPS: withdrawing recognition of Kosovo's independence, lifting sanctions against Russia, and Montenegro's exit from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Montenegro is set to hold parliamentary elections on June 11, and an official coalition has been confirmed between Democratic Montenegro and United Reform Action. [EuropeanWesternBalkans]

(at/gc)

North Macedonia: Corruption detection rises 50 percent in 2022

North Macedonia's Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski said corruption detection increased 50 percent in 2022. This announcement came during an interview with local media Kanal 5, where the minister discussed the country's recent strides in fighting corruption and organised crime. [MIA]

A total of 124 acts of corruption were uncovered last year, causing over 227 million denars (EUR 3.6 million) in material damage, primarily within public administration and state enterprises, Spasovski said. [Slobodenpecat]

Minister Spasovski emphasised the crucial role of public awareness and active cooperation between citizens and law enforcement in tackling corruption. The minister also highlighted the media's role in promoting this public engagement.

Spasovski also discussed the country's ongoing battle against terrorism, underscoring a recent joint operation with French authorities that resulted in the arrest of individuals linked to ISIS. [MIA]

He stressed the government's commitment to maintaining the highest level of safety, security, and peace for citizens.

The minister affirmed that the strategic priorities of the Ministry of the Interior continue to include fighting organised crime, terrorism, cybercrime and human trafficking. [MIA]

(kg/gc)

Romania: Teachers strike over low pay

Educators in Romania went on strike over low pay on May 19, with more than 150,000 teachers and school staff in primary and secondary education participating.

Unionists are asking for inflation-indexed salary increases, overtime pay to boost infrastructure, and additional teaching supplies. Currently a new teacher in Romania makes USD 537 a month, nearly half of the average income in Romania, which is USD 1,019. [Reuters]

Unionists gathered on May 25 to protest the governments' offer on bonuses for June and July instead of meeting their demands. The unionists called

the government offer “offensive” as negotiations broke down, threatening to extend the strike period. [Radio Free Europe]

Romania’s Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca said he will remain prime minister until the government solves the school strike. According to an agreement between the composing parties of the coalition – National Liberal Party, PNL and the Social Democrats – Ciuca was due to resign on May 26. [Balkan Insight]

(lc/gc)

Romania: Right-wing opposition party holds protests

The populist and nationalist political party Alianta pentru Unirea Romanilor (AUR) held a demonstration on May 6 in front of the country’s parliamentary buildings in Bucharest against education laws in the country. [Crisis24]

The AUR called on its supporters to stage another protest on May 10, this time in relation to a draft bill to prevent the separation of children from their families. The right-wing party falsely claimed that the bill included provisions for the legalisation of child abduction. [Euractiv]

Protesters clashed with police and reportedly shoved several members of Parliament during a protest on May 10. The same day, Bucharest police also opened a criminal investigation after an affiliate of AUR attempted to enter the Parliament building with ammunition. [RomaniaInsider]

“On May 10, 2023, officers of the General Police Directorate of Bucharest Municipality - Section 17 were notified that a person carrying items that appeared to be ammunition had been identified at the access point of a public institution in Sector 5,” the Capital Police announced in a press release. [RomaniaInsider]

The person in question, a female collaborator of the AUR group in the Chamber of Deputies, was taken to the police station for further investigation. AUR president George Simion claimed that the several bullets found were keychains. AUR is requesting a technical examination to clarify. [RomaniaInsider]

(sw/gc)

Romania: Virginity tests banned

The Ministry of Health in conjunction with the Ministry of Justice announced on May 4 that virginity testing would be banned.

Until now, virginity testing was legal when related to a criminal investigation, or when requested by parents – fathers in particular. In 2019, virginity tests accounted for 2 percent of all examinations conducted by the country's forensics unit. This amounts to roughly 1,000 tests a year. [EuroNews]

The ban follows a campaign, known as #UnExaminable, that started in June 2022. The resulting petition reached 40,000 signatures. Virginity tests have an accuracy rate of below ten percent. The World Health Organisation has deemed them a violation of human rights. [LBB]

(sw/gc)

Romania: Report shows that nearly half of workers have two jobs to supplement income

The online recruitment platform eJobs released results of an online survey, showing that 44.5 percent of respondents needed to supplement their income with a second job.

A total of 29.5 percent have simultaneous Monday to Friday jobs, 11.2 percent have a full-time Monday to Friday job and a part-time weekend job, 11.6 percent take on extra projects as needed and less than four percent have several part-time jobs. [RomaniaInsider]

(sw/gc)

Serbia: Thousands protests lax weapons policy after two mass shooting

Tens of thousands of Serbians protested against government weapons policy after two mass shootings on May 3 and 4 killed eight people and injured more than a dozen.

During the first attack, a 13-year-old middle school student opened fire during class, targeting one teacher, one security guard and several classmates on May 3 with two guns that belonged to his father,

according to a police report. After initial questioning, the shooter was sent to a psychiatric hospital since the shooter is considered a minor under Serbian law. [Reuters]

A day after the first shooting, a 20-year-old man carrying neo-Nazi symbols killed eight people and wounded 14, according to police. The shooter opened fire from his vehicle after an altercation. [Reuters]

The government announced a three-day national mourning period in response to the shootings. Minister of Education, Branzo Ruzic, handed in his resignation on May 7.

Consequently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic called on citizens to turn in their illegally possessed firearms, promising anonymity and amnesty. The number of weapons handed over to the government surpassed 3,000. [Reuters] [Reuters]

Tens of thousands gathered in Belgrade on May 16 and May 24 to protest the government's policies on gun control, as well as the violence shown on TV and Serbian popular culture. The protestors called for the resignations of Vucic, Interior Minister Bratislav Gasic and the head of Serbia's security agency, Aleksandar Vulin [Reuters]

In a counter rally organised by the governing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Vucic accused the opposition of trying to use the mass shootings for self-promotion and said: "Serbia is fed up with your revolutions." Vucic later announced his resignation from the SNS as the chairman and appointed Minister of Defense, Milos Vucevic, as his successor. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Cyprus: Ex-president denies match-fixing claims

Former Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades has dismissed allegations of corruption and match fixing levelled at him by the ex-chairman of the country's sports ethics committee.

The ex-chairman, Andreas Papacharalambous, accused Anastasiades in a recent podcast interview of personally asking him not to investigate a suspicious friendly football match.

Papacharalambous resigned from the Committee of Ethics in Sport in 2021, saying he was unhappy about connections between politicians and football team owners. [Politis]

Anastasiades called the accusations against him "false, unfounded, and vulgar," and challenged Papacharalambous to provide evidence. [Cyprus Mail]

Papacharalambous said that during Anastasiades' presidency from 2013 to 2023, not a single one of numerous match-fixing allegations led to arrests or fines. He also criticised what he said was a lack of political will to tackle match-fixing. [Cyprus Mail]

(kg/pk)

Cyprus: Warning over money laundering concerns

EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders has urged Cyprus to "close all loopholes" that could be used to carry out money laundering through the island. [EU Commission].

The call by Reynders, which came during a visit to Nicosia on May 4 and 5, followed recent US and British

sanctions against Cyprus-based “financial fixers” who have allegedly helped Russian oligarchs hide their assets. [The Guardian]

Reynders met with Cypriot officials including the justice minister, the attorney general and representatives of various parliamentary committees. [EU Commission]

Attorney General George L. Savvides assured Reynders that Cyprus followed EU guidelines for battling corruption. [Simerini].

(kg/pk)

Italy: Deadly floods displace more than 36,000 in northern Emilia Romagna region

Torrential rains have caused deadly floods in Italy’s northern Emilia Romagna region, where more than 36,600 people have been displaced and 15 killed. [ANSA]

Heavy rain started battering Italy in early May, causing rivers to swell and burst their banks in many regions. Floods at the start of the month caused two deaths and the evacuation of 250 people in Emilia Romagna, prompting the government to declare a state of emergency. [ANSA] [ANSA]

The situation worsened on May 16 as a new wave of rain hit the region, causing 23 rivers to overflow in 41 municipalities. Five hundred roads were closed.

Experts said that among the causes of the floods were heavier-than-normal rains caused by global warming. [Corriere]

Emilia Romagna Governor Stefano Bonaccini said that repairing the damage would cost billions of euros. [Rainews]

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni left a G7 summit in Japan a day earlier than scheduled in order to visit the areas affected. On May 23, she approved a plan that makes EUR 2 billion available for reconstruction in Emilia Romagna. [ANSA]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited the region on May 25. She affirmed the EU’s solidarity with Italy and said that the country could draw an extra EUR 6 billion from the NextGenerationEU recovery plan to help deal with the aftermath of the floods. [Rainews]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Local elections deliver boost for conservative ruling coalition

Local elections have delivered a boost for Italy's conservative ruling coalition after divided centre-left opposition parties suffered a string of defeats.

The May elections resulted in a victory for the three government parties in nine out of the 13 provincial capitals up for grabs, leaving three to the centre-left and one to an independent coalition. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni welcomed the results, saying they reflected the "good governance" of her ruling coalition. After grabbing the historically leftist eastern coastal city of Ancona, Meloni added that no electoral goal was out of reach for her coalition. [ANSA]

Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left opposition Democratic Party, described the outcome as a "clear defeat", saying that the blame for election losses should be shared among all opposition parties, which often chose to run separately, dispersing their support in the face of united centre-right coalitions. [OPEN]

Schlein added that her party needed to be reconstructed, while highlighting that she was elected its leader only two months ago. [OPEN]

(ps/pk)

Italy: PM Meloni opens talks on constitutional reform amid criticism

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on May 9 started a series of meetings with opposition leaders on her proposal to reform the constitution and give more power to the president in a bid to end political instability in a country which has had frequent changes of government.

Meloni, whose hard-right Brothers of Italy party won September parliamentary elections, is in favour of a French-style system, where the president has real power rather than a ceremonial and representative role. However, her proposal has been met with fierce criticism. [Reuters]

Wary of Italy's history of dictatorial rule until 1943 under Benito Mussolini, opposition politicians fear that

a strong presidential system could give too much power to one person.

Meloni said before the meeting, according to her office, that she wanted to achieve constitutional reform with broad support, but that she would not back down if that did not happen. [ANSA]

To pass, her proposal to change the constitution would need to be backed by a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament. That level of support will be hard to achieve given Italy's fractured political landscape.

There have been several attempts to reform Italy's constitution but these have failed every time. [Politico]

(mr/pk)

Italy: Reintroduction of nuclear power assessed

Italy's lower house of parliament on May 9 approved an action plan aimed at decarbonising the country's energy consumption and assessing the reintroduction of nuclear energy.

The hard-right, three-party ruling coalition – comprising Brothers of Italy, Forza Italia and Lega – pledged to invest in nuclear power in the electoral programme with which it won parliamentary elections last September. [Camera dei Deputati] [Euractiv]

Italy's Environment and Energy Security Minister Gilberto Pichetto Fratin said that fourth-generation nuclear power plants are both safe and clean. [Linkiesta]

A transition to nuclear energy production would be supported by the centrist opposition Third Pole coalition comprising the Italia Viva party, led by former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, and Azione, headed by former Economy Minister Carlo Calenda.

Italy stopped producing nuclear energy after a referendum held in 1987. A reintroduction of nuclear energy would not require a new referendum.

The lower house of parliament on May 9 also approved funds for improving the energy efficiency of buildings and encouraging electricity-based consumption. [Camera dei Deputati] [Euractiv]

The Italian authorities, who aim to achieve energy neutrality by 2050, have recently struck gas deals with

North African countries aimed at making Italy the "energy hub" of the Mediterranean.

(ps/pk)

Italy: Campaigners sue energy firm over climate change

Italian energy company ENI is being sued by an environmental coalition including Greenpeace and 12 Italian citizens who say they have suffered the impact of climate change first-hand. The lawsuit accuses ENI of knowingly contributing to climate change. [AP] [Greenpeace]

The litigators claim that ENI has followed an industrial policy which violates international agreements and poses a threat to Italians' rights to life, health and an undisturbed family life. [AP]

ENI's two biggest shareholders are Italy's ministry of economy and the country's state lender and public investment bank, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti.

ENI responded to the accusations by saying it would demonstrate the "groundlessness" of the lawsuit, and threatened to take legal action against NGO ReCommon for alleged defamation. ReCommon is part of the coalition that initiated litigation against the energy firm. [AP]

In a statement issued on May 16, the NGO urged ENI and Italy's economy ministry to adopt an environmental policy in adherence with the Paris Agreement, the international treaty on climate change that came into force in 2016. ReCommon added that ENI's "legal threats" aimed to divert the public's attention. [ReCommon]

(ps/pk)

Italy: EUR 100m allocated to tackle drought emergency

Italy's ministry of infrastructure and transport has made available EUR 100 million for urgent measures to tackle a drought emergency in five regions of the country.

The funds will be used to carry out water management projects across the northern regions of Lombardy,

Piedmont, Veneto, Emilia Romagna and the Lazio region that includes Rome.

The extra funding was announced on May 5 during the first meeting of a newly established committee of government ministers that has been charged with tackling the drought crisis.

The infrastructure ministry on April 6 approved a decree setting up the post of a special national commissioner overseeing efforts to tackle the water crisis as well as easing bureaucratic procedures for building water management infrastructure. [ANSA] [Italian government] [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Ban on ChatGPT lifted

Italy has lifted a ban on ChatGPT after the chatbot's parent company OpenAI agreed to comply with requirements laid out by the country's data protection authority. [BBC] [ANSA]

The Italian authority, known as Garante, temporarily banned ChatGPT at the start of April amid concerns over privacy and about young users having access to the artificial intelligence system. [ANSA] [Europe Monthly May 2023]

OpenAI has agreed to make the chatbot's privacy policy available to users before they sign up, as well as introducing a new age verification tool. [BBC] [ANSA]

ChatGPT users in Italy are now required to be aged 13 and above. A spokesperson for OpenAI said the company was "implementing an age verification system and planning and conducting an information campaign to inform Italians what happened as well as their right to opt out from the processing of their personal data for training algorithms". [BBC] [ANSA]

Launched in November 2022, ChatGPT has been used by millions of people. Concerns are growing that such systems, which answer questions in a human-like manner, could threaten jobs and spread misinformation. [BBC] [ANSA]

Garante told the BBC that it "welcomed the measures OpenAI implemented." [BBC] [ANSA]

(iy/pk)

Italy: PM announces tax cuts, opposition voices criticism

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has announced what she says is the biggest tax cut in decades for Italian workers.

A decree issued by the government on May 1 – International Workers' Day – introduces a 7 percent tax cut for employees earning less than EUR 25,000 a year and a 6 percent cut for those earning less than EUR 35,000. [ANSA]

The leader of the Italia Viva centrist opposition party, Matteo Renzi, said that Meloni's move would see the total amount paid by workers to the taxman cut by only EUR 4 million, compared to a EUR 25 million cut introduced during his term as prime minister from 2014 to 2016. [ANSA]

During a demonstration in the northern city of Bologna on May 6, the leader of Italy's centre-left opposition Democratic Party, Elly Schlein, criticised the government decree for encouraging fixed-term contracts. [Adnkronos]

(ps/pk)

Italy: MPs approve plan to tackle energy costs, healthcare shortages

Italy's upper house on May 26 approved a plan to limit rises in electricity and gas costs. The package, which earmarks EUR 4.9 billion for a relief package to cut Italians' bills, also introduces healthcare reforms. [Corriere]

The approval by lawmakers came in the form of a vote of confidence for the government, with 99 votes in favour, 54 against and two abstentions. [Corriere]

The plan extends a rebate on electricity bills until the end of June, and introduces reductions to heating bills from October to December. [Corriere]

In an effort to support companies in a green transition, the package makes up to EUR 200,000 available in tax deductions for start-ups investing in renewable energy, and brings in simplified rules for the installation of solar panels. [Corriere]

The plan also aims to tackle a shortage of doctors by easing recruitment procedures for postgraduates undertaking specialised medical training, as well as

increasing hourly rates for on-call physicians. [QuotidianoSanita]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Ex-PM Berlusconi says his party is 'backbone' of ruling coalition

Former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi addressed members of his centre-right Forza Italia party on May 6 in a video message from a hospital room, insisting that his grouping is the "backbone of this government". [The Guardian]

Berlusconi was hospitalised on April 5 due to a lung infection and spent the first week and a half in intensive care before being moved to a normal ward. He was later diagnosed with leukaemia and discharged on May 20 after 45 days in hospital. [The Guardian] [ANSA]

Despite its junior position in the country's ruling coalition, Berlusconi said his party's role was to ensure that the government's decisions are "truly correct, fair and balanced". [ANSA]

Public support for Forza Italia stands at 7 percent, according to the latest YouTrend survey.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party, which leads the ruling coalition, is backed by 29 percent of voters. Matteo Salvini's populist right-wing League party, which is also part of the coalition, is backed by 9 percent, the YouTrend poll found. [The Guardian]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Lower house backs plan for bridge from Sicily to mainland

Italy's lower house of parliament on May 16 approved government plans for the construction of the world's longest suspension bridge to link the southern island of Sicily to the mainland.

The approval by lawmakers came in the form of a vote of confidence for the government, which has made the bridge project a key goal. The ballot was called by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's administration, which won with 206 votes in favour and 124 against, with five abstentions.

The construction of a bridge across the Messina Strait has been long debated in Italy, with fears voiced that building such a structure is risky in an earthquake zone. [Politico]

The bridge would cover a distance of over 3.6 kilometres along a fault line considered to be one of Europe's most seismically active areas. Officials have estimated the project will cost EUR 13.5 billion. ANSA]

Infrastructure and Transport Minister Matteo Salvini has unsuccessfully tried to convince the European Commission to allow EU recovery funds to be used for building the bridge. [Euronews]

Salvini said on May 10 he hoped the bridge would be operational by the end of 2032. [Agenzia Nova] [ANSA]

The project will now be discussed by Italy's upper house. [ANSA] [Rainews]

(ps/pk)

Italy: PM Meloni and Pope Francis voice concern at declining birth rate

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Pope Francis voiced concern about the country's fertility rate – one of the world's lowest – during a National Fertility Summit on May 12. [Associated Press] [Rainews]

Italy is facing a demographic trend that poses a threat to its social security system. With a fertility rate of 1.24 children per woman, the country saw a record low of 392,598 live births in 2022, 65,553 fewer than in 2017. [Associated Press] [ISTAT]

Meloni is backing a campaign aimed at achieving a level of 500,000 births by 2033, a threshold considered necessary by demographers to balance taxes paid by wage-earners and pensions received by retirees. [Associated Press]

Pope Francis called for policies to tackle the financial precariousness that many young couples experience and pointed to the difficulties young people face in finding a stable job, as well as high housing costs and low salaries. [Associated Press] [Rainews]

During the fertility summit, Meloni said she wanted to strengthen the "social value of parenthood" in Italy. [Rainews]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Law enforcers pretend to run in local elections 'to get holidays'

Half the candidates standing in local elections in Italy's southern Molise region may be law enforcement officials pretending to run so they can obtain a month-long holiday, the ANSA national news agency reported on May 9. [ANSA]

Law enforcement officers and army personnel in Italy standing as candidates are entitled to a month off work so they can hold an electoral campaign. [ANSA]

In small towns of under 1,000 inhabitants, people who want to run in elections are not required to collect signatures of support. [ANSA]

According to ANSA, among the 66 lists of candidates running for office in the Molise region, 33 included people who were largely unknown in such small towns. [ANSA]

In administrative elections in 2019, a small municipality comprising 461 inhabitants in the southern city of Caserta saw over 50 candidates running – meaning that there was one candidate for every nine inhabitants. [Il Giornale]

(ps/pk)

Spain: PM calls early election after ruling party suffers losses in regional vote

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has called an early general election for July after his governing left-wing Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) suffered losses across the country in regional elections.

The conservative opposition People's Party (PP) won 31.5 percent of the vote in the regional ballots on May 28, almost nine percentage points up on the last such elections in 2019, while the PSOE garnered 28.2 percent, a 1.2-point decrease from four years ago. Voter turnout was 63.9 percent. [AP News]

The prime minister, who has for almost four years led Spain's coalition government, said: "These results suggest Spaniards should clarify which political forces they want to take the lead."

Threat of the far-right

In an analysis piece, Euronews said that Sanchez's decision offered Spaniards a choice: they can either consolidate the result of the regional elections and vote in the conservatives – who would need the far-right party Vox to rule – or mobilise to stop this.

"Sanchez is banking on the latter, believing the threat of a far-right party would work in his electoral favour," Euronews added.

The leader of the opposition PP, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, welcomed Sanchez's move to bring the general election forward from the end of the year. He said: "Spaniards have said enough is enough, and I'm grateful that that sentiment has translated into a clear victory for the People's Party." [The Guardian]

Conservatives triumphed in seven out of the 12 regions holding elections, including in several regions that had been dominated by the Socialists. [Euronews]

Sedition laws and scandal

The regional losses for the PSOE came after Sanchez was criticised over reforms of the law on sedition. Those changes were seen by opponents as an attempt to appease the left-wing Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) party and gain its support for the government on key legislation.

In March, Sanchez's Socialist-led coalition government saw off a vote of no confidence called by the far-right opposition Vox party. The vote was partially a response to the reforms of the sedition laws. [Europe in Review April 2023]

Days before the regional elections, the PSOE also suffered from a scandal over alleged voting fraud in Spain's North African exclave of Melilla. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Despite securing victory in regions across Spain, the PP generally failed to secure outright majorities in regional governments. The conservative party would need to enter into coalitions with Vox to achieve such majorities.

The PSOE suffered major losses in the Valencia, Aragon and Balearic islands regions, as well as in the autonomous community of Extremadura. [France 24]

The outgoing president of Aragon, Javier Lamban, a member of the PSOE, said: "The tsunami that has swept through all the Spanish regions... has also swept through us."

In response to the election results, Juanma Moreno, the president of the Andalusia region and a member of the PP, said on Twitter: “The time has come for the change to reach the government of Spain.”

(km/pk)

Spain: Ten held over alleged election fraud in Melilla exclave

Authorities in Spain’s North African exclave of Melilla arrested 10 people over alleged voting fraud ahead of Spanish regional elections on May 28.

Police became concerned after over 20 percent of Melilla’s voting population requested to cast their ballots by mail this year, far above the average of two percent. [El Pais]

Among those arrested on May 23 and 24 was Mohamed Ahmed Al-lal, a member of the centre-left Coalition for Melilla party (CpM) which split from Spain’s ruling left-wing Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) in 1995. The CpM is now only present in Melilla. [El Mundo]

Ahmed Al-lal denied wrongdoing and said that his arrest was a politically motivated move against his party. [ABC]

CpM headquarters were also raided by police. A spokesperson for CpM said that the search of the party’s offices was “an attack on democracy”. [Reuters]

Isabel Rodriguez, a Spanish government spokesperson and member of the PSOE, said the police response proved that “the rule of law works” to correct anomalies in the voting process. [Reuters]

Spain’s national election board issued an order requiring voters in Melilla to present their ballot paper and national identity card in person at a post office to be able to vote by mail.

Postal workers in Melilla were also granted police escorts after multiple robberies by unidentified individuals.

(km/pk)

Spain: Outdoor work in extreme heat to be banned

The Spanish government plans to ban outdoor work during extreme heat. The measure is part of a package approved at a May 11 cabinet meeting on the country's drought emergency.

The ban, introduced by the governing left-wing coalition, will affect employees in the agriculture and construction sectors, who will not be allowed to work outdoors when the Spanish national weather agency, AEMET, issues high-temperature alerts.

The weather alerts, colour-coded as orange or red, will kick in when temperatures hit 37 and over 40 degrees Celsius respectively. [AP News] [El Mundo]

Also included in the package approved by the government is more than EUR 2 billion for the protection of agriculture and water resources. [Euronews]

According to AEMET, the first four months of 2023 were the driest on record. Last year as a whole was Spain's hottest ever recorded, with 360 deaths from high temperatures during a heatwave in July. [El Pais]

Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz said that unusually high temperatures were a result of climate change. She added: "We have already seen many episodes, certainly very serious ones, in cleaning and waste collection in which workers have died from heat strokes." [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: Blaze after suspected arson forces hundreds to evacuate

A wildfire in Spain's western region of Las Hurdes, suspected to have been started intentionally, forced 700 people to evacuate. The blaze, which began on May 17, burned around 8,000 hectares, officials said.

The president of the surrounding autonomous community of Extremadura, Guillermo Fernandez Vara, said that whoever was responsible for the fire "knew very well what they were doing." He added that the high winds in the area at the time made the blaze difficult to extinguish. [The Guardian] [AP News]

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez cancelled a rally in Extremadura scheduled for May 19, ahead of regional elections on May 28. He said on Twitter: "I am closely following the evolution of the fire in the Las Hurdes region." [France 24]

According to AEMET, Spain's national weather agency, the first four months of 2023 were the driest on record.

Spain has had three years of below-average rainfall and saw its first major wildfire in 2023 burning more than 3,000 hectares of land in the eastern Valencia region in March. Sanchez said at the time that the blaze was "proof of the climate emergency that humanity is living through." [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(km/pk)

Spain: Controversy over ban on 'dwarf bullfighting'

A ban on "dwarf bullfighting" passed by the Spanish parliament to protect people with dwarfism from discrimination has ignited controversy.

In Spain, events featuring people with dwarfism dressed in costumes who chase bulls without killing them have long been a source of entertainment. Such events were particularly popular under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco from 1939 to 1975.

The Spanish Social Rights Commission, which supported the ban, said that spectacles of this kind "subject people with dwarfism to humiliation in public squares." [The Guardian]

The ban puts Spain in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Against the decision by legislators are certain "bullfighting" performers, who staged a protest in front of the parliament in Madrid on April 27. [AP News]

Some opposition politicians say that the ban violates performers' right to work freely, and cite concerns over whether such people will be able to find other jobs.

Jesus Martin, the director general of Spain's Royal Board on Disabilities, said that EUR 200,000 would be set aside for the professional training of those affected by the ban. [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Spain: Women's race organiser apologises over food processor prize

The organisers of a women's 7km race in Madrid have apologised after the winner was awarded a food processor, triggering complaints of sexism.

The event organisers, Carrera de la Mujer, issued a statement on Twitter saying: "We apologise but we consider this a product with no sexist character and ideal for any athlete who wants to improve their nutritional habits." [The Guardian] [La Vanguardia]

The choice of first prize went largely unnoticed at first, but public anger rose after Spain's secretary of state for equality, Angela Rodriguez, tweeted an acerbic comment about the food processor and some of the other prizes on offer, including zero-fat products. Rodriguez said: "If you win: housewife and if not at least you'll lose weight."

A total of 32,000 runners took part in the race in the Spanish capital. It was one of a series of such events held in cities across the country on May 8 – Mother's Day in Spain – in support of domestic violence victims and cancer survivors. [The Guardian] [La Vanguardia] [Marca]

(iy/pk)

Spain: Activists protest against planned octopus farm in Canary Islands

Animal rights activists protested in Madrid on May 21 against plans to construct the world's first octopus farm in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean.

The demonstrators gathered in the country's capital to voice concern at plans to confine three million octopuses in captivity for breeding. Octopuses are solitary creatures in the wild.

The plans for the farm are seen by some as a way to ensure sustainable food production in response to rising demand for octopus consumption around the world. [Euronews] [AP News] [BBC]

(km/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Majority against joining NATO, study finds

Most Austrians are against their country joining NATO, according to a recent survey by the Austrian Society for European Policy (OGfE). [DerStandard] [Kurier]

Six out of 10 respondents said they would reject any proposal to join the Western military alliance, which comprises 31 nations including Austria's neighbour Germany. [DerStandard] [Kurier]

OGfE Secretary General Paul Schmidt said that Austrians "say yes to stronger European cooperation in security and defence, while on the other hand joining NATO is firmly rejected". [DerStandard] [Kurier]

Austria has a history of neutrality dating back to 1955, when it gained its independence, and has "permanent neutrality" clauses in its legislation. [FT]

Meanwhile, 68 percent of Austrians are in favour of their country remaining a member of the EU, up 4 percentage points since the last such survey in September 2022. [DerStandard] [Kurier]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Most voters oppose any coalition between far and centre-right, survey finds

The majority of Austrian voters are against a coalition at the national level between the opposition far-right

Freedom Party (FPO), which is topping the polls, and the ruling centre-right People's Party (OVP), a survey has found.

The study by television station ATV found that 54 percent of voters would be against such a coalition, with only 35 percent in favour.

The idea of a coalition between the FPO and the OVP has extensive support only among voters who already back those two parties – 81 percent in the case of the former and 61 percent among the latter. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

Ahead of next year's federal government elections in Austria, the current ruling coalition comprising the OVP and the Green party has become increasingly unpopular amid public anger over its handling of issues like inflation and migration. [Der Standard] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

This has led to the FPO moving into first place in the opinion polls, with the OVP dropping down to second.

After recent state elections in both Lower and Upper Austria, the two parties have formed local government coalitions, paving the way for a potential federal partnership in 2024. [Der Standard] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Ten held in crackdown on right-wing extremists

Ten people have been arrested after the Austrian government conducted a large-scale operation against right-wing extremists.

State security officers conducted country-wide raids on May 4, seizing weapons, ammunition and Nazi memorabilia.

Several houses were targeted in the operation, with nine men and one woman detained. All are accused of promoting illegal Nazi propaganda on social media. [Der Standard] [Die Presse]

The operation was led by the Directorate for State Security and Intelligence, which says that investigations into Nazi propaganda have increased recently.

Interior Minister Gerhard Karner said after the arrests: "The aim of these extremists is to divide society and

demolish democracy. We will not allow that." [Der Standard] [Die Presse]

The far-right movement in Austria has grown in recent years, with the opposition Freedom Party (FPO) currently topping opinion polls. The FPO's first two party chairmen were former SS officers. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [DW]

(iy/pk)

Austria: Anti-Semitic violence on the up, says Jewish group

Austria has seen an increase in violence linked to anti-Semitism, despite a drop in the overall number of anti-Semitic incidents, according to a Jewish group.

A record 14 assaults linked to anti-Semitism were recorded last year by the Vienna Jewish Community (IKG), up by two compared to 2021. Anti-Semitic incidents as a whole dropped by over 25 percent, but were still at the highest level since 2008.

IKG released the statistics on May 15, with the organisation's president, Oskar Deutsch, saying: "Every anti-Semitic incident is one anti-Semitic incident too many." [Der Standard] [Die Presse]

(iy/pk)

Austria: 2030 climate targets could be missed

Austria is on course to miss the EU's 2030 climate goals, estimates by the country's Federal Environment Agency (FEA) indicate. [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

Projections in the biennial report of the FEA show that Austria is likely to produce 12 million more tons of CO2 than the target set for the country by the EU, which is 30 million tons by the end of the decade. [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

"The result is frightening: Austria will only reach the legally binding EU reduction target in 2050, i.e. 20 years late," environmental campaign group Greenpeace said, commenting on the FEA's report. [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

The Austrian government has set itself a target of achieving carbon neutrality by 2040 but now seems on

course to miss even the EU's less-demanding target for the bloc as a whole to be carbon neutral by 2050.

The Greens, who are part of the country's ruling coalition, have blamed their conservative partners in government, the Austrian People's Party, for holding up progress on environmental goals. The Greens say the government has failed to pass "long overdue laws" such as the Renewable Heat Act. [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

Jasmin Duregger, a climate and energy expert at Greenpeace Austria, said that Chancellor Karl Nehammer "only has the next election in mind, but with his limited horizon, he is gambling away our climate future". [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

(iy/pk)

Austria: New measures to tackle rising child poverty

The Austrian government has announced new measures to tackle rising child poverty levels in the country. [Der Standard] [Kurier]

Parents who are on unemployment benefits, emergency assistance or social assistance will receive an extra EUR 60 per month per child until the end of 2024. [Der Standard] [Kurier]

Single parents will also qualify for the scheme if they earn less than EUR 2,000 gross a month. Social Affairs Minister Johannes Rauch announced the package on May 17.

The new measures, which will cost the government EUR 500 million, are intended to help roughly 400,000 children and about half that number of adults. [Der Standard] [Kurier]

Poverty levels in Austria increased sharply last year, with over 40,000 more people in poverty than in 2021. Over 350,000 children and young people were reported to be at risk of poverty. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

The incomes of many Austrians have been hit by recent rises in inflation and the lasting effects of Covid pandemic lockdowns.

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Government aims to hike workers' pay

The Croatian government has announced plans to increase workers' wages by the start of next year.

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic announced the news on May 1 – International Workers' Day – saying that the "government is trying to find a model to increase net wages for all workers, notably those with the lowest wages."

Plenkovic added: "I believe the parliament will support us and that with a period of adjustment, from October to December, we have enough time to ensure that everyone's net wages go up as of January 1." [Hina] [N1]

The government did not specify how much wages could increase, with further news expected in June. [TCN]

Plenkovic denied that the move to hike pay was a pre-election gambit, saying it was the "result of systematic and continual work". [Hina] [N1]

Croatia's next parliamentary election is scheduled for mid-2024. [PolitPro]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Permit granted to build country's largest solar plant

A Spanish energy company has gained permission to build what will be Croatia's largest solar power plant.

Acciona Energia, based in Madrid, will soon gain all the necessary licences to build the EUR 100 million, 150-megawatt facility in Croatia's eastern Dalmatia region, news outlet Jutarnji List reported on May 9.

The Spanish company is also planning to build two wind farms, expected to be operational in 2024, with the capacity to produce enough electricity for 60,000 households. [Hina] [HRT]

Croatia aims to cut its CO2 emissions almost by half by 2030 and to completely phase out coal by 2033. [EIB]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: President criticises PM for telling public about death threats

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic has criticised the country's prime minister for telling the public about death threats made against the premier. [Hina] [N1]

Milanovic said on Facebook: "The prime minister has been alarming the Croatian public... about threats being made against him. He is not the only person being threatened, but he is the only one making a media show of it." [Hina] [N1]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic had told the public on May 13 that threats against him and members of his cabinet were a regular occurrence and should never be ignored. [Hina] [N1]

Milanovic, who has frequently quarrelled with the prime minister, said that the job of leading the government requires "a little more personal courage and confidence in the institutions of the Croatian state."

He called on the premier to "stop harassing Croatian citizens with stories of being threatened". [Hina] [N1] [Balkan Insight]

(iy/pk)

Croatia: Anti-abortion marches held across country

Anti-abortion demonstrations have been held across Croatia, organised by the Catholic conservative group In the Name of the Family.

Named the "Walk for Life" marches, 12 have been held across different cities, with one in Zagreb on May 20 and another a week earlier in the eastern city of Osijek. During the rallies, a recording of the heartbeat of an unborn child was played, with the slogan "Don't stop my heartbeat, just give me love." [Hina] [Balkan Insight]

In the Name of the Family has strong links to the Croatian Catholic Church, with many priests attending the group's gatherings. It has also campaigned against what it calls the "harmfulness of imposing gender ideology on children". [Hina] [Balkan Insight]

(iy/pk)

Czech Republic: New fiscal plan aims to rein in ballooning deficit

The Czech government has proposed spending cuts, tax increases and pension reforms as part of a package to reduce a budget deficit projected at some 70 billion crowns (EUR 2.9 billion) in 2024.

Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on May 11 that the fiscal consolidation package, known as "Czechia in Shape", was needed given the "horrific" pace at which the country's public debt was rising. [AFP/France24]

"If we weren't able to step on the brake, the situation would get out of hand in several years and our children would suffer the consequences," said Fiala, adding that without the consolidation package, the budget deficit for 2024 would be 94 billion crowns higher and 148 billion crowns higher in 2025. [TVP] [AP News]

The central government's 2023 budget deficit is predicted to be 295 billion crowns, down from a record deficit of 420 billion crowns in 2021, while the overall budget deficit this year is expected to stand at 3.5 percent of GDP. [Financial Post] [Reuters]

With the proposed fiscal plan, Finance Minister Zbynek Stanjura said the budget deficit would decrease to 1.8 percent of GDP in 2024 and to 1.2 percent in 2025. [Nasdaq]

While most of the measures require approval from both chambers of parliament, the centre-right government is expected to easily pass the fiscal plan, given that the five-party ruling coalition has a majority of 108 votes in the 200-member lower house. [France24]

Before taking effect in 2024, the measures also need the president's approval.

Rise in corporate tax

The government has proposed raising corporate income tax to help control the budget deficit. Finance Minister Stanjura said the government also planned to streamline the current value-added tax (VAT) system by reducing the three current rates of 10, 15 and 21 percent to just two rates: 12 and 21 percent. [France24] [Radio Prague]

The government plans to raise levies on betting, alcohol, and tobacco while lowering VAT on food, daily necessities, housing and healthcare to 12 percent against the current 15 percent. [Radio Prague] [France24]

Under the fiscal plan, the rise in corporate tax is expected to generate an additional 22 billion crowns in revenue in 2025. [TVP]

The soaring budget deficit in the Czech Republic, an EU and NATO member country, has been fuelled by spikes in welfare pay-outs to help citizens battle rising energy costs and inflation.

The country also faces the pressure of higher defence spending after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, as it has pledged to meet a NATO-agreed goal of spending 2 percent of national wealth on defence.

Pension overhaul

The retirement age, now at 65, will gradually be raised under the proposed fiscal plan, and early retirement will become harder. [Nasdaq] [APnews]

Labour and Social Affairs Minister Marian Jurecka said the change was needed due to the country's ageing population. He added there would be "one working person per pensioner" by 2050. [France24]

Public backlash

Czech labour unions have threatened to strike in response to the government's fiscal plan.

Josef Stredula, the chairman of the Confederation of Trade Unions, accused the cabinet of disregarding workers' needs while formulating the plan.

"We have been trying to convince the government to sit down at the negotiating table for half a year but nothing happened," Stredula said. [Bloomberg]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: Opposition party challenges pension overhaul in court

The major opposition party in the Czech Republic has lodged a challenge with the Constitutional Court against a new law that will put a brake on pension rises, arguing the change is unconstitutional and violates pensioners' rights.

The opposition centrist ANO party, led by populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, has questioned the legitimacy of the law, claiming that it was approved without proper justification. [bnn]

In March, the ruling coalition pushed through a bill to prevent inflation-linked pension hikes from kicking in automatically in June.

The centre-right government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala has said the measure will save state coffers some EUR 800 million this year by limiting a rise in the average monthly pension from EUR 73 to EUR 31. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

President Petr Pavel signed the bill into law despite voicing concerns about its constitutionality. He said that he would approach the Constitutional Court himself if the matter was not addressed by others. [Czech Daily]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: Blame game over inflation

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on May 3 that the central bank was responsible for curbing the country's double-digit inflation and should not blame the government for soaring prices. [Reuters] [Radio Prague]

Tensions between the two entities escalated after the government announced a revised macroeconomic forecast for 2023, with average inflation expected to be 11.2 percent and GDP growth at 0.5 percent. [Radio Prague]

Central bank governor Ales Michl, known for his opposition to hiking interest rates, warned that the central bank might have to raise rates if the government failed to provide a "credible" fiscal consolidation package addressing high inflation. [Czech Daily] [Radio Prague] [bnn]

Fiala highlighted the importance of presenting a joint front in addressing the country's economic challenges.

"But if the governor is calling on the government to act, then I say it is acting, and I would ask if the central bank is acting enough," said Fiala. [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

Hungary: At right-wing summit, Orban slams migration, progressives

Hungary's right-wing prime minister compared liberalism to a "virus" at a special session of America's Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held in Budapest on May 4 and 5. [AP]

"No migration, no gender, no war," Viktor Orban told the conference. He described Hungary as "an incubator where the conservative politics of the future is being experimented with."

"We don't just talk about [causing] a conservative political turn and about defeating the liberals, but we have actually done it," he added. [AP] [Telex]

Hungary is in dispute with the European Union over human rights and rule-of-law concerns.

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]

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

On the second day of the conservative conference in the Hungarian capital, former US President Donald Trump delivered a recorded video message in which he said that "a historic battle" was underway with "the Marxists, the globalists and communists." [Telex]

A day earlier, Orban said that "if President Trump were president now, there would be no war affecting Ukraine and Europe today." [AP]

(msa/pk)

Poland: 'Russian influence' law passed amid US, EU concerns

The United States and the European Union have criticised a new "Russian influence" law passed in Poland that critics say could be used to interfere with free and fair elections. [Politico] [Reuters] [DW News] [BBC News]

The law, signed by Polish President Andrzej Duda on May 29, sets up a commission to investigate Russian influence on Polish politics in the years spanning from 2007 to 2022. Anyone found to have been influenced by Moscow could be effectively banned from holding

public office for ten years. [DW News] [BBC News] [Reuters]

Critics of the new law say it was tailor-made to eliminate the threat posed by Poland's main opposition challenger to the country's ruling nationalists ahead of parliamentary elections this autumn.

The US State Department said in a statement that it shares "the concerns expressed by many observers that this law... could be used to block the candidacy of opposition politicians without due process."

"We call on the government of Poland to ensure this law does not preempt voters' ability to vote for [a] candidate of their choice and that it not be invoked or abused in ways that could affect the perceived legitimacy of elections," the statement added. [US State Department]

Meanwhile, EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders said that the European Commission would "analyse the legislation and will not hesitate to take measures if it is needed." [BBC News]

In response to the US and EU, the foreign ministry in Warsaw said that the legislation "remains within sovereign national competence of the Polish parliament". It added: "We are always ready to clarify and explain all potential misinterpretations and doubts about it." [Polskie Radio]

Targeting Tusk?

The passing of the legislation – dubbed the "Tusk Law" by critics – comes just months before parliamentary elections in Poland. [Reuters]

Donald Tusk heads Poland's main opposition party, the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), and is seen as the top challenger against the governing nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Critics claim the new law was designed to specifically target former prime minister Tusk, whose party led the Polish government from 2007 to 2015. [Politico]

"In a normal democratic country, somebody who is president of that country would never sign such a Stalin-esque law," said Marcin Kierwinski, a member of Poland's parliament for the Civic Platform. [Reuters]

Critics also say that the bill does not comply with the Polish constitution, and that the new commission's responsibilities are too vaguely defined and provide it with too much authority. [DW News] [Politico]

'Kangaroo court'

"Duda has signed a law allowing the parliament to create a commission that will usurp the functions of courts, prosecutors and special services," said Ben Stanley, an associate professor at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. Stanley described the planned commission as a "kangaroo court straight out of Putinist ideology." [Politico]

President Duda, however, said that the Polish people "have the right to know" whether elected officials were influenced by Russia. [Politico]

"The public should form its own opinion on how... those elected in general elections... understood the interests of the Republic of Poland, whether those interests were actually properly executed," Duda said. [Politico]

Under the new law, members of the commission tasked with investigating Russia links will be chosen by a parliament where Law and Justice and its allies have a majority. [DW News]

Duda announced that he would submit the legislation for review by the country's Constitutional Tribunal – a body that critics have long said is a political tool serving the interests of the ruling Law and Justice party. [Politico]

The new investigative panel is to specifically look at energy deals that Polish governments made with Russia. [BBC News]

Law and Justice accuses the opposition Civic Platform of leaving the country too reliant on Russian energy when it was in power. [DW News]

But Poland continued to purchase Russian energy until Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year – long after the Civic Platform government was unseated by Law and Justice in 2015. [Politico]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Opposition presses defence minister to quit after 'Russian missile' lands in forest

The opposition in Poland has called on the country's defence minister to step down over what officials said was a Russian missile that lay undetected for four months after landing on Polish soil. [AP News] [Polskie

Radio] [Reuters] [Notes From Poland] [Polsat News] [The Telegraph] [Yahoo News]

The missile, initially described by Polish authorities as a "military object," was discovered in April in a forest near Bydgoszcz, a city hundreds of miles away from Poland's border with Ukraine. It is thought to have crashed in December after flying off its intended course. [The Telegraph] [Reuters]

Pawel Szrot, head of the office of Polish President Andrzej Duda, said on May 19 that the object was a Russian missile. His announcement came after initial Polish media reports identified it as a Russian KH-55 cruise missile. [Polsat News] [AP News] [Reuters]

The projectile was not armed, according to Szrot, who said that the warhead was made of concrete and was likely intended to confuse Ukrainian air defence systems. [Polsat News] [AP News] [Yahoo News]

Donald Tusk, the head of Poland's main opposition party, the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), called for the resignation of Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak over the incident. [Notes From Poland] [The Telegraph]

"We will not let this matter drop, and the whole of Poland must hear a detailed explanation of the incident," said Tusk. [The Telegraph]

Blaszczak deflected blame, however, saying that the Polish armed forces command had failed to notify the government about the object heading into Polish airspace, despite being made aware of it by Ukrainian authorities and despite both Polish and American aircraft being scrambled in response. [Polskie Radio] [TVP Info tweet]

Polish Army Operational Commander General Tomasz Piotrowski "neglected to perform his duties" by not notifying the government and by not conducting a thorough enough search for the crashed missile, added Blaszczak. [Polskie Radio] [TVP Info]

However, Poland's top general, Rajmund Andrzejczak, the chief of the general staff of the armed forces, insisted that he had informed his superiors about the incident. [Notes From Poland]

Meanwhile, opposition leader Tusk said that Blaszczak was "dropping the blame on people in uniform" and "running away from responsibility and hiding behind Polish generals." [TVN24] [Notes From Poland]

The incident was the second instance of the war in Ukraine spilling over into neighbouring Poland, a NATO

state. Two people were killed when a rocket hit a rural area in eastern Poland in November 2022. Western officials said they believed it was a Ukrainian air defence missile that had gone astray. [AP News]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Junior ruling party changes name, vows to protect nation's sovereignty

A hardline junior partner in Poland's ruling coalition has changed its name to Sovereign Poland, declaring that it will protect Polish sovereignty against "German collaborators." [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio] [RMF24] [Euractiv] [Polsat]

"We are changing our name to Sovereign Poland to say a firm 'no' to those who seek to deprive us of our sovereignty, and consequently of our independence," said Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, who heads the right-wing party, formerly known as United Poland. [Polskie Radio] [Politico]

The new name was unveiled at a conference in Warsaw on May 3 – the anniversary of the adoption of a landmark Polish constitution in 1791 – at which Ziobro said that his country's sovereignty was facing its greatest danger since the fall of the Polish communist regime in 1989. [Polskie Radio]

"Two dangerous processes are taking place at the same time," Ziobro said. "On the one hand, Russia is waging a bloody war of aggression against our neighbour, which may also pose a direct threat to Poland... on the other, left-wing fanatics in Western Europe are pushing to turn the European Union into a federal state under German leadership." [Polskie Radio]

Ziobro also accused Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk, a former European Council President, of being an "agent" working on behalf of Berlin. [RMF24]

Tusk, the head of Poland's main opposition party, the centre-right Civic Platform (PO), has often been accused by Poland's ruling coalition of scheming with Berlin against Warsaw. Opposition politicians have derided such claims as right-wing conspiracy theories. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Sovereign Poland is a junior partner in the ruling coalition in Warsaw, which is led by the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party.

The two parties have clashed in the past, with United Poland, as it was then called, taking more hardline stances on several issues. [Politico]

Although Sovereign Poland enjoys far less electoral support across the country than PiS, the main ruling party needs the backing of its junior partner in order to maintain a parliamentary majority. [Politico] [Notes From Poland]

"A small party, with about one percent of support, announces that it will defend the sovereignty of Poland?" said Ryszard Terlecki, a senior PiS figure, tweeting in response to the name change.

"A name change will change nothing. Only Law and Justice can guarantee freedom and development for Poland."

(ek/pk)

Poland: Free speech under threat, critics say as radio station fined for 'Hitler Youth' comment on textbook

Critics have warned that free speech in Poland is increasingly under threat after a leading radio station was fined for suggesting a school textbook approved by the nationalist government sounded as if it had been written for the Hitler Youth. [Notes From Poland] [TVN24] [Rzeczpospolita]

Private broadcaster ToK FM was fined PLN 80,000 (EUR 17,500) by Poland's National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), for what the media regulator said were "actions conflicting with the law, views and attitudes conflicting with morality and social good," and for spreading "content that called for hate and discrimination." [Rzeczpospolita] [Notes From Poland]

The radio station described the penalty imposed on it as an "assault on independent media" and said that it would launch legal action against the decision. [Notes From Poland]

Agnieszka Wisniewska, editor-in-chief of Polish liberal publication Krytyka Polityczna (Political Criticism), said that financial penalties like the one imposed on ToK FM negatively impact journalism. [TVN24]

"When a penalty is imposed... you are a little afraid, but the penalties also result in less money [being available] for everyday journalistic work," Wisniewska added. [TVN24]

The comments for which the station was fined were made in June 2022, when radio presenter Piotr Maslak was discussing a newly approved controversial school textbook. [Notes From Poland] [TVN24]

"It reads like a textbook – sorry for the comparison – for the Hitler Youth. Sometimes, not everywhere," Maslak said on-air. [TVN24]

The textbook was approved in 2022 by the conservative government in Warsaw for a new high school subject called "History and the Present," and was the target of fierce criticism over a passage it contained that compared in vitro fertilisation (IVF) to "human breeding." The passage in question has since been removed by the book's publisher. [Europe Monthly September 2022] [Notes From Poland]

Members of Poland's political opposition accused the ruling nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party of using the new school subject to attack ideas that the government opposes, which include liberalism, feminism and "gender ideology". [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Kamila Ceran, the editor-in-chief of ToK FM, said the head of the regulatory body that fined her station "has accused us of using hate speech because we criticised hate speech". [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Caretaker PM quits in blow to country's pro-Western stance

Slovakia's pro-Western Prime Minister Eduard Heger announced his resignation on May 7 after his caretaker cabinet started to disintegrate, leaving a Kremlin-friendly party in pole position for early parliamentary elections in September.

"I decided to ask the president to remove my authority and to leave the president space to try with a technocrat government to stably and peacefully lead Slovakia to democratic parliamentary elections," said Heger, who had been facing a spate of opposition calls to make way for a technocrat administration. [Reuters]

Heger quit after losing two ministers in a week. Slovakia's agriculture minister stepped down on May 4 following a scandal over his recycling company receiving state subsidies worth EUR 1.4 million *(see separate story in this issue)*. A day later, the foreign

minister offered his resignation without giving an explanation. [FT] [Guardian]

Four ministers earlier left the interim administration after Heger lost a vote of no confidence in December, which left him leading several departments, including the finance ministry, as such posts cannot be filled when the government is acting in a caretaker capacity. [Guardian] [Bloomberg]

The ruling coalition has faced political uncertainty since it lost its majority last September after the centre-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party quit. SaS later aligned with a leftist opposition party to initiate the vote of no confidence, which resulted in Heger staying on in a caretaker capacity with limited power as the country battled soaring energy prices and a cost-of-living crisis. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

Even so, Heger's stopgap administration enjoyed a strong international reputation. Under Heger, Slovakia has been a staunch backer of its eastern neighbour Ukraine, hosting about 115,000 Ukrainian refugees while providing Kyiv with military aid, including battle tanks, an S-300 air defence battery, and its entire fleet of Soviet-era MiG-29 fighters jets. [Times]

Pro-Russia populist eyes return to power

Slovakia's pro-Western stance is now on the line amid a deepening political quagmire that could pave the way for the return of Robert Fico, a populist former prime minister who promises to cut off military support to Ukraine and who has compared German NATO troops in Slovakia with Nazis.

Fico's leftist opposition Smer party is leading in the opinion polls, with slightly under 20 percent support, followed closely by centre-left breakaway party Hlas, which was founded by another former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini. [Politico]

Fico has capitalised on a groundswell of public opinion against Ukraine. Around 56 percent of Slovaks believed Ukrainian refugees have weakened the country's economy, while 70 percent thought the government has provided more support for Ukrainians than for its own citizens, according to Eurobarometer poll results released by the European Commission on March 23. [European Commission]

Fico has also claimed that NATO and the EU have pressured Slovakia to support Ukraine, which he said undermined the country's sovereignty. He also criticised Heger's caretaker government for sending

MiG-29 fighter jets to Kyiv without parliament's approval. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [FT]

New technocrat leader

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova on May 7 named central bank deputy governor Ludovit Odor to lead a stopgap technocrat administration until the election, hours after Heger, who has led the government since 2021, tendered his resignation. Caputova said the focus of the technocrat administration is to stabilise the country's politics. [TVP]

Odor has been a deputy chief of the National Bank of Slovakia since 2018. [Spectator]

Caputova announced the rest of Odor's technocratic government on May 12. It marks the first time in Slovakia's history that the country has a cabinet consisting solely of experts in various fields without any party affiliation. [Euronews]

Fico's Smer party said on May 7 that it would not back the new technocrat government unless the parliamentary elections were rescheduled to early July. [Spectator]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Tycoon acquitted of ordering journalist's murder in retrial

A politically connected Slovak businessman has again been cleared of orchestrating the 2018 slaying of an investigative journalist and his fiancee, a case that sparked mass protests against corruption and resulted in the resignation of then-Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Businessman Marian Kocner was on May 19 acquitted over the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancee Martina Kusnirova, even though a go-between in the attack testified that Kocner had ordered the killing. [BBC] [Reuters]

Kocner, about whom Kuciak had written articles, repeatedly pleaded not guilty. He said during his trial: "I am not a saint, but I am not a murderer." [TVP] [Aljazeera]

Meanwhile, Kocner's associate Alena Zsuzsova was given a 25-year sentence, though she denied involvement in the murder. She was found guilty over her part in planning the killings, as well as the intended murder of three prosecutors. [AP] [Reuters]

A court previously acquitted Kocner in 2020, saying there was insufficient evidence to prove he had ordered the murders. But the country's Supreme Court ordered a retrial in 2021 after a prosecutor said the verdict was issued "prematurely, based on an insufficiently investigated situation". [Spectator] [DW] [TVP]

The case is not over, as the defendants and prosecutors can still appeal.

An investigative article that Kuciak had been working on was published shortly after he and his fiancée were gunned down at their house in 2018. It revealed an alleged business link between the Italian mafia and government advisers close to then-Prime Minister Robert Fico. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

According to evidence given at the trial, Kocner had verbally threatened Kuciak, who had investigated his business practices. [Reuters]

The killings sparked major political protests which resulted in the collapse of Fico's government and ushered in a new administration that championed an anti-corruption drive in 2020.

The centre-right coalition that defeated Fico recently collapsed after years of infighting, while Fico's leftist Smer party now tops opinion polls ahead of parliamentary elections in September. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Agriculture minister quits over conflict of interest claims

Slovak Agriculture Minister Samuel Vlcan quit on May 4 amid allegations he had a conflict of interest over state subsidies worth EUR 1.4 million for his family-owned waste treatment company.

Vlcan announced his resignation a day after being criticised by Robert Fico, the leader of the leftist opposition Smer party, who said that out of eight firms which applied for subsidies, Vlcan's Reko Recycling was the only one to succeed. [Tasr]

Vlcan said he saw "no violation of any ethical principles", but added that he had quit because he did not want to harm the reputation of the agriculture ministry. [Tasr]

He acknowledged being a shareholder in his family's waste treatment company while in office, adding that he had never hidden his ownership through shell companies. [Spectator]

Slovakia's environment ministry has granted Reko Recycling EUR 1.4 million in subsidies for revitalising a landfill. [Euractiv]

Environment Minister Jan Budaj said on May 4 that he had been unaware of Vlcan's connection to the company. Budaj added that the ministry would conduct further checks to rule out a potential conflict of interest. [Spectator] [Euractiv]

Vlcan was appointed agriculture minister in 2021 after being nominated by the centre-right OLaNO party.

In Slovakia, it is permissible for government officials to conduct business with the state. [Spectator]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: President to sue opposition leader for 'American agent' claim

Slovak President Zuzana Caputova has said she will take legal action against populist opposition leader Robert Fico for accusing her of being an "American agent". She announced the move after she and her family received a death threat that used the same language.

Caputova, who champions a pro-Western stance, said she would "use all available legal means" against Fico.

During a press conference on May 9, Fico – head of the left-wing Smer party – labelled Caputova an "American agent" after she announced her decision to appoint a technocratic government. [bnn]

Fico has also linked the new technocratic administration to George Soros, a Hungarian-American financier who has been a target of the far-right for his support of liberal and humanitarian causes. [Euractiv]

"Making someone a target with hateful lies has cost lives already in Slovakia," Caputova said in a Facebook post.

Lubos Blaha, the deputy chairman of the Smer party, received a court order last year that forbade him from calling Caputova a "traitor". [The Slovak Spectator]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Ex-defence minister claims Moscow bribing Slovaks to 'manipulate' elections

Former Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad has claimed that Moscow has been bribing Slovak citizens to "manipulate" the country's upcoming parliamentary elections in favour of the Kremlin-friendly opposition Smer party.

"We have received intelligence information from abroad, including the exact person, time and place," said Nad, a member of the pro-Western, centrist Democrats grouping recently founded by former Prime Minister Eduard Heger.

"When someone wants to manipulate the elections here, Russia is behind it, and it uses Trojan horses, including the Smer party," Nad said in a TV interview. [Spectator]

Former Interior Minister Rob Kalinak, a member of the Smer party, refuted the claim, insisting that his grouping had never accepted "external money". He questioned the credibility of Nad's claim, calling it "unbelievable gibberish". [Euractiv][Tasr]

Populist former Prime Minister Robert Fico, whose leftist Smer party opposes military aid for Ukraine, is topping opinion polls ahead of a September general election.

Senior European diplomats have raised concerns over Fico's potential return to power, which they say could undermine EU and NATO unity on Russia. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: New foreign policy strategy seeks closer defence ties amid Russian threat

Denmark's foreign minister, Lars Lokke Rasmussen, has unveiled a new foreign policy approach aiming to enhance defence cooperation with other Nordic and Baltic countries and advocating for admitting more countries to the EU. [Reuters]

In a speech at the University of Copenhagen, Rasmussen said Denmark's new approach has been prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year. [The Local]

The new strategy entails continued support for Ukraine in its defence against the invasion and advocates admitting three more countries to the EU: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Denmark opened an embassy in Georgia on May 15. [Reuters] [Copenhagen Post]

Denmark also aims to enhance defence cooperation with other Nordic nations to help safeguard critical infrastructure and check the Russian threat in the Baltic and Arctic Sea regions. The revised strategy proposes increased joint military exercises and improved coordination of defence plans among the Nordic neighbours. [Reuters]

'Historic opportunity'

"With Finland's accession to NATO and Sweden on the way, there is a historic opportunity for us to move closer together in a situation where all the Baltic Sea countries, except Russia, are members of the same defence alliance," said Rasmussen. [Reuters]

Last year, following Russia's attack on Ukraine, Denmark voted in favour of joining the EU's common defence policy in an effort to deepen military ties with the rest of the bloc. [The Guardian] [Europe Monthly July 2022]

Rasmussen said, however, that NATO would remain the centrepiece of Denmark's security and defence. [Reuters]

The revised policy highlights the need for greater attention to the security threat posed by Russia in the Baltic Sea region. It says that Copenhagen has not sufficiently prioritised this threat, and identifies weaknesses in Denmark's capacity to protect its territory.

As part of its objectives, Denmark has set a goal of reaching the NATO spending target of allocating 2 percent of its GDP to defence by 2030. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The new foreign policy strategy also advocates a more tolerant stance toward nations whose values do not align entirely with those of Copenhagen – a change in approach which Rasmussen termed "pragmatic realism".

'We must address the world as it actually is'

"We must address the world as it actually is and not as we want it to be. With a realistic approach," he said. [The Local]

The foreign minister mentioned Denmark's relations with Africa as an example of where such an approach would be applicable.

"It's okay to think – we should think – that our values are right and give better lives than the ones in other places. But we must not become missionising. We shouldn't go out and try to tell the world what's right," he said.

He added that if Denmark only focuses on preaching its values, African leaders may turn to the Chinese, who offer practical solutions to pressing needs. [The Local]

Rasmussen said that two-thirds of the world's population live in countries that are either neutral or supportive of Russia's actions in Ukraine. [The Local]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Billions planned for upgrading military

Denmark's government has proposed spending an additional 38 billion kroner (around EUR 5 billion) over

the next 10 years to strengthen the country's armed forces and address a backlog in military investments. [Reuters]

The proposal comes in addition to Denmark's commitment in 2022 to increase its annual defence spending to reach 2 percent of gross domestic product by 2030, aligning with a key objective of NATO member states. [Reuters]

The defence ministry has announced plans to allocate around 27 billion kroner for defence equipment, information technology, infrastructure and personnel. An additional 11 billion kroner will be designated for new investments. [Defence Post] [The Local]

The planned new funds are intended to "re-establish the foundation of the armed forces," Denmark's acting defence minister, Troels Lund Poulsen, told journalists on May 4. [Reuters]

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year, Denmark, like other European nations, increased its defence expenditure. A budget assessment conducted in September revealed that Denmark's defence sector had been neglected in various areas, necessitating additional funding merely to reinstate the country's military capabilities. [Defence Post] [The Local]

"We are short of soldiers. Many buildings are either outdated or simply worn out. The same is true for some of the armed forces' equipment and IT systems," Danish defence chief Flemming Lentfer told reporters. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: PM emerges as contender for new NATO Secretary General

Speculation about who might replace Jens Stoltenberg as NATO Secretary General has started after the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, was invited to the White House for talks with US President Joe Biden.

Frederiksen and Biden are to meet on June 5, with an agenda covering matters relating to NATO, transatlantic security, bolstering economic prosperity and support for Ukraine. [Politico]

Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian prime minister, is due to step down in September. The appointment of a

NATO chief requires unanimity among all 31 members of the military alliance. The US government, meanwhile, has traditionally vetted candidates.

According to Politico, Frederiksen seems to tick several boxes for the job. She has a middle-of-the-road stance on Ukraine, exhibiting strong support for Kyiv but without appearing hawkish. Moreover, it is possible that NATO may seek its first female chief.

If Frederiksen were to be appointed, it would mean her stepping down as Danish premier, which would likely cause political uncertainty in her home country. [Reuters]

Possibly denting Frederiksen's chances is the fact that Denmark does not meet the NATO target of nations spending 2 percent of their GDP on defence. [Politico] [Reuters] [Liga] Furthermore, it is not long since a Dane has held the top NATO post – former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was Secretary General from 2009 to 2014. [NATO] [Politico]

Other potential candidates to succeed Stoltenberg include Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, and Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. [Liga]

(ts/pk)

Denmark: Capital to ban fossil fuel-burning cars by 2030

All political parties in Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, have supported a resolution to impose a complete ban on fossil fuel vehicles in the city by 2030. [The Local] [Copenhagen Post] [tv2]

Feasibility studies outlining the plan, which includes installing charging stations and related infrastructure, will be presented by the end of the year. [Copenhagen Post] [tv2]

The move, which could boost sales of new electric cars, has been welcomed by Denmark's car manufacturers. According to Mads Rorvig, CEO of the Danish Car Importers Association, the 2030 deadline provides citizens with time to transition from older fossil fuel-burning vehicles to newer alternatives. [The Local]

"We know that the future is zero-emission cars," Rorvig said. "Electric cars will probably dominate the picture when we look a little further ahead. Therefore, we see

it as quite natural that the city of Copenhagen will make this requirement in the future." [The Local]

In March, the Copenhagen municipality reached an agreement with contractors to set up 1,000 new charging ports for electric vehicles in the city. [The Local]

(rs/pk)

Denmark: Millions to be injected into healthcare

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced on May 23 that her government will be upping its investment into the nation's healthcare system by 5 billion Danish crowns (EUR 670 million) a year.

Denmark is already the EU's second highest spender per capita on healthcare after Luxembourg, ploughing 10.5 percent of its GDP into such services. [Eurostat] But the country faces pressures because of its ageing population and rising cancer treatment and surgery waiting times.

The rise in spending comes after stronger than expected economic growth, with low unemployment and high industrial activity helping to mitigate the problems of the Covid-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. [Reuters]

Frederiksen has pledged that as well as helping address geographical and social inequality in access to healthcare, the extra money will be used to improve treatment for cancer. [Reuters] Initially, EUR 53.6 million of the additional funds will be devoted to this, increasing to EUR 80.4 million in 2025 to initiate an entirely new cancer treatment programme. [Euractiv]

(ts/pk)

Finland: Parties aiming to form ruling coalition reach deal on immigration, climate

Prime Minister-designate Petteri Orpo announced on May 27 that four parties including a far-right grouping negotiating to form a new Finnish government had reached an agreement on the key issues of migration and climate policy, after weeks of talks beset with tensions.

Orpo, who leads the centre-right National Coalition Party, was given the first opportunity to form a governing coalition after his grouping came first in Finland's parliamentary elections, held in April.

He said he would attempt to draw up a government programme with the narrowly defeated far-right Finns Party, as well as two smaller groupings: the centrist Swedish People's Party and the centre-right Christian Democrats. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

After long negotiations labelled "the most secretive ever" by a veteran Finnish political reporter, the potential government partners appeared to be at a standstill on the issues of immigration and climate.

Rikka Purra, who leads the Finns Party, told reporters her grouping had requested that negotiations focus exclusively on those two hot-button issues.

'Practically opposite' stances

"The Finns Party cannot participate in a government that does not significantly tighten immigration policy. There is a party participating in the government negotiations, the Swedish People's Party, whose stance is practically the opposite of ours," Purra said before a deal was reached. [Yle]

The Swedish People's Party was the last of the four groupings to agree to a proposed new immigration policy, after extracting some last-minute concessions from the three other parties. [Yle]

Tensions between the Finns Party and the Swedish People's Party were evident during the talks, starting two weeks into the negotiations, when members of parliament from the former took to social media to criticise the latter. [Euractiv] [Yle]

Anna-Maja Henriksson, who leads the Swedish People's Party, acknowledged the political differences, including over climate policy. Henriksson said it was important Finland continues to pursue a 2035 carbon neutrality goal that was set by the previous government, of which her grouping was a part.

Distaste at far-right

The Swedish People's Party, which has been in almost every Finnish government since 1980, also faces opposition from its members and voters to climbing into bed with the far-right, Euronews reported. The news outlet cited a poll showing that only 8 percent of the grouping's voters want it to govern with the Finns Party.

If a ruling coalition with The Finns or the Swedish People's Party fails to materialise, the National Coalition Party could try to form a partnership with the Social Democratic Party, as has been the case in previous governments.

The latter party, led by incumbent Prime Minister Sanna Marin, finished third in the parliamentary elections. After her defeat, Marin said she would step down as leader in September, but is currently at the helm of a caretaker government while talks to form a new executive are underway.

Orpo will hope to wrap up negotiations before Finland's Midsummer holiday on June 24. His party will also aim to have a functioning government in place before a European Council meeting scheduled for the end of the month. [Euronews]

(qv/pk)

Finland: Wind power production expected to surge, electricity prices plunge

Finnish wind energy company Myrsky Energia and Danish investment firm Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners (CIP) on May 24 announced a joint project that is expected to increase Finland's total wind power output by a third.

CIP, a global leader in offshore wind energy, will invest EUR 2.3 billion in what will be its first onshore wind power project in the Nordic countries. The initiative will generate around 1.8 GW of onshore wind power in Finland over the next decade. [Euractiv] [CIP]

CIP said the project would help Finland achieve its goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2035 and bolster the country's energy security.

Wind-generated power on the market in Finland has grown swiftly, rising from 3,200 megawatts in January 2022 to 5,200 megawatts by the year's end. A further 500 megawatts have been added so far this year. [Yle]

Average electricity prices plunge to negative

Finland saw its average electricity prices dipping below zero on May 24, a move triggered by an unexpected surplus of renewable energy and a reduction in power consumption amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Insider]

The CEO of Finland's grid operator, Fingrid, Jukka Ruusunen, said: "Production is high, consumption is low and now we are in a situation where it is not easy to adjust production." [Yle]

Finland's electricity and pipeline gas imports from Russia ended in May 2022, several months after Moscow's troops invaded Ukraine. Finnish spending on energy imports surged to around EUR 18.8 billion last year, up 86 percent compared to 2021, according to preliminary data released by the country's national statistics institute. [Statistics Finland] [Yle]

However, the start of regular electricity production by Finland's new Olkiluoto 3 nuclear reactor in April provided a considerable amount of power and brought electricity prices down by 75 percent. [Insider] [The National]

Meanwhile, melting snow caused spring floods in the country and forced hydroelectric power plants to produce surplus electricity. [Yle]

Finland's energy producers are now facing a new challenge as electricity prices dip below production costs. Since hydroelectric production cannot stop due to the flood situation, it is likely that nuclear and other energy producers will consider reducing output to avoid financial losses. [Yle] [Insider]

(rs-ts/pk)

Finland: Funds for research, development and innovation to rise

Finland's Prime Minister-designate, Petteri Orpo, has announced that the government will increase investment in research, development and innovation (RDI) from 2.9 percent of GDP to 4 percent by 2030, equating to an extra EUR 280 million a year. [Euractiv]

Since the decline of Finnish telecom giant Nokia, which was acquired by Microsoft in 2013, the nation's RDI funding has dwindled, dropping from a peak of 3.7 percent of GDP in 2009. [ScienceBusiness]

The new injection of funds, which would make Finland the EU's largest RDI spender in terms of percentage of GDP, reflects the country's ambition to become "a clean energy superpower". [Eurostat] [Euractiv]

The plans were largely drawn up in 2021 after concerns were raised that Finland was lagging behind

its neighbours and competitors in research and innovation. [Euractiv]

(ts/pk)

Finland: Assets of berry companies seized in human trafficking probe

A Finnish court has ordered assets worth around EUR 1.5 million in total to be seized from two companies suspected of deceiving and coercing over 100 berry pickers from Thailand into forced labour.

The confiscation of assets is a precautionary measure to secure potential damages for victims and prevent the suspects in a human trafficking probe from hiding or disposing of their property.

The number of suspected victims in the case has risen to over 100, up from an earlier estimate of several dozen, said Teemu Mantyniemi, a detective superintendent in charge of the probe at Finland's National Bureau of Investigation (KRP).

All the suspects have denied the criminal allegations against them, Mantyniemi added.

The National Bureau of Investigation and the Finnish Border Guard are also probing a Thai company that allegedly assisted in recruiting the berry pickers.

The alleged human trafficking took place in northern Finland between 2020 and 2022. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

Norway: Navy officer found guilty of negligence over sinking of frigate

The duty commander of a Norwegian navy frigate was found guilty of negligence by a court on May 15 over a collision with an oil tanker in 2008 which caused the warship to sink. [Reuters]

The officer, who has not been publicly identified, was given a two-month suspended jail sentence. He denied negligence.

The early-morning collision on November 8, 2018, occurred between the 134-metre KNM Helge Ingstad frigate and the fully loaded, Maltese-flagged Sola TS

crude carrier near a major North Sea oil export terminal in a harbour in Sture, north of the city of Bergen. [Washington Post]

The collision tore a large hole in the frigate's side. The tanker was slightly damaged but did not leak oil.

The frigate's 137 crew were evacuated before their vessel sank. Eight people were slightly injured. The collision revealed safety gaps in the Norwegian navy's training and risk assessment systems. [Reuters] [Metro]

(mr/pk)

Norway: Wage talks falter between oil firms and labour unions

Oil firms and labour unions will take part in a state-led mediation process in an effort to avoid a strike by workers after negotiations on pay and conditions broke down on May 24.

In a bid to agree a settlement for offshore workers, the Industri Energi, Safe and Lederne unions had been negotiating since May 2 with the Norwegian Oil and Gas Association.

The talks covered wages, benefits and working conditions for nearly 8,000 staff employed by oil firms and industry suppliers. [Reuters/MSN] [Industri Energi]

(mr/pk)

Sweden: Largest military drills in 25 years conclude amid NATO bid

The Swedish armed forces and international allies have wrapped up Aurora 23 – Sweden's largest military exercises in 25 years.

The drills in southern Sweden, which ended on May 14, involved more than 26,000 soldiers from 14 different nations, including European NATO member states and the US.

Aurora 23 was designed to enhance the capabilities of Sweden's own military but also to increase the operational readiness of allied nations in the event of an attack on the Nordic country.

The exercises, which started in mid-April, were held ahead of a NATO summit to be held in Lithuania in July. At that gathering, Sweden hopes to become the 32nd member of the military alliance, following a year-long application process. [Politico] [Shape] [Shepard]

After Russia invaded Ukraine, Sweden's neighbour Finland ditched its longstanding policy of non-alignment and joined NATO on April 4. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(ab/pk)

Sweden: Far-right leader says 'fully practising Muslims' cannot be wholly integrated into society

The leader of a far-right party which has threatened to upend the balance of power in Sweden over migration issues has said he does not believe that "fully practising Muslims" can be fully integrated into Swedish society. [Göteborgs-Posten]

Jimmie Akesson of the Sweden Democrats, whose support is vital for Sweden's governing coalition, argued in an interview with the Goteborgs-Posten newspaper that a "fundamentalist Muslim" has views on women's rights, gender equality, child rearing and animal rights that cannot be part of a modern society. [The Local] [Expressen]

Akesson said that he had no problem with supporting his party colleague Richard Jomshof's claim that an "Islamisation of Sweden" is underway.

"It is clear that when the Muslim minority grows quite rapidly, as it has done in recent decades, it affects society in some way," Akesson added, claiming that this leads to increased divisions and brings with it values "that we have more or less eradicated in this country."

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

The Sweden Democrats have threatened to destabilise the country's ruling coalition over a proposal, backed by the European Parliament, for dealing with rising migration to the continent.

The far-right party is unhappy with a mandatory relocation clause in the proposed new policy. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(mr/pk)

Sweden: World's first e-motorway will allow cars to charge while driving

Sweden is building the world's first e-motorway: a road that will allow electric vehicles to charge while driving on it. [Electrek]

Swedish companies are expected to use innovative technology in the project, such as overhead conductive, ground-based conductive or ground-based inductive charging. [interestingengineering.com]

Experts say that "dynamic charging" allows electric vehicles to travel longer distances with smaller batteries and to avoid waiting at charging stations.

The new road is expected to be finished in 2025 or 2026, and will be built on European route E20, which provides access to Sweden's major cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmo. [MSN]

Sweden's move comes as European countries prepare infrastructure for fossil fuel-free mobility. The EU passed a law in April that requires most new cars sold in the bloc from 2035 to have zero CO2 emissions. [Euronews]

That measure means the sale of the majority of new diesel and petrol cars will effectively be banned from that year – a step aimed at accelerating the EU's transition to electric vehicles and reducing the bloc's emissions in line with its climate targets. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

However, combustion engines running on so-called e-fuel, which emits some CO2, will still be allowed after 2035. [POLITICO]

(mr/pk)

Sweden: Parliament hit by cyberattack

The Swedish parliament was targeted by a Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDOS) cyberattack on May 2 ahead of a meeting the next day between Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, and other Nordic premiers in Helsinki.

Such attacks direct high volumes of internet traffic to overwhelm targeted servers. The incident took place amid a reported increase in cyberattacks against Sweden following its application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

While there has been no official attribution of blame, the timing prompted speculation of Russian involvement. [Cybersecurity Connect] [Reuters]

(hj/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Rallies held across Europe in solidarity with political prisoners in Belarus

Rallies were held across 19 European countries and 39 cities to commemorate the International Day of Solidarity with political prisoners in Belarus. [Belsat]

Viasna Human Rights Centre, based in Minks, declared May 21 the International Day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners in Belarus in memory of political prisoner Vitold Ashurak, who died in a penal colony in May 2021. About 1,511 people in Belarus are considered political prisoners. [Viasna] [TVP World]

People are detained based on their beliefs, the non-violent exercise of freedom of thought, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and other rights and freedoms, according to Viasna. Others are detained

based on “falsified evidence of the alleged offence or in cases where there is no event or composition of the offence.” [Viasna][Viasna]

In Poland, hundreds of Belarusians gathered in Warsaw for a solidarity rally on Constitution Square. Dozens also marched to the Belarusian consulate in the northeastern city of Bialystok carrying portraits of political prisoners. According to Belsat, coordinated rallies were also held in Vilnius, Rome, Stockholm, Barcelona, Prague, London, Kyiv and other European cities. [Belsat]

The European Union (EU) also expressed its solidarity with Belarusian political prisoners. On May 21, the Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Belarus released a statement by High Representative Josep Borrell in which he demanded “the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.” [EEAS Press Team]”

(ag/gc)

Hungary, Greece block new EU sanctions package against Russia

EU foreign ministers failed on May 22 to agree on new sanctions against Moscow after Hungary and Greece linked the matter to the inclusion of European companies on Kyiv’s list of “war sponsors”. [Le Monde] [Politico]

Earlier in May, Ukraine’s National Agency on Corruption Prevention added Hungarian bank OPT and five Greek shipping companies to its list of “international sponsors of war”, accusing them of having continued operations in Russia. [AP] [Le Monde]

The list was launched last summer and now includes 17 companies with links to the EU. The list aims to put pressure on businesses to leave Russia, though being included on it has no legal consequences. [Le Monde] [Euronews]

Hungary also blocked the approval of further EU military support for Ukraine.

“As long as Ukraine keeps OTP on the list of international sponsors of the war, Hungary cannot agree to decisions that would require the EU and its member states to make further economic and financial sacrifices,” said the Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto on May 17.

At stake is the release of EUR 500 million from the European Peace Facility, a fund set up in 2021 to provide the EU's partners with military equipment and infrastructure, and the bloc's 11th sanctions package against the Kremlin. [Euronews]

'Too early' to release frozen funds to Budapest

Meanwhile, European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova said on May 3 that it was "too early" to grant Budapest billions in EU funding frozen in December over rule-of-law concerns. [Euractiv] [Bloomberg]

Her comments came on the same day that Hungary approved a reform aimed at strengthening the independence of its judicial system. [Euractiv]

Jourova said that the new law was "a very good step forward" but "not the end of the process". [Bloomberg]

Hungary's EU negotiator Janos Boka said on May 23 that the justice reform gave talks with Brussels "a new impetus". [Financial Times]

(msa/pk)

NATO peacekeepers injured in clashes with ethnic Serb in Kosovo

Dozens of peacekeepers in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s Kosovo Force (KFOR) have been injured in clashes with Serbian protesters after being deployed in northern Kosovo on May 26 to help local police protect municipal buildings targeted by rioters [ABC].

"While countering the most active fringes of the crowd, several soldiers of the Italian and Hungarian KFOR contingent were the subject of unprovoked attacks and sustained trauma wounds with fractures and burns due to the explosion of incendiary devices," KFOR said in a statement [The Guardian].

"The unprovoked attacks on NATO units are unacceptable and KFOR will continue to fulfil its mandate impartially."

Kosovo police vehicles, in addition to a journalist's car, were spray painted with nationalist Serbian symbols and the letter 'Z', a symbol used by Russians in the ongoing Ukraine War [The Guardian] [ABC].

Ethnic Serbs began protesting outside of municipal buildings in the predominantly ethnic-Serb region of

northern Kosovo, blocking newly elected mayors from entering the municipal administration buildings. The mayors were elected in April elections which ethnic Serbs boycotted [CNN].

The protesters continue to demand that the Kosovo government remove the elected ethnicAlbanian mayors from the town halls, calling for Serb administrators financed by Belgrade to replace them. On May 26, Serbia placed its armed forces on the highest level of combat readiness and ordered Serbian forces to "start moving" towards its border with Kosovo. [Euractiv] [CNN].

Serbia continues not to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, with Serbian President Aleksander Vucic having vowed to never recognise Kosovo. [BBC]

Zdravko Ponos, a former Serbian army chief who is now an opposition politician, labelled Vucic's response as "inappropriate."

"This is only sabre-rattling that serves as face saving for Vucic," he said in an interview with Serbian television. [NBC]

Kosovo, which is 92 percent ethnically Albanian and 6 percent ethnically Serb, declared independence from Serbia in 2008. The campaign by ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to become an independent country began following the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Serbia responded with a military campaign against the ethnic Albanian Kosovars which ended with a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing campaign against Serbia. KFOR troops have been present in Kosovo since 1999. [BBC]

NATO calls for de-escalation

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg called for Kosovo's leaders to unilaterally de-escalate tensions with Serbia as ethnic Serbs blocked the entrance of elected officials into municipal buildings. "Pristina must de-escalate & not take unilateral, destabilising steps," the NATO chief tweeted on May 28. [Al Jazeera]

Ethnic Serbs refused to participate in April elections for local mayors, which subsequently saw a 3.5 percent voter turnout and ethnic Albanian candidates elected. [BBC] [Al Jazeera]

Secretary of State Antony Blinken criticised Pristina for going against US and European advice by attempting to install the elected officials to their positions, stating that Pristina had "sharply and unnecessarily escalated tensions, undermining our efforts to help normalise

relations between Kosovo and Serbia will have consequences for our bilateral relations with Kosovo." [Euractiv].

Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani said that police actions taken "against Vucic's illegal structures and criminal gangs are legitimate, in fulfilment of their constitutional duties to defend all citizens without distinction."

(jn/gc)

'Ndrangheta suspects arrested across Europe, South America

More than 200 suspected members of the 'Ndrangheta mafia – one of the world's most powerful organised crime networks – have been arrested in raids across Europe and South America.

A total of 132 suspects were detained on May 3 in 10 countries – Belgium, Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Romania, Brazil and Panama – during a massive operation involving 2,770 law enforcement officers, according to the European Union's international policing agency.

Europol described the operation as the "largest-ever coordinated strike" against the 'Ndrangheta. [Europol] [BBC] [NBC]

On May 10, Italian police arrested 61 additional suspected 'Ndrangheta members across seven regions of the country.

The 'Ndrangheta network, consisting of around 150 families, has surpassed the Cosa Nostra as Italy's most powerful mafia organisation and operates in over 40 countries worldwide. [AP]

Europol said that the 'Ndrangheta is responsible for a significant portion of Europe's cocaine trade and that it engages in systematic money laundering, bribery and violence.

(mr/pk)

Russia denounces European Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces

Russian Duma deputies have voted unanimously in favour to denounce the European Treaty on

Conventional Armed Forces (CFE) on May 16 following directives provided by President Vladimir Putin on May 10.

“Since the beginning of the 90s, the large-scale military-political changes, primarily related to NATO expansion, affected the Treaty and made it obsolescent and irrelevant,” stated an explanatory document attached to Putin’s directives. [Duma]

“Washington and Brussels, obsessed with the idea of building a unipolar world and expanding NATO to the east, have destroyed the global system for ensuring security,” State Duma Speaker, Vyacheslav Volodin, said. [TASS]

The Federation appointed Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to represent Putin during parliamentary proceedings on denouncing the treaty and aimed at regulating the number of forces deployed by NATO members.

"Any illusions of those who still hoped that Russia will return to the treaty - they will disappear," said Ryabkov during an interview. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Ukraine’s President Zelensky visits European leaders, international summits

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky toured Europe in May, where he met with leaders from Germany, France and the United Kingdom as he tried to bolster support for the country’s war effort against Russia. He also travelled to Saudi Arabia and Japan.

On May 14, Zelensky met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in his first visit to the country since the Russian invasion in February 2022. During the meeting, Germany promised new military and humanitarian aid. Berlin will support Ukraine "for as long as necessary," Scholz said. [DW] [EURACTIV] [Reuters]

Scholz and Zelensky agreed to "bring to justice those responsible for war crimes and other atrocities” and to "increase pressure on Russia and those who are supporting its war efforts through further sanctions," according to a joint statement after their meeting. [DW]

Zelensky received the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen. The prize is a mostly symbolic award established in

1950 to celebrate efforts toward European unification.

European leaders

Zelensky met with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Pope Francis on May 13. He went to Paris to speak with French President Emmanuel Macron on May 14. [Reuters] [AP]

Meloni said that Italy would support Ukraine for "as long as is necessary" against Russia's "brutal and unjust aggression." With the Pope, Zelensky talked about the invitation to back Kyiv's peace plan and the possible repatriation of Ukrainian children taken to Russia. [EURACTIV]

French President Macron promised the delivery of more weaponry and "unwavering" support for Ukraine. Zelensky prolonged his Europe tour and travelled to the UK on May 15 to meet with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. [EURACTIV][EURACTIV][AP]

"The UK will remain steadfast in supporting Ukraine and its people to defend itself," Sunak said, adding that the UK is "here for the long term."

Zelensky visited the Netherlands unannounced on May 4 to mark Remembrance Day.

Zelensky went to the Hague where he met with Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Defence Minister Kajsa Ollongren. He then gave a speech at the World Forum entitled "No Peace without Justice for Ukraine" during which he held a moment of silence for the victims of "Russia and its terror." [NLTimes]

Nordic leaders

Zelensky also visited Finland to attend a Nordic summit aimed at gaining international support in defending Ukraine against Russia and securing backing for the country's European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership aspirations.

Following his discussions with Finland's President Sauli Niinistö, President Zelensky met with the prime ministers of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. In a joint press conference after the summit, Zelensky thanked the Nordic nations for their continued support of Ukraine since Russia's invasion in 2022.

Zelensky also restated Ukraine's hopes for joining NATO, highlighting it as a key reason for his presence at the summit.

"Our goal is to have full membership in the alliance. This is one of the reasons why I am here today. The

second reason, or to be honest the priority, is strengthening our army," he said. The Nordic countries expressed their support of Ukraine's aspirations to join both the EU and NATO.

Regarding Moscow's recent allegation of a drone attack on the Kremlin, Zelensky dismissed the claim and announced Ukraine's plan to launch a counteroffensive against Russian forces within its own territory. He clarified that Ukraine's focus is on defending its own land rather than targeting President Putin or Moscow directly. "We don't attack Putin or Moscow, we fight on our territory," he said.

Attending the Arab League summit

Zelensky attended the Arab League summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on May 19. [EURACTIV] [Kyiv Independent]

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia "plays a significant role and we are ready to take our cooperation to a new level," said Zelenskyy. It was his first visit to the country.

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman mediated between Ukraine and Russia last year, resulting in the release of ten foreigners captured by Russian forces in Ukraine. [EURACTIV]

G7 summit in Japan

After speaking to the Arab League, Zelensky went on to join the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan on May 20. [Reuters] [DW]

During the summit, Zelensky held bilateral meetings with multiple leaders of the Global South and Europe, including the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A planned meeting with Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva did not take place.

Both at the Arab League Summit and at the G7 summit Zelensky tried to convince international leaders to back the Ukraine peace plan.

(mb-rs-ava-sw/gc)

Germany, France, and Norway leaders meet with China's Foreign Minister

Germany, France, and Norway leaders met with China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang during his trip to

Germany from May 8 and 12 to discuss the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Qin met with both German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during his visit. Reportedly, the visit with Scholz was mainly to prepare for the 7th round of Germany-China intergovernmental consultation held in Germany in mid-June. [Chinese Foreign Ministry 1]

During the meeting with Foreign Minister Baerbock, with whom Qin met in mid-April in China, the main topic of discussion was Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and China's role in the conflict. Baerbock discussed China's efforts to end the conflict.

"As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China can play a significant role in ending the war, if it decides to do so," Baerbock said.

The two foreign ministers are reported to have discussed the possible sanctioning of Chinese companies if they supply the Russian army with weapons or goods to support Russia in its war, or if they enable the Russian economy to circumvent the sanctions imposed by the West. [Chinese Foreign Ministry 2] [Deutsche Welle] [German Foreign Office via Twitter]

The topic of discussion came up mainly because the European Commission has added eight Chinese companies allegedly guilty of the above-mentioned offences to a new draft sanctions package. [Politico 1] [Politico 2]

France

During his visit to France, Qin met with Catherine Colonna, the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs. As with Baerbock, they discussed Russia's war in Ukraine. Colonna echoed the European position, though somewhat more cautiously than her German counterpart.

"China has an important role to play in convincing Russia to return to full compliance with the U.N. Charter, in particular the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Colonna said. Qin reiterated the Chinese position that it is in favour of ending the war peacefully, but that Russia's position must also be taken into account when it comes to negotiations. [Chinese Foreign Ministry 3] [French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs]

Qin furthermore stressed that China's relationship with France and the European Union (EU) should not

be influenced by third parties.

This can be interpreted as a reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to China at the beginning of April, who said that Europe should not be a vassal state of the US. Macron also said that in the case of possible war between China and the US, Europe should not blindly follow the US. This caused a lot of criticism from the EU, the US and Taiwan, leading to a backpedalling of the French government [see AiR No. 15, April/2023, 2][Global Times].

They also discussed economic cooperation between China and France. Qin called for both countries to find and develop new areas of cooperation and build a more resilient transnational supply chain. [Reuters] [Xinhua]

Norway

The last stop of Qin's Europe trip was Norway, where he met with Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt and representatives from the Norwegian business community.

Qin called for the two countries to expand their economic cooperation, especially in the context of the green economy. He also stressed the importance of working together "to liberalise and facilitate trade." xStore also said in a statement following the meeting that the Norwegian government "[is] concerned about the human rights situation in Xinjiang and the developments in Hong Kong" and that these issues also received attention in the talks. [Chinese Foreign Ministry 4] [Chinese Foreign Ministry 5][Reuters] [S

(aml/gc)

Japan's foreign minister meets European counterparts at EU-IndoPacific forum

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi met with a number of counterparts from European countries on the sidelines of the EU-IndoPacific Ministerial Forum, held on May 13 in Stockholm.

Meeting with Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, Hayashi congratulated his country on its recent accession to NATO. Both ministers agreed to strengthen economic ties between their countries and to deepen cooperation between NATO and Japan. The military alliance is in talks about establishing an office in Japan. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 1]

At a meeting between Hayashi and his Austrian counterpart Alexander Schallenberg, both sides affirmed that they wanted to deepen bilateral relations and economic cooperation. Hayashi welcomed a deal in principle on the Japan-Austria Social Security Agreement. Hayashi asked Austria to support lifting import restrictions imposed by the European Union on Japanese food products. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2]

In another meeting, Hayashi and Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics agreed to strengthen security and defence cooperation and expand people-to-people exchanges. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 3]

Meeting with Constantinos Kombos, the foreign minister of Cyprus, Hayashi reaffirmed Japan's wish to strengthen cooperation between the two island nations. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4]

Hayashi also held talks with Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom. During their May 14 meeting, Hayashi voiced Japan's support for Sweden's bid to join NATO, and agreed with his counterpart to deepen security cooperation, including economic security. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 5]

(aml/pk)

Germany: Chancellor Scholz visits Kenya, Ethiopia

Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Ethiopia and Kenya from May 4 to 6 in his second trip to Africa since becoming the leader of Europe's largest economy, to discuss green energy and regional conflicts. [EURACTIV] [Reuters] [DW]

Scholz met with African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat in Addis Ababa on May 4, where they discussed a possible G20 membership for the AU. The AU should get a seat at the G20 Scholz said.

"Africa must play a bigger role in international relations," Scholz said. The 55-member bloc is Germany's "central partner" on the African continent and deserves to be more involved in G20 meetings, Scholz tweeted.

The only African member of the G20 is currently South Africa. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was the first representative to propose a G20 membership

for the AU, a bid that received support from United States President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron. [EURACTIV]

(mb/gc)

Albanian election win for jailed Greek candidate causes diplomatic strains

Fredi Beleri, a Greek minority candidate in Albania, won the mayoral election for the municipality of Himare, despite his arrest on vote-buying charges. The victory, decided by a slim margin of 19 votes, has intensified the ongoing diplomatic strain between Greece and Albania. [Euractiv]

Beleri, a representative of the ethnic Greek minority's Human Rights Union Party, was detained for allegedly offering EUR 360 to secure eight votes in the election. [Euractiv]

His arrest triggered outrage in Greece, with the Foreign Ministry demanding his release and warning that the situation could impact Albania's bid to join the European Union (EU). Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis stated his pleasure at Beleri's win, but emphasised that Albania's EU journey depends on respecting Greek minority rights. [Euronews]

Albanian Foreign Minister Olta Xhacka retorted, arguing Greece had no right to challenge Albania's court decision and dismissing any suggestion that Greek nationality exempted Beleri from Albanian law. [Euronews]

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias threatened to raise the issue of Beleri's arrest at the EU Council of Foreign Ministers, insisting that this incident could significantly affect bilateral relations. [Euractiv]

Beleri remains in custody, with it unclear whether he'll assume his elected role or if fresh elections will be held. [Euractiv]

(kg/gc)

EU praises latest Armenia-Azerbaijan meeting as promising after decades of conflict

The European Union (EU) expressed satisfaction with a meeting between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, describing it as a “positive” step towards achieving a lasting peace agreement between the two neighbouring countries, Reuters reported on May 14. [Reuters][EuropeanUnion]

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met in Brussels at the invitation of the EU. Although neither leader provided comments after the meeting, it marked another round of discussions following a six-week conflict in 2020 that resulted in territorial gains for Azerbaijan. [Reuters][EuropeanUnion]

The leaders discussed the release of prisoners, border demarcation and facilitating access to isolated regions in the Caucasus through each other's territories. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians, remains a central point of contention. The EU's Council President, Charles Michel, praised the leaders' commitment to achieving peace in the South Caucasus and emphasised the need for continued progress and the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement. [Reuters][Politico]

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has a long history, including a war in the 1990s, and the recent meeting in Brussels was part of ongoing efforts to address various issues. Michel discussed the importance of recognizing the borders established after the end of Soviet rule in 1991. [Reuters][Politico]

He urged Azerbaijan to pursue a positive agenda that ensures the rights and security of the population in Nagorno-Karabakh. Additionally, Michel called on both parties to refrain from hostile rhetoric, engage in good faith and demonstrate leadership in finding solutions. [Reuters][Politico]

Despite the ongoing talks, clashes along the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan have continued. Recent incidents resulted in the deaths of soldiers from both sides, and Azerbaijan accused Armenia of launching mortar fire in the Kalbajar district, near the border. [Reuters]

The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan are scheduled to meet again on June 1 at a development conference in Moldova, where they will be joined by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. [Reuters]

Nagorno-Karabakh

Pashinyan said on May 22 that Armenia was willing to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan on the condition that Baku ensures the security of the ethnic Armenian population residing there. [Reuters]

Pashinyan stated during a news conference that the territory of Azerbaijan, encompassing Nagorno-Karabakh, measures approximately 86,600 square kilometres. He expressed a willingness to recognize Azerbaijan's territorial integrity within these defined limits.

In return, he expects Baku to recognize Armenia's territorial integrity covering 29,800 square kilometres. Pashinyan indicated that this arrangement, essentially accepting Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders, could be considered if the rights of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh are guaranteed. He suggested that the matter should be discussed in bilateral talks between the two countries.

Pashinyan also emphasised Armenia's commitment to the peace process in the region. He expressed hope that an agreement on the text of a peace treaty could be reached in the near future, leading to its signing. [Reuters]

(at/gc)

Austria tightens border security as Hungary frees convicted people smugglers

Austria strengthened its border controls on May 21 after neighbouring Hungary freed about 700 imprisoned people-smugglers. [The Guardian] [Reuters] [AP]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's right-wing, populist government issued a decree in April allowing the release of up to 700 foreign detainees convicted of people smuggling, giving them 72 hours to leave the country. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

"As long as there is overcrowding in prisons (...) we don't want to use Hungarian taxpayer money to finance the care of several hundred human smugglers," Gergely Gulyas, Orban's chief of staff, said earlier in May. [AP]

Austria's foreign minister, Alexander Schallenberg, described Hungary's move as "entirely wrong" and demanded "full clarification" from Budapest.

Hungary's state secretary of the interior ministry, Bence Retvari, said that Budapest's decision had been necessary because the EU "refuses to contribute to border controls". [The Guardian]

Austria and Hungary are part of the so-called Balkan route, a popular trail for refugees and migrants, mostly from the Middle East and Africa, who aim to reach wealthier countries in Western Europe. [AP]

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]

(msa/pk)

Austria rejects Romania's request for timeframe on lifting Schengen veto

Austria's interior minister has said after meeting his Romanian counterpart that Vienna cannot offer a date for when it will lift its veto on Bucharest joining Europe's passport-free Schengen Area. [Kurier] [Euractiv]

In December, Vienna blocked Romania and Bulgaria from joining the Schengen zone, with Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer complaining that many unregistered migrants or asylum seekers were arriving from those countries. [The Guardian]

Vienna's move strained relations between the three nations and was criticised by other EU members. [The Guardian]

Countries trying to join the Schengen zone require the backing of every member of the area. Only Austria opposes Romania's bid. [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

Romanian Interior Minister Lucian Bode said that his country aimed to join Schengen later this year, but his Austrian counterpart Gerhard Karner told news agency APA: "We are currently still very far away from the system working." [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

Karner said after the two ministers met in Bucharest: "I am not fighting against Romania or the Romanian Interior Minister, Lucian Bode, but together we are fighting to make the system work." [Kurier] [EURACTIV]

(iy/pk)

Belgium increases offshore wind energy cooperation with Azerbaijan

Belgium's Minister of Energy Tinne van der Straeten met with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Parviz Shahbazov, in Brussels on May 2, signing an agreement to increase cooperation regarding offshore wind energy. [AzerNews]

The two discussed the importance of improving the Southern Gas Corridor, a trade route between Europe and Asia that crosses the Caspian Sea and Caucasus mountains. The route has become particularly important geopolitically given the gas supply shocks triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and sanctions on Iran.

The energy ministers also discussed improving the alternative gas supply routes put forward by the Solidarity Ring – a group that includes Azerbaijan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Slovakia – that aim to transport gas from the Caucasus mountains to Southern Europe. [CEPA]

Other topics of conversation included Belgium's wind energy projects in the North Sea. Straeten was invited to the Baku Energy Forum in Azerbaijan in June. [Ministry of Energy Azerbaijan]

(sw.gc)

Bulgarian MEP denied entry to North Macedonia amid tensions

Bulgarian Member of Parliament Andrey Kovachev and four others were denied entry into North Macedonia, citing potential disruptions to public order, according to the country's Interior Ministry on May 7. The group was on their way to a Bulgarian military cemetery near Novo Selo in North Macedonia to pay respects to Bulgarian casualties from the Balkan Wars. [RadioFreeEurope]

North Macedonia's Foreign Ministry clarified that the group accompanying Kovachev included individuals deemed a risk to public security. The ministry underscored that all MEPs respecting North Macedonia's state and citizen dignity are welcome. [Novinite]

The incident, coming amid ongoing tensions between the two countries over historical and national

differences, elicited reactions from Bulgaria, the European People's Party and the European Parliament. Bulgaria expressed its “strong disappointment.” [Novinite]

The cemetery in Novo Selo is home to 71 Bulgarian soldiers who died during the Second Balkan War and World War I. North Macedonia is currently undergoing a key phase in constitutional amendments and European Union membership, a process the ministry does not wish to jeopardise.

(kg/gc)

Croatia defends plans for radioactive waste centre at border with Bosnia

Croatia has defended plans to build a nuclear waste disposal centre at its border with Bosnia and Herzegovina after criticism from the government in Sarajevo.

Bosnia’s Foreign Trade and Economic Relations Minister Stasa Kosarac has accused Zagreb of violating European regulations and standards.

Plans were originally drawn up for the facility in 2018, with the chosen site near the eastern Croatian village of Dvor, right next to the border with Bosnia. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Bosnia tried to stop the project and the following year declared its land close to the site a nature reserve.

Kosarac told Reuters: “Our primary goal is to save the health of 250,000 people in north-western Bosnia.” He also suggested that Bosnia could build a similar plant near Dubrovnik, one of Croatia’s most popular tourist spots, which lies close to the border between the two countries.

Croatia has countered criticism of its planned radioactive waste facility, with one senior official involved in the project, Josip Lebegner, telling the Euractiv news outlet: “Minister Kosarac’s statement that Croatia violates European regulations and standards is wrong.”

Critics have pointed to the fact that the Croatian government has yet to publish any official health or environmental risk assessments, but Lebegner said that preliminary studies showed the chosen location was “extremely safe”. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

(iy/pk)

Denmark to deploy battalion to Latvia

Denmark will next year deploy a battalion to help NATO bolster security in Latvia, which is fearful of Moscow amid Russia's war on Ukraine. [Reuters] [Defence Post]

Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said that his country would reduce its military presence in Iraq from early 2024 and redirect focus towards the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia which, alongside Denmark, are all members of NATO. [Reuters]

The battalion is expected to comprise 700 to 1,200 soldiers and is to be stationed in Latvia for four to six months every year. For the rest of the time, the troops will be stationed in Denmark, prepared for deployment to the Baltic states in the event of a crisis, the defence ministry in Copenhagen said. [Defence Post]

"We must be prepared for the Danish presence in the Baltics to be long-term, and there is a need for balancing between having soldiers on the ground and being ready to deploy them from Denmark," said Poulsen. [Danish Ministry of Defence]

By February 2024, Denmark will withdraw one of its security and escort units consisting of 105 soldiers from Iraq. However, the country will continue to support NATO's mission in Iraq by providing personnel and advisory assistance, according to the defence ministry. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

European Commission gives Netherlands permission to buy out large nitrogen emitters

The European Commission approved the Dutch Government's plan to buy out 5,000 livestock farms that emit the most nitrogen for EUR 13 billion in its bid to curb emissions.

The government's proposal last June led to mass protests across the country. The cabinet said this would resolve the crisis "really quickly." [NLTimes]

On May 2 the Netherlands got the go-ahead for a EUR 1.5 billion buy-out of 3,000 farms, not the proposed

5,000. [NLTimes] [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

EU cybersecurity centre opens in Bucharest

The European Cybersecurity Competence Center (ECCC) opened its new headquarters in Bucharest on May 9.

The ECCC was established in June 2021 to increase the European Union (EU)'s cybersecurity capacities and competitiveness, in conjunction with the Network of National Coordination Centres. [ECCC]

The headquarters will be tasked with facilitating industrial policy and innovation, as well as overseeing coordination and development projects across the EU. [AA]

A EU member since 2007, Romania was blocked from becoming a member of the Schengen zone in December. [TheGuardian]

(sw/gc)

Finland's Gasum ends pipeline supply deal with Russia's Gazprom

Finnish state-owned energy company Gasum has officially ended a contract with Russia's Gazprom Export for natural gas supplies via pipelines.

Russian gas has been exported to Finland since the 1970s. [Yleisradio Oy] However, Gazprom has not supplied Gasum with any natural gas via pipeline since May 2022. This is a result of Gasum refusing to agree to Gazprom's demand to make payments in roubles rather than euros. [Reuters] [Diesel & Gas Turbine Worldwide]

Gasum referred this issue, among a number of other disagreements, to an external arbitrator. In November last year, an arbitration tribunal issued a verdict stating that Gasum was not obliged to pay in Russian currency and gave the two companies time to resolve the dispute. [Yleisradio Oy][Diesel & Gas Turbine Worldwide]

However, negotiations ended without an agreement. A separate contract for non-pipeline liquefied natural gas

between the two firms remains unaffected. [Diesel & Gas Turbine Worldwide] [Yleisradio Oy]

(ts/pk)

Finland probes possible market manipulation by Swedish energy firm

Finland's energy regulator has launched an inquiry into whether Swedish power giant Vattenfall tried to manipulate the electricity market last year, when energy prices rose sharply following Russia's attack on Ukraine.

If found guilty, the company could face substantial fines. Vattenfall says that it made unintentional mistakes. [Reuters] [Yle]

The Finnish Energy Authority alleges that on several occasions Vattenfall – one of the largest electricity suppliers in Finland – offered less to the grid than it could have or bought less electricity than needed. [Yle]

The Swedish utility has acknowledged that it made three bidding errors related to the Finnish power market which it says were promptly reported through market announcements. It insists that the mistake was an "administrative error, not an intentional market manipulation." [Reuters]

"We are cooperating with the Energy Authority," said Markus Fischer, a senior press officer at Vattenfall. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finnish firm 'illegally' shipped waste to Sweden

A Finnish company illegally transported 66,200kg of septic waste to Sweden, according to a probe by Finnish customs into suspected violation of environmental rules. [Helsinki Times]

The inquiry found that the Finnish company, which took the waste sludge to a Swedish processing plant, had not applied for the required permits. [Helsinki Times] The company has not been named.

Peter Nevalainen, chief of the Economic Crime Investigation Unit at the Finnish customs service, said

that the aim of illegal waste shipments is usually to reduce costs. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Customs]

(rs/pk)

Tensions between Rome, Paris and Madrid as ministers criticise Italy

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani cancelled a trip to Paris on May 4, claiming that French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin had insulted Rome and its hard-right government over its migration policy.

Tajani had been planning to attend a meeting with Catherine Colonna, France's foreign minister.

Earlier on May 4, Darmanin told the RMC radio station that the Italian government was "incapable of resolving migration problems." [Politico] [The Guardian]

In response to the comments, Tajani said on Twitter: "Insults to the government and Italy by minister Darmanin are unacceptable. This is not the spirit in which common European challenges should be addressed."

The following day, Tajani requested an apology from Darmanin. [France 24]

Italian 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. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Last November, tensions between Paris and Rome escalated when France accepted 234 migrants who were denied entry into Italy. [AP News]

On May 10, Stephane Sejourn, the secretary general of French President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance party, said: "Meloni does lots of rabble-rousing on illegal immigration: her policies are unjust, inhuman and ineffective."

On the same day, Spanish Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz criticised new welfare rules passed in Italy. A decree issued by Meloni's Cabinet on May 1 – Labour Day – introduced measures including reduced unemployment benefits. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Diaz said that the measures approved by Meloni's administration show that it wants to "govern against workers." [ANSA] [El Pais]

The move by the government in Rome was also slammed by Elly Schlein, leader of Italy's centre-left opposition Democratic Party, who said: "We are fed up with seeing heaps of poor, precarious jobs that condemn young people, especially in the south, to unbearable precarious conditions." [ANSA]

(km/pk)

Italy refuses to take refugees from Switzerland

Italy continually refuses to readmit asylum seekers from Switzerland despite being party to a relevant international agreement on immigration. Since December 2022, Italy has refused to take back refugees from Switzerland.

"The pressure at Italy's southern border is enormous, which is why this attitude is partly understandable," Swiss Justice Minister Elisabeth Baume-Schneider said. [Swissinfo]

Pressure is also increasing on refugee centres in Switzerland. Of the 184 refugees concerned, 152 are asylum seekers while the other 32 have no legal residence status in Switzerland. [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands and UK collaborate on sending F-16 jets to Ukraine

Dutch Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra said Ukrainian fighter pilots will begin training to fly F-16 fighter jets very soon, answering questions on the matter, as he arrived in Brussels on May 22 to attend meetings with his European Union counterparts. [NLTimes]

The Netherlands and the United Kingdom worked on May 16 on an international coalition to deliver F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine. Prime Ministers Mark Rutte and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak met at the Council of Europe Summit in Iceland. [Twitter]

US President Joe Biden said on May 19 that the United States will support an effort with allies and partners to train Ukrainian pilots in the use of combat aircrafts, including fighter jets. Rutte said he is glad the US joined the initiative.

The training will take place in Europe and American personnel will participate in the training. [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Norway takes over Arctic Council chairmanship, vowing not to cooperate with Russia

Norway on May 11 began its two-year turn at the rotating chairmanship of the eight-state Arctic Council, pledging to continue the forum's policy of excluding Russia from the organisation's activities.

While Russia has not been formally ejected from the body over the invasion of Ukraine, the seven other council members have paused all collaboration with Moscow within the organisation.

The council is an intergovernmental body that focuses on the mitigation of climate-related challenges and giving a voice to 4 million indigenous people in the Arctic region. [Reuters I]

The council has previously produced legally binding treaties, and the stagnation of the forum's cooperation with Russia – its largest member by territory – has caused concern. Climate scientists, for example, now face problems in exchanging data and accessing Arctic research facilities. [AP]

The Arctic Council comprises Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden and the United States. [Reuters II] [Norwegian Government]

(hj/pk)

Norway to train 3,200 Ukrainian soldiers

Norway will train around 3,200 Ukrainian soldiers this year, both in Norway and abroad, the general staff of Ukraine's armed forces said in a Facebook post on May 14. [Kyiv Independent/Yahoo]

According to the post, Norwegian Defence Minister Bjorn Arild Gram said while visiting a Ukrainian military training centre that Oslo supports Kyiv both financially and in terms of providing training. [SB]

(mr/pk)

Poland sanctions hundreds of Belarusians after jailed journalist's sentence upheld

Warsaw has sanctioned 365 Belarusian officials after a Polish journalist's eight-year prison sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court in Minsk. [Polskie Radio] [DW News] [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland] [TVP World]

Andrzej Poczobut, a Polish-Belarusian journalist and activist, was sentenced to eight years in a maximum-security penal colony by a Belarusian court in February. Poland's interior minister at the time called it a "repressive measure" against the Polish minority in Belarus. [Polskie Radio] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

The Supreme Court of Belarus on May 26 rejected an appeal by Poczobut against the February ruling, prompting the latest wave of sanctions from Warsaw. [DW News]

Polish Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski said the sanctions target individuals who "promoted the Belarusian regime and were engaged in legitimising and supporting [the] repressive policy of the authorities in Minsk" and who "are responsible for the politically motivated sentence against Andrzej Poczobut." [Euractiv]

The sanctions list includes 20 business entities and 16 businesspeople with links to Russia. [TVP World] [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland]

Those sanctioned will be prohibited from entering Europe's passport-free Schengen Area and will have their economic assets frozen, according to Warsaw. [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

Restrictions on freight

In addition to the sanctions, Poland is blocking freight vehicles registered in Belarus or Russia from crossing the Polish-Belarusian border from June 1. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland]

Warsaw placed curbs on some Belarusian road traffic across its border following the initial sentencing of Poczobut in February, leading to Minsk responding in kind to set off a series of tit-for-tat border restrictions between the two countries. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Relations between Minsk and Warsaw – which has provided refuge for political opponents of Belarus' strongman President Alexander Lukashenko – were previously already tense over issues including the case of Poczobut.

The Polish journalist has been arrested and imprisoned numerous times since 2011, including in 2021 as part of a wider crackdown against critics of Lukashenko's regime. [Radio Poland] [Politico]

Following almost 700 days in custody, Poczobut was given an eight-year sentence on February 8 after being found guilty of "fomenting hatred" and "acting to the detriment of Belarus." [Radio Poland] [Politico]

The foreign ministry in Warsaw said the case was politically motivated and that the verdict showed "systemic discrimination" against the Polish national minority in Belarus.

This community totals some 300,000 people, according to the 2019 Belarusian census. [Radio Poland] [Politico] The Polish government, however, says the number is closer to 1.1 million. [Radio Poland] [Politico] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(ek/pk)

Russia freezes Danish, Finnish embassy bank accounts

The bank accounts of Denmark and Finland in Russia have been frozen, leading to their embassies resorting to cash payments, according to officials in the two Nordic nations. [Reuters] [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

Finland's Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto said the Finnish embassy's bank accounts in Russia ceased functioning on April 27. Denmark's foreign ministry said on May 17 that its bank accounts had been frozen since last summer. [Reuters]

Haavisto criticised Russia's move as "bullying" and pointed to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961, which was designed to protect diplomatic missions abroad. [Reuters]

The Kremlin said that Russia was responding to "unfriendly actions" of "the collective West", including Finland. [Reuters] [Yle]

Finland, which shares the longest border with Russia of any EU country, formally joined NATO on April 4, marking a geopolitical shift that was triggered by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last year. Russia viewed the accession as a hostile move and issued a warning of "counter-measures". [Europe Monthly May 2023] [Reuters]

“We are reacting to the situation created by the authorities of several countries of the collective West, including, to our regret, Finland,” said Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. [Reuters] [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Russian fighter jet intercepts Polish jet patrolling Romania’s border

The Romanian Ministry of National Defence announced on May 6 that a Russian fighter jet intercepted a Polish aircraft during a routine patrol along the Romanian border.

Romania was the first to report the incident, followed by Poland on May 7.

The Polish jet was carrying out a routine patrol in conjunction with Romanian forces over the Black Sea. A Russian fighter jet then flew into Romanian airspace without making radio contact and began performing “aggressive and dangerous manoeuvres,” according to border authorities. [DW]

Romania shares a border of about 600 kilometres with Russia-invaded Ukraine. The region is becoming increasingly tense, with the Ministry of Defence releasing a statement on May 2 that the army is seeking to fill over 4,000 vacancies of professional soldiers. [RomaniaInsider]

(sw/gc)

Russia: Activists map where Ukrainian children are being held in Russia

Activists from the Kidmapping Project mapped more than 250 locations inside Russia where Ukrainian children have been forcibly transferred since the start of Moscow’s full-scale invasion.

“We focus on finding orphans and those whom the Russian authorities consider orphans. These are children whose parents were killed in the bombings, who didn't make it through 'filtering measures' -- who became civilian hostages, or whose parents were military prisoners of war,” said the activists on their Twitter account in an attempt to raise awareness on the project. [Twitter]

The organisation's website presents a map which displays all the data found on the children.

The map presents several kinds of dots. Red dots represent locations where there is a high probability of finding deported Ukrainian children. Yellow is for children that have been there at some point in time. And in grey are the places in which children are most likely to be brought. [Kidmapping]

The Kidmapping Project gathers data from Russian news reports, social media, networks and official state organisations that track the movement of children within the country.

"Our project focuses on locating places, but humanitarian organisations are involved in the process of repatriation, and we are ready to assist with our data upon request." Kidmapping wishes to collaborate with international organisations to address the problem practically. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Ex-Wagner commander moots return to Russia after fleeing to Norway

A former commander in the Wagner mercenary group who applied for political asylum in Norway has said he wants to return to his native Russia, even if his life could be in danger. [Reuters] [The Telegraph/MSN]

Andrey Medvedev said in one of five short videos published on May 17 that he would cancel his asylum application. However, he later deleted his videos and declined to speak when contacted by phone. [The New York Times] [DNyuz]

"Recently I've decided that I'm ready to go back to the Russian Federation. I've contacted the Russian embassy in Oslo for help, to facilitate my return," he said while the videos were still up.

"I hoped that I could find peace and calm here [in Norway], that I could leave all the politics, the war, the army behind, but somehow I couldn't manage." [CNN]

The former Wagner commander fled to Norway in January, crossing its Arctic border with Russia. He said he heard Russian guards firing as he ran through a forest and across a frozen river. [Reuters]

He added that he had fled to Norway because of the murder by the Wagner group of its own deserters.

[CNN]

(mr/pk)

Switzerland chairs UN Security Council for the first time

Switzerland chaired the United Nations Security Council on May 3 for the first time in its history. The country, represented by Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis, will hold the rotating role for one month.

The UN General Assembly voted on June 9 for Switzerland to preside over the Security Council as a non-permanent member. Since 2002, Switzerland has held important UN positions but never had the chance to preside over the Security Council. [Swissinfo] [Government]

"It's time for the Security Council to take responsibility and reflect on its potential," Cassis said. "Injustices and violations of the UN Charter do not justify the entrenchment of each behind its positions." [Swissinfo]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland: Kosovans will no longer need a short-stay visa

The Federal Council announced on May 17 that Kosovans will no longer need a visa for short-stays to Switzerland. The visa exemption will be valid from January 1, 2024.

Bern stated that the exemption has been motivated by Kosovo meeting security, border controls and migration management conditions. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union made a similar announcement on April 19. [LeMatin]

(sw/gc)

UK, Norway increase cooperation to counter undersea threats

British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and Norwegian Defence Minister Bjorn Arild Gram have signed a "statement of intent" indicating the countries agree to

a strategic partnership on countering undersea threats.

This includes threats to undersea energy infrastructure and anti-submarine warfare. The statement was signed by Wallace and Gram during a visit to the Maritime Operations Centre in Northwood, northwest London, on May 18.

In a statement, Wallace indicated that the strengthened cooperation with Norway was motivated by the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines last year.

Several underwater explosions in September damaged the Nord Stream 1 and newly-built Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipelines linking Russia and Germany across the Baltic Sea. A Swedish prosecutor investigating the attack said in April that a "state actor" was probably behind the blasts. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [UK Ministry of Defence] [defense-aerospace] [Politico]

(ab/pk)

UK and EU strengthen cooperation to tackle migration across English Channel

The United Kingdom and European Union (EU) have agreed to strengthen cooperation to curb illegal immigration across the English Channel. The agreement was announced on May 16 after discussions between British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and President Ursula von der Leyen of the European Commission. [Euronews] [Reuters]

Sunak has been under pressure from fellow Conservative government members to tackle immigration, which hit a record high in 2022. The UK will work alongside Frontex, the EU's border agency, in line with Sunak's goal to "stop the boats" with over 45,000 migrants estimated to have crossed the Channel from France to the UK in 2022. [Politico] [Sky News]

Despite new cooperation, the UK and EU clashed over migration policies earlier in 2023 as Sunak's Illegal Migration Bill seeks to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda. For Ylva Johansson, the European Home Affairs Commissioner, "this is violating international law."

Sunak's bill may also be incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights – which the UK must abide by despite its departure from the EU – as it intends to prevent illegal immigrants from claiming

asylum once they arrive. [European Council on Refugees and Exiles] [Sky News] [Sky News]

(ew/gc)

Israeli foreign minister visits Sweden in bid to warm ties

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen visited Sweden on May 15, aiming to mend strained ties between the two nations.

Cohen's trip, during which he held talks with his Swedish counterpart, Tobias Billstrom, was the first by an Israeli foreign minister to Sweden in 22 years. [The Local] [AP/ABC News] [MSN]

Relations between Sweden and Israel deteriorated after Stockholm recognized a Palestinian state in 2014. [The Washington Post]

Billstrom on his Twitter account described his meeting with Cohen as "very good and productive". [Times of Israel]

Cohen, in a statement issued by the Israeli foreign ministry, said: "We are opening a new page in relations between Israel and Sweden after years in which Sweden took a critical line against Israel."

(mr/pk)

Montenegro sign USD 22 million agreement with Israel for Elbit-made weapons systems

Israel and Montenegro have signed a defence agreement worth USD 22 million, which includes the acquisition of weapons and training equipment manufactured by Elbit Systems on May 15. The deal involves Elbit Systems supplying 120 mm mortar munition systems that can be mounted on 4x4 armoured vehicles, as well as training for Montenegrin soldiers and officers at the Elbit-IMI Academy in Israel. [JNS]

The agreement was approved by the director general of the Israeli Defense Minister Eyal Zamir. The signing ceremony took place at the Kirya military headquarters in Tel Aviv, with Yair Kulas, the director of the International Defense Cooperation Directorate of the

Israeli Ministry of Defense, and Vladan Martic, the director of logistics in the Montenegro Ministry of Defense, signing on behalf of their respective countries. [JNS]

Kulas expressed confidence in the Israeli defence industry and emphasised the strong partnership between Israel and Montenegro. He noted that Montenegro, like other European countries, faces complex security challenges, and Israeli defence industries can provide them with high-standard technological solutions.

Yehuda Vered, the general manager of Elbit Systems' Land Division, expressed pride in the partnership between Israel and Montenegro. He stated that Elbit's solutions are well-suited to address the growing defence needs of Europe, and the company is committed to providing top-quality products and professional services to its partners and customers.

This defence agreement is the third between Israel and Montenegro since their defence relations were strengthened in 2019. In a previous contract announced in December 2019, Elbit Systems won a USD 35 million deal to supply Remote Controlled Weapon Stations for integration into the Joint Light Tactical Vehicles operated by the Montenegrin armed forces. [MEMO]

(at/gc)

Swiss ambassador to Iran summoned after Tweet condemning executions

Swiss ambassador to Iran, Nadine Olivieri Lozano, was summoned to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 21 after the Foreign Ministry condemned on Twitter executions in the Islamic republic.

The Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted on Twitter on May 19 that the country “strongly” condemned the executions of three men in connection to the Mahsa Amini protests in Tehran. Switzerland also urged Iran to stop executions and “reduce the use of the death penalty.” [Twitter]

Iran’s Foreign Affairs Minister accused Switzerland of adopting an interventionist policy. [RTS]

(sw/gc)

German, US ministers discuss Russian sanctions evasion

German Finance Minister Christian Lindner and United States Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen met on May 12 during the G7 finance official summit in Japan, where they discussed measures to prevent the evasions of Western sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions imposed "systematically degraded Russia's military-industrial complex and helped reduce the revenues that Russia can use to fund its war," Yellen said. It's important to align efforts to counter sanctions evasion, she added. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Croatia signs anti-cybercrime agreement with US

Croatia has signed a memorandum with the United States on combating cybercrime that pledges to ensure better cooperation and exchange of information.

The justice ministry in Zagreb announced the news on May 22, with the agreement signed at an international conference in the central-western Croatian city of Sibenik. [Hina] [N1]

Ivan Malenica, the Croatian justice minister, said: "Transnational cybercrime is among the biggest challenges of today. Technology is rapidly changing the structure of crime. States need to keep up with those changes."

The American representative at the signing was Amy Davidson, the acting charge d'affaires at the US embassy in Zagreb. She said that the memorandum highlighted America's commitment to cooperate with its allies to enhance cyber security and effectively combat cybercrime. [Hina] [N1]

(iy/pk)

US aircraft carrier arrives in Norway for NATO exercises

The world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, arrived in Oslo on May 24 to take part in NATO exercises amid heightened tensions between the

military alliance and Russia over the war in Ukraine. [Scripps News] [Washington Times]

The nuclear-powered American vessel will reportedly take part in drills in the Arctic with the Norwegian armed forces, in a signal of US commitment to collective defence and deterrence. [US News]

The Russian embassy in Oslo said that "such demonstrations of power look illogical and harmful."

Norway is a US ally and a founding member of NATO.

(mr/pk)

US's CIA created Telegram channel to increase Russian recruits

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has created a Russian-language Telegram in an attempt to increase the number of Russian recruits, specifically targeting the Russian military, secret services, foreign service, science and technology and other key sectors.

In the first post on the channel, the CIA explained its main goal to instruct potential spies and how they can get in touch with the agency securely. It also posted a recruitment video. "I'm going to live a genuine life," says the voiceover of the video. "I will persevere. My family will persevere. We will live worthy lives, thanks to my actions." [Meduza]

"We all know very well that the CIA and other foreign intelligence agencies have been relentlessly active in our country," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said when asked about the recruitment drive. [The Washington Post]

Foreign Ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova said the CIA's new Telegram channel is a "very convenient resource for tracking those who want to get in touch." [Meduza]

(ava/gc)

Sweden: Saab launches production line for Gripen fighter jets in Brazil

Swedish aerospace company Saab AB launched a joint production line with Brazilian company Embraer for the Gripen-class fighter jet on May 9.

The bilateral technology transfer deal will see 15 Gripen aircraft produced at the Gaviao Peixoto Embraer plant in Sao Paulo state for the Brazilian air force. [Reuters] This will be Saab's first international production facility, marking an increase in already close ties between Swedish and Brazilian aerospace.

Embraer, meanwhile, wants the Swedish air force to purchase a number of Embraer C-390 transport aircraft. [ADN]

The C-390 is already on order for NATO countries such as Portugal and the Netherlands, and Embraer may seek to persuade Stockholm to strengthen its air capabilities further as Sweden bids to become a NATO member.

(hj/pk)

China's 14+1 framework has 'neither substance nor future', Czech foreign minister says

The Czech Republic is considering ending its engagement with the China-led "14+1" investment platform for Central and Eastern Europe, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky said on May 2 during a visit to Washington.

In talks that were part of the US-Czech Strategic Dialogue format, Lipavsky met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss issues including support for Ukraine, financial sanctions on Russia, and tensions between China and Taiwan. [State.gov]

Lipavsky told Politico: "I assured Secretary Blinken that we are ready to work with them within the European framework. The 14+1 has neither substance nor future."

When asked if Prague would quit the decade-old 14+1 forum, Lipavsky said Prague was not an "active member." He declined to disclose further information until official decisions have been made. [Politico]

Launched in 2012, the investment mechanism aimed to secure Beijing's political and economic influence on the European Union. It promised trade opportunities and Chinese investment in major infrastructure such as roads and rail networks to boost the economies of post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe. [Bloomberg] [Aljazeera]

However, interest in the initiative has cooled since a series of failed Chinese investments.

Shift in stance

Lipavsky's remarks underline a shift in Prague's stance towards Beijing since Petr Pavel, a former NATO general, became Czech president in March. Unlike his predecessor Milos Zeman, who favoured a pro-China foreign policy, Pavel has advocated for collaboration between the US, Europe and other democracies to counteract China's rising power. [Euractiv]

Lipavsky said that dependence on Beijing created risks in cyber security, artificial intelligence and renewable energy sources, though Prague still relies on China to supply solar panels. [Radio Prague]

"China is following the development of the Russian war against Ukraine very closely. And it will have an impact on other international relations," he added. [Radio Prague]

In a joint statement, Washington and Prague said they affirmed their commitment to "deepen support and cooperation with democratic partners", including Taiwan, to ensure "a free and open Indo-Pacific that is more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient". [State.gov]

(yl/pk)

Czech president urges unity among democracies to offset China's influence

The EU and democratic nations need to present a united front and have realistic plans to counter China's influence, as even the largest European countries cannot stand on par with Beijing by themselves, the Czech president has said.

Petr Pavel, a retired NATO general, told Reuters in an interview published on May 12: "If we are to be balanced in relation to China, we need to operate in a united way if possible, not only within the EU or Europe but with all democratic countries of the world."

He added that China's record after Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed it was not a constructive player. Beijing has refused to call on Moscow to withdraw its forces from Ukraine.

Different values

“We see that its [Beijing’s] strategic aims really are not compatible with ours, that values on which Chinese society is built are not and will not be our values,” said Pavel.

China has proposed a peace plan to be brokered by Beijing between the warring parties in the Ukraine war. But Pavel told The Guardian he was doubtful that China could be a trustworthy mediator because it had no “real interest” in pushing Russia to make concessions to Ukraine.

Unlike America’s stringent trade approach towards China, the EU has embraced a “de-risking” policy to preserve stable relations with Beijing while reducing the bloc’s dependence on the country for rare earth elements and critical technologies. [FT] [DW]

While leaders of EU countries like Germany and France have visited China in recent months to promote bilateral relations, Pavel told Reuters that Beijing was eyeing “any chance to split the European countries or split Europe from the United States”. He added that Beijing would only see a united EU as an equal partner. [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

Dutch municipalities break ties with China

In the past two years, at least eight municipalities and two provinces have broken formal ties with Chinese counterparts, NRC reported on May 7, after surveying the administrative bodies involved. [NRC][NLTimes]

Dutch municipalities have pointed to the oppression of the Uyghur people – who the Chinese government has persecuted and imprisoned in labour camps – as the reason for the separation. Other municipalities claim they broke ties because they got little economic benefits from the relationships, with others “rethinking” their relations, with many saying they want to focus more on friendships with European cities. [NLTimes][NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

EU, India agree to cooperate on trade and technology

The EU and India agreed to strengthen strategic engagement on trade and technology at the first ministerial meeting of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council in Brussels on May 16.

Both sides agreed to cooperate on AI research as well as to coordinate their policies on the semiconductor industry. Other topics discussed were planned cooperation in green energy technologies and efforts to develop resilient value chains. [EU Commission]

The Trade and Technology Council was set up by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a visit by the EU chief to New Delhi in April 2022 (see AiR No. 17, April/2022, 4).

(aml/pk)

Germany accuses China of carrying out illegal police activities in the country

China is still carrying out police activities in Germany, despite a reassurance to stop such activities in February, according to the German Foreign and Interior ministries. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Illegal extraterritorial Chinese police stations in 30 countries, including Germany, were initially reported in October 2022. The German government told Beijing to shut down all policing activity in Germany in November. [Europe Monthly November 2022] [Reuters]

There could still be two “overseas police stations” in Germany, Press Spokesperson for the interior minister, Maximilian Kall, said. [Reuters]

These stations are "not fixed-location offices, but mobile facilities," Kall said, adding that Chinese and non-Chinese nationals are carrying out "official duties" on behalf of Beijing. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

German authorities suspect that the stations are used to control and intimidate Chinese people living in Germany. [Bloomberg]

(mb/gc)

Ukraine receives China envoy to discuss peace

A Chinese envoy met with Ukrainian officials on May 16 and 17 to discuss options for peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow. [Reuters] [Bloomberg] [AP]

Chinese ambassador for Eurasian Affairs and former ambassador to Russia Li Hui MET with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy and the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, amongst other officials.

China wants all parties to work towards peace and "will continue to provide assistance to Ukraine within its capacity," said a statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. [Reuters]

Kyiv is willing to accept a "just peace based on respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," said Dmytro Kuleba. But the Ukrainian government would not accept a peace proposal that involved the loss of territories or the "freezing of the conflict," he added. [AP]

Li will also visit other countries like Poland, France, Germany and Russia during his trip. [Reuters]

(mb/gc)

Hungarian FM praises China's peace plan in talks with top diplomats

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said during a visit to Beijing on May 15 that Budapest and Beijing will "work closely together to achieve a ceasefire in Ukraine (...) and to establish peace talks". [Telex]

Szijjarto praised a peace plan that China unveiled earlier this year and said that Beijing had "a key role to play in amplifying the voice of the peace camp" following talks with his Chinese counterpart Qin Gang. [Telex]

He added that Hungary opposes Europe's "decoupling and disconnection" from China. [Global Times] [CGTN]

On the same day, China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, met with Szijjarto and hailed Budapest's "China-friendly" policy. [South China Morning Post]

Wang called on Europe to avoid "bloc confrontations" and a "Cold War mentality". [South China Morning Post]

Szijjarto attended the third China–Central and Eastern European Countries Expo held in Ningbo, eastern

China, between May 16 and 20. [Global Times]

“If the EU perceives China as a rival, it will lose out,” said Szijjarto at the opening of the exhibition after pointing out that China’s GDP now exceeds that of Europe. [Hungary Today]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been criticised by Budapest’s European Union and NATO allies for his friendly ties with Moscow amid Russia’s war on Ukraine. [NewEasternEurope]

(msa/pk)

Polish foreign minister, Japanese PM voice support for Ukraine

Poland’s foreign minister and Japan’s premier have declared that Warsaw and Tokyo will work to help stop Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and “help maintain a rules-based international order.”

Poland’s Zbigniew Rau met Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo on May 11, discussing efforts to develop bilateral relations, cooperation in trade and investment, and the war in Ukraine.

The talks between the two men are “another sign of the growing importance of Polish-Japanese relations,” Polish foreign ministry spokesman Łukasz Jasina said on Twitter.

Warsaw has been one of Kyiv’s staunchest supporters internationally, donating modern Leopard 2 tanks and Soviet-era MiG-29 warplanes to help Ukraine fend off Russia’s invasion. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Rau and Kishida also discussed security in East Asia, officials said. [wnp/PAP] [Polish Radio] [wPolityce]

(pk)

Russian Prime Minister held talks with Xi during Business Forum

Russia’s Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin hailed economic ties with China on May 23 during a visit in which he met President Xi Jinping.

Mishustin attended a Russian-Chinese Business Forum with Russian tycoons, who have been sanctioned by

Western nations, from fertiliser, steel to mining sectors. [The Moscow Times]

The Forum included a plenary session with the participation of the heads of the Russian and Chinese delegations and five roundtable discussions on bilateral cooperation priorities, such as transportation, agriculture, industry, energy and digitalization. [Government]

“Last year Russia was subjected to sanctions pressure on an unprecedented scale…We withstood and also continued progressive development,”Mishustin said at the event. “I am convinced that deepening Russian-Chinese ties and increasing cooperation will have a positive effect on the economies of both countries.” [The Moscow Times]

Mishustin's visit to China is part of increasing collaboration between the two countries, bolstered in March 20 when President Vladimir Putin met with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Kremlin. [Tass]

Meeting with Xi Jinping

Mishustin met President Xi on May 24. During their meeting, the parties discussed a series of deals on infrastructure and the economy.

“I hold a positive view of this development path. This will enable us to keep adding new substance to our strategic partnership and comprehensive cooperation,” said the Chinese President during the meeting. [Government]

While Western nations have hoped the relations between China and Russia would have pressured the latter to end the invasion of Ukraine, the parties seem to focus mainly on the discussion of further economic cooperation.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning described the ties between the two countries as being “normal economic and trade cooperation… on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.” [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Sweden urges EU, Philippines to resume free trade talks

Sweden’s minister for foreign trade, Johan Forssell, has urged the Philippines and the European Union to

resume talks on a bilateral free trade agreement.

Forssell issued the call during a two-day visit to the Philippines on May 18 and 19. He said the Philippines' economic growth, demographics, and its transition to clean energy make it an attractive destination for Swedish investors.

Exploratory talks on a bilateral free trade deal were launched a decade ago, with two rounds of negotiations held in Brussels in 2016 and in the Philippine city of Cebu in 2017. Since then, negotiations have ground to a halt. [The Manila Times] [Philippines News Agency] [AiR,No.21, May/2023, 4]

(aml/pk)

Russia evacuates diplomats and civilians from Sudan

Russia has evacuated more than 200 people, including diplomats and civilians, from Sudan during the conflict between the Sudanese Army and the Parliamentary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) for control of the country.

The Ministry of Defence organised the evacuation and used two Il-76 aircraft to take people out of Sudan's capital Khartoum. [The Moscow Times] [Tvzvezda]

Since the escalation of tensions between the warring sides in Sudan, many have raised concerns about the presence of Russia's mercenary Wagner Group in the country. It allegedly has ties with the RSF's commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.

The head of the Peace and Conflict Research Department at Uppsala University in Sweden, Ashok Swain, said: "The US has recently pressured Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council to remove this mercenary group from the country. Thus, the Wagner Group has a considerable interest in who wins the ongoing battle for power in the country." [Al-Jazeera]

Although there is no direct evidence of Wagner's involvement in the conflict, a leaked US intelligence document shows that the mercenary group has provided equipment and training to the RSF as well as advised government leaders and conducted information operations. [The Washington Post]

(ava/gc)

Switzerland donates USD 2.8 million to support emergency food initiatives in DRC

The Swiss government donated USD 2.8 million to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), intended for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

The money will go towards supporting emergency nutrition and food security. Last year, the country donated USD 22 million to the WFP, also intended for the DRC.

Civil war and poor agricultural output has led to massive food insecurity in the DRC. The WFP will need USD 285 million over the next six months to ensure food security for the entire population. [MirageNews]

(sw/gc)

Team:

Aiyana Vittoria Amplatz (ava), Anna Berk (ab), Antonia Lawrenz (aml), Assaf Yona Olshansky Gefen (ag), Aydan Talibli (at), Efe Ozkan (eo), Emily Whitchurch (ew), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Ethan Flanagan (ef), Giulia Taraborrelli (gt), Glen Carey (gc), Harry Johnson (hj), Henning Glaser (hg), Isaac Yielder (iy), Jemina Nuredini (jn), Katherine Mansfield (km), Konstantinos Giavasis (kg), Lara Cin (lc), Maria Rusu (mr), Maria Simon Arboleas (msa), Marlene Busch (mb), Paolo Salvatori (ps), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rex Wempen (rw), Rohini Singh (rs), Sophie Millington (sm), Stephanie Wild (sw), Toby Shay (ts), Venus Phuangkom, Warren O'Broin (wb), Wiktoria Drazewska (wd), Yi-Ting Lo (yl)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe