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. 7, July/2023

Brought to you by CPG

Supported by KAS

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN
WESTFÄLISCHE WILHELMS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNSTER
Asian Governance Foundation – AGF –
Auswärtiges Amt
DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange Service

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.

Russia's Wagner Group turned on the Kremlin in late June, launching a rebellion that caught observers by surprise and left President Vladimir Putin looking weak. Over the course of just two days, the mercenaries captured a major Russian city, destroyed several Russian military aircraft, and were well on their way to Moscow, only for the mutiny to be abruptly halted before any large-scale bloodshed broke out.

Meanwhile, after months of training, stockpiling equipment and planning, Kyiv has finally launched its long-expected counter-offensive against Russian positions in the south of the country. While this is a significant and costly escalation in the fighting, experts

believe it's only the beginning of what is certain to be a long, hard slog.

In Western Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron has been challenged by a new eruption of unrest. Police have once again been battling rioters in the streets across the country, this time after the shooting of a youth of North African descent. The turmoil follows months of strikes and protests over pension reform.

In the south-east of the continent, Turkey seems to be charting a new economic course as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan tries to slow inflation of almost 40 percent and support the Turkish lira after winning elections in May.

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

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

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

Wagner Group mutiny against Moscow leaves Putin looking weak

Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries turned on their masters in the Kremlin in late June, launching a rebellion that caught observers by surprise and left President Vladimir Putin looking weak.

Over the course of just two days, the Wagner Group captured a major Russian city, destroyed several Russian military aircraft, and seemed well on their way to Moscow, only for the mutiny to be abruptly halted before any large-scale bloodshed broke out.

The dramatic turn of events was the culmination of a long and increasingly bitter conflict between the mercenaries and Russia's military commanders.

The Wagner Group first appeared during Russia's initial incursion into Ukraine in 2014 and has been active in the country's east since that time. The group has also put down roots in the Central African Republic, where it has furthered Russia's foreign policy in the region by shoring up the country's weak, autocratic government, committing atrocities and enriching itself in the process.

Wagner plays a similar role in Syria, where it has helped the Assad government fight rebel coalitions, and in Libya. Wagner contractors are usually veterans of the Russian army, often with links to far-right movements in Russia. Wagner's leadership long remained in the shadows despite the obvious links between the group and the Kremlin. Dmitri Utkin, a neo-Nazi veteran of the Russian Army, was the group's most senior field commander, while its chief director and financier was – and continues to be – Yevgeny Prigozhin, an ex-convict, caterer to the Kremlin, and one-time children's author.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Wagner Group mercenaries joined

the fray. The group's size – and profile – increased dramatically when, from June 2022, it was permitted to recruit from Russian prisons. The group then became a vital force for Russia in Ukraine, despite the Kremlin having always disassociated itself from the use of mercenaries.

With its blend of experienced professional soldiers and large numbers of expendable convict conscripts, the group was at the forefront of grinding out costly advances in Sieverodonetsk, Lysychansk, and Bakhmut. Since Ukraine repelled Russia's assault on Kyiv in late March 2022, the Wagner Group has played a leading role wherever the Kremlin has managed to further advance into Ukrainian territory. [Atlantic] [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [CBS News] [Centre for Strategic and International Studies] [Council on Foreign Relations] [Economist] [Foreign Policy] [Guardian] [Reuters] [TIME] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

By the time Russia finally captured what was left of Bakhmut in late May 2023, the Wagner Group was Russia's most capable ground fighting force in Ukraine. Though it had largely exhausted its pool of convict soldiers, the mercenaries held entire sections of the front, flew sorties using jets supplied by the Russian air force, and even operated Russia's most modern tanks, the T-90 series.

Corroded relations

However, the conduct of the Battle of Bakhmut corroded the group's relationship with the Russian military establishment. As the group's role in Ukraine expanded, its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, stepped out of the shadows and became an increasingly outspoken and ostentatious critic of Russia's war effort, despite reputedly being a close friend of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Prigozhin's ire reached new levels in early May when, as *Europe in Review* reported, he posted a video of his dead mercenaries and directly accused Sergei Shoigu, Russia's minister of defence, and Valery Gerasimov, the chief of staff of Russia's armed forces, of withholding supplies from Wagner. Prigozhin announced the group's intention to leave Bakhmut, which they did upon the city's capture. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Economist] [Europe Monthly June 2023] [Euronews] [Foreign Policy Research Institute] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

On 10 June, while the Wagner Group was reorganising behind the lines in occupied Luhansk, the Russian ministry of defence issued an order to the various

mercenary groups fighting for Russia in Ukraine that directed their fighters to sign contracts and formally enter the Russian military's command structure.

In response, Prigozhin bluntly stated that Wagner would not be signing up with the ministry of defence and reiterated his complaints. Experts believe that Prigozhin, through his public statements, had been jockeying with Shoigu and Gerasimov for Putin's favour, but on June 13 Putin publicly backed the ministry of defence's order.

In doing so, Putin sided with Gerasimov and Shoigu over Prigozhin. The sequence of events that led Prigozhin and the Wagner group from verbal to physical opposition to the Kremlin is contested, with evidence coming largely from US intelligence agencies and Russian opposition media.

These sources claim that Prigozhin was planning to lead Wagner into open rebellion after learning of the ministry of defence's intentions in early June, and that senior figures in Russia's government were aware of the plans but did not act due to a belief that Prigozhin was bluffing. Sources also claim that Prigozhin intended to detain Gerasimov and Shoigu before the pair found out about the plot. The details of the mutiny's inception are, however, shrouded in mystery and we are unlikely to find out what really happened any time soon. [BBC News] [CNN] [Economist] [Guardian] [Le Monde] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

What we can say for certain is that on June 23 a video circulated among Wagner-affiliated channels on the social media site Telegram which purported to show a strike by the Russian military on a Wagner base in occupied Luhansk. Observers cast doubt on the video's legitimacy, given the lack of destroyed equipment and lack of visible casualties – gory details that Wagner has not shied away from showing in the past.

Prigozhin then took to Telegram to let loose with his fiercest criticism of the ministry of defence to date, accusing its leadership in a video of destroying "many tens of thousands of Russian soldiers" and lying to Putin. Prigozhin announced that his fighters, who he claimed numbered 25,000, were crossing back into Russia to "punish" Russia's military leadership.

Not bluffing

The declaration stunned observers and provoked a strong reaction from the Kremlin, as Russia's Federal Security Bureau announced it was opening a criminal case against Prigozhin for treason. General Sergei

Surovikin, a close ally of Prigozhin, and General Vladimir Alekseyev released videos addressed to Prigozhin asking that the Wagner Group stand down. At the same time, some suspected that Prigozhin was bluffing. He was not. [Associated Press] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [Financial Times] [France24] [Moscow Times] [Newsweek] [New York Times] [NPR] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Telegraph]

In the early hours of June 24, a column including tanks and military vehicles carrying Wagner troops and equipment crossed into Russia from occupied Ukraine. Observers estimate between 4,000 and 10,000 Wagner mercenaries entered and occupied the city of Rostov-on-Don in Russia's south. Remarkably, they appeared to have done so unopposed by any Russian state force or by the residents of the city itself.

Prigozhin set himself up in the headquarters building of Russia's Southern Military District and released a video showing him meeting with and berating Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov and General Alekseyev. The Kremlin's reaction to these events appeared to be one of panic.

Armoured vehicles were hastily deployed in Moscow and Russian air assets scrambled, while makeshift barricades and hastily-dug trenches appeared on the M4 highway connecting Rostov to the capital. These did little to deter a second Wagner convoy, which Prigozhin had split off from his main force at Rostov and which was now barrelling down on Moscow.

Russia's internal troops, the Rosgvardia, were conspicuous by their limited response and lack of heavy equipment, a marked contrast to their imposing strength in pre-war Russia and a possible indication of just how much combat power the Kremlin has invested in its war in Ukraine.

With Wagner's column blowing past barricades erected outside the city of Voronezh, and in the absence of any resistance on the ground, the task of halting the mercenaries appeared to fall to the Russian air force. According to both Wagner and official sources, the column made contact with helicopters on the highway. While Wagner appeared to have lost several vehicles, the Russian air force came off worse in the fight, losing six helicopters and a rare IL-22M airborne command post, together with their crews. Prigozhin denied his troops' actions constituted a military coup and maintained that Wagner's fight was with Russia's ministry of defence.

Special address to nation

Rumours swirled that Putin had left the capital, that Wagner's head office in Moscow was being raided by Russia's security forces, and that the security forces were threatening the families of Wagner mercenaries and leaders. A visibly angry Putin delivered a special address to the nation, condemning Wagner's move as treason and promising a harsh response, invoking the Russian 1917 revolution as a parallel.

Russian society at large did not rally behind Wagner or the government, while the Russian military remained loyal to the Kremlin. Elements of the Rosgvardia and the OMON armed police dug in around Moscow – but provided no credible resistance to Wagner's column as it advanced through the capital's neighbouring oblasts. [Associated Press] [Bellingcat] [CNN] [Drive] [Economist] [France 24] [Guardian] [New York Times] [PBS] [Sky News] [Spectator] [Telegraph]

However, as suddenly as it had begun, the Wagner rebellion was halted around 200 kilometres from Moscow.

With over 100 kilometres to go before the column would run into Rosgvardia's first line of defence on the Oka river's northern bank, an unlikely peacemaker emerged in the form of Aleksandr Lukashenko. The Belarusian president brokered a deal between the Russian state and the Wagner Group. While the exact terms of the agreement and the negotiations involved are not known, it appears that Priogzhin made contact with the Kremlin while his troops headed to Moscow.

Rather than engage directly, reports suggest that Putin instructed Lukashenko to mediate. The deal guaranteed Wagner and Prigozhin safety in exchange for the end of the mutiny. Prigozhin put his acceptance of the terms down to the fact that the rebellion had reached the point where "Russian blood would be shed". Wagner would hand over its heavy equipment while its fighters had the choice of either signing contracts with the Russian ministry of defence and continuing fighting in Ukraine or joining Prigozhin in an unusual form of armed exile in Belarus.

While the deal was met with mixed responses from Wagner troops, it appears a significant number chose to follow Prigozhin to Belarus, with satellite evidence apparently showing the construction of a large military camp for use by the Wagner Group outside the Belarusian town of Asipovichy. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [Economist] [Meduza] [New York Times] [Sky News] [TIME] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

Mutual damage

Observers argue that the mutiny has damaged both Prigozhin and Putin.

Prigozhin appears to have lost his influence in Russia and alienated many of his supporters among Russia's pro-war circles. Though his treason charges have been dropped, he has become persona-non-grata, being derided on state television as a profiteer, with mention of his name being scrubbed from Russian search engines, all while his nemeses Shoigu and Gerasimov remain in their posts.

The mutiny, in particular the lack of any punishment for its plotters or consequences for the death of over a dozen Russian air force pilots, has left the Kremlin looking weak. And with the Wagner Group leaving Ukraine, Russia has lost one of its most experienced and offensively potent units at a time when Ukraine is actively retaking ground.

Meanwhile, Russia's internal security services failed to distinguish themselves, and observers are asking why the Kremlin's response on the ground appeared desperate and ineffectual against Wagner's rapid advance.

Though the Kremlin line is that the mutiny leaves Russia stronger than before, experts say that it has left an indelible dent on the internal stability that they view as critical to Putin's decades-long rule. [Al Jazeera] [Atlantic] [Atlantic Council] [BBC News] [Business Insider] [CBC] [Centre For European Policy Analysis] [Chatham House] [European Council on Foreign Relations] [Financial Times] [Foreign Policy] [Foreign Policy Research Institute] [Institute for the Study of War] [Intercept] [Irish Times] [Meduza] [Moscow Times] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [RFE/RL] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

Ukraine launches southern counter-offensive

After months of training, stockpiling equipment and planning, Ukraine has finally launched its long-expected counteroffensive against Russian positions in the south of the country. While this is a significant – and costly – escalation in the fighting, experts believe it's only the beginning of what is certain to be a long, hard slog.

On or around June 5, Ukrainian forces launched simultaneous attacks against Russian defences in the

occupied southern Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions. The attacks formed a trident as Ukrainian forces concentrated on three main vectors: Lobkove, Orikhiv, and Velyka Novosilka.

The Lobkove axis saw limited advances by Ukrainian forces, while larger groups appeared to be engaged on the Orikhiv and Velyka Novosilka axis. Orikhiv proved to be the most challenging direction, as Ukraine advanced slowly and with high equipment losses and casualties against what appeared to be a highly competent Russian defence.

Velyka Novosilka was the most promising axis for Kyiv, as Ukrainian troops advanced down the Mokri Yaly river, raising the Ukrainian flag over three settlements for the first time in well over a year. The Russian military destroyed a dam on the river, which allegedly prevented a further breakthrough.

Western-made hardware such as the Leopard 2 tank, the Bradley infantry fighting vehicle, and French AMX-10 armoured reconnaissance vehicle has played an important role as Ukraine's first major offensive operation in 2023 gets underway with what the Institute for the Study of War described as "limited but still significant" armoured attacks. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [Drive] [France24] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Institute for the Study of War] [Le Monde] [Reuters] [RFE/RL]

Ukraine's efforts are expected to be frustrated by the considerable fortifications established by Russia in southern Ukraine, and all available evidence points to a competent defence by Russian forces.

High cost

Ukraine's advances have come at a high cost. One high-profile incident saw a column of over a dozen Ukrainian armoured vehicles destroyed or disabled south of Mala Tokmachka, on the Orikhiv axis, having allegedly fallen victim to a combination of mines, Russian helicopters, and artillery strikes.

Such losses are to be expected in a counter-offensive where combat engineering is a key challenge. Ukraine's forces are creeping steadily through extensive minefields, tank traps, and trenches all while enduring withering artillery fire from well-prepared Russian defenders.

Despite these formidable obstacles, Ukraine's Western donations are proving successful once again. The American-donated Bradley infantry fighting vehicle has achieved near cult status among Ukraine's assault

infantry for the high level of protection it offers its crew, a vital attribute for operations in the most heavily mined sectors of the frontline.

In fact, despite making up a significant proportion of initial Ukrainian losses, several Bradleys have been recovered, repaired and returned to service by advancing Ukrainian forces. However, other gear such as the French AMX-10 has come in for criticism for its inferior protection. Ukraine's commander in chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, has argued that Western weapons are crucial to Ukraine's progress, and that the speed of Ukraine's advance will be dictated by their supply.

Initial assessment by experts of the military performance of both sides has been positive. With the exception of the early fighting on the Mokri Yaly, Russian forces have been successfully containing breakthroughs where they appear.

At the same time, the Ukrainians are executing well-disciplined attacks against Russian positions and, while these have been slow, they are making progress and are taking ground. In an indication of how static the frontline has been in recent months, the Ukrainian advances since the beginning of June represent the largest exchange of territory since Russia's retreat from Kherson in November 2022. [ABC] [Bellingcat] [Business Insider] Centre for European Policy Analysis] [CNN] [Drive] [Economist] [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Hill] [Institute for the Study of War] [Insider] [Moscow Times] [New York Times] [PBS] [Royal United Services Institute] [Sky News] [Wavell Room] [Washington Post]

Expert observers argue that June represented the initial phase of Ukraine's counter-offensive and that it may be some time before this reaches its peak.

While Kyiv has tasked significant forces with attacking Russian lines, it is clear that several of the country's assault brigades have not been deployed. Entire classes of equipment, such as British Challenger tanks, Swedish CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, and American Stryker personnel carriers are conspicuous by their absence at the frontline.

It appears that Kyiv has made considerable efforts to hit targets behind Russia's defence lines. Storm Shadow cruise missiles have been deployed against logistical targets such as a railway hub and ammunition store at Rykove, and the Chonhar bridge in Crimea. The HIMARS artillery rocket system has also been spotted at the front, where it has been used to target Russian artillery.

Ukraine has also been steadily reclaiming ground around Bakhmut, though experts believe it is highly unlikely Ukraine will invest significant combat power on reclaiming the ruined city. To the north of Bakhmut, near the cities of Svatove and Kreminna, Russian forces have been launching probing attacks of their own but have failed to take any ground in the heavily forested region.

Taking the new offensive together, experts believe that Ukraine's strategy is to wear down Russian defences before attempting to break through with a larger force. The Institute for the Study of War said that, rather than taking territory, the current Ukrainian attacks may be intended to "gradually attrit Russian forces and set conditions for a future main effort." [Associated Press] [Business Insider] [Evening Standard] [Guardian] [Institute for the Study of War] [Kyiv Post] [New York Times] [Newsweek] [RFE/RL] [Washington Post]

If and when this major movement comes, the cost will be high for both sides and the road to success or failure will be paved with wrecked vehicles, destroyed villages, and lost lives.

High motivation

However, one would be hard pressed to find a Ukrainian who does not think the cost is worth it. There is no shortage of motivation. Russia's leadership continues to harbour dreams of conquering Ukraine as a whole and, through mass passportization and deportation of Ukrainian civilians, continues its efforts to "Russify" the areas it occupies.

One-time Russian President Dmitri Medvedev celebrated Russia's national day on June 12 by posting a crude photoshopped image of Kyiv's Independence Square with a Russian flag flying over it. The prospect of this, not to mention the fresh fury sparked by the Kakhovka dam's destruction, provides ample fuel for Ukrainian resistance.

Writing in POLITICO Europe, Ukrainian author Mariam Naiem described a fear among Ukrainians that the country's Western allies may abandon its cause. While experts believe Kyiv's success to be highly dependent on support from the West, it is clear Ukraine will carry out offensives even if this support is not provided at a sufficient level or is not timely enough – and this sentiment is echoed by Ukraine's political leadership and its military's top commanders.

June again demonstrated Ukraine's will to resist, its ability to absorb catastrophe, and underlined its refusal to normalise Russia's occupation. A common

English-language phrase that appears on patches worn by some Ukrainian soldiers sums this attitude up: “No one is coming – it’s up to us”. [Al Jazeera] [Guardian] [Insider] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Toronto Star] [UA Pravda] [Wall Street Journal]

(wb/pk)

Senior Putin advisor justifies pre-emptive nuclear strike against the ‘enemy’

A senior political advisor close to Russian President Vladimir Putin has justified the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the country’s enemies, a warning that has raised concerns in Western political circles. [CBC]

"The enemy must know that we are ready to deliver a pre-emptive strike ... to prevent a slide into global thermonuclear war," wrote Sergei Karaganov, chair of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a prestigious Russian think-tank, and an adviser to Putin. The only way Russia may be able to break the will of Western countries so they stop helping Ukraine is by launching nuclear weapons at "a bunch of targets in a number of countries." [CBC]

Karaganov lays out his thinking in an article titled "A Difficult but Necessary Decision" in the publication Russia in Global Affairs. Karaganov's thinking appears to be that to prevent a civilization-ending nuclear war, Russia needs to lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons and consider initiating a smaller, containable attack that will split the NATO alliance and ensure Russia emerges victorious against Ukraine.

“It is necessary to arouse the instinct of self-preservation that the West has lost and convince it that its attempts to wear Russia out by arming Ukrainians are counterproductive for the West itself,” he wrote. “We will have to make nuclear deterrence a convincing argument again by lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons set unacceptably high, and by rapidly but prudently moving up the deterrence-escalation ladder.” [GlobalAffairs]

Serious minded

Serious-minded analysts in Moscow took issue with Karaganov’s argument, the Washington-based Brookings Institution said on its website. [Brookings]

“Russian leadership appears to understand that actually using nuclear weapons would not change

attitudes in Ukraine, which already regards this war as existential, and would lead to a harsh Western response," Brookings said. Moreover, such threats do not go down well with audiences that matter to Moscow, including in Beijing and New Delhi. [Brookings]

Asked about the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons as suggested by Karaganov, Putin said: "I reject this. ... First, we see no need to use it [a tactical nuclear strike]; and second, considering this, even as a possibility, factors into lowering the threshold for the use of such weapons." [Brookings]

Some Western experts believe the nuclear threats are being strongly pushed again because Russia has no clear exit strategy from the war."There is an increasing despondency about how the war is going and an increasing need to think of how it might end without a complete catastrophe for Russia," said Patricia Lewis, director of the international security program at Chatham House, a think-tank in London. [CBC]

(gc)

New eruption of unrest challenges Macron

French President Emmanuel Macron has been challenged by another bout of social unrest, with the latest eruption pitting police against rioters after the shooting of a young boy of North African descent, following strikes and protests over controversial pension reform earlier in the year.

The latest unrest was sparked after Nahel, whose last name has officially been withheld by authorities, was shot at close range in a car in Nanterre, his hometown. The officer who fired the gun has been charged with murder and is in pre-trial detention. Laurent-Franck Lienard, a lawyer for the officer, told Europe 1 radio that the policeman believed he needed to shoot. [Bloomberg]

The shooting has highlighted a crisis over racism and inequality in France, where there are tensions in ethnically mixed suburban neighbourhoods. Images of riot police once again battling in the streets further tarnish the country's reputation, potentially adding to the economic toll just as the government faces pressure to speed up debt reduction. [Bloomberg]

Labour unrest and street demonstrations happen regularly in France but have taken on a more intense

and confrontational tone in recent years, reflecting divisions within French society. Before the pension protests and the pandemic, the so-called Yellow Vest movement caused widespread property damage. The French opposition at both ends of the political spectrum has seized on the crisis as evidence that the government is failing to ensure public safety and narrow economic disparity. [Bloomberg]

Thousands of police deployed

French authorities have deployed thousands of police and other forces to quell the unrest. About 45,000 officers were deployed across the country for three nights, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin said. [BBC]

The number of vehicles burned or buildings damaged has dropped each night since peaking on June 29 while the number of nightly arrests has fallen since June 30, government data show. All told, some 3,200 people have been arrested since unrest began a week ago. [Bloomberg]

“The instructions are the same,” Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said. “As soon as there’s something that doesn’t comply with the law or is creating public disorder: firmness, arrest, presentation before a judge.” [Bloomberg]

Protestors have gone after government buildings and mayors of cities. One attack in particular has brought widespread condemnation — the ramming of a burning car into the home of the mayor of L’Hay-les-Roses, a Paris suburb. His wife and two young children escaped the house through a back door.

“Democracy itself is under attack,” the mayor, Vincent Jeanbrun, said after leading a march surrounded by supporters through the town. “Each of its symbols is being targeted today.”

That’s enough!” he shouted, the chant picked up and repeated back by the crowd. The attack prompted an outpouring of support for local governments in many towns where the city hall is often literally central to public life.

The regional prosecutor Stephane Hardouin opened an attempted murder investigation, telling French television that a preliminary investigation suggested the intention to ram the house was to set it ablaze. “First indications suggest the car was driven into the building in order to set fire to it,” Hardouin said, adding that a Coca-Cola bottle filled with flammable liquid had also been found at the scene. [TheGuardian]

Rioters also entered the garden of another mayor, in La Riche, outside the city of Tours, and tried to set light to his car, prosecutors said. Politicians of all parties expressed outrage at the attacks. On July 4, Macron met mayors of 220 towns and cities affected by the protests. The president had been due to fly to Germany for a state visit that was cancelled due to the crisis.[TheGuardian]

Financial Support

French regional authorities have started to announce financial support measures for looted businesses and hospitality venues. In the region of Marseille, business owners will be able to apply for a EUR 10,000 one-off grant, while the Paris region has unblocked EUR 20 million to help restore the public buildings that were damaged and looted. [BBC]

But there are concerns that the spate of violence might have a long-term effect on the tourism sector just as the summer season begins. French media outlet Le Point quoted a tourism official as estimating that up to 25 percent of hotel bookings in Paris had already been cancelled. [BBC]

Francois Rial said that the riots posed "a real risk" to the image of France: "This is true even if the unrest subsides, as many tourists are allergic to risk." [BBC]

A GoFundMe page to support the police officer charged over the killing of Nahel had attracted more than EUR 800,000 in donations. The officer was “doing his job and was now paying a high price for it,” the page read. [TheGuardian]

Pension protests

The government also confronted massive protests against its pension reforms during the early part of the year. On June 6, 281,000 protesters marched across the country, a sharp decline from as many as 1.28 million protestors who took to the streets on March 7. [LeMonde]

On April 15, Macron signed the new pension plan into law. It raised the statutory retirement age from 62 to 64 and seeks to bolster France's troubled long-term social security budget by putting France more in line with its European Union neighbours. [Reuters]

On June 17, between 3,000 and 5,000 people – the former figure reported by the police, the latter by organisers – gathered in the Saint Remy-de-Maurienne village in southeastern France to protest the construction of a new, European Union-backed, high-

speed railway that would connect France and Italy via the Alps.

The roughly 2,000 responding police officers clashed with protestors and used tear gas on the crowd. Twelve police officers were injured, 96 individuals sent back to Italy, and 400 dangerous objects seized, according to French police. [DW][France24]

The proposed railway would span 57.5 kilometres, linking Lyon, France with Turin, Italy at an estimated cost of EUR 26 billion. While the railway is expected to reduce motorway freight traffic, protestors claim that the construction of the railway and necessary tunnel risks devastating ecological damage. [France24]

(gc-ava-sw/rw)

EU moves to radically reform migration rules

European Union interior ministers have agreed to a radical reform of the bloc's migration policy under which countries that refuse to take a share of reallocated migrants would be charged EUR 20,000 per refugee who is not allowed in.

After 12 hours of negotiations, the ministers agreed by qualified majority to measures they called "historic", following a last-minute compromise allowing individual EU members to decide which "safe" countries migrants who are not eligible for asylum can be transferred to.

The agreement, which still needs to be approved by the European Parliament, includes new rules for redistributing migrants across the bloc, with quotas on how many people frontline states will have to process before asking for help from other EU members. [The Guardian]

Some nations are reluctant to provide the kind of help proposed. The prospect of being charged for every reallocated migrant they refuse to let in has caused anger in Poland and Hungary, which both have nationalist governments and did not vote in favour of the agreement. In a largely symbolic move to protest against the reform, Warsaw and Budapest vetoed a joint statement from a European Council summit on June 30.

Warsaw wants referendum

Warsaw labelled the planned EUR 20,000 charges "fines", and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who leads Poland's

ruling Law and Justice party, told members of his country's parliament that the EU agreement should be put to a national referendum. [Reuters]

A member of the Polish government suggested that the referendum could be held at the same time as Poland's parliamentary elections in the autumn. [Reuters]

According to Frontex, the EU's border agency, around 330,000 "irregular" crossings were detected at the bloc's external frontiers last year, the highest figure since a migrant crisis buffeted the continent in 2016.

Frontex said there were over 80,000 illegal crossings in the first four months of this year, which is also the highest number since 2016. Meanwhile, crossings in the central Mediterranean over the same four-month period rose to the highest level since the border agency began recording such data in 2009.

Under the deal agreed by interior ministers, EU nations that want to transfer migrants not eligible for asylum will have to show a "connection" between such migrants and the countries they would be sent to, such as the presence of family members or a long work history. But, ultimately, defining this link falls to each individual EU member state.

At its weakest interpretation, this "connection" could be that a migrant has stayed in a given country, which would allow EU members to transfer migrants to areas they travelled through on their way to Europe, such as Tunisia. Refugees have been undertaking the perilous journey to Europe from the Tunisian coastline in record numbers.

In a visit to the North African country on June 11, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced the EU was exploring a deal with Tunis. The bloc said it would provide EUR 100 million to Tunisia this year for border management, search-and-rescue, anti-smuggling and return operations. [Al Jazeera] [Euronews] *(See separate story in this issue)*

Migrant boat disaster

These migration deals come amid one of the worst migrant boat disasters in the Mediterranean in recent years – the capsizing of an overcrowded fish trawler off the coast of Greece on June 14. The official death toll is over 80, but the United Nations says at least 500 people may have drowned. [BBC]

The boat is thought by the UN to have left from Egypt and picked up between 400 and 750 passengers in Libya before journeying into the Mediterranean.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the role of Athens has come under scrutiny. The EU's border agency said that after initially detecting the vessel, it offered to provide assistance to the Greek coastguard, but that the latter never replied. [Politico]

The Greek coastguard claimed the boat was on a course to Italy and that those on board did not want help, yet data obtained by the BBC suggests the ship was not moving for at least seven hours before it capsized.

Last year, more than 2,000 people in total perished while attempting dangerous crossings to Europe.

(qv/pk)

European Parliament passes law to guard against threat of AI

The European Parliament has approved new rules on artificial intelligence (AI) in an attempt to protect citizens from mass surveillance and dangerous applications of the emerging technology.

The proposed law, known as the EU AI Act, is broad in scope, encompassing generative AI technology like chatbots but also covering automated medical diagnoses and "social scoring", or the creation of risk profiles of individuals based on surveillance of their behaviour.

The regulations include a ban on emotional recognition software in law enforcement, border control, schools and the workplace. [Euractiv]

'Setting the global standard'

The law would be one of the first in the world to address the dangers posed by artificial intelligence systems. European Parliament President Roberta Metsola said the rules "will no doubt be setting the global standard for years to come". [The Guardian]

The legislation places the EU ahead of the United States in managing AI, positioning the bloc as the leader in the West on addressing this issue, The Guardian and The Washington Post reported. China unveiled its own legislation in April.

However, the rules would not come into force until 2026 at the earliest, even if the European Union adopts the law by the end of the year – an ambitious target set by the Spanish presidency of the EU Council of Ministers. [Euractiv]

The details will now need to be negotiated by EU member countries, some of which are expected to push back against the proposals. Police forces across the bloc argue that facial recognition technology would help combat crime and terrorism, or identify missing children. [FP]

Such a law, in its current form, would have prevented the French government from allowing the use of live mass facial recognition at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, argued one of the co-rapporteurs on the legislation, Romanian MEP Dragos Tudorache, who sits on the EU's AI committee.

The new rules also address generative AI companies, requiring developers of this technology to submit their systems for review before commercial release, and mandating that they label all forms of AI-generated content. [CNBC]

Warning from ChatGPT boss

Additionally, the regulations tackle copyright infringement issues, requiring generative AI services like chatbot ChatGPT to disclose all material used to train artificial intelligence systems, and prove that all aspects of such training complied with the law. [WaPo] [CNBC]

If they do not follow the rules, AI companies could be fined up to 7 percent of their annual revenue – which could amount to hundreds of millions of euros – or even be forced to delete their applications entirely.

Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, which operates ChatGPT, has argued that such requirements could make it impossible for generative artificial intelligence firms to continue in the EU.

After warning that his company may leave the region because of the proposed legislation, Altman made an about-turn, tweeting: "We are excited to continue to operate [in the EU] and of course have no plans to leave." [BBC] [The Guardian]

(qv/pk)

Turkish government implements monetary policy U-turn

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has shifted his attention to slowing inflation of almost 40 percent and to supporting the Turkish lira after winning elections in May, with the country's central bank raising interest rate raise as the "first step" of a monetary tightening policy.

The decision to increase the benchmark rate to 15 percent from 8.5 percent was meant to "establish the disinflation course as soon as possible," the Turkish Central Bank said in a summary, published in its June 22 Monetary Policy Committee meeting. It was the bank's first hike in more than two years and signalled a shift from Turkey's strategy of boosting economic growth through ultra-low interest rates, which investors blamed for triggering a surge in inflation. [Reuters][Bloomberg]

The central bank said on July 3 that it will continue its monetary policy U-turn, until the inflation outlook improves significantly. The hawkish policy guidance came as data showed the central bank's net foreign reserves recorded their biggest weekly leap on record as the bank eased off interventions in the currency market to stabilise the lira. [Reuters]

"The monetary tightening process is expected to continue until a significant improvement is achieved in the inflation outlook," the central bank said in minutes of its June monetary policy committee meeting. The bank said the U-turn after a two-year easing cycle was the first step of a process to curb inflation. Annual inflation was near 40 percent in May after touching a 24-year high above 85 percent in October last year. [Reuters]

Erdogan signals

Erdogan, who has extended his rule into a third decade with his election victory, has signalled a return to more orthodox economic policies with the appointment of Mehmet Simsek as Finance Minister and Hafize Gaye Erkan as the new governor of the Turkish Central Bank. Simsek served as Finance Minister between 2009 and 2015 and is highly regarded by investors. [Reuters]

Erkan, previously a financial executive at Goldman Sachs and co-CEO of First Republic Bank, is the Central Bank's first female chief alongside the fifth appointee in the last 4 years. Erkan raised the interest rates soon after taking over as governor. [Reuters][Bloomberg]

The interest rate move underwhelmed traders, who were mostly expecting a bigger raise, Bloomberg reported. Turkey still has one of the world's lowest real rates and the lira has dropped almost 10 percent against the dollar since the decision, extending its loss this year to 28 percent. Turkish state-run commercial banks sold as much as $1 billion to prop up the currency, according to traders. [Reuters][Bloomberg]

"Transparency, consistency, predictability and compliance with international norms will be our basic principles in achieving this goal," Simsek said after being appointed. Simsek has argued that macro-financial stability, rationality, fiscal discipline and price stability have restored some confidence in the Turkish markets. [NTV] [Bloomberg][Reuters]

The central bank reported that its net reserves dropped to a negative $5.7 billion in the first week of June. Leading up to the elections in May, the Central Bank reported a 15.5 percent decrease in its foreign currency reserves compared to the previous month. [Reuters] [TCMB]

Erdogan said Gulf states have provided funds to Turkey to provide relief to the central bank and markets. Gulf states provided an estimated USD 3 billion to USD 3.1 billion to the Turkish Central Bank, according to bankers contacted by Reuters. [Reuters]

Substantial revisions

The newly-elected government also announced a revision to the national minimum wage. Beginning on July 1, Erdogan said Turkey would raise its current minimum wage by 34 percent to TLR 11,402 from TLR 8,506.80. [Reuters]

"The minimum wage assessment commission completed its work with an agreement between the workers and employers," Labour Minister Vedat Isikhan said. [Reuters]

This is the third time the minimum wage has been revised upwards in the last year. Previously, the minimum wage was set at TLR 4,253 in January 2022, an increase of 50 percent from 2021. In the 18 month period between January 2022 and July 2023, the minimum wage has increased a total of 268 percent. [PwC]

(ef-gc/rw)

Germany introduces new national security strategy

Germany's coalition government, led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), presented the nation's National Security Strategy during a press conference on June 14.

The National Security Strategy introduces the concept of "Integrated Security for Germany," emphasising the need to address both external and internal threats comprehensively. The 76-page document outlines three crucial points to guide policy measures. They include a long-contested increase in military spending to meet the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) goal of two percent set after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

They also include enhancing capabilities to counter cyber-attacks, combat disinformation to prevent online radicalisation, reduce economic dependencies on authoritarian forces and defend the principles outlined in the United Nations (UN) Charter and international law; taking into consideration climate change, food security and biodiversity when responding to security threats. [Der Spiegel] [Reuters][Associated Press]

The comprehensive National Security Strategy was initially included in the pact formed by the three-way coalition government between the SPD, the Greens, and the Free Democratic Party when it assumed office in November 2021.

However, the urgency to develop the strategy intensified following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which highlighted Germany's vulnerability to new geopolitical threats, including its reliance on Russia for energy and its insufficient protection of critical infrastructure – as exemplified by recent attacks on the Nord Stream Pipelines.

The strategy is the result of extensive consultations with experts and the general public at the district, state, and national levels. Originally planned to be introduced at the Munich Safety Conference in February, the policy faced delays after due to internal disagreements between parties, ministries, and between the Chancellor's Office and the Foreign Ministry.

An earlier proposal to create a National Security Council, similar to those in the United States and Britain, proved to be contentious. Disagreements over its location and concerns about upsetting the balance of power between ministries, the Foreign Office, and

the Chancellery ultimately led to the abandonment of the proposal. [Reuters] [Der Spiegel]

Ensuring security

Cabinet members and representatives Chancellor Scholz, Finance Minister Christian Lindner, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, Minister of Interior Nancy Faeser and State Secretary Annalena Baerbock attended the press conference announcing the new strategy. [Reuters] [Der Spiegel]

Scholz underscored the strategy's significance in ensuring the safety of the German people, highlighting its relevance not only to military affairs but also to development cooperation, cyber security and the resilience of supply chains. While the policy outlines a general approach, it refrained from delving into specific details, as officials plan to develop them further at a later stage. [Reuters] [Der Spiegel] [Associated Press]

The strategy characterises Ukraine as a "watershed era, a Zeitenwende," stating that "Germany's security environment is undergoing profound change." State Secretary Baerbock of the Green Party emphasised during a news conference in Berlin that Russia's invasion demonstrated "what many of our neighbours in Eastern Europe have warned us about--that Europe is vulnerable." [New York Times]

The document briefly addresses the complex issue of China and indicates that a separate paper specifically focusing on this topic will be published. This timing coincides with the German government's plan to host high-level talks with Chinese officials in Berlin on June 20.

Scholz has referred to a recent declaration by the Group of Seven (G7), which called for a strategy of "de-risking" rather than "decoupling" from China, recognizing that a complete separation could take decades to accomplish. The strategy acknowledges China as "a partner, competitor, and systemic rival," but stresses that "at the same time China remains a partner without whom many of the most pressing global challenges cannot be resolved." [New York Times] [Associated Press]

Criticisms

Reactions to the National Security Strategy have generally been positive among analysts, while noting that more detail regarding budget is required. Finance Minister Christian Lindner acknowledged the need for

new financing but was unable to provide specific cost projections. [New York Times]

Ahead of its release, criticism emerged from some federal states. The State of Hesse's Interior Minister Peter Beuth, who also represents the conservative opposition parties Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union, expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of involvement of states in the strategy's development.

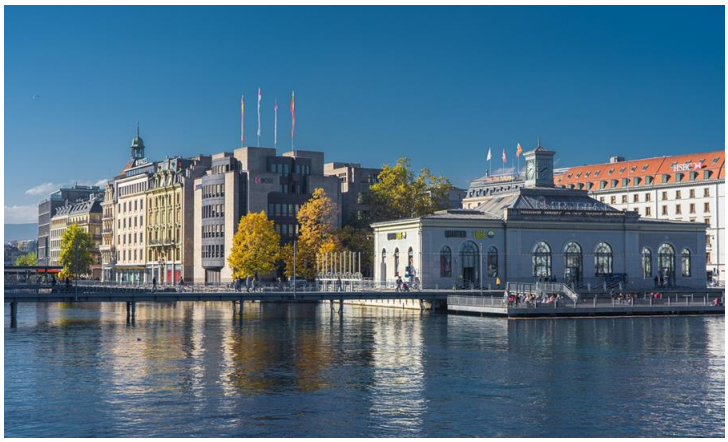
"If the federal government had a serious interest in developing a forward-looking security strategy, it should have involved the states in an appropriate manner via the specialist working groups of the Conference of Interior Ministers," Beuth stated. Despite repeated requests from the Conference of Interior Ministers, which regularly convenes among German states, they were only recently involved. [Der Spiegel]

In addition, members of opposition parties have criticised the strategy for being lacklustre. Friedrich Merz, leader of the CDU, criticised the strategy for being "anaemic in terms of substance, strategically irrelevant, without operational consequences." [Associated Press]

Norbert Röttgen, a CDU legislator and foreign policy expert, described it as the "lowest common denominator" of a divided coalition government, "a description of the undisputed part of the status quo" and "essentially without a strategy." [New York Times]

(if/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe



Belgium: Far-right Flemish separatists lay out vision for independence

The extreme right-wing Flemish secessionist party Vlaams Belang held a party congress in Lier on June 11, where it presented its vision for Flemish independence if elected in the 2024 Belgian elections. Last year, Vlaams Belang leader Tom Van Grieken said that if all goes according to the party's plan, Flemish independence would be effective from 2029. [VRTNews][BrusselsTimes][DeStandaard]

Vlaams Belang is the most popular party in Flanders with 23 percent of the regional vote, 1 percent more than the conservative Flemish separatist N-VA – led by Prime Minister Jan Jambon. Nationally, Vlaams Belang is currently on course to become the second largest party in Belgium. [VRTNews][BrusselsTimes] [DeStandaard]

Both Vlaams Belang and the N-VA advocate for Flemish autonomy. However, the N-VA leader and mayor of Antwerp, Bart De Wever, would also prefer to see Belgium de-federalised, with the regions effectively becoming autonomous independent states united under a confederal system.

This would remove all forms of shared governance. In contrast, Vlaams Belang has made clear its ambition to put a declaration of sovereignty to a vote in the Flemish parliament. If successful, Brussels would become part of Flanders. [VRTNews][BrusselsTimes] [DeStandaard]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Thousands of public sector workers on strike

Thousands of health and social services workers protested against poor working conditions and personnel shortages in the country's major cities on June 13. The protestors were represented by all the major unions – the National Central Employees, Setca, General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions, Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, and the General Union of Public Services. [Crisis24]

The protests led to road closures in the capital of Brussels. With banners and flags, the protestors made their way from Brussels-North railway station to Brussels-South railway station, covering a distance of three kilometres. [AA]

This came a day after Merksplas prison staff held a 24 hour strike in the Antwerp region. The strike was prompted by an inmate setting fire to his cell – sending staff to the hospital – the day before. The prison workers demanded better working conditions, stating that this was only one in a series of similar incidents caused by inmates that should be in psychiatric facilities rather than being placed in Merksplas. [AA 2]

Demands for better working conditions coincide with the federal Debt Agency's annual report, and rumours that the federal government may increase value added tax from six to nine percent. The report revealed that the country's debt ratio increased four points to 105.1 percent in 2022, placing Belgium in sixth place in the eurozone – after France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. [7sur7] [7sur7 2]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Government ends exports of EU-banned pesticides

The Belgian Council of Ministers ended the exports of agricultural pesticides prohibited in the European Union (EU) on June 23.[Belganews]

Federal Environment Minister Zakia Khattabi first presented the bill. [BrusselsTimes]

Prior to the ban, Belgium was exporting these pesticides to non-EU member states. Between 2013 and 2020, the country exported 50,000 tons of pesticides banned from agricultural use in the EU to 70 different countries, according to a study conducted by six domestic NGOs. [FIAN]

The country had been facing domestic pressure to ban this practice for ethical reasons. Opponents to the ban,

however, argued that, given 5,000 Belgians are directly involved in the industry, the ban would result in heavy job loss. [BrusselsTimes 2]

(sw/gc)

France: Iranian opposition rally blocked by Paris police, raising terrorism concerns

Paris police announced on June 19 that a major exiled Iranian opposition group – the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) – would not be granted permission to organise a rally planned for July 1.

The NCIR, calling the decision a "ban," has accused authorities of caving to pressure from Tehran. The organisation has also expressed its intention to challenge the decision in court Authorities have defended the decision by citing concerns that the rally is likely to trigger public disturbances. [France24]

In a letter, police also explained that the decision was motivated by concerns about terrorist threats, citing a 2018 foiled terrorist attack against a major NCIR rally just outside of Paris.

(sw/gc)

France uncovers Russia-led disinformation campaign

French officials announced on June 13 that they had uncovered a major, Russian-led disinformation campaign.

Investigations were conducted by VIGINUM – the country's agency responsible for fighting foreign digital interference – who has been tracking Russian interference in France ever since Moscow's invasion in 2022. [ABC]

VIGINUM linked false news stories to Moscow, identifying Russia's use of a broader, hybrid war strategy in Ukraine. Fake web pages impersonating reputable, national media outlets – targeted daily newspapers include Le Figaro, Le Parisien, Le Monde and 20 Minutes – and fake social media accounts were created to spread the false information.

Investigations also showed that France was only one of several European countries targeted.

The Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna, said that France "condemns these actions as unworthy of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council." The Russian embassy in France did not respond.

This is not the first time France has accused Russia of spreading disinformation, who highlighted Russia's influence in francophone Africa for several years. [France24]

(sw/gc)

France: Syrian refugee arrested after knife attack, four toddlers stabbed

A Syrian refugee was arrested after carrying out a knife attack in a playground in the French town of Annecy on June 8. Four toddlers and two adults were stabbed in the attack. The injured were in critical condition and taken to hospitals in Geneva and Grenoble. British and Dutch nationals were amongst the injured.

French satellite news BFMTV reported that the attacker was a 31-year old Syrian refugee. After living in Sweden for 10 years, he requested asylum in France late last year. The application was ultimately rejected. [CNN]

Just two days after the knife attack, two British children were caught in the middle of a dispute between neighbours in Western France. The eldest, 11-years old, was shot and killed. [CNN 2]

(sw/gc)

France: Nuclear power is non-negotiable

Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said nuclear power is an "absolute red line" and non-negotiable on June 8 while closing the annual French Electricity Union. This follows disagreements between Paris and Berlin regarding the role of nuclear energy in Europe. [Euractiv]

France is reliant on nuclear energy, with 70 percent of the country's energy being supplied by its 56 nuclear reactors. Berlin switched off its last three nuclear reactors in April, taking the stance that nuclear energy is not renewable. [NDTV]

(sw/gc)

Germany's ruling coalition reaches compromise on controversial heating law

Germany's ruling coalition reached a consensus on June 13 on the country's controversial heating law – a key component of its ambitious climate policy – after emergency negotiations were held between key figures from all three coalition parties – the leftist Greens, the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and [x] – ultimately avoiding an imminent government crisis and reaching a compromise deal presented to parliament on June 15. [Politico] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Deutsche Welle]

During discussions, the Greens proposed a more aggressive, expedited approach to phasing out oil and gas heating, while the FDP expressed concerns about the financial burden on consumers. The resulting compromise allows homeowners more time to transition away from gas or oil. Moreover, the new draft includes provisions to extend government subsidies to low-income households purchasing new, environmentally friendly heating systems. [Guardian] [Deutsche Welle] [Associated Press]

Shifting responsibility to municipal governments

Initially, the Greens suggested a complete ban on installing new oil or gas furnaces from 2024, aiming to replace them with greener alternatives like heat pumps, or renewable heating sources – such as wind or solar. In the revised proposals put forth by the FDP, the responsibility shifted from individual households to municipal authorities.

Local and regional governments will now be responsible for expanding district heating plans – typically using geothermal energy – and for assessing the specific needs of households to connect to these heating plans. [Guardian] [Associated Press]

The bill stipulates that buildings in newly developed zones must install heating systems operating on 65 percent renewable energy, minimum. Those building new houses or replacing broken heating systems will still be allowed to install gas heaters if they can be converted to operate on hydrogen – a clause introduced by the FDP. [Guardian] [Politico] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

For all other homes and buildings, the heating law would only apply after municipal authorities present heating plans to the federal government in which they outline strategies for achieving climate-neutral heating infrastructure by 2028.

Heat pumps, which have seen record installations since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are the Green Party's preferred alternative. Critics, however, argue that they are unsuitable for older homes and are expensive to install even with government subsidies. [Guardian] [Politico]

Opposition

Jens Spahn, vice chairman of the coalition's largest opposition – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – denounced the bill as an "imposition" and demanded its withdrawal. [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

Meanwhile, representatives from municipalities and the housing industry suggest the bill needs increased input and deliberations to reach a compromise agreement. [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

Public support for the bill has diminished, according to recent polls. Opponents argue the proposed legislation would impose excessive costs on consumers and prove unfeasible in older buildings. Proponents contend that in the long term, the bill would yield cost savings because the prices of oil and gas are projected to rise in coming decades – due to the implementation of emissions surcharges by the European Union. [Associated Press]

(if/gc)

Germany: Government and Intel strike EU 33 billion deal to establish chip-making plant

The German government and US chipmaker Intel have reached an agreement to invest EUR 33 billion in building two new chip-making plants in Magdeburg – located in the Saxony-Anhalt state. The purpose of this deal is to improve domestic production of semiconductors – used for mobile phones and electric cars. Vice Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck has declared this as Germany's largest foreign direct investment in history. [Tagesschau] [Euronews] [Reuters]

Following several months of negotiations, the agreement was officially signed onJune 19, during a meeting between Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Intel CEO Pat Gelsinger in Berlin. When Intel first announced its plans to produce microchips in Magdeburg in March 2022, it had initially planned to invest EUR 17 billion – expected to create approximately 3,000 jobs. At the time, the federal government had indicated the

possibility of a taxpayer subsidy up to EUR 6.8 billion. [Zeit Online] [Euronews] [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

However, due to rising construction and energy costs, Intel later requested additional funding. Gelsinger explained to the Germany news agency Tagesschau, "clearly, the Ukraine situation, the energy situation, inflation, all these things were variables that when we started the negotiations weren't on the table." Ultimately, the German government agreed to provide approximately EUR 10 billion in state support, leading to Intel increasing its total investments to over EUR 30 billion. [Zeit Online]

According to Intel, the project is now expected to generate around 7,000 construction jobs and 3,000 high-tech jobs – significantly impacting employment across industries.

On June 20, Intel received further concessions from the government, including assurances of low electricity costs for the company. On June 16, the company announced plans to establish an assembly and test facility near Wroclaw, Poland, involving an investment of up to EUR 4.6 billion. Just two days later, news emerged of Intel's intention to invest nearly EUR 22 billion in a plant in Israel. Notably, Intel already operates an existing chip factory in Ireland. [Reuters] [Politico] [Der Spiegel] [Euronews] [Reuters] [Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk]

Europe has actively sought to attract major industrial players through a combination of state subsidies and favourable legislation. One key objective for the European Union (EU) is to reduce its dependence on chip supplies from the United States, South Korea and Taiwan. Germany, in particular, has expressed concerns about losing its appeal as an investment destination, responding by investing billions of euros in subsidies to entice tech companies. This initiative is driven by growing alarm over supply chain fragility and the country's reliance on South Korea and Taiwan for chip production. [Reuters]

The substantial payout made by Germany to one of the world's largest corporations has not gone without criticism. Critics, particularly economic researchers, question the necessity of providing such significant financial aid – suggesting that it may not yield sufficient returns in the long run.

Justus Haucap, an economist at the University of Düsseldorf, expressed his concerns to a television reporter, stating, "that's about 1 million euros per job, and in a situation where we already have a shortage of skilled workers. That means that most of these

workers will probably be poached from elsewhere." [Tagesschau]

Sceptics also assert that the deal does little to address the need to reduce economic dependence on China, as Germany continues to rely on it as its largest trading partner for raw materials. [Zeit Online]

Other critics have questioned the priorities behind the investment, suggesting that it may divert fiscal resources and attention away from more sustainable initiatives. On Twitter, German journalist and author Malte Kreutzfeld highlighted the potential danger of tapping into funds intended for environmental reform, stating, "regardless of how sensible the #Intel subsidies may be, the fact that the three additional billion euros are now to come from the climate and transformation fund is problematic."

(if/gc)

Germany: Parliament to attract skilled migrant workers

Germany's parliament has approved measures aimed at attracting skilled workers to the country in an effort to combat labour shortages across various professional sectors.

The decision on June 23 – supported by 388 votes in favour and 232 against, with 31 abstentions – highlights the government's commitment to reducing immigration barriers and streamlining bureaucratic procedures for workers from outside the European Union. This move is expected to facilitate the process of individuals seeking employment in Germany, even in the absence of a job offer. [Euronews] [BBC]

The recently approved bill introduces a points system resembling Canada's model of immigration, which evaluates eligibility based on professional experience, age, educational level and German language proficiency, amongst other factors. Eligible applicants will be granted an "opportunity card," enabling them to search for jobs within the country for at least 12 months. [Euronews] [Euractiv] [BBC]

The legislation also seeks to relax rules for information technology specialists who lack university degrees but possess other relevant qualifications. Additionally, it allows asylum seekers with professional qualifications who arrived prior to March 29 to become residents without having to leave the country to apply for a residence permit. [Euronews]

Economic analysts have noted that labour shortages pose significant risks to the German economy, estimating the need for approximately 400,000 additional skilled immigrants annually to meet workforce demands. A recent analysis by the national labour agency indicates that out of 1,200 surveyed professions, 200 across the nursing, child care, construction, truck driving, architecture, pharmacy, gastronomy, service, metalwork and IT sectors experienced labour shortages in 2022. [Euronews] [BBC]

(if/gc)

Germany: Local election victory could be milestone for far-right AfD party

In a significant political upset, far-right candidate Robert Sesselmann emerged victorious in a local election held on June 25, securing the top municipal office in Sonneberg –a small county in the southern region of Thuringia.

This marks a significant milestone for the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), as it is the first time a party member has been elected to a leadership position in a county administration. [Tagesschau] [Washington Post] [Guardian]

The initial round of elections, which took place on June 11, saw Sesselmann leading the race with [PERCENT] of the vote. However, since no candidate managed to secure the 50 percent threshold, a runoff became necessary. In the second round, voter turnout in the tiny district of Sonneberg was relatively high, standing at around 60 percent. Despite other parties in the region uniting against the AfD to support incumbent Jürgen Köpper from the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Sesselmann managed to win by a 5.6 percent margin. [Washington Post] [New York Times]

Political analysts perceive this election as a potential bellwether for upcoming elections, particularly in eastern Germany. State parliament elections are scheduled to take place in 2022 in Saxony, Thuringia and in Brandenburg. Early polls suggest that the AfD could make significant gains in these three states. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

The AfD was established in 2013 by a group of Eurosceptics. Its popularity surged following the 2015 migration crisis, during which over one million migrants entered Germany. The party has since

campaigned extensively on anti-immigration sentiments, particularly focusing on what it perceives as the "over-Islamification" of the country. In 2017, the AfD made its entry in the German parliament for the first time. [Guardian] [Reuters] [Washington Post]

Despite mainstream parties largely shunning the AfD due to its radical views, the party has managed to maintain its appeal among voters – particularly in the eastern region, which has seen stunted economic growth after communist rule.

Germany's domestic intelligence agency declared far-right extremism the most significant threat to the country's democracy and cautioned voters against supporting the AfD. The agency has classified approximately 10,000 of the party's 28,500 members as extremists, including the head of the AfD's regional branch in Thuringia, Björn Höcke, who recently faced charges for employing a forbidden Nazi slogan during a campaign speech in 2021. [New York Times] [Washington Post] [Guardian] [Reuters]

Over the past year, national support for the AfD has reached a record high. Recent polls indicate that the party enjoys a 18 to 20 percent majority, doubling its support from a year ago and positioning it as the second-largest opposition party after the CDU. The ruling coalition government, composed of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP), trails behind the AfD in public support. [Guardian] [New York Times] [Washington Post]

Martin Schirdewan, chairman of the Left Party, attributed the AfD's unprecedented rise in support to a "very great dissatisfaction with the policies of the federal government." Since taking office in 2021, the ruling coalition has faced internal conflicts over key policy issues, budgetary matters and major restructuring projects in sectors such as energy and the military.

The government's struggle to implement economic reforms and address high levels of migration – currently at levels not seen since 2015 and 2016 – has further fueled discontent among the electorate. [Guardian] [New York Times]

During the AfD's campaign in Sonneberg, the party's focus largely revolved around criticising federal politics rather than addressing local issues typically relevant in district campaigns.

Sesselmann, echoing other AfD constituents, called on the federal government to pursue a peace agreement

with Moscow concerning its invasion of Ukraine and opposed Germany's military support for Ukraine. Additionally, he supported the AfD's recent call for the dissolution of the European Union, characterising it as an "undemocratic construct" governed by a "non-transparent, unchecked bureaucracy." [Zeit Online] [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Guardian]

(if/gc)

Germany: Author Salman Rushdie wins Peace Prize of the German Book Trade

Celebrated British-American author Salman Rushdie was awarded the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade on June 19, according to the prize's board of trustees. The accolade recognises Rushdie's "great imagination" and "deep humanity," which have persisted despite living under constant threats of violence and terror attacks. [Euronews]

The board lauded Rushdie's unique style of magical realism intertwined with historical fiction, often set against the backdrop of his birthplace, India.

Last August, during a conference in New York, an assailant rushed onto stage and stabbed Rushdie several times in the eye and abdomen, causing the writer serious lasting injuries including the loss of sight in one eye and impaired use of his hands.

(if/gc)

Ireland: Firefighters strike for more pay

Approximately 2,000 firefighters across Ireland began striking on June 6 to protest inadequate pay and poor working conditions. On June 13, part-time firefighters followed suit, with almost 50 percent participating in a second strike.

A third strike scheduled for June 20 was called off. [Irish Independent] [RTÉ]

The strikes were primarily for retained firefighters, who are paid EUR 8,500 annually to be on call and then receive additional payment for each call-out. This annual payment has not increased in line with rising inflation over the past 20 years. Financial insecurity is worsened by the unpredictability of how many call-outs a firefighter will attend each year.

A government review found that 58 percent of retained firefighters said they were likely to leave the fire service within three years. [Irish Examiner] [Breaking News Ireland]

(ew/gc)

Ireland: Greta Thunberg receives Freedom of Dublin award

Climate activist Greta Thunberg received the prestigious Freedom of the City of Dublin award for her ongoing work.

Originally from Sweden, the 20-year-old Thunberg began skipping school in 2018 to draw attention to climate change, with school strikes quickly gaining global popularity among young people. In September 2019, over 10,000 Irish students marched across Dublin, inspired by Thunberg's sustained efforts to engage the next generation in climate activism. [The Journal] [The Irish Times]

Thunberg and Irish environmentalist Duncan Stewart will be the first recipients of the Freedom of Dublin award for climate activism. The award makes Thunberg an honorary citizen of Dublin and, according to historic traditions, requires her to defend the city from attack. Climate change is "the greatest threat" to the freedom of Dublin, according to Lord Mayor and Green Party politician Caroline Conroy. [The Journal] [RTÉ] [The Irish Times]

However, some Dublin councillors have accused Conroy of using the award for "greenwashing," highlighting Ireland's poor climate change record. A Eurostat report found that Ireland had the highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the European Union in the second quarter of 2022, with Dublin deemed one of Europe's dirtiest cities. [Irish Independent] [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times]

(ew/gc)

Netherlands: Female participation in Senate increases

Women represented 40 percent of the Dutch Senate after 30 were sworn into office in the 75-seat assembly on June 13.

The elections for Senate on May 30 saw an increase in women's participation in Dutch politics. Four years ago, 27 women became members of the Senate. This year, 31 women were elected though one of them – Tamara Monzón gave up her seat for personal reasons. [NLTimes]

Women make up almost half of ministers and secretaries of state in the Netherlands. Out of the 29 ministers and secretaries of state roles, women represent 14 of the positions. Women also make up about 40 percent of the Tweede Kamer, Netherlands' lower house. [The Logical Indian]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Social-liberal party wants to integrate asylum seekers into labour market

Asylum seekers in the Netherlands should be allowed to work earlier and for longer in order to help them integrate more quickly and to help fill staff shortages in the tight Dutch labour market, the social-liberal D66 party proposed on June 5 to the Tweede Kamer – the country's lower house. [NOS] [NLTimes]

Asylum seekers are currently not allowed to work until they've lived in the Netherlands for six months, and then for no more than 24 weeks a year. They also need a work permit, which employers have to apply for, and must open a bank account for their wages, which is a heavy logistical burden. [NOS] [NLTimes]

Ukrainian refugees are exempt from most of these requirements, as they can register with any municipality upon arrival in the Netherlands and start working as soon as their employer registers them as an employee. [NOS] [NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Influx of Ukrainian refugees slows down

The number of Ukrainian refugees entering the Netherlands has slowed, according to a report by the Clingendael Institute.

The number of Ukrainians seeking safety in Holland will depend on the outcome of the long-awaited

Ukrainian offensive and Russia's response to it, according to the Clingendael Institute. Most Ukrainians fleeing the war want to return to their country once it is safe, it said. [NLTimes]

State Secretary Eric van der Burg (Justice and Security) reported in a parliamentary letter that about 580 Ukrainian refugees arrive in the Netherlands each week at present. About 75,000 Ukrainians are currently staying in the Netherlands in emergency shelters. [NLTimes]

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Netherlands announced that refugees from Ukraine with proof of residence from the Immigration and Naturalisation Services will be allowed to stay in the Netherlands until at least March 2024. This can be extended by the Dutch government up to March 4, 2025. [Refugee Help]

(ava/gc)

Netherlands: Police violate demonstrators' privacy, Amnesty says

The Dutch police have been accused of violating the privacy of peaceful protesters on a large scale after using unauthorised surveillance tools – such as unjustified ID checks, social media monitoring, drone surveillance at demonstrations, infiltration of group chats and unannounced home visits – Amnesty International said on June 1 in a report titled Unchecked Power. [NOS][NLTimes]

Interviews with dozens of protesters between September 2020 and November 2022 showed that such violations continue to occur on a very regular basis, contrary to the government's firm promise that the Compulsory Identification Act would not be used for these purposes when passed in 2003. [NOS] [NLTimes]

The police said that their method of checking IDs and storing this information was not illegal. The automatic addition of personal data is necessary to contact a witness or complainant quickly, the police said. Nothing is done with this data unless a police officer specifically looks it up, the police said. [NOS][NLTimes]

(gt/gc)

Netherlands: Dutch banks are failing to freeze Russian assets

Around a third of Dutch financial institutions are unable to locate Russian-owned assets and freeze those detailed in sanctions lists published after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, according to research by De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB), the Netherlands' central bank said on June 12. [NOS] [NLTimes]

This compares with EUR 21.5 billion in assets frozen so far among European Union members, on top of the EUR 300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets that the EU and G7 countries have blocked, a European Council report said in May. [EuropeanCouncil]

(gt/gc)

Swiss parliament allows arms re-exportation to Ukraine

The upper house of parliament, the Council of States, approved arms re-exportation to Ukraine on June 7 by 22-17 votes, bringing the country one step closer towards allowing its allies to re-export arms purchased from Switzerland to Ukraine.

The new provision – which would allow arms re-exportation to countries five years after purchasing, or to countries using weapons for self-defence – would be retroactive. [UkrainianWorldCongress]

The decision comes after the lower house of parliament, the National Council, voted against a similar amendment on June 2. Since Russia's invasion in February 2022, there has been mounting pressure for Switzerland to provide more support to the war effort in Ukraine, with many European countries imploring Bern to change its stance. [KyivIndependent] [past edition]

Some amongst the opposition – the green and right-wing parties – have expressed concern that the provision violates Switzerland's policy of neutrality and signals closer ties with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – a military alliance. [AA]

Switzerland also participated in a joint military drill with the European Union along the Iberian peninsula – the first joint military drill of its kind. [Le Temps]

Tanks to Ukraine

Ahead of the decision, the Netherlands' decision to supply Ukraine with Leopard 1 tanks in collaboration with Denmark and Germany might have been affected by the Swiss Parliament.

The Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany plan to provide about a hundred Leopard 1-A5 battle tanks to Ukraine. The three nations will also provide ammunition, spare parts, and training for Ukrainian tank crews. [NLTimes]

(sw-ava/gc)

Switzerland: Parliament revises definition of rape to increase protection of women

The Switzerland houses of parliament agreed to a legal revision of the definition of rape on June 1. The revision will increase women's protections and recourse.

Prior to the revision, rape was defined as forced sex involving violence, threats or psychological pressure. As a result, if victims did not specifically defend themselves, their attackers could only be tried for sexual harassment.

Leading up to the vote, there was disagreement over whether a yes-means-yes approach or a no-means-no approach was best. The first qualifies all non-consensual sex as rape, the second only qualifies non-consensual sex as rape if the victim explicitly objects.

Eventually, agreement was reached on a no-means-no approach that also takes victim shock into account.

Amnesty International, as well as domestic feminist and women's rights groups have been pushing for the revision since the Istanbul Convention took effect in 2018. The convention broadly aims to combat violence against women. [SwissInfo] [AmnestyInternational]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Women protest nationwide for better working conditions

Over 30,000 protestors took to the streets of Basel, Bern, Zurich, Lucerne, St Gallen, Lausanne and Geneva on June 14, in what is known as the Feminist Strike.

The first Feminist Strike protest took place on June 14, 1991 where women demanded that a constitutional article on equality of the sexes be translated into concrete legislation. The date – June 14 – is the anniversary of the 1981 vote that enshrined the principle of equality in the Constitution. [SwissInfo]

On June 14, 2019, about 500,000 protestors took to the streets in a similar strike – demanding better protection against harassment; equal pay; reconciliation between work, family and health; and increased representation of women in decision-making roles. That same year, women won 84 of the 200 parliamentary seats – a 10 percent increase. [SwissInfo 3]

The focus of this year's protest was closing the gender pay gap. According to the Swiss Trade Union Federation, women take home 43 percent less income than men per annum and earn 18 percent less than men for comparable jobs. [Reuters]

Women working in the media and journalism industries were particularly involved in this year's protest. [IFJ]

According to a study commissioned by the Swiss Employers' Association that was released on June 13, there is no pay gap in the country. The Swiss Trade Union Federation called the report an attempt at "embellishing" workplace treatment of women. [SwissInfo 2]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Appeals court upholds 20-year prison sentence for former Liberian warlord

The Federal Criminal Court of Switzerland on June 1 upheld the 20-year sentence of Alieu Kosiah, a former Liberian warlord.

Kosiah was prosecuted for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the First Liberian War from 1989 to 1996 by the Trial Chamber of First Instance in 2021. Sentencing included 21 counts of war crimes, ranging from murder, rape, to cannibalism.

Kosiah – a resident of Switzerland since the end of the war – was arrested in 2014 under a law allowing individuals to be prosecuted for war crimes committed worldwide. He has pleaded innocence since his arrest.

Kosiah is the first person to be prosecuted anywhere for human rights violations committed during the Liberian civil war. [Jurist] [DW]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Federal administration targeted with DDoS attack

Switzerland's federal administration was hit by a distributed denial of service (DDoS) cyber attack on June 12, three days ahead of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenky's address to the Swiss parliament. [Reuters]

The DDoS attack was aimed at overwhelming several government websites and applications. Federal officials said the attack was quickly noticed and intercepted.

The group known as NoName took responsibility. The same group was involved in a similar attack the week before, which specifically targeted the Swiss parliament's website parlament.ch. The Office of the Attorney General opened a criminal investigation after the attack. [AA]

Zelenksy's video address to both the country's upper and lower parliaments went on as scheduled on June 15.

In his address, Zelensky urged Switzerland to allow for the re-exportation of weapons to Ukraine, stating that these weapons would be "vital" in the fight against invading Russia. Zelensky also thanked the country for joining the European Union in imposing sanctions against Moscow, and suggested that Switzerland host an international peace summit. [USNews]

The country's right-wing opposition party, the Swiss People's Party, opposed Zelensky's address, stating that receiving the Ukrainian president's address undermined the country's policy of neutrality. Only two of the party's 53 representatives attended the address. [RTS]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Six police officers on trial for Nigerian man's death, acquitted

Six policemen appeared in a Lausanne court on June 12 to face charges over the death of a Nigerian man while in police custody.

The victim, 39-year old Mike Ben Peter, died of a heart attack in 2018 while being pinned down during his arrest. Many civil society groups have drawn comparisons to the infamous American case of George Floyd – whose death in police custody sparked nationwide protests against racism in the police forces.

The six policemen faced charges of "homicide by neglect." The court acquitted all six officers, ruling that they were not responsible for Peter's heart attack. Supporters of the victim's family held banners outside the court reading "From the USA to Switzerland, the police kill," a reference to the Floyd case. [Aljazeera] [Reuters] [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: President Alain Berset announces his surprise resignation end 2023

Swiss President Alain Berset announced his surprise resignation from the Federal Council on June 14. His resignation will come into effect at the end of the year.

The 51-year old served as the Minister of Health through the Covid-19 pandemic, and has been a member of parliament since 2012.

Berset's term as president was set to end at the end of this year, after which he would have continued serving in the Federal Council in a ministerial capacity.

In his public announcement, Berset said that he had accomplished all that there was to accomplish and that he had given his all. The timing of his announcement was particularly surprising as he gave much more notice than necessary. [20minutes] [LeParisien]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Voters support net-zero carbon emissions bill in referendum

Fifty-nine percent of Swiss voters backed a new climate bill in a referendum on June 18, which will cut fossil fuels to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Opponents argue that the law will require the country to reduce its dependence on imported oil and gas, risking increased energy prices. Supporters of the bill argue that the law is necessary to prevent the country's glaciers from melting further. [BBC]

According to two studies conducted by the Energy Science Center in Zurich and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne – both in May – secure and carbon neutral energy supply by 2050 is both financially and technically possible in Switzerland. [SwissInfo]

That same day, voters also backed a 15 percent global minimum corporate tax, as well as voted to extend an emergency Covid-19 law for the third time. The first – passing by 78.5 percent – will be applicable from 2024 and is aimed at curbing international tax evasion. The second – passing by 61.9 percent – details the rules governing foreigners and cross-border employees during periods of border closures, regulates protections of vulnerable individuals, and supports the development of Covid-19 medicines. [Politico] [SwissInfo 2]

(sw/gc)

Swiss National Bank calls for new regulatory measures, announces interest rate hikes

The Swiss National Bank called for an in-depth review of its current rules and regulations in the wake of the Credit Suisse collapse in its annual financial stability report, published on June 22.

While the existing framework and financial safeguards were established after investigations prompted by the 2008/09 global financial crisis, the central bank argues that the collapse of Credit Suisse – ultimately leading to a state-backed merger with competitor UBS – indicates a need to create more robust safeguards to prevent a similar collapse in future. [APNews] [April edition]

A couple days later, Swiss National Bank Chairman, Thomas Jordan, announced on June 24 that interest rate hikes are to be expected. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland announces framework to enhance, stabilise EU relations

The Swiss government announced a new strategy to stabilise relations with the European Union (EU) on June 21.

The framework aims to guarantee barrier-free access to the EUs single market in the electricity, agriculture, health, education and transport sectors, as well as ensure the free movement of people. [Bloomberg]

Talks to establish a new framework treaty deal collapsed in 2021 after Bern walked away from negotiations. Cooperation and talks have been unstable ever since. The EU has demanded a foundational set of principles to govern Swiss-EU political and economic ties, which would replace the existing series of bilateral agreements. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

United Kingdom: Brexiteer Farage loses prestigious bank account at Coutts

British Brexiteer Nigel Farage has lost his account at Coutts, a prestigious private bank for the wealthy, after his funds fell below a required financial threshold, the BBC reported, citing people familiar with the matter. [BBC]

The former leader of the UK Independence Party accused the bank of closing his account for political reasons, saying in a six-minute video on Twitter that he was confronting "serious political persecution" from an anti-Brexit banking industry. Coutts declined to comment, the BBC reported.

The account closure and accusation prompted a reaction from the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government. Downing Street confirmed there were "concerns" at the highest levels of government and said the Treasury was now looking at whether the banks were being overzealous in closing certain accounts. [TheIndependent]

"The chancellor is concerned by some of the reports," Sunak's official spokesperson said. "Free speech within the law and the legitimate expression of differing views is an important part of British liberty." [TheIndependent]

Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer said on July 3 that she was "concerned that people's bank accounts might be

closed for the wrong reasons." She warned that financial institutions should tread "very carefully" when it comes to people's political views. [TheIndependent]

Political Exposed Person

Speaking to the BBC from France, Farage did not dispute the fact that he did not meet Coutts' threshold of GBP 3 million in savings but added: "They didn't have a problem with it for the last 10 years." He has tried to open an account with a number of other banks but claims he was rejected on the grounds that he is a "Politically Exposed Person" (PEP). [BBC]

Farage told the Financial Times that an official from Coutts rang him on June 29 at 6.55pm after he threatened to go public on his GB News show about the closure of his accounts. He claims Coutts has not told him why it was closing down his personal and business accounts at the bank. "They said I could have a personal account at NatWest and they'd think about a business account." [Financial Times]

The Financial Times reported that his Coutts account had been shifted to an account at high street lender NatWest. The BBC reported that he had only been offered an account at NatWest. Farage disputed the fact that he had been offered an account at the high street lender. [BBC] [Financial Times]

Separately, Church of England vicar Rev Richard Fothergill told The Times that his own bank account with the Yorkshire Building Society had been closed after he complained about its support for what he has termed the "transsexual agenda" during Pride month. He accused the company of "bullying" him. [TheIndependent]

A Yorkshire Building Society spokesperson said the company did not close accounts for particular views but only if a customer is "rude, abusive, violent or discriminates in any way." [TheIndependent]

(gc)

United Kingdom: Former prime minister Boris Johnson resigns as Conservative MP

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson formally resigned on June 9 as the Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) for the Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency in West London. Serving as prime minister from 2019 to

2022, Johnson represented Uxbridge and South Ruislip in Parliament for eight years.

His resignation comes as a result of the Partygate scandal which involved Conservative government and staff member's parties during COVID-19 while the public was prohibited from attending any gatherings themselves. The Privileges Committee's investigations into Partygate found that Johnson misled parliament regarding the parties in Downing Street.

Johnson said the committee was carrying out a "political hit job" and a "witch hunt" against him. Johnson said he is sad to be leaving "for now", hinting at a potential return to parliament. [The Guardian] [BBC] [Reuters]

In his 22-year political career, Johnson has served as MP, foreign secretary, mayor of London, Conservative party leader and prime minister. His resignation adds to the list of rising tensions within the Conservative party, with members divided over whether he should be allowed to stand for reelection as an MP in the future. [The Independent] [Sky News] [BBC]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Labour Party present their green energy and climate strategy

The United Kingdom's Labour Party presented its new green energy plans in Edinburgh on June 19, focusing on boosting jobs and ending oil and gas exploration in the North Sea. [BBC]

Labour hopes to revitalise Britain's historic industrial heartland by creating jobs in the renewable sector, Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer said. Over a five-year period, GBP 2.5 billion would be granted to clean energy companies who invest in "good jobs and supply chains" in former industrial or coastal communities. This could potentially create 65,000 jobs in clean energy by 2030. [Financial Times] [The Labour Party] [The Guardian]

While Starmer claimed that new oil and gas exploration in the North Sea would be terminated, he also reassured workers in the region that current oil and gas production would continue.

With Labour trying to win back seats in Scotland, many Scottish politicians have criticised Starmer's proposals. Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish nationalist Alba Party, said that Labour's plan to limit North Sea oil and

gas investment was “a great British sell-out of Scotland,” while Conservative MSP (Member of Scottish Parliament) Liam Kerr deemed the plans “economically and environmentally illiterate.” [BBC] [The Guardian] [The National Scot] [BBC]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Former SNP leader arrested in connection to party finance investigation

Scottish National Party (SNP) member and former Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was arrested on June 1 as part of an investigation into SNP’s finances.

An investigation into Sturgeon was mounted after GBP 600,000 in donations was given to the party to be used for an independence campaign that never took place. A spokeswoman for Sturgeon confirmed that she had attended a police interview.[BBC] [BBC]

Sturgeon was later released without charge and has told reporters that she was “heavily constrained” in what she could discuss about the ongoing investigation. She said she respects the process adding: “I am absolutely certain I have done nothing wrong.” [BBC]

This comes only a couple of months after Sturgeon’s husband Peter Murrell, who was the SNP’s chief executive until March, was arrested and later released without charge as part of the same investigation. [BBC]

Some SNP members are calling for Sturgeon to resign after she returned to Scottish Parliament for the first time since the arrest. When questioned on whether she would stand down, Sturgeon stated she would always consider what is best for the party. [BBC]

(sm/gc)

United Kingdom: 8,000 Afghan refugees may end up homeless in August

Thousands of Afghan refugees who came to the United Kingdom in 2021 under Operation Warm Welcome are now at risk of homelessness. The UK government therefore continues facing ongoing pressures to appropriately house and support refugees.

A crisis meeting in Downing Street took place on June 1 to discuss the pending eviction due to a government deadline, with the 8,000 Afghan refugees currently living in temporary housing. [The Guardian] [CNN-News18]

The Conservative government has said that the current housing shortage and high costs are making it difficult to find alternative housing for the refugees, who came to the UK following the US's withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul in 2021.

Earlier in February, forty of these refugee families who settled into jobs and schools in London were ordered to move to Wetherby, West Yorkshire, with just a few weeks' notice. [Al Mayadeen] [The Guardian]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Albanians considered to be safe and not in need of asylum, government says

The British Home Affairs select committee said in a report published on June 12 that there is "little evidence" to suggest that Albanians face significant risks in their country and therefore need asylum in the United Kingdom.

The committee, led by Member of Parliament Diana Johnson, stated that Albania is a seemingly peaceful country, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally, and a candidate for European Union membership, further questioning the necessity of granting routine asylum to Albanian nationals.

The committee's findings revealed that 51 percent of asylum claims made by Albanians were initially accepted in the first half of 2022. However, the majority of these claimants arrived in the UK by ferry or plane, rather than through small boat crossings. Nine countries, including Germany, accepted no asylum claims from Albania during the same period, prompting the committee to call for an explanation from the Home Office regarding the UK's high acceptance rate. [UKParliament]

While the committee acknowledged that some Albanians seeking asylum have been trafficked, particularly women, it stressed that the driving factors for migration from Albania to the UK appear to be better job opportunities and higher wages. To address this, the committee recommended promoting seasonal work visas in sectors such as agriculture and

construction, providing legal avenues for Albanians to enter the UK and reducing reliance on unauthorised Channel crossings. Additionally, the report highlighted the need for appropriate safeguards before returning trafficking victims to Albania. The committee urged the UK government to maintain strong links with the Albanian government and emphasised the government's obligation to support victims of trafficking.

The rise in Albanian arrivals via small boat crossings in 2022 has raised concerns and strained the UK's asylum system. However, the committee stressed that singling out Albania as the sole cause of the asylum backlog or immigration processing centre overcrowding is unwarranted. The Prime Minister has committed to clearing the backlog by the end of the year, and the Home Office is expected to provide quarterly progress reports on pending claims, staffing levels, and decision-making statistics. [TheJusticeGap]

Acknowledging the economic motivations behind Albanian migration, the committee suggested that increasing awareness of work visa programs would support legal migration, benefiting both the UK and Albania. Currently, only 325 work visas were granted to Albanian nationals in the first nine months of 2022, indicating the potential for greater collaboration to fill worker shortages in the UK economy and facilitate the transfer of wealth back to Albania.

(at/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Belarus: Lukashenko confirms Wagner chief has arrived in Belarus

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said on June 27 that the leader of the Russian mercenary group Wagner Yevgeny Prigozhin had arrived in Belarus. [CNN] [BBC]

"I see that Prigozhin is already flying on this plane. Yes, indeed, he is in Belarus today," Lukashenko said. [CNN]

Prigozhin is the founder of the Wagner private mercenary group, which seized control of a military base in southern Russia and sent a convoy toward Moscow on June 24. The short-lived mutiny came to an end 200 kilometres away from Moscow with a deal that saw Prigozhin promised amnesty in Belarus and the criminal case against the Wagner group dropped in Russia. [BBC]

Putin offered Wagner fighters three options: sign contracts with the Defense Ministry, return home or go to Belarus. [CNN]

In front of the leadership of the military and law enforcement agencies in the Independence Palace on June 27, Lukashenko explained his role in the negotiations. He said he was "completely involved" in the deal that ended the mutiny. [BelTa]

"I also realised there was a harsh decision taken – to destroy. I suggested Putin not to hurry. Let's talk with Prigozhin, with his commanders," Lukashenko said. [CNN]

(aog/gc)

Estonia: First Baltic state to legalize same-sex marriage

Estonia's parliament passed a law to legalize same-sex marriage on June 20 – becoming the first Baltic state to do so – with 55 members of the parliament voting in favor of the bill and 34 voting against. [Reuters] [ERR]

Same-sex couples have been allowed to register partnerships in Estonia since 2016. According to the Estonian Human Rights Centre, 53 percent of the Estonian population supports same-sex marriage in 2023. [LSM]

“Everyone should have the opportunity to marry the person they love and want to spend their lives with. With this decision, we will finally join the other Nordic countries and all other democratic countries in the world where this right is guaranteed," said Prime Minister Kaja Kallas. [Postimees]

"This is a decision that does not take anything away from anyone, but gives many something very important. It also shows that our society is caring and we respect each other. I am proud of Estonia," she added. [Postimees]

The law will enter into force on January 1, 2024. [ERR]

(aog/gc)

Estonia: Government amends 10-year defence plan

The Estonian parliament, known as the Riigikogu, decided to increase the country’s military defence spending to 3 percent of gross domestic product. Spending between 2022-2031 will exceed EUR 13.4 billion. [ERR]

The renewal of the National Defense Development Plan (RKAK) will increase the Estonian Defence Forces’ (EDF) armament. [ERR]

“Our security situation has changed. The escalation of the Ukrainian conflict into a full-scale war is also forcing us to revise the National Defense Development Plan, which was initially approved at the end of 2021,” Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur said during a press conference on June 9. [ERR]

One of the main parts of the renewal of the development plan is to increase the EDF’s armament. [ERR]

Martin Herem, commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, said: “What the EDF needs, before air defence and tanks, is ammunition. After that comes ammunition again, and only then all these beautiful weapons systems, including the dream of every defence commander: a tank battalion.” [ERR]

(aog/gc)

Latvia restricts visas for Russians

The Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that visas for Russians will be suspended until March 2024. [LSM]

According to the Ministry's website, the decision comes "in connection with the unpredictable development of Russia's internal political events." These events refer to the recent insurrection by Wagner mercenaries in Russia under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin.

In September 2022, the Baltic States and Poland agreed to restrict the flow of Russian citizens to prevent security risks. On September 9, 2022, Latvia restricted visas for Russians from September 19, 2022 to June 30, 2023. [LSM]

(aog/gc)

Lithuania: President discusses upcoming NATO summit

Lithuania's President Gitanas Nausėda has said the purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) summit is to "respond to the complicated geopolitical situation" and not to increase Lithuania's visibility. [LRT]

When asked whether Lithuania might benefit from increased visibility by hosting the NATO summit, he responded: "The NATO summit is an attempt to address the problems gathering around us. To respond to the complicated geopolitical situation, to be worthy of those challenges, which we face in terms of security." [LRT]

"We are not holding the NATO summit for publicity. If it leads to more visibility for Lithuania, spreads the word about Lithuania around the world, we will of course be happy about that," he added. [LRT]

Lithuania will host the NATO summit for the first time on July 11 to12 in Vilnius, 30 kilometres from the border with Belarus. [LRT]

(aog/gc)

Moldova: Government bans pro-Russian Shor party

Moldova's Constitutional Court banned the pro-Russian Shor Party, led by the exiled businessman Ilan Shor on June 19. This comes after months of pro-

Russian protests, which the government labelled as attempts to destabilise Moldova. [Reuters]

The President of the Constitutional Court, Nicolae Rosca, said that the justice ministry will appoint a commission for the liquidation of the party. Rosca added that Shor Party Members of Parliament will continue their roles in the parliament as independent MPs. [Anadolu Agency]

Marina Tauber, the vice chairwoman of the Shor Party, condemned the decision and called the ruling a "shameful process" and promised citizens that Shor will continue its work. [Al-Jazeera]

After the closure verdict, Shor announced on June 26 the creation of a new political party to replace the pro-Russian bloc in parliament. Shor announced the new party will be known as "Chance, Responsibilities, Implementation" which is an acronym of Shor in Russian and Romanian. [Reuters]

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. Over the past months his party organised anti-government protests all around Moldova with the support of the Russian government. [Europe in Review no.6]

(lc/gc)

Moldova: European Union allocates EUR 145 million

The European Union (EU) allocated EUR 145 million to Moldova to support economic and financial reforms. The announcement was made by the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola on June 14 on Twitter.

"Three weeks ago in Chisinau, I told the people of Moldova that they are not alone. Today, we are delivering another EUR 145 million to support Moldova's reforms as the country continues to defy Russian threats. Moldova's future is in the European Union," she wrote.

Metsola previously joined the rally organised by the Moldovan government in the capital Chisinau on May 21 to support Moldova's EU accession. [Europe in Review no.6]

(lc/gc)

Russia: Court sentences artist to 15 years in penal colony

A Russian court has sentenced an artist to 15 years in a penal colony for allegedly criticising the country's war in Ukraine. The Southern District Military Court in the city of Rostov-on-Don sentenced Bohdan Ziza, Crimean performance artist, on June 6.

Authorities arrested Ziza in May 2022 after he splashed paint in the colours of the Ukrainian flag on the door of the Yevpatoria city administration building in Russian-annexed Crimea. The prosecutor previously asked for an 18-year sentence. [The Moscow Times]

During his final statement, the artist declared that he would go on a hunger strike. He said he would no longer eat starting from 10 June and also spoke out against force-feeding. [Novaya Gazeta]

Hours after his detention, Ziza apologised for his actions on a local TV channel. He later said that the video was filmed under duress and that there were five different versions of him apologising. He alleged that when the officers did not like his reaction during the filming, they would hit him. [The Moscow Times] [Novaya Gazeta]

(ava/gc)

Russia ships record amount of crude oil in May

Russian crude oil imports by China and India surged in May as buyers bought discounted supplies and reduced demand for oil from the Middle East and Africa, according to preliminary assessments from energy cargo trackers.

Arrivals of Russian shipments in India are assessed to have reached a record high of 8.6 million tonnes (62.8 million barrels) – 15 percent more than the previous high in April – while China received 6 million tonnes, steady from the previous month, according to *Vortexa*.

Data from Kpler showed a similar trend, with India's imports hitting a record of 66.7 million barrels and China's rising to 49.2 million barrels. [Reuters] [The Hindu]

The European Union's high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, said that the

bloc should crack down on the importation of Indian petroleum products that use Russian oil [see AiR No. 21, May/2023, 4]. Oil products sales from India to Europe have surged over 70 percent to USD 15 billion in the past year, according to data from the Indian commerce ministry, indicating that anti-Russia restrictions are not watertight. [Air, No.23 June/2023, 1]

Gas exports

Russian oil companies have exported 37 percent more gasoline so far this year, the Kommersant business daily reported. January-May 2023 gasoline exports from Russia neared 2.5 million tons, the publication said, citing an unidentified source familiar with the data. [Kommersant]

The boost came ahead of Russia's plans to halve subsidies to oil refineries from July to rein in its higher-than-forecast budget deficit. With gas price increases and shortages on the domestic market, Russian authorities were also considering banning gasoline exports altogether, Reuters reported last month. [Moscow Times]

Amongst African states, Nigeria stands out the most in its increase of Russian gasoline imports. Of the 812,000 tons exported to Africa, Nigeria accounts for 488,000 tons . Western energy sanctions seem to have redirected much of Russian energy exports into the African and Asian markets. [Kommersant][Reuters]

(aml-ef/gc)

Russia: 32,000 convicts fighting under the Wagner Group return home

Some 32,000 prisoners recruited by the mercenary Wagner Group have returned to Russia after fighting in Ukraine, according to the group's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. [Telegram]

Wagner started recruiting prisoners last summer, offering convicts a pardon if they survived six months in Ukraine. According to leading prisoner's rights activist Olga Romanova, the private army recruited between 48,000 and 49,000 convicts.

"Persons released from prison during the same period without a Wagner PMC contract committed 80 times more crimes," Prigozhin said, adding that less than 1 percent of all Wagner recruits have committed crimes after completing their contracts and being released. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Russia: ECHR orders EUR 40,000 to be paid for refusal to probe activist's poisoning

The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that Russian authorities violated opposition politician Alexey Navalny's rights by refusing to investigate his poisoning in 2020.

According to the Court, Russia violated Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to life and ordered the Russian government to pay Navalny EUR 40,000 in compensation. The Court also required that the government "take all necessary and appropriate measures to ensure in the present case that the procedural requirements of Article 2 of the Convention are complied with." [ECHR]

An ECHR spokeswoman said that since Russia was a member of the Court and the Council of Europe at the time of the alleged poisoning, the judgement applies and will be passed to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe for enforcement. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Navalny faces 30 more years in prison on extremism charges

Kremlin critic and opposition leader Alexei Navalny faces an additional 30-year sentence following the start of a new trial against him by the Moscow City Court.

"We assume that the trial will be over relatively quickly, and Alexei will really be sentenced to an unimaginable prison term of around 30 years," Navalny's spokesperson Kira Yarmysh said. [DW]

When the opponent of President Vladimir Putin returned to Russia in 2021, authorities imprisoned Navalny. He was accused of violating his judicial supervision during his convalescence abroad, which was necessary following his poisoning in August 2020 and sentenced to prison for two years. Another sentence of nine years followed for allegedly defrauding his supporters. [LeMonde]

The new 30-year sentence is based on charges of extremism and a number of other crimes.

The Moscow City Court did not allow reporters in the courtroom during the first hearing. Navalny and his lawyers urged the judge to hold an open trial, arguing that authorities are eager to suppress details of the proceedings to cover up the weakness of the case.

“The investigators, the prosecutors and the authorities in general don't want the public to know about the trial,” Navalny said. [Independent]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Central Bank holds steady on interest rates

The Russian central bank has continued to hold interest rates steady at 7.5 percent, though this may change if inflation accelerates this year. [CBR]

The Bank of Russia said that it is open to raising interest rates to combat inflation and will hold another interest rate review on July 21. The central bank said that inflation or higher interest rates have not slowed down economic activity. Moscow Times][CBR] [CBR] [Moscow Times]

“Given gradually rising inflationary pressures, the Bank of Russia holds open the prospect of increasing the key rate at its next meetings to stabilise inflation close to 4 percent in 2024 and further on,” it said. “According to the Bank of Russia’s forecast, given the current monetary policy stance, annual inflation will come in at 4.5 to 6.5 percent in 2023 to return to 4 percent in 2024.” [CBR]

An increase of domestic consumption has helped stabilise the economy, despite the economic sanctions levied on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, the central bank said. The biggest challenge the Russian economy faces now is its increasing labour shortage. As unemployment hits a historic low, industrial capacity to increase production is severely affected. [CBR]

“The current capacity to expand production in the Russian economy is increasingly limited by labour market conditions,” the central bank said. “Unemployment has dropped to a new historical low. Labour shortages are increasing in many industries amid the effects of the partial mobilisation as growth in businesses’ demand for labour continues.”

World Bank lifts forecast

The World Bank has improved its outlook for the Russian economy due to stronger-than-expected revenues from energy exports to countries. According to the World Bank, the Russian economy will slightly contract in 2023 marking a sharp change from the previous forecast of a more pronounced economic contraction. [World Bank]

The sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a significant cut in exports of oil and gas to those countries. But the new economic alliances made with countries such as India and China have supported the Russian economy. [The Moscow Times]

Russia's economy is now expected to contract by just 0.2 percentage points this year, according to the updated forecast. This is 3.1 percentage points higher than the bank's previous estimate in January. [The Moscow Times]

(ef-ava/gc)

Russia: Soviet-American thinker moderates Putin's SPIEF Panel

A conservative US political scientist and historian of Soviet origin, Dmitri Simes, moderated this year's St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) plenary session between President Vladimir Putin and Algerian counterpart Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

For past SPIEF events the name of the host was always announced in advance. This year, SPIEF organisers delayed the announcement.

Simes is considered one of the most successful Soviet-Russian emigre experts. During the plenary session on June 16, Simes steered clear of any questions that could have challenged Putin and repeatedly voiced pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian sentiment.

"His job there is to play the role of the 'model American,' to show viewers that there is another, 'normal' America. So he's been thanked and promoted to the honorary role of moderator," an old acquaintance of Simes said. [The Moscow Times]

The SPIEF

The SPIEF, called the "Russian Davos," is a forum that serves as a platform for intensive discussions on the

modernization of Russia's economy, often culminating in the signing of multinational business deals.

While in the past the event had drawn crowds of foreign investors to President Vladimir Putin's hometown, this year, turnout is the least impressive in the event's 25-year history.

"The main problem for the 2023 organisers is to scrape together participants," one of the forum's organisers said. "Even (Kazakh President)Kassym-Jomart Tokayev refused to come at the last minute." [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Greece: Prime Minister wins run-off elections

Greece's New Democracy party led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis won the run-off elections held on June 25, which will give Mitsotakis another term in office as the country faces economic and migration challenges.

Results show that the right-wing New Democracy Party won 40.5 percent of the vote nationally, which gave the party 158 seats in the 300 seat parliament – securing a slim majority for Mitsotakis. The main opposition, the leftist Syriza party – led by the former prime minister Alexis Tsipras – will be the second largest in parliament, with only 18 percent of the vote. This represents an even worse result than the 20 percent during the first round of elections. [Reuters]

Tsipras told reporters that the results were disappointing.

“We have suffered a serious electoral defeat but I believe that the election result is mainly negative for society and for democracy,” and “the emergence of three far-right parties in Parliament, one of which has fascist extensions and connections, combined with the majority of Mr. Mitsotakis right is a negative development,” he said. [Euro News]

Tsipras, who led Syriza for 15 years, resigned from his position as the chairman of the party on June 29 after the results of the elections. “The time has come to start a new cycle” he said during his televised resignation speech. [Reuters]

Mitsotakis was sworn into office on June 26. He took over premiership from the caretaker prime minister Ioannis Sarmas, who ruled after the inconclusive results of the first round of parliamentary elections. Mitsotakis promised to increase the welfare of Greece by rebuilding the country’s credit rating and by creating new jobs. [Reuters]

“I have committed that in this second term we will realise the big changes that the country so much needs,” he told the Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou after receiving the official mandate to form a government.

(lc/gc)

Greece: Migrant ship sinks, hundreds missing

A migrant ship sank near the Greek town of Pylos on June 14, killing at least 78 people and leaving hundreds missing.

The ship was carrying up to 750 migrants, according to official reports. Greek authorities said 104 survivors had been brought ashore. An official from the shipping ministry said nine Egyptians were arrested over the shipwreck. The ship initially departed from Egypt, stopped in Libya, and was sailing to Italy, according to the witnesses. [Reuters]

The cause of the shipwreck remains unclear, Greece’s caretaker Prime Minister Ioannis Sarmas said: “a thorough investigation of the real facts and technical judgements” will take place to determine the cause, after receiving criticism over Greece’s role in handling the tragedy. [Reuters]

There are more than 20,000 registered deaths and disappearances since 2014 in the Mediterranean, according to United Nations data. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Montenegro's pro-EU party wins snap parliamentary elections

Montenegro held a snap parliamentary election that marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape on June 11. The polls were the first in over 30 years without the presence of Milo Djukanovic, Europe's longest-ruling contemporary politician. [Reuters]

The Europe Now Movement (PES) emerged as the winner with 25.6 percent of the vote, according to preliminary results projected by the Center for Monitoring and Research. However, PES did not secure enough support to form a government independently and will need to seek coalition partners in the 81-seat parliament.

PES, a recently formed centrist party with pro-European Union (EU) policies, expressed its willingness to collaborate with other parties that share its values and aim to establish a new pro-EU government.

The pro-EU Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which had ruled Montenegro from 1990 to 2020, came in second place with 23.7 percent of the vote. The DPS, along with a group of small allied parties, has been a dominant force in Montenegro's past politics, but experienced a decline in popularity in recent years. The election outcome signifies a shift away from long-standing political power structures.

The conservative alliance For the Future of Montenegro, led by the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian Democratic Front, gained 14.7 percent of the vote, while a pro-EU group consisting of the Democratic Party and the URA movement secured 12.2 percent of the vote. These parties are expected to play significant roles in coalition negotiations, with the leader of the Democratic Party emphasising their influence as a potential kingmaker. [Reuters]

The election campaign focused primarily on economic issues and improving living standards, a departure from previous elections that revolved around geopolitical alignments with the EU, Russia and Serbia. Montenegrin voters expressed their concerns about

promises made by politicians, stating that they should be based on the country's economic reality.

With the election results, Montenegro aims to overcome deep political divisions and years of instability that have hindered its progress towards EU membership. The EU has welcomed the preliminary results, expressing confidence that Montenegro will continue on its path of alignment with EU foreign policy and integration. Montenegro is considered a candidate country that is fully compatible with the EU's goals .[EuroNews]

The outcome of the snap election in Montenegro signals a desire for change, with voters seeking a new direction for the country's future. The focus on pro-EU policies and aspirations demonstrates the population's commitment to closer integration with the EU. As Montenegro works towards forming a coalition government, the hopes for a politically stable administration that prioritises economic development and infrastructure improvement remain high. [AnadoluAgency]

(at/gc)

Romania: Ruling coalition reveals list of new ministers

Marcel Ciolacu was installed as Romania's new Prime Minister on June 15 after the ruling coalition – consisting of the country's two major political parties, the Social Democrats (PSD) and the Liberals (PNL) – released its approved list of ministers in the new government. [BalkanInsights]

Former Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca resigned on June 12 as part of the rotation of power agreement between the PSD and PNL parties. Ciuca is now serving as the president of the Senate. [RomaniaInsider]

The power rotation agreement was made two years ago as part of a joint coalition agreement. The arrangement has brought a period of political stability after years of turmoil. [Bloomberg]

Ciolacu reiterated his priorities in a speech on the day of his appointment, citing boosting wages and public investment, lowering government debt and slowing price hikes. In his inaugural speech, Ciolacu also proposed a policy of economic patriotism." [EuroTopics]

(sw/gc)

Romania: Teachers protest nationwide, school exams delayed

Romanians high school baccalaureate exams were postponed by two days to June 14 after a nationwide teachers' strike entered its third week, according to Education Minister Ligia Deca. [Europe Monthly, June edition]

More than 150,000 teachers have been on strike since May. Starting on May 22, it is the first nationwide teachers' protest since 2005.

Teachers are asking for an increase in salaries, overtime pay, inflation indexing and more supplies. New teachers currently earn EUR 462 a month, where the average wage is EUR 945. [Reuters]

While exam delays were triggered by the protests, the Romanian government adopted a memorandum stating that teachers will get an increase. Negotiations ended on May 22, bringing teachers' wages closer to the national average. Unions stated that if the "principles included in the emergency ordinance regarding salaries in education are not applied in the text of the new wage law, the strike will be resumed." [EuroNews] [RomaniaInsider]

A few days later, on June 26, about 3,000 judges and prosecutors followed suit, taking part in an unofficial strike in protest of a bill that would raise the retirement age for magistrates and reduce their pensions. [Eurotopics]

(sw/gc)

Serbia: Citizens take the streets to protest mass shootings

Tens of thousands of Serbians took to the streets of Belgrade to continue their protest against the mass shootings on May 3 and May 4. The protestors blamed the current government and the country's violent culture for the shootings, calling for Interior Minister Bratislav Gasic to resign. [Reuters]

The protestors gathered in front of parliament and held banners that read "Vucic out." Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said on June 7 she is willing to resign after the mass shootings that resulted in 18 deaths.

Serbian President Aleksander Vucic said his government is not at fault, hence resignation of any government official is not necessary.

Serbia experienced two mass shootings in May. On May 3 a teenager opened fire in an elementary school causing the death of 10 children and the next day a 21-year-old man killed 8 people in a town near Belgrade. [Europe in Review no.6]

(lc/gc)

Serbia: Launches first renewable energy auction

Serbia's ministry of mining and energy launched on June 7 auctions to develop renewable energy resources. [Balkan Energy News]

The auction is led by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and will be supported by the government of Switzerland through a grant from the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). [EBRD]

The three-year program is open to wind power projects with a total capacity of 400 megawatts (MW), as well as solar photovoltaic system (PV) projects with a total capacity of 50 MW. [Reuters]

Currently Serbia is dependent on Russian gas for energy supply. With this project Serbia will be able to generate energy using their own resources.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Jailed Kurdish politician quits politics

The former co-chairperson of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) _ who has been in prison since 2016 due to alleged ties to the organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) _ announced on Twitter that he will quit political activity.

Despite being in prison, Selahattin Demirtas remained an active figure in Turkish politics through Twitter.

"While I will continue my struggle with resistance from prison like all my comrades, I'm withdrawing from active politics at this stage," he tweeted. "I sincerely apologise on my behalf that we failed to maintain a

policy that our citizens deserve. I promise to compensate for our shortcomings through my practices." [Twitter]

Two sources close to Demirtas said that the HDP wanted him to be silenced given that he was having a negative impact on the party's support. His opinions on HDP's agenda were also being disregarded. [Cumhuriyet]

The PKK is considered a terrorist organisation in Turkey. The US State Department designated the PKK a foreign terrorist organisation in October 1997.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Governor of Istanbul bans pride parade

The Governor of Istanbul, Davut Gul, banned the pride parade scheduled for June 18. Police increased security and closed metro stations in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Taksim to decrease event attendance .

Istanbul Trans Pride Week organisations returned after six years under the theme "We won't go back, we are here." The Human Rights Association LGBT+ commission called on the Istanbul police department and the governorship of Istanbul, "Parade is a constitutional right. Stop the hate, remove the barricades." [Medya Scope]

Previously, the Governor of Istanbul banned the March 8 Women's Day marches with the same precautions.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Elected Labour Party MP remains in prison

Turkish Labour Party (TIP) Member of Parliament Can Atalay has remained in prison despite being elected during the May 14 elections. Atalay was sent to prison in 2022 due to his involvement in the 2013 Gezi protests.

The Higher Election Council (YSK) announced prior to the May 14 elections that Atalay's candidacy would be lawful. Despite being elected, he was not released under political immunity. [Gazete Duvar]

During the first day of the Turkish Grand National Assembly meeting, Atalay's name was called out to take the parliament oath. In his absence TIP Istanbul Member of Parliament Sera Kadigil yelled out loud: "He is unable to take the oath because he is being held hostage." [Sözcü]

Chairman of the main opposition party, Kemal Kılıcdaroglu, accused the chairman of the parliament Numan Kurtulmus of being responsible for Atalay remaining behind bars. "Numan Kurtulmus you are responsible for this," he said. "You will get Atalay out of there, he will come here and will take his oath."

Kurtulmus told reporters that he has a right to comment on Atalay but has no jurisdiction over his release. [NTV]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Jails a prominent journalist on terrorism propaganda

A Turkish court jailed the editor-in-chief of an opposing TV channel for allegedly praising a terrorist organisation and spreading terrorist propaganda. Yanardag was detained by the police on June 26 after he made comments on the leader of the terrorist organisation Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. [Reuters]

The Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation against Merdan Yanardag after he said the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's isolation in prison should be lifted. Yanardag was detained within a few hours after the TV program ended. [Sözcü]

Before he was detained, Yanardag said: "I never praised any terrorist organisation or its leader. It was not my intention. During the program I said Justice and Development (AKP) MP Galip Ensarioglu is aiming to start a new solution process and open a new space for the AKP, whose power has narrowed." [Euro News]

The Turkish Journalist's Association (TGC) released a statement that said Yanardag's detention violated the right of freedom of expression. Many opposing politicians expressed the unlawfulness of Yanardag's detention.

Umit Ozdag, leader of Homeland Party (Vatan Partisi), an ultra-nationalist pro-Kemalist leader said: "I don't agree to a single word Yanardag said in the program however in order for AKP to detain Yanardag, which

wrote the constitution with Ocalan in Imrali, should first detain 95 percent of his own party." he said. " My view that Abdullah Ocalan is a dishonourable traitor and that he should be executed has never changed," he added. [Halk TV]

(lc/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Cyprus: Social media campaign aims to deter high irregular migration

Cyprus is launching an information campaign on social media aiming to discourage irregular migration.

The campaign, called "Let's talk truth about Cyprus", points out that the Mediterranean island rejects 96 percent of asylum requests, and that those rejected face a five-year ban from entering the EU. [Reuters] [Infomigrants]

Cyprus has had the highest number of new asylum applications in the EU in proportion to its population for the last six years. [Reuters] [Eurostat]

In 2022, the country granted asylum to 568 applicants out of 21,565 registered applications. [LeMonde]

European Union interior ministers on June 8 agreed to a major reform of the bloc's migration policy. Under the deal, EU countries that refuse to take a share of reallocated migrants would be charged EUR 20,000 per refugee who is not allowed in. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(nc/pk)

INSIGHT

Italy's Berlusconi (1936–2023): A life of success and scandals

Former four-time Italian prime minister, media mogul, football kingpin and billionaire Silvio Berlusconi died of leukaemia on June 12 at the age of 86. [Reuters] [BBC]

The former premier's passing endangers his centre-right party Forza Italia, a junior member of a governing coalition which includes Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's nationalist-conservative Brothers of Italy and Matteo Salvini's right-wing populist League party.

Some analysts believe the absence of Berlusconi's larger-than-life personality and unquestioned leadership over Forza Italia will see supporters move over to Meloni's or Salvini's parties. [Euractiv]

The survival of the pro-market party now depends on funding from the Berlusconi family and good relations with Meloni's government, The Guardian reported.

Sex and right-wing politics

Berlusconi, nicknamed *Il Cavaliere* (the Knight), had a career marked by a string of diplomatic gaffes and scandals, including allegations of having sex with an underage girl and hosting notorious "bunga bunga" sex parties with prostitutes.

His legacy includes "ushering far-right politics into the mainstream", wrote American magazine The Nation, referencing Berlusconi's support in 1993 for a candidate from the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement party for Rome's mayoral election, and the presence of that party's successor, the National Alliance – an ancestor of Meloni's Brothers of Italy – in Berlusconi's governing coalitions. [The Guardian]

In total, Italy's longest-serving post-war leader had been embroiled in 35 criminal legal cases, being convicted at first instance multiple times. Those cases included tax fraud, false accounting, paying for sex with a minor, wiretapping political rivals, bribing witnesses and handing a senator a EUR 3 million bribe. [BBC]

However, victory in appeal hearings, statute of limitations time-outs, amnesties, or even changes in the law that rendered Berlusconi's crimes no longer

illegal, led the billionaire to being definitively convicted only once, in 2013, for tax fraud in relation to his broadcasting and publication empire Mediaset. [Reuters]

He was sentenced to four years in prison, a punishment immediately reduced to one year under an amnesty law. Ultimately, the then-septuagenarian never went to jail but was required to commit to four hours a week of community service in a home for the elderly. [The Guardian]

Il Cavaliere's power, political leanings and bombastic, controversial behaviour led some to view him as a precursor to populist-right politicians of the Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro ilk.

Sway over public opinion

Born in 1936, the self-made billionaire made his fortune in property development, then in Mediaset, Italy's largest commercial broadcaster. Berlusconi's media empire included three of Italy's four commercial networks and scores of newspapers and magazines, which gave the tycoon significant influence over public opinion. [The Guardian]

Berlusconi entered politics in 1994, in a launch buoyed by his wealth and media influence, and became the first Italian prime minister to be appointed without having held a previous position in government.

His premiership lasted less than a year but he returned to power in 2001, running two successive governments until 2006 – the longest stint in power for any politician in Italy since World War II.

In a response similar to Trump's reaction to his 2020 electoral failure, Berlusconi refused to acknowledge defeat in 2006 after a narrow loss and took a month to resign from office. [The Guardian]

The AC Milan owner became prime minister once again in 2008. His final tenure at the helm ended in 2011, when he stepped down after proving unable to tackle the European financial crisis that severely struck Italy. [NYT]

Master of the bounceback

Following his conviction for tax fraud, Berlusconi was kicked out of the Senate, of which he was a member, and barred from running for office for six years, though the ban was lifted a year early by an Italian tribunal for "good behaviour". In 2019, the ever-

returning politician won a seat in the European Parliament. [Independent] [Reuters]

In 2022, his last campaign led to Berlusconi becoming a senator once again. His Forza Italia joined a ruling coalition that includes Meloni's and Salvini's parties, allowing Berlusconi to maintain influence over the government.

His death sparked a wave of condolences nationally and internationally. [Politico]

Italy's current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, said on the day his death was announced that Berlusconi was "a fighter" and "one of the most influential men in the history of Italy." [The Guardian]

Praise from Putin

In a statement, Russian President Vladimir Putin, with whom Berlusconi cultivated a close relationship, said the former Italian premier was "a dear person, a true friend", adding that he "admired his wisdom and his ability to make balanced, far-sighted decisions, even in the most difficult situations".

"During each of our meetings, I was literally charged with his incredible vitality, optimism and sense of humour. His death is an irreparable loss and great sorrow," the Russian president added. [The Guardian]

Berlusconi's legacy was tellingly summed up by former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. "Many loved him, many loathed him," Renzi said, while adding that "everyone must recognise" the "unprecedented" impact the billionaire had on Italian political life.

(qv/pk)

Italy: Government launches justice reforms amid criticism

In a bid to speed up Italy's notoriously slow court system, the government on June 15 approved reforms that were quickly criticised by opposition parties and public prosecutors.

The reforms would eliminate the crime of abuse of office, while introducing new procedures for pre-trial detentions, and curbing the use of wire-tapping.

Under the new rules, which are being debated in parliament, public prosecutors will not be able to appeal against acquittals in cases of "reduced gravity".

[ANSA] Pre-trial detentions will have to be ordered by a panel of three judges, rather than one.

Justice Minister Carlo Nordio said that the crime of abuse of office, which allows public officials to be penalised for abusing their office to obtain private gain, slows decision-making procedures while clogging up judicial proceedings.

According to a draft of the reforms seen by Reuters, only 18 out of 4,745 investigations conducted in 2021 into abuse of office resulted in convictions.

In an interview with the Repubblica newspaper, the president of Italy's Association of Magistrates (ANM), Giuseppe Santalucia, voiced concern over the constitutionality of the reforms.

Giuseppe Conte, the leader of the populist opposition Five Star Movement party, said the reforms could foster corruption and weaken the freedom of the press because of the restrictions on wiretapping. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Ruling party aims to stop warehouses being turned into mosques

Italy's ruling hard-right Brothers of Italy party has proposed a controversial law that would forbid the conversion of industrial warehouses and garages into mosques.

The proposed law, put forward by a parliamentary committee on the environment, has been strongly criticised by the opposition and by the Muslim community. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

The ban would apply to places of worship used by religious organisations lacking a formal agreement with the Italian state. Islam is the only religion, among the most popular ones in the country, which does not have such formal agreements. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Opposition lawmakers on the environment committee have asked for a hearing to clarify whether the bill is compatible with Italy's constitution. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Sami Salem, the imam of a mosque in Rome, said that the bill discriminates against Muslims and that it violates the constitution, which protects the rights of all citizens. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

According to the Pew Research Center, 2.7 million Muslims lived in Italy in 2020, accounting for 4.9 percent of the population. [Openpolis]

Islam is Italy's second largest religion in terms of number of followers, but Muslims have struggled to find a common body able to represent them in an agreement with the state. [Openpolis] [Daily Muslim]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Five officers arrested after probe into police brutality

An investigation led by a judge in the northern Italian city of Verona has led to the arrest of five police officers accused of torturing and humiliating people apprehended at a police station.

Judge Livia Magri, who is leading the probe, said on May 6 that the officers have been accused of causing bodily harm and humiliating detainees. In one incident, according to Magri, officers are suspected of having forced a man to urinate on the floor and later using him as "a mop to clean up". [ANSA]

Magri added that the alleged abuses were perpetrated against "weak targets", including homeless people, migrants and people struggling with addictions. [ANSA]

The allegations against the arrested officers include embezzlement, forgery, bribery and neglect. [ANSA]

Verona Police Commissioner Roberto Massucci said that the arrests highlight transparency in the police force as the investigation, lasting several months, was conducted internally by officers aiming to identify "unlawful behaviour" by their colleagues. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Gay Pride march in Rome, opposition from conservative regional government

An annual Gay Pride march was held in Rome on June 10 amid political clashes after regional governor Francesco Rocca withdrew his administration's support for the event.

Rocca took office in February after winning regional elections as the candidate of a centre-right coalition supported by hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

In a statement, Rocca claimed the Gay Pride march "promoted illegal practices". He was referring to a call on the organisers' website for regulations to be introduced in Italy permitting a surrogate mother to give birth to a child which will then be cared for by someone else. [ANSA]

Surrogacy is illegal in Italy. Meanwhile, Meloni's government has recently cancelled the recognition of parenthood certificates obtained abroad by same-sex couples.

The organisers of the Rome march accused Rocca of succumbing to pressure from Pro-Life and Family, a Catholic lobby group, to withdraw the regional government's support for the event. [RomaPride]

The march received the backing of Rome's mayor, Roberto Gualtieri, a member of the centre-left Democratic Party, which is in opposition at the national level. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: 'Right to be forgotten' for cancer survivors

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has said she supports plans to introduce the "right to be forgotten" via a law under which cancer survivors will not have to disclose their medical history when buying financial services such as loans or insurance. [ANSA]

According to Saverio Cinieri, head of the Italian Association of Medical Oncology, there are almost a million cancer survivors in Italy who are required to pay higher prices or denied services, despite having the same life expectancy as people who were never ill. [ANSA]

In a statement released on June 13, Meloni said the law would be a "necessary solution to a concrete problem" that many Italians face after experiencing cancer.

While the new rules are being put forward by lawmakers rather than by the government, Meloni has tasked the health ministry with providing support to ease the legislation through parliament. [Rainews]

According to Elisabetta Iannelli, secretary general of the Italian Federation of Volunteer Associations in Oncology, the law will differentiate between those who fell ill after the age of 21 – who will acquire the right to be forgotten 10 years after the end of medical treatment, and those who fell ill before the age of 21, who will have to wait five years. [Rainews]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Rules to ban online 'glorification' of crime mulled

The Italian government has announced it is considering introducing a new law to ban the online "glorification of criminal activities" after a YouTuber crashed a Lamborghini SUV that was rented to film a video into a car carrying a five-year-old, killing the child. [Il Messaggero]

The accident caused a national debate over the appropriateness of certain types of internet content, including videos where YouTubers take on risky "challenges". Fears have been voiced that such content could encourage viewers to undertake copycat stunts.

If approved, the new rules would prohibit filming and sharing online any illegal conduct that could be replicated. The penalty would be one to five years in jail for both minors and adults.

According to the Italian National Institute of Health, 6.1 percent of children aged 11 to 17 have undertaken risky challenges posted on social media. [Sky TG24]

(ps/pk)

Italy: New law planned on problem of short-term rentals as tourism rises

Italy is drawing up a bill that aims to safeguard the residential character of historic city centres as tourist numbers rise to pre-pandemic levels.

A housing emergency is unfolding in such areas as inhabitants move away due to homes increasingly being turned into short-term rental accommodation that is too expensive for locals, according to news outlet Repubblica.

While many local authorities are trying to regulate short-term rentals, only in the northern city of Venice

does the mayor have the power to impose limitations on accommodation of this type in the historic centre of the city.

Tourism Minister Daniela Santanche is preparing a bill that would allow owners who rent out such property to accept only visitors who book a stay of at least two nights. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

(ps/pk)

Italy: PM Meloni talks tech with Elon Musk

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on June 15 held talks with tech billionaire Elon Musk in Rome on innovation, the risks and opportunities of artificial intelligence, and the rules of the EU single market. [Xinhua]

Musk voiced concern at "hyper regulations" in the European Union, and called for deregulation. [SwissInfo]

While in Rome, Musk met Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani to talk about cybersecurity, space and freedom of expression. The two also discussed industrial policy and electric mobility. [ANSA] Musk is the CEO of Tesla, the world's leading electric carmaker.

Musk's trip to Italy, which was welcomed by Meloni in a tweet, was part of a short European tour by the entrepreneur.

(ps/pk)

Italy: Flooding halts rail network in southern Basilicata region

Heavy rainfall in Italy's southern Basilicata region on June 2 caused rivers to overflow, causing damage to rail infrastructure and residential areas. [ANSA] [BNN]

Rail network company RFI said that the damage required a suspension of train traffic, expected to last until mid-July. [ANSA]

Meanwhile, Basilicata's regional government on June 5 signed investment agreements worth EUR 33.5 million. The funds, part of Italy's National Resilience and Recovery Plan, are aimed at mitigating flood-related damage to infrastructure and reducing hydrogeological risks in 13 municipalities. [ANSA]

In May, floods hit the northern Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, while heavy rain on June 2 led to post-harvest losses on the island of Sardinia and disruption in the southern mainland region of Apulia. [Virgilio]

(ps/pk)

Malta: EU's toughest abortion rules eased, activists demand broader reform

Maltese lawmakers have unanimously approved legislation easing the most severe abortion restrictions in the EU, but pro-choice activists say the new rules are unworkable and even dangerous.

The bill in its original form allowed access to terminations if a pregnant woman's life was in danger or if her health was at risk, but the latter provision was removed in subsequent amendments. [The Guardian] [BBC]

The approved legislation authorises abortion only if a woman is at risk of death, and if a panel of three doctors consents to the procedure. But if a mother's life is in immediate danger, doctors can terminate the pregnancy without the panel's go-ahead.

Unlike in some other Catholic countries, the law does not allow a termination if a pregnancy results from rape or incest.

The bill was introduced after a pregnant US citizen visiting Malta was denied an abortion in June 2022 following a miscarriage and was airlifted to Spain to undergo the procedure. [The Independent] [Euractiv]

Women who have terminations in Malta risk up to three years in prison, and assisting a woman in ending a pregnancy is punishable by up to four years in jail.

However, the law is rarely enforced. The last-known occurrence of someone being imprisoned under these rules was in 1980. Nonetheless, a woman was charged on June 1 for carrying out an abortion at her home, though she was ultimately given a conditional discharge.

Since 2000, three women have been convicted for undertaking an abortion but none were jailed. [The Guardian]

Last-minute amendments that watered down the new legislation sparked outrage among pro-abortion activist organisations. Voices For Choice, a coalition of

14 Maltese pro-choice groups, said the amended bill was “vague, unworkable, and even dangerous”, adding that the legislation “will lead to vulnerable pregnant persons being left permanently disabled or dead”.

The legislation also drew criticism from international organisations. Elisa De Pieri, a Europe researcher for Amnesty International, called the bill “reckless” and a “U-turn”.

After the bill’s approval, Malta’s abortion laws remain the strictest in the European Union.

In Poland, another Catholic nation, thousands on June 14 protested against restrictions on abortion, though terminations there are allowed if the health or life of a mother is endangered or if a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(qv/pk)

Malta: Financial services industry grows rapidly

The number of people working in Malta’s financial services industry has risen by over a quarter since 2021 and now stands at over 17,000, the Malta Financial Services Authority has said in an annual report. [Times of Malta]

The Mediterranean country, which is the EU’s smallest state, applies a tax rate of 5 to 10 percent on foreign-owned companies and is attractive to overseas investors. [Malta Today]

The inter-governmental Financial Action Task Force put Malta on its list of untrustworthy jurisdictions in 2021, but last year the international watchdog, which aims to counteract money laundering and terrorist financing, announced that the nation was no longer subject to its heightened monitoring process. [Reuters]

(nc/pk)

Portugal: Privatisation of flagship airline TAP set to start

The privatisation of TAP, Portugal’s flagship airline, is set to begin in July after the company has been independently valued. [Euractiv]

The Portuguese government has outlined two conditions for potential buyers: that Lisbon must remain an airport hub and that TAP will continue to play a strategic role for Portugal. [Reuters]

The government says that the Lisbon airport hub is crucial to bringing people into the country and supporting tourism. [Reuters]

In an announcement on June 21, Portugal's Infrastructure Minister Joao Galamba said he would "not give up keeping the Lisbon hub, safeguarding the company's strategic value, which is its Portuguese identity and, hopefully, the increase of its contribution to the economy." [Reuters]

It will be the second time that the government has sold the airline, which was privatised in 2015 before being renationalised a year later. [SimpleFlying]

The government wants to retain a strategic stake in TAP and will not offer all its capital to privatisation. [Reuters]

(jw/pk)

Portugal: Gov't approves lithium mine in boost to Europe's electric car industry

Portugal's environmental protection agency has approved plans by British-owned mining firm Savannah Group to create a lithium mine in the north of the country. [Reuters]

The site, in the town of Barroso, is set to become one of Europe's largest lithium mines, in what the Financial Times described as a "significant fillip" to Europe's electric vehicle industry.

It is the first time that a lithium-mining project has been given environmental approval in Portugal. The decision came despite fierce opposition from environmental organisations. [Portugal Resident]

Savannah Group has said it plans to begin mining in 2026 and that it will be able to provide lithium for up to 500,000 electric vehicles a year. [Financial Times] Extracting lithium is the first step in producing lithium-ion batteries for electric cars.

The move by Portugal comes after the EU in March announced a Critical Raw Materials Act which set out the European Commission's aim to streamline the permit process for mining companies in order to

ensure a more “sustainable and secure” supply chain for materials such as lithium. [Critical Raw Materials Act]

Benchmark Mineral Intelligence, an industry research group, has reported that demand for lithium in Europe is set to account for a quarter of global demand by 2030, despite just one percent of the material being produced in Europe at present. [Financial Times]

Portugal’s environment minister, Duarte Cordeiro, said he was committed to “minimising the impact” of the new mine on the surrounding area. [Blackout News]

(jw/pk)

Spain: National election could see conservatives and far-right take power

Spaniards head to the ballot box on July 23 in a snap national election that pollsters expect the conservative opposition People’s Party (PP) to win but without gaining a majority, meaning it would need the backing of the far-right to form a government. [The Guardian]

However, if the People’s Party and the far-right opposition Vox grouping fail to form a coalition government, Spain could face a repeat election. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who has for almost four years led Spain’s coalition administration, called an early parliamentary election after his governing left-wing Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) suffered losses across the country in a regional ballot on May 28.

Vox, meanwhile, has steadily gained ground since its launch in 2013 and has become the third largest party in the national parliament. [Reuters]

The prospect of rule by PP and Vox has raised concerns that Spain could veer sharply rightwards – fears that have been fuelled by recent pronouncements.

One such comment came from Jose Maria Llanos, Vox’s leader in the eastern-central Valencia region, who said that “gender-based violence doesn’t exist; violence against women doesn’t exist.”

Sanchez sounded the alarm bell, warning: “There is something much more dangerous than Vox, and that is a PP that assumes the postulates and policies of Vox.” [El Pais]

In an effort to distance itself from far-right views, PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo said: “Gender-based violence exists and our society is profoundly shaken every time a woman is murdered.”

Concerns in EU

In the European Union, some have voiced concern that a new Spanish government with vastly different political priorities to the currently ruling socialists could slow down the EU’s agenda, including reforms of the bloc’s power market and climate-change goals. [Reuters] *(See separate story in this issue)*

Spain took over the rotating presidency of the EU’s Council of Ministers on July 1. Johannes Greubel, a senior analyst at the European Policy Centre think tank, said: “For the EU and particularly the Council, these elections certainly come at a more than unfortunate time, as they will fundamentally impact the functioning of the Spanish presidency, particularly on a political level.” [Euronews]

A survey conducted between June 16 and 23 found that the PP was in the lead and was expected to win 140 seats in Spain’s 350-member lower house. Sanchez’s PSOE was in second place and likely to win 102 seats, while the Sumar leftist alliance was expected to get 35.

According to the poll, if the PP were to join up with Vox – which is expected to gain 35 seats – they would together be one seat short of an outright majority. [Reuters]

The PP has already entered into coalitions with Vox in cities across the country. *(See separate story in this issue)*

If elected, the People’s Party has said it plans to repeal Spain’s Law of Democratic Memory, which aims to remember the victims of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, and reassess parts of Spain’s abortion and euthanasia laws, among other plans. [The Guardian]

Left-wing parties unite

Over a dozen left-wing parties on June 9 agreed to unite to help boost Prime Minister Sanchez’s chances for re-election, forming a coalition including his ruling PSOE’s junior partner in government, Podemos, and the leftist alliance Sumar. [AP News]

Sumar said in a statement: “This is the broadest agreement ever reached in Spanish democratic history

between progressive and ecological forces." [France 24]

Jose Pablo Ferrandiz, a director at polling company Ipsos in Spain, said that a unified far-left was essential for Sanchez to have any chance of returning to power. [Reuters] Despite the leftist agreement, Podemos and Sumar disagree on various issues.

Sanchez said that the deal between Sumar and Podemos was "more than positive", and that "unity is the first proof of responsibility". [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Spain: People's Party in string of local coalition deals with far-right Vox

Spain's opposition conservative People's Party (PP) has struck coalition agreements with far-right party Vox in a number of regional parliaments and ten major cities after local elections on May 28. [Reuters] [Reuters] [El Mundo]

The Spanish press reported that as many as 135 local municipalities may be governed by the two groupings when all agreements have been finalised. [La Vanguardia] [El Pais]

Vox said in a statement that it was committed to abolishing "ideological" city departments, such as those focused on fixing inequalities, and would instead use the money to solve "real problems". [The Local]

The coalition agreements between the PP and Vox following the local elections are widely expected to be repeated on the national stage following the country's general election on July 23. (*see separate story in this issue*) [The Local] [Reuters]

The two parties made a deal on June 13 that will see Vox take the presidency of the regional parliament in Valencia, eastern-central Spain, while the PP will lead the regional government. [Reuters]

Vox also agreed to abstain from voting in the Balearic Isles, which allowed the PP to form a government alone. Like Valencia, the presidency of the Balearic Isles' regional parliament will be held by Vox. The two parties agreed on June 20 to crack down on illegal immigration in the Balearic Isles, a region which includes popular holiday destinations Ibiza, Mallorca and Menorca. [El Mundo] [Reuters]

Despite poor local election results, current Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez had what has been described by Reuters as a "consolation" victory after a leftist mayor was elected in Barcelona. [Reuters]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Weakened centre-right Citizens party will not run in general election

Following losses during Spain's regional elections, the centre-right opposition Citizens party said that it will not run in the country's July 23 parliamentary election.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called an early general election after his governing left-wing Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) also suffered losses across Spain in the May 28 regional ballot. The majority of votes were in favour of the conservative opposition People's Party (PP). [Europe Monthly June 2023]

The Citizens party garnered just over 1 percent of the total vote and lost seats in all 12 regional parliaments that were up for grabs. [Reuters]

The general secretary of the Citizens party, Adrian Vazquez Lazara, said: "We have concluded that as things stand today, the Spanish people do not see us as a transformative political alternative for our country."

People's Party leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo welcomed the Citizens party's decision, saying: "In my opinion, it would be a mature and responsible thing to do – and, in the name of the Spain that is hoping for a change, I'd like to recognise that." [The Guardian]

The Citizens party said that it would now focus on future elections. [El Mundo]

(km/pk)

Spain: Town to ban LGBTQ flag after far-right party takes over

Spain's eastern town of Naquera will ban the LGBTQ rainbow flag from being displayed on public buildings after the far-right opposition Vox party was victorious there in the country's May 28 regional elections. [Reuters]

Vox won the most votes in Naquera, but its candidate Ivan Exposito needed to strike a deal with the conservative opposition People's Party (PP) to secure his position as mayor. [La Vanguardia]

The pact between Vox and PP includes a promise to rename campaigns against gender-based violence as "campaigns against all violence". [Reuters]

In response, the Socialist Party of the Valencian Country, a regional branch of the nation's governing left-wing Spanish Socialist Workers Party, said on Twitter: "We cannot allow the right and the extreme right to end the rights that have been so difficult for us to achieve."

The ban has raised concerns that similar measures could be applied nationally if the People's Party wins general elections on July 23 in a coalition with Vox. [EU Observer]

(km/pk)

Spain: Exhumation of over 100 unknown Civil War victims starts

Forensic scientists began exhuming the remains of over 100 victims of the Spanish Civil War from a mausoleum near Madrid on June 12.

A team of 15 experts has been tasked with extracting DNA samples from people buried in the Valle de Cuelgamuros mausoleum and matching them with surviving relatives. The work is being carried out in a laboratory recently installed in the complex. [Euronews]

In April, the remains of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of Spain's fascist Falange movement, were exhumed from the same mausoleum and transferred to a cemetery in Madrid. The move was in preparation for the mausoleum to be converted into a memorial to the victims of the country's bloody 1936-1939 civil war. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

It is estimated that there are around 34,000 unidentified victims of the war buried in the mausoleum. [Reuters]

The exhumation is in line with the Law of Democratic Memory, which was backed by the governing Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and approved in August 2022.

Under the law, the government has been tasked with investigating cases of human rights violations involving the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, which lasted from 1939 to 1975, and searching for missing victims of the Spanish Civil War. [Europe Monthly September 2022]

Government spokesperson Isabel Rodriguez said: "Finally, and perhaps too long overdue, Spanish democracy is providing an answer to these victims."

Spain's conservative opposition People's Party (PP), which has opposed the Law of Democratic Memory, has said that it plans to scrap the legislation if elected in July 23 parliamentary elections. [AP News]

(km/pk)

Spain: Gov't asks EU for loans worth EUR 84 bn

Madrid has asked the EU for EUR 84 billion in loans from the bloc's Covid-19 recovery package for plans that include steps to boost Spain's energy, agriculture and technology sectors. [European Commission]

Madrid wants EUR 20 billion in such loans to be divided among Spain's autonomous regions, and the remainder to be managed by the central government formed after parliamentary elections on July 23.

Spain is also set to receive EUR 7.7 billion in direct aid in addition to the EUR 77 billion in subsidies that Brussels initially allocated the country, which was among the EU economies that suffered the most during the pandemic. [Reuters]

The European Commission has two months to formally approve the loans. [El Pais]

(km/pk)

Spain: Drought causes southern wetlands to dry up

Spain's Fuente de Piedra wetlands in the southern Andalusia region have nearly dried up after the country experienced one of its driest springs on record. [BBC][El Pais] [Reuters]

The wetlands were declared a natural reserve in 1984 and since then, more than 200,000 flamingos have

hatched there. However, Spain has received over 25 percent less rain than expected so far this year.

A local resident told Reuters: "Normally the lagoon is full of flamingos. There are also many other birds. It looks like climate change is causing this."

After three years of below-average rainfall, Spain is experiencing a drought that has sparked fears of more wildfires. Meanwhile, the government has approved measures like banning outdoor labour during extreme heat. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Europe Monthly June 2023]

(km/pk)

Vatican City: Pope leaves hospital after surgery

Pope Francis on June 16 left the Gemelli hospital in Rome after undergoing surgery for an abdominal hernia.

The 86-year-old pontiff was discharged after nine days of hospitalization, during which there were no complications, according to his medical team. [Reuters] [Vatican News] [Rai News]

Sergio Alfieri, the surgeon who operated on the pope, told reporters that the procedure went well and that Francis was in "better shape than before." [Reuters] [CNN]

The pope has previously suffered from a number of health problems, including intense knee pain, which gives him trouble standing for long periods and forces him to often rely on a wheelchair. [Rai News] [il Post]

Despite his age, Francis has given no indication that he intends to resign after ten years as pontiff. His predecessor, Benedict XVI, announced in 2013 that he was resigning, becoming the first pope to do so in centuries. [BBC] [il Post]

(nc/pk)

Vatican City: Synod of bishops to discuss LGBT+ rights, abuses in Catholic Church

The Vatican on June 20 released a document setting out issues – including LGBT rights, sexual abuses in the Catholic Church, women's rights, and marriage by

priests – that will be topics for discussion during the Synod, an assembly of bishops gathering to resolve key religious questions. [il Post] [Ansa] [La Repubblica]

According to Vatican News, an official Vatican website, the new document aims to guide the Synod in the direction of a more inclusive Church. [Vatican News]

A document published by Pope Francis in 2016 called "Amoris Laetitia", which generally called for the Church to be more open towards divorced people and same-sex couples, went in the same direction, according to online newspaper il Post. [il Post] [Reuters]

Pope Francis has stressed the importance of the Synod for the Catholic Church and has called this meeting more frequently than in the past. [La Repubblica]

In April, Francis agreed that for the first time women could take part in the assembly, which will consist of multiple discussion sessions this year and next. [La Repubblica]

(nc/pk)

Vatican City: Climate activists fined for glueing themselves to ancient statue

Two climate activists have been ordered to pay over EUR 28,000 in damages after they glued themselves to a famous sculpture from ancient Rome during a protest at the Vatican Museums.

A Vatican court on June 12 also handed out a nine-month suspended prison sentence to the two protesters from the "Last Generation" climate group. [Vatican News]

The two activists, aged 62 and 26, in August 2022 superglued themselves to the base of the Laocoon and His Sons sculpture, an artwork dating back to 40 BC. [Vatican News]

A Vatican prosecutor had asked for the pair to be given two years in jail, and for a third activist who filmed the protest to be sent to prison for a month. [Agensir]

Last Generation said in a tweet that the activists were accused of damaging the base of the sculpture, adding that the museum had glued two QR codes for audio guides on the base. [Agensir]

(ps/pk)

Vatican City: Magistrates work with Italy on high-profile case of missing girl

After running parallel investigations for years, Italian and Vatican magistrates are for the first time exchanging information on the high-profile case of a teenage girl who disappeared 40 years ago. [Ansa]

Fifteen-year-old Emanuela Orlandi, the daughter of a Vatican official, went missing in Rome on June 22, 1983, under circumstances that have never been cleared up. The case has gripped the public's imagination. [il Post]

During Sunday ceremonies in St. Peter's Square on June 25, Pope Francis said he would pray for Emanuela Orlandi's family. [TgCom] [Ansa]

He spoke as a demonstration calling for the truth in the case to be revealed took place in Rome, just a few metres outside the Vatican City's perimeters. [Rai News] [Corriere della Sera]

Pietro Orlandi, the girl's brother, said the pope's words were a positive sign that "Emanuela is no longer a taboo for the Vatican". [TgCom]

In a break with its previous stance, the Vatican recently decided to open an inquiry into Emanuela's disappearance. The move came after the release of a Netflix docuseries which explores various theories around the case. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

The series features a childhood friend of Emanuela who claimed that the girl was sexually assaulted by a member of the clergy a few days before she went missing.

(nc/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Opposition Social Democrats announce wrong winner in election for party chief

Austria's centre-left opposition Social Democrats (SPO) announced the wrong candidate as the winner of an internal election to choose a new party leader on June 3.

The party declared Hans Peter Doskozil, the governor of the eastern Burgenland province, as its new chief. Two days later, the Social Democrats admitted to making an error and Andreas Babler, the mayor of the south-eastern city of Traiskirchen, was instead announced as the winner, with over 52 percent of the vote.

SPO official Michaela Grubesa told reporters: "Unfortunately, the paper ballots did not match the result that was announced digitally". She attributed the mistake to "a colleague's technical error in an Excel list".

Babler said: "Today's low point with the reversed election result is painful for everyone involved, and I feel sorry not only for Hans Peter Doskozil, but for the entire movement."

The voting mix-up threatens to further diminish trust in the Social Democrats, who are trailing the far-right opposition Freedom Party (FPO) a year before parliamentary elections. [The Washington Post] [The Guardian] [The Hill] [Politico]

The Freedom Party is topping the opinion polls, ahead of the centre-right People's Party (OVP). The current ruling coalition comprising the OVP and the Greens has become increasingly unpopular amid public anger over its handling of issues like inflation and migration. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(ab/pk)

Austria: Terror attack on Vienna Pride parade foiled

Austrian security services on June 17 foiled a terrorist attack on the Vienna Pride Parade, arresting three Islamic State sympathisers just an hour before the march started, authorities announced.

The suspects, aged 14, 17, and 20, were detained in Vienna by Austria's special forces following searches of their homes that revealed firearms, knives and other lethal weapons.

The three are all Austrian citizens of Bosnian or Chechen origin. [Daily Mail] [MSN/The Telegraph]

(mr/pk)

Austria: Hitler's birthplace to be turned into police human rights training centre

The house in Austria where Adolf Hitler was born will be turned into a centre for providing police officers with human rights training, the country's interior ministry has announced after lengthy debate over what to do with the building. [BBC]

Hitler was born in the elegant 17th-century three-storey building in the north-western Austrian town of Braunau am Inn, near the border with Germany, on April 20, 1889. [CNN]

The building was rented from its owner by the interior ministry in 1972 and was sub-let to various charities.

In 2016, it was bought by the government, which wanted to demolish the house. However, the authorities feared that such a move could be seen as Austria denying its past, and the idea was shelved.

Concerns also arose that the site would attract Neo-Nazis and other far-right sympathisers of Hitler's ideology.

The house is now due to open as a police station and training centre in 2026. [The Guardian]

(mr/pk)

Austria: Mountain peak collapses as permafrost thaws

The peak of the Fluchthorn mountain on the border between Austria and Switzerland collapsed on June 12, sending more than 100,000 cubic metres of rock crashing into the valley below. No one was injured.

The collapse also triggered a huge mudslide. Geologists said the incident was likely caused by melting snow and thawing permafrost, exacerbated by climate change.

The 3,400 metre (11,155 foot) mountain is situated in the Silvretta Alps in western Austria's Tyrol region. [MSN] [CNN]

(mr/pk)

Czech Republic: Lawmakers back stricter conflict-of-interest rules

The Czech lower house on June 16 approved rules to tighten the country's law on conflicts of interest, a move aiming to ban politicians from owning media outlets. The measures are designed to curb the influence of populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis.

The amendment will prohibit government ministers, members of parliament and the president from owning media channels. In addition, companies connected to politicians would not be eligible for state subsidies and investment incentives. [Expats.cz]

Despite strong objections from Babis's centrist opposition ANO movement, the amendment was passed, with 85 lawmakers voting for it out of the 164 present in the 200-seat lower house of parliament. [Expats.cz]

ANO threatened to challenge the result in the Czech Constitutional Court.

The amendment still needs approval from the upper house and President Petr Pavel before it can come into effect next year. [Radio Prague] [Expats.cz]

Babis – who established the Agrofert conglomerate, comprising around 250 companies with interests in farming chemicals, food processing and the media – was required by law to transfer his ownership of the business to two trust funds in 2017 amid accusations

of conflicts of interest with his role as prime minister. [Reuters]

Babis was premier from 2017 to 2021.

The new amendment bans politicians from transferring ownership of media outlets to a trust fund or to relatives. [Radio Prague]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: Government struggling to meet budget deficit target

The Czech government's budget deficit target of 295 billion crowns (EUR 12.4 billion) for the whole of this year is already close to being exceeded, Prime Minister Petr Fiala has said.

The deficit reached an all-time high of 271.4 billion crowns in the first five months of the year, fuelled by spikes in pension pay-outs and energy price subsidies. The deficit was 189 billion crowns in the same period last year. [Brno]

"It has not been evolving well, but I still cannot say that we will not meet" the deficit target, Fiala said on June 4 in a television debate. [Reuters]

"We will see during the summer, when (extra) revenues will be coming, what the state of the budget is," added Fiala. He said that additional revenue is expected from the majority state-owned utility CEZ and European Union funds. [Reuters]

The centre-right government has also imposed a 60 percent levy on excess profits for major energy companies and banks from 2023 to 2025. The measure aims to raise some 85 billion crowns this year to fund energy subsidies without increasing government borrowing. [Bloomberg]

(yl/pk)

Hungary: Caps on food prices to end as steep inflation expected to fall

The Hungarian prime minister's chief of staff has announced that controversial price caps on food introduced at the start of last year amid surging inflation will end on August 1.

Gergely Gulyas said that price caps had been "useful" and pointed to forecasts indicating that inflation in Hungary would fall to "around 15 percent" in August. [MTI] [24.hu] [Index.hu]

Eurostat data from June 16 showed that Hungary's inflation stood at almost 22 percent in May, the highest in the European Union. The average rate in the EU was just over 7 percent.

Gulyas said that achieving single-digit inflation in Hungary by the end of the year, as promised by Economic Development Minister Marton Nagy, was "realistic". [24.hu] [Reuters]

Last December, the governor of Hungary's central bank blamed the government's fiscal policy for driving prices up and urged an end to price caps, which he said had led retailers to increase the prices of non-capped goods. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

(msa/pk)

Poland: Up to half a million march in pro-democracy rally

Up to half a million demonstrators protested in Warsaw on June 4 against what they claimed is the nationalist Polish government's flouting of democratic norms, in a rally that strengthened the opposition months ahead of parliamentary elections.

A sea of red and white flags – Poland's national colours – interspersed with blue European Union flags filled a thoroughfare in the centre of the capital and nearby streets as marchers chanted "Freedom, equality, democracy" and "We've had enough!"

The rally, attended by the leaders of most of Poland's main opposition groupings, appeared to be the country's biggest political demonstration in decades. [Politico]

'The silence is over'

The march was called by Donald Tusk, a former prime minister and the head of the largest opposition party, who told the crowds: "Democracy dies in silence but you've raised your voice for democracy today. The silence is over, we will shout." [Polish Radio]

Most opinion polls show that Tusk's centrist Civic Platform (PO) is trailing the ruling right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party. [Politico – poll of polls]

[ewybory.eu] But Tusk, a former president of the European Council, is hoping the mass turnout at the rally heralds a political wave that will sweep PiS from power in autumn general elections.

The nationalists' eight years of rule, which have seen Warsaw clash repeatedly with Brussels over allegations of democratic backsliding, have seen bitter rifts emerge in Polish society. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

The rally saw marchers descending on Warsaw from across the country, many of them undertaking long journeys, to protest at what they say is a multitude of government sins: creeping authoritarianism, erosion of women's rights – especially access to abortion, failure to ease the pain of double-digit inflation, and endemic cronyism.

"Today, I'm vowing to win, to make those in power accountable, to mend injustice so that in the end people can be reconciled," Tusk told marchers. [Polish Radio]

Laden with symbolism

The rally in Warsaw was held on the 34th anniversary of the country's first partially free parliamentary elections after World War II. The triumph of the pro-democracy Solidarity movement led by Lech Walesa in the landmark 1989 ballot paved the way to the end of communist rule in Poland after decades marked by violation of human rights and corruption.

The marchers paused by the presidential palace, calling for PiS-friendly head of state Andrzej Duda to be brought to account for what they claimed is his failure to stop the ruling nationalists from repeatedly violating the Polish constitution.

The rally was held days after Duda signed into law controversial legislation, which has been criticised by the United States, to set up a commission tasked with probing alleged Russian influence on Polish governments. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

The EU's executive has launched legal proceedings against Warsaw over the legislation, arguing that it breaches the bloc's laws.

Targeting Tusk?

The opposition warned that the commission could be used to interfere with free and fair elections, claiming it was designed to eliminate the political threat posed by Tusk, the man Law and Justice regards as its arch-enemy.

Anyone found by the commission to have been under Moscow's sway could be effectively banned from holding public office for ten years, under the original version of the legislation. Days after signing off on the law, Duda proposed a new softened version – later passed by the lower house – which removes this power of the commission.

Critics say, however, that the panel will still be able to smear the government's opponents.

Show of unity

Warsaw City Hall, which is controlled by the opposition, estimated that half a million people took to the streets of the capital in the June 4 rally. Warsaw police, who answer to the right-wing government, refused to give an official estimate of the turnout. [Rzeczpospolita]

A spokesman for the ruling Law and Justice party said the very fact that opposition supporters were able to march gave the lie to claims that the government had strangled democracy.

Law and Justice, which presents itself as "a good government for hard times", argues that it has improved the lives of ordinary citizens, especially the poor, while defending the country's Christian heritage against encroaching Western liberalism, including "gender ideology".

The ruling party tried to play down the impact of the march, but some commentators said that Law and Justice has so far failed to deliver a convincing response to the wave of pro-opposition support evident at the rally.

Wojciech Przybylski, editor of the Visegrad Insight news outlet, told the BBC that such protests showed Polish opposition groups were capable of putting their political differences aside to unite around a common cause.

State TV rails against rally

Despite the presence of placards inscribed with a series of asterisks – denoting the Polish for "F*** PiS" – a correspondent for *Europe Monthly* who attended the march found the protesters to be peaceful and good humoured.

The main national evening news bulletin by state-controlled broadcaster TVP – which critics describe as a crude government propaganda mouthpiece – castigated the marchers, announcing that the rally had been full of anger and hate.

(pk)

Poland: Main political groups campaign on 'Super Saturday' ahead of elections

Poland's main political parties held a series of campaign events on what was dubbed a political "Super Saturday" on June 24, ahead of autumn parliamentary elections. [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv] [TVN24] [Polskie Radio 24]

The ruling right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party and its main challenger, the opposition centre-right Civic Platform (PO), hosted rallies in the south-west of the country. [TVN24]

Smaller groupings, like the centrist Poland 2050, the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), The Left party, and the right-wing Confederation – all members of the opposition – also held meetings. [TVN24]

Law and Justice made national sovereignty the main theme of its event, which was reflected in the party's decision to hold its rally in Bogatynia. The small town is host to the Turow coal mine, which critics say harms the environment and which has long been a point of contention between the EU and Poland.

In May 2021, the European Court of Justice ruled that the mine must be closed, and began fining Warsaw EUR 500,000 daily when it did not comply. [Europe Monthly March 2022]

PiS has used the case to launch verbal attacks against what it says is political overreach from Brussels. [Europe Monthly March 2022]

"We have to fight a great battle for Poland," said Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who is head of the governing PiS party and the most powerful political figure in Poland.

'Attack on our sovereignty'

"What is happening around the [Turow] mine is nothing less than an attack on our sovereignty," Kaczynski added. [Notes From Poland]

Zbigniew Ziobro, the Polish justice minister and head of PiS's right-wing junior coalition partner Sovereign Poland, which was also represented at the rally, said: "Turow has become a symbol of Polish resistance to the Berlin-Brussels diktat, a symbol of energy sovereignty, but also a symbol of Polish sovereignty in general." [Notes From Poland]

Law and Justice also used its campaign meeting to criticise an EU migration and asylum plan, which would, among other things, require migrants to the EU to be redistributed across member states. [The Guardian] [Notes From Poland]

"We will defend ourselves, we will not allow others to decide for us," Kaczynski said. [Notes From Poland]

Meanwhile, the opposition Civic Platform used its own rally in the south-western city of Wroclaw as an opportunity to stress what its leader, Donald Tusk, says is the importance of maintaining strong ties with the EU. [Notes From Poland]

Referring to the PiS government's ongoing disputes with Brussels *(see separate story in this issue)*, Tusk, a former prime minister, said: "Anyone who declares war on the European Union and the West at this time threatens the interests of our homeland." [Polsat News] [Notes From Poland]

'Unbearable propaganda'

Tusk also accused the ruling party of cronyism and of spreading "unbearable propaganda" and "lies which flow every day from state media." [TVN24]

Critics have long accused the government of stacking national institutions with loyalists and of using state-run broadcaster TVP as a propaganda mouthpiece.

The centrist Poland 2050 and the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), which recently formed an alliance, held a rally together. The Third Way, as the alliance is named, offered voters its vision of an alternative to Law and Justice and Civic Platform. [Notes From Poland]

"We must end this civil war, because it will end tragically," said PSL leader Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, referring to bitter political rifts in Polish society. [Polskie Radio 24] [Notes From Poland]

His Poland 2050 counterpart, Szymon Holownia, added: "A divided home, a divided nation means insecurity... We will bring you peace, you will be safe with the Third Way." [Notes From Poland]

Meanwhile, women's rights were at the forefront of The Left party's messaging during its own campaign event in Warsaw, with sexual education, free access to contraception, and legal access to abortion the key promises made to voters. [Polskie Radio 24] *(See separate story in this issue on protest against Poland's abortion rules)*

"We... want a safe Poland, free, and a Poland free of fear for Polish women. Because a safe Polish woman is a safe Poland and this is our most important election promise," said Joanna Scheuring-Wielgus, an MP for The Left. [Polskie Radio 24]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Judiciary reforms breach EU law, top court rules

Several judicial reforms enacted in Poland in 2019 are in breach of EU law, the bloc's top court ruled on June 5. [Reuters] [France24] [BBC News] [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

A disciplinary chamber for judges, long the centre of a rule-of-law dispute between Warsaw and Brussels, was among the reforms declared illegal by the European Court of Justice. [BBC News] [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

"The Polish justice reform of December 2019 infringes EU law," the court said in a statement, adding: "The value of the rule of law is an integral part of the very identity of the European Union." [Reuters]

The case was brought to the European Court of Justice by the European Commission after Warsaw enacted controversial changes to its legal system four years ago. Brussels says that the changes undermine the political independence of the judiciary and erode rule-of-law principles. [Reuters] [Notes From Poland]

Polish Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro called the top EU court "corrupt" and said its verdict "was not written by judges but politicians because it constitutes a clear violation of European treaties." [France24]

The court also ruled that Warsaw's 2019 reforms violate the privacy of Polish judges by making public their membership of political parties or charities. [Reuters] [BBC News]

The European Commission levied fines of EUR 1 million per day on Poland in 2021 until Warsaw reversed the legal reforms. The fines were halved to EUR 500,000 in April 2023 after the Polish government made some concessions. [Reuters] [France24] [Politico]

In an effort to halt the fines and unlock frozen EU funds, Poland in July 2022 replaced its controversial disciplinary body for judges with a Chamber of Professional Responsibility. However, Brussels has said

that the new chamber does not go far enough to ensure the independence of the judiciary. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Warsaw and Brussels have been in a long-running dispute over rule-of-law concerns, with the EU continuing to block EUR 35.4 billion in Covid recovery funds for Poland. Brussels refuses to release the money until Poland's governing right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) party reverses some of the sweeping changes it has made to the Polish judiciary. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Critics claim that PiS has flouted a key tenet of liberal democracy by setting up a mechanism that can be used to punish judges who refuse to toe the ruling party's line. PiS denies the charges. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Thousands protest at abortion rules after pregnant woman dies

Thousands of people across Poland marched against the country's strict abortion laws after a woman died in hospital following complications with her pregnancy. [The Guardian] [AP] [Al Jazeera] [Notes From Poland]

The protests took place in cities and towns nationwide on June 14, with the government being blamed for the death of 33-year-old Dorota Lalik, whom demonstrators saw as the latest victim of abortion legislation. [The Guardian] [AP] [Al Jazeera] [Notes From Poland]

Critics say that Poland's tough rules have made doctors hesitant to perform terminations for fear of being prosecuted. Polish courts can issue prison sentences for illegal abortions. [Europe Monthly December 2021] [The Guardian]

A 2020 ruling from Poland's Constitutional Tribunal further curbed access to pregnancy terminations, even though the deeply Catholic nation already had some of the strictest abortion laws in Europe. [AP] [Europe Monthly December 2021]

The court's decision was enacted by the ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2021, effectively making most terminations illegal except if a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or if the health or life of a mother is endangered. [Al Jazeera] [Europe Monthly December 2021] [Notes From Poland]

Activists say the rules have led to the deaths of several women. The cases have prompted waves of demonstrations. [Al Jazeera] [AP]

Law and Justice has denied that the deaths, including that of Lalik, were due to the legislation. The governing party instead blamed the hospital in which Lalik was being treated. [Europe Monthly December 2021] [AP]

“In Poland, every woman whose health and life is in danger has the right to… have an abortion,” said Health Minister Adam Niedzielski, adding: “Health does not only mean physical health, but also mental health.” [The Guardian]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Technocrat government fails to secure vote of confidence, increasing instability

Slovakia’s pro-Western technocrat government failed to secure a mandatory vote of confidence in parliament on June 15, heightening political instability in the country.

The result of the vote means that President Zuzana Caputova has to dismiss the stopgap administration led by former central bank deputy governor Ludovit Odor, who was sworn in as prime minister on May 15 to head a 15-member cabinet until early parliamentary elections scheduled for September.

Caputova’s office said the president would ask Odor’s administration to remain in office with limited powers until a new government is formed. [AP News] [TVP]

Out of the 136 lawmakers present in the 150-seat parliament, only 34 expressed confidence in Odor's administration, while 43 voted against it, 54 abstained, and five did not vote. [Spectator] [TVP]

Lawmakers voting against the government included members of the leftist Smer party led by pro-Kremlin populist Robert Fico, the far-right Republika, and the far-right People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS). [Bne] [European Conservative] [BBC]

The outcome increased political turbulence in the country, which has battled soaring inflation and a cost-of-living crisis without a proper government since last December, when former Prime Minister Eduard Heger’s ruling centre-right coalition lost a no-

confidence vote initiated by the opposition. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Initially, Caputova asked Heger to stay in a caretaker capacity with limited power until early elections could take place. But Heger, who faced opposition calls to step down, tendered his resignation on May 7 after four ministers left his interim administration. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Caputova then named Odor to lead a stopgap government. She said the aim of the new technocratic administration was to stabilise the country and to prepare next year's budget. [AP News]

Under Heger's pro-Western government, Slovakia was a staunch backer of Ukraine in its fight against Russia's invasion. Slovakia became the second NATO country to donate warplanes in response to requests by Kyiv. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The main opposition leader, Robert Fico, whose leftist Smer party is topping opinion polls, has vowed to halt military support for Ukraine.

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: President will not seek re-election next year, unnerving Western allies

Slovakia's President Zuzana Caputova has said she will not seek re-election next March, an announcement likely to unsettle NATO allies who were counting on her to uphold a pro-Western trajectory amid the rise of pro-Russian populism in her country.

Slovakia's first female president said on June 20 that after carefully assessing her options, she would not run again, citing "personal" reasons. [Guardian]

Caputova, who won a five-year term in 2019, has firmly supported Ukraine in its fight against Russian occupation. She has visited Ukraine twice since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. [AP News]

"I'm sorry if I disappoint those who expected me to run again," said Caputova, adding the fate of Slovakia, an EU and NATO country with a population of 5.4 million, does not rest "in the hands of one person". [FT]

Targeted by death threats

The divorced mother-of-two said that her "consideration" for her family was among the reasons for her decision not to seek re-election. [Guardian]

Caputova has been constantly attacked for backing Kyiv by pro-Kremlin populist opposition leader Robert Fico, whose left-wing Smer party opposes military aid for Ukraine.

She announced in May that she would take legal action against Fico, who accused her of being an "American agent", after she and her family received death threats using the same language. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Fico claimed Caputova, a strong advocate of liberal politics, was a US puppet and that the technocrat government she recently appointed stood for the interests of George Soros, a Hungarian-American financier who has been a target of the far-right for his support of liberal and humanitarian causes. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

"Please do not see my decision to not run as proof that you can't succeed with decency," said Caputova, who remains Slovakia's most trusted politician, even if her popularity dipped slightly after she swore in the technocratic cabinet to stabilise the country. [Bne] *(See separate story in this issue)*

The president wields significant influence in Slovakia, holding the power to veto laws passed by parliament, ratify international treaties and appoint top judges.

Anti-Ukrainian populism

Caputova's term in office has been marked by the coronavirus pandemic and soaring inflation, as well as the war in Ukraine. [AP news]

Meanwhile, recent political turbulence has benefited former Prime Minister Fico, who has voiced scepticism over EU sanctions against Russia and insisted that "Ukrainian fascists" started the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Fico and his leftist Smer party are the frontrunners to win early parliamentary elections, slated for September 30. The ballot was called after former Prime Minister Eduard Heger's pro-Western centre-right coalition lost a no-confidence vote.

Senior European diplomats have raised concerns over Fico's potential return to power, which they say could challenge EU and NATO unity over Ukraine. [Europe Monthly March 2023]

Fico's campaign is capitalising on a groundswell of public opinion against Kyiv. He has highlighted the costs Slovaks have to bear to back sanctions against Russia, which was Slovakia's main energy supplier before the outbreak of the Ukraine war.

Fico has portrayed himself as a defender of Slovakia's sovereignty amid pressure from NATO, criticising Heger's government for giving Ukraine MiG-29 fighter jets without parliament's approval. [FT] [Europe in Review March/2023]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Small parties may struggle to make it into parliament, nation's pro-Western course at stake

Several small political parties running in Slovakia's September parliamentary elections are struggling to reach a 5 percent share of voter support – the threshold they would need to make it into parliament, which could lessen the chances of a pro-Western government being formed.

The elections could result in a substantial shift in Slovakia's foreign policy. Leading in opinion polls is the leftist opposition Smer party headed by populist Robert Fico, who has opposed military aid to Ukraine and voiced scepticism over Western sanctions on Moscow. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The formation of a coalition government that is friendly to the West after the September elections could hinge on the ability of smaller pro-Western parties, such as the centre-right Democrats, to exceed the 5 percent threshold required for parliamentary representation. The Democrats, led by former Prime Minister Eduard Heger, are polling at 3.2 percent. [Euractiv]

Polling data suggests that five groupings are hovering at between 4 and 5.5 percent. [Bnn]

The opportunity for parties to merge – and so attract more votes – by adopting a joint name expired on June 9.

"Personally, I don't foresee big mergers anymore, which unfortunately could mean big vote wasting," said Marian Viskupic, a member of parliament for the opposition centre-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, which is polling at 5.3 percent. [Euractiv]

(y/pkl)

Slovakia: Citizens at risk of Russian disinformation, president warns

Slovakia has been facing a pro-Russian disinformation campaign as the nation heads into early parliamentary elections in September, the country's president has warned.

"(As a) younger democracy, we are more vulnerable," Zuzana Caputova told Politico in an interview published on June 3.

Caputova, a pro-EU liberal lawyer, added that "some" politicians, including lawmakers, were disseminating pro-Kremlin disinformation in parliament. [Politico] [Bnn]

Slovakia's leftist opposition Smer party, led by populist Robert Fico, refuted suggestions that it was involved in spreading Russian propaganda, saying that such claims were a "very dirty political practice." [Politico]

Fico, who has been prime minister three times, has vowed to halt weapons deliveries to Ukraine. He has also insisted that "Ukrainian fascists" started the war in Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Smer is topping opinion polls ahead of a September general election. Although it claims to fully support Slovakia's membership of the EU and NATO, doubts remain as the party has adopted increasingly harsh rhetoric against Brussels. [Bnn] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

A poll conducted by the Globsec think tank in May indicated that Kremlin propaganda may have found fertile ground in Slovakia. The survey found that only 40 percent of Slovaks thought Russia was responsible for the war in Ukraine, while 34 percent believed that the West was responsible for the conflict.

According to Globsec, the results suggest that Slovaks are more likely to believe disinformation narratives than citizens of other Central European countries.

(yl/pk)

Slovenia: New nuclear plant could cost up to EUR 11bn

The construction of a second reactor at the Krsko nuclear power station in Slovenia would cost EUR 11 billion if the most powerful option under consideration – a 1,600 MW unit – is chosen, Prime Minister Robert Golob has said. [Euractiv]

Discussions initially focused on a new 1,000 MW unit. However, state-owned utility Gen Energija, the investor in the project, suggested that a larger unit would make more sense due to projected increases in electricity consumption. [Euractiv] [World Nuclear News]

Golob assured parliament that the costs and other project details would be known before a final decision was made. A referendum will then be held to seek national consensus for the construction of the unit, he said. [Euractiv] [Balkan Green Energy News]

The final decision on Krsko2 is expected to be made by Gen Energija in 2027. [Balkan Green Energy News]

(ss/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Rail workers' strike causes disruption

Seven hundred employees of Danish national rail operator Danske Statsbaner (DSB) went on strike from June 12 to 14 over pay, causing train cancellations and delays throughout the country. [The Local] [CPH Post]

DSB employees are disgruntled over what they deem insufficient salary increases. The leader of rail maintenance workers' union Fællesorganisationen

Jernbanedrift, Jens Kjeldsen, said that during negotiations employees were offered a 2.7 percent wage hike, which the union declined. [The Local]

Staff are also unhappy with the way DSB has "dictated wage negotiations," as Kjeldsen put it. [The Local]

(ts/pk)

Denmark: Move to limit Big Tech's harvesting of children's data

The Danish government said on June 12 that it aims to raise the age at which minors can consent to share their personal data with tech giants like Google, Meta and Snapchat from 13 to between 15 and 16. [dig watch] [Children in the city] [Reuters]

The government also wants to stipulate that companies must gain parental approval to use data from children younger than 13.

The move comes after Germany implemented a similar law, setting the age limit at 16. Other European countries including Hungary, Lithuania and the Netherlands are looking to do the same. [Reuters] [Verdict]

(ts/pk)

Denmark: Climate activists deflate tyres of SUVs

Climate activists from a group called the Tyre Extinguishers deflated the tyres of over 100 sports utility vehicles in Denmark's capital on June 7. [AP]

The group says on its website that its objective is "to make it impossible to own a huge polluting 4x4 in the world's urban areas." It adds that it is defending citizens against air pollution, climate change and unsafe drivers. [Tyre Extinguishers]

The perpetrators tweeted a picture of flyers they left on the vehicles they targeted, reading: "WARNING: Your gas guzzler kills". [The Local]

However, local Copenhagen television news channel Kosmopol reported that the vehicles targeted were electric as well as gasoline-powered. [AP]

The group's action in the Danish capital was the latest in a string of similar stunts carried out throughout Europe and North America. [The Guardian]

(ts/pk)

Finland: New government sworn in as nation swings to the right

The leader of the conservative National Coalition Party, Petteri Orpo, has been sworn in as prime minister, ushering in a new coalition government seen by analysts as the most right-wing in Finland's recent history. [AP] [Reuters]

The ruling coalition includes the far-right, anti-immigration Finns Party, the smaller, centre-right Christian Democrats and the centrist Swedish People's Party of Finland. [AP] [Reuters] [BBC]

In a major political shift, the administration led by Orpo is set to adopt stricter immigration policies while simultaneously loosening commitments related to environmental issues. It is also expected to cut unemployment and welfare benefits in order to reduce the country's fiscal deficit. [Reuters] [BBC]

The new government, formed after parliamentary elections in April, has a majority of 108 seats in the 200-seat Finnish legislature. [Guardian]

Orpo's 19-member cabinet was approved by parliament, after which President Sauli Niinitso formally appointed it on June 20. [AP]

Orpo, who has previously served as finance minister and interior minister, and who has led the National Coalition Party (NCP) since 2016, takes over the reins of a country that is a new member of NATO. After years of non-alignment, Finland joined the Western military alliance on April 4, a move triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

The NCP's Elina Valtonen has been appointed as Finland's second-ever female foreign minister, while the party's vice chair, Antti Hakkanen, is the new defence minister. [AP] [Bloomberg]

The far-right, populist Finns Party, which secured the second-highest number of votes in the parliamentary election, has obtained several key portfolios in the new government. Party leader Riikka Purra has been appointed finance minister. The Finns Party also has

six more positions in the cabinet, including that of interior minister and justice minister. [Yle] [Guardian]

Coalition negotiations went on for 11 weeks, during which the Finns Party and the Swedish People's Party faced problems in reaching a consensus on immigration, climate policy and public finances. [Europe Monthly May 2023] [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Tougher on immigration

Finns Party chief Purra announced that the coalition had reached an agreement on several immigration measures. These include reducing refugee quotas, increasing the requirements for work-based immigration, and implementing stricter criteria for foreigners to obtain citizenship. [Guardian]

"I am delighted that together with our negotiating partners we have agreed on an immigration package that can rightly be called a paradigm shift in immigration policy," she said.

"Finland has been the only Nordic country with a looser immigration policy. This changes now." [Guardian]

The new government plans to decrease the number of refugees received through the UN refugee agency from 1,050 annually to 500. It is also aiming to establish a separate social security benefits system for immigrants, a proposal that experts have cautioned may potentially violate the constitution. [Guardian]

The NCP won 48 seats in the April parliamentary elections, while the Finns Party garnered 46. The left-wing Social Democrats party of then-Prime Minister Sanna Marin came third with 43 seats and will now be part of the opposition. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Economy minister quits over Nazi references

Finland's newly-appointed economy minister, Vilhelm Junnila stepped down on June 30, just 10 days into his term, after he was accused of repeatedly making references to Nazi ideology. [Reuters] [Yle]

Junnila, from the far-right Finns Party, assumed office as a member of a new coalition government formed after parliamentary elections in April.

“For the continuation of the government and the reputation of Finland, I see that it is impossible for me to continue as a minister in a satisfactory way,” he said in a statement. [Reuters] [Yle]

Junnila had survived a no-confidence vote on June 28 called by the centre-left Green Party in protest at his alleged far-right links. [Helsinki Times]

“The connections to far-right movements are not a single mistake, misunderstanding or bad humour, but rather repeated, systematic and comradely liaison,” Green Party MP Hanna Holopainen said when she proposed the motion a day earlier. [Al Jazeera]

Public broadcaster YLE reported that during election campaigning Junnila was seen congratulating a fellow party member on his candidate number, 88, which is recognized as a neo-Nazi symbol and used in far-right circles as a substitute for the “Heil Hitler” salute. [Yle]

“First of all, congratulations for the excellent candidate number. I know it’s a winning card. Obviously, this ‘88’ refers to two H letters which we won’t say more about,” Junnila had said in a speech at a campaign-related event on March 10, according to YLE. [Yle] [Reuters]

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, the leader of the conservative National Coalition Party, said that Junnila’s resignation was the “right and only possible solution.” [Reuters] [Yle]

According to Emilia Palonen, a senior political science lecturer at the University of Helsinki, the controversy has put into question the stability and unity of Orpo’s new government. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Ex-foreign minister, central bank chief to run for president

Former foreign minister Pekka Haavisto and central bank chief Olli Rehn have announced they will run for head of state in Finland’s presidential election next year.

Haavisto, who launched his campaign on June 8, was runner-up to the current president, Sauli Niinisto, in the last two such elections in 2012 and 2018. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Niinisto is not eligible to run again in elections slated for January 28 because he has served two terms as

head of state, the maximum allowed.

On June 21, the governor of Finland's central bank, Olli Rehn, threw his hat into the ring, saying he would be taking leave of absence to start his presidential campaign. [Reuters]

Rehn boasts an impressive CV, having been an EU commissioner for a decade from 2004 to 2014, then a vice-president of the European Parliament from 2014 to 2015. He subsequently returned to domestic politics and served as Finland's economy minister from 2015 to 2016. He has headed the central bank since 2018. [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, businessman-turned-politician Harry Harkimo entered the race on June 28. Unlike his rivals, he has spent most of his professional career in the corporate world. [Ilta Sanomat]

Further candidates are expected to announce bids for the presidency. A recent poll published by the Helsingin Sanomat daily found Haavisto to be the current favourite, with 36 percent support. [Reuters]

His popularity likely derives from Haavisto's role as a key negotiator in accession talks that led to Finland joining NATO, a move supported by the majority of Finns. [AP/The Independent] [Reuters]

Finland became a member of the Western military alliance in April following decades of official military nonalignment, a move triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Unlike in previous elections, Haavisto will be running independently from his party, the Greens. He has said that he wants to gain cross-party support in his endeavour to bring about unity in Finland during "these difficult and exceptional times". [Euractiv]

Although the president in Finland has fewer powers than the prime minister, the head of state can veto legislative proposals and has a substantial say in foreign policy.

(ts/pk)

Finland: Electric car sales too low to meet national emissions goal, says study

A new study has concluded that current sales of electric vehicles are not high enough for Finland to achieve its target of halving polluting emissions from

transport by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. [Helsinki Times]

The survey by the Finnish Information Centre of the Automobile Sector (AUT) forecasts that by 2030, 70 percent of newly registered cars will be electric. [yle]

However, 94 percent of the 2.7 million cars on Finnish roads at present have combustion engines. [Helsinki Times] [Euractiv] On average, such cars are scrapped when they are 22 years old.

The managing director of the Finnish Central Organisation for Motor Trades and Repairs (AKL) said that the number of plug-in cars will not exceed that of combustion-engine vehicles until 2037. [Helsinki Times]

A survey by the Automotive Information Centre found that only 42 percent of Finnish motorists would opt for an electric vehicle as their next car. Such vehicles cost EUR 50,000 on average in Finland, where drivers complain of a lack of charging stations. [yle] [Euractiv]

(ts/pk)

Finland: Rail and port projects receive over EUR 60m from EU

The European Commission has granted Finland EUR 61.31 million for seven transportation projects.

The money, which will come from the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), will mainly be used to improve rail transport and port infrastructure throughout Finland. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Government]

Among the aims of the projects is streamlining freight operations and maritime transport. [Finnish Government]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Phones to be banned in schools after declining exam results

Finland is introducing a law banning mobile phones from schools in an attempt to counteract poor exam results. [Euractiv][The Telegraph]

Finland has seen a decline in pupils' attainment in reading, mathematics and science since 2006,

according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

To reverse this downward trend, the new Finnish government has pledged to pump EUR 200 million into the education system. It will also ban phones from the classroom in order to eliminate distractions for pupils. [Euractiv] [The Telegraph]

(ts/pk)

Norway: Deep-sea metal mining plans cause environmental concerns

Norway is preparing to open a vast marine area for deep-sea mining, hoping to extract metals essential for batteries and electric vehicles, in a project that has triggered environmental concerns and which could ignite geopolitical tensions.

The area, roughly the size of Germany, stretches from the Norwegian Sea to Norway's Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard. [High North News]

The proposals for mining at depths of up to 4,000 metres have sparked disputes with fishing businesses and environmentalists. Norway's own government-run environment agency and the Norwegian Fishermen's Association have voiced concern about the impact of such mining on marine areas. [WWF]

Oslo also risks sparking geopolitical tensions if it starts mining close to Svalbard. [Mining Technology]

The international Svalbard Treaty, signed in 1920, gives mining rights to Norway but also to other countries including Denmark, France, the UK and Russia. However, Norway asserts larger territorial water rights around Svalbard than the UK and Russia. [Mining Technology]

(pp/pk)

Norway: Parliament approves new oil venture in North Sea

The Norwegian parliament on June 5 gave the green light for hydrocarbon firm Aker BP to exploit new oil reserves discovered in the North Sea. [NS Energy] [OGV] [Upstream]

While initial estimates put the size of the new reserves, found in the Yggdrasil area of the Norwegian North Sea, at 18 to 45 million barrels of oil, Aker BP announced on June 9 that the field was far larger than initially thought, containing up to 90 million barrels. [Aker BP 1] [Aker BP 2]

The discovery comes as Norway has adopted a crucial role in European energy security, supplying vast quantities of both oil and natural gas to the EU following the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year. [New York Times]

The CEO of Norway's Aker BP, Karl Johnny Hersvik, said the decision by lawmakers "has said yes to thousands of jobs and great value creation" in the country. [Offshore]

(hj/pk)

Norway: Gas output restricted by fault at Shell plant

Norwegian gas output has been restricted because of a fault at the Nyhamna processing plant operated by Shell on the country's western coast. [MSN] [Reuters I]

The facility initially halted operations on May 19 for maintenance. After a series of faults were discovered in a water-based cooling system, a prolonged outage was announced from June 13. [Reuters II]

The problems are expected to keep the plant offline, and Norway's gas production capacity constricted, until mid-July, according to state pipeline operator Gassco. [Upstream]

European gas futures rose in response to the outage announcement in mid-June. Norway is Europe's primary supplier of natural gas. [Bloomberg]

(hj/pk)

Norway: New government buildings must have solar panels from 2024

All new government buildings in Norway will be required to install solar panels from next year as the country strives to diversify its energy mix and minimise dependence on conventional sources. [Reuters] [ESG]

Legislation planned for 2024 will enforce the same rules for larger commercial buildings.

At the same time, the government plans to streamline the permit process for commercial solar installations and to promote local distribution of solar-generated electricity.

Norway has set a target of achieving 8 terawatt hours (TWh) of solar power production a year by 2030, equivalent to about 5 percent of the country's annual electricity output in 2020. [Energy Facts Norway] At the moment, solar power contributes around 0.3 TWh per year in Norway, according to energy regulator NVE.

(pp/pk)

Norway: Gov't wants 40% gender quota for boards of large and mid-size firms

At least 40 percent of seats in the boardrooms of large and mid-size unlisted private firms based in Norway will have to be filled by women under a bill that was unveiled by the government on June 19. [Reuters I]

The move comes after previous laws that in 2005 required publicly listed firms to enact a 40 percent gender quota, and required large non-listed firms to do the same in 2022. Companies that did not conform faced shutting down. [Reuters II]

The latest measures would affect a far higher number of firms than previous legislation in 2005 and 2022, with around 8,000 companies expected to be initially covered by the new rules before rising to 20,000 firms by 2028. [Bloomberg]

"Norway is the first country in the world to take this step," the government said on its website.

The government added that it needed to intervene due to slow progress in increasing women's representation at the executive level.

In 2003, 15 percent of board members in limited-liability companies were women, rising only to 20 percent in 2023. [Norwegian Government]

(hj/pk)

Sweden: New 'fossil-free' energy target facilitates new nuclear power plants

Sweden's parliament voted on June 20 to abandon a policy of making electricity generation 100 percent renewables-based by 2045 as it looks to boost energy security by building new nuclear power plants.

The country will instead aim to have 100 percent "fossil-free" electricity generation. [Reuters] [Sydney Morning Herald]

Ninety-eight percent of electricity in Sweden already comes from non-fossil fuel sources. [Euractiv II] [World Nuclear Association]

At a multilateral meeting in Paris on May 16, Stockholm pledged to support a "nuclear alliance" of European states. [Euractiv I] [French Government]

Sweden pursued a policy of phasing out nuclear energy through legislation passed in 1980, but extended the use of ten reactors in 1997. In 2010, the government repealed the policy of phasing out nuclear power. [World Nuclear Association]

Sweden has some of the largest uranium deposits in Europe, but extraction of the metal was prohibited in the country in 2018. The government will seek to overturn this ban in order to reduce its reliance on imported uranium for nuclear reactor fuel, The Sydney Morning Herald reported.

A three-way, centre-right coalition took power in Sweden in October following parliamentary elections, forming a new minority government reliant on a far-right party to secure majorities in parliamentary votes. [Europe in Review November 2022]

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Deposit estimate upped for Europe's largest rare-earth site

Swedish mining firm LKAB has increased its estimate of rare-earth element deposits – vital for producing electric vehicle batteries – in the Kiruna area in the north of the country.

The Per Geijer deposit in the region is now estimated to contain 1.3 million tonnes of such materials, up from a previous projection of over 1 million tonnes, according to LKAB.

The site was already known to have the largest deposits of rare earth elements in Europe.

LKAB now intends to apply for an environmental permit required for extraction to begin.

"In the coming decades, the need for a number of minerals such as those containing rare earth elements will increase many times over as a result of electrification," said LKAB CEO Jan Mostrom. [Reuters]
LKAB

(pp/pk)

Sweden: Call to combat rising gun violence after deadly shooting

Following a deadly shooting on June 10 in a southern Stockholm suburb, a Swedish police union has called on the government to establish a crisis commission to combat increasing gun violence. [DW] [Reuters]

The shooting, which was suspected to be part of a feud between criminal gangs, left two people dead and another two wounded. [AP]

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson condemned the killings on his personal Facebook page, citing a police estimate that more than 30,000 people in Sweden are presently connected to criminal gangs.

Gun violence in Sweden is on the rise, with 62 shooting-related deaths in 2022, up from 45 in 2021. Such violence has frequently involved immigrants, leading to criticism of gun control legislation and accusations that the authorities have failed to effectively implement social integration strategies for immigrants and refugees.

At the same time, support for right-of-centre parties in Sweden has surged, especially for the far-right, anti-immigration Swedish Democrats on whom Kristersson is dependent for a "confidence and supply" majority in parliament. [AP] [Euro Conservative] [San Diego Tribune] [TVP]

Kristersson's ruling coalition in the Riksdag, Sweden's unicameral legislature, is composed of both centre-right and right-wing parties. These identified combating gun violence and curbing immigration as key targets in their manifestos ahead of a general election last September. [Euractiv]

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Ambitions to host 2030 Winter Olympics unveiled

Sweden on June 15 announced its aspirations to host the 2030 Winter Olympics following a feasibility study conducted by the country's Olympic committee.

Sweden has not yet proposed an exact location for holding the games. [AP] [SportsBusiness]

Other bids have come from Salt Lake City (United States), Sapporo (Japan), and Vancouver (Canada). Each of the alternative bids, however, faces a set of challenges. [Japan Times] [Salt Lake Tribune]

The US Olympic Committee has cited concerns over the proximity of the games to the 2028 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. Meanwhile, the Japanese bid lacks public support following numerous scandals surrounding the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, according to the Japan Times.

The Canadian attempt is perhaps the most problematic, as Vancouver's provincial government has not supported the bid by the nation's Olympic committee, news outlet NBC reported.

The Swedish effort appears to have the highest level of public approval as, according to the country's Olympic committee, 70 percent of Swedes support a bid for the 2030 Winter Olympics if the budget is kept within a reasonable level.

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Watchdog finds evidence of unjustified food price hikes

Sweden's competition authority has said it has found signs of unjustified price hikes by the country's food industry amid high inflation in food prices.

The authority said in a report released on June 27 that it was investigating signs of limited competition in the groceries market. "Already in our first results there are indications that indicate the risk of a lack of competition and unjustified price increases," it added.

The high level of brand concentration and merger agreements on the Swedish grocery market in recent years have restricted consumer choice, the competition authority said.

Supermarket chain ICA enjoyed a 53 percent share of the country's market in 2022, with retailers Axfood and Coop accounting for most of the rest. [Reuters]

The situation has been exacerbated by supply chain problems resulting from the war in Ukraine. Swedish food inflation exceeded 20 percent in the first quarter of 2023. [BBC]

While inflation in food prices has fallen since then, it remains one of the highest in Europe, standing at 14 percent in May, according to the Swedish central bank.

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Quarter of online gambling is illegal, trade group warns

Almost a quarter of online gambling in Sweden is unlicensed, illegal and untaxed, the country's trade association for online gambling (BOS) said in a report published on June 19.

In total, 77 percent of online gambling takes place through licensed sites, according to BOS. This is below the Swedish government's goal of 90 percent. [BOS] [SBC]

Heavy restrictions on licensed gambling have led consumers to pursue unlicensed alternatives, particularly in regard to sports betting and online casinos, BOS added. [BOS] [CasinoBeats]

(hj/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Belgium joins European aviation combat programme

French President Emmanuel Macron announced on June 19 that Belgium would be joining the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) – led by France, Germany and Spain – as an observer. Belgian Minister of Defense, Ludivine Dedonder, confirmed that Belgium would be a FCAS observer for six to 12 months. [LeSoir]

Previously, Brussels had shown intent to join the American-led F-35 programme, before announcing a change of heart in June, preferring to join a multinational European sixth-generation fighter programme.

Prior to Macron's announcement, given that French defence contractors were divided on whether Belgium would be welcome, it was unclear whether Brussels would opt for the Franco-German-Spanish programme or the British-Italian-Japanese programme. [EurasianTimes]

Macron also announced that Belgium, in conjunction with France, Cyprus, Estonia and Hungary, signed a letter of intent to jointly purchase French Mistral transportable lightweight anti-air missiles – the first time such a joint purchase has been made. [BreakingDefense]

Brussels also signed a final procurement agreement with the Netherlands on June 22. The two will jointly procure four new anti-submarine warfare frigates, two for each navy. [NavalNews]

(sw/gc)

Belgium calls for a joint European approach to Iran

Belgium Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne and Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib called for a coordinated European approach to Iran and the European hostages it is holding before the Parliament's Foreign Affairs and Constitutional Affairs Committees on June 5. [Belga] [europarl]

The parliamentary hearing followed Operation Blackstone, in which Belgian NGO worker Olivier Vandecasteele and three other Europeans were exchanged for Iranian diplomat Assadolah Assadi. The implementation of the second and final part of Operation Blackstone resulted in the release of two Austrians and a Dane from Iranian prisons. [Belga] [europarl]

(gt/gc)

Latvia will have one more seat in the European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) Constitutional Affairs Committee decided that Latvia will have nine seats instead of eight in the next EP. The Committee proposed to increase the number of seats in the EP by 11. Spain and the Netherlands will each get two of these seats and one will be allocated to Austria, Denmark, Finland, Slovakia, Ireland, Slovenia and Latvia. [LSM]

The draft proposal for a European Council decision was adopted with 15 votes to 8, and 5 abstentions. [European Parliament]

(aog/gc)

Spanish EU presidency: PM says industry, migration pact will be key

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has said that reindustrialising Europe and finalising a migration pact are his priorities during his nation’s turn at the rotating presidency of the EU’s Council of Ministers.

Spain took over the helm of the council from Sweden on July 1 and will hold the position for six months. The council – formally known as the Council of the European Union – co-legislates for the EU alongside the European Parliament.

Sanchez said: “I think that over the past four years we have learned many lessons from what the process of deindustrialisation in Europe has been and also what have been the consequences and the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that we have been accumulating as a result.” [Politico]

Meanwhile, Sanchez’s decision to prioritise an agreement on migration follows a breakthrough in EU discussions about asylum rules which had been under negotiation for years. [Euractiv] [Politico] The agreement needs to be approved by the European Parliament. (*See separate story in this issue on EU moving to reform migration rules*)

Sanchez said: “We are all victims of irregular migration” and called for unity among EU members. The Spanish prime minister would have to achieve a migration agreement before April 2024, when the current European Parliament dissolves before elections. [Euractiv]

Sanchez unveiled his priorities during a conference in Madrid where he insisted that the July 23 general election in Spain would not disrupt Madrid’s presidency of the EU’s Council of Ministers. [Politico]

(jw/pk)

EU holds emergency meeting with Kosovo and Serbian leaders

Following months of increasing tension between Kosovo and Serbia, the European Union (EU) called the countries’ leaders to Brussels for crisis talks. [The Guardian]

Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksander Vucic both travelled to Brussels on June 22 following requests by the EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell for a meeting. Both leaders met with Borrell separately. [Politico] [Euractiv]

Tensions between the two countries increased following the decisions of Kosovar-Serbs to boycott local elections in Serbian-majority regions of Kosovo. As a result of the boycott, the remaining voting population of the four regions elected four minority ethnic-Albanian mayors. [Politico]

Serbs have protested against the newly elected mayors since May 26, when they began blockading the entrance of the mayors to municipal buildings and

subsequently clashed with NATO's KFOR peacekeeping forces. [Balkan Insight]

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s KFOR peacekeepers were sent to northern Kosovo on May 26 in order to assist Kosovan police in protecting the municipal buildings targeted by Serbian protesters. Both the EU and US have called for Serbia to remove protesters from the four municipalities and for Kosovo to remove police officers and call for new snap elections. [Reuters] [ABC]

Whilst the EU brokered meetings did not result in a breakthrough, Borrell said that both Kosovo and Serbia had "agreed on the need for new elections." [Politico]

"We agree that we cannot have mayors in their offices protected by NATO forces forever, being elected with two percent or three percent of the census – that is not a sustainable solution," Borrell said. Borrell warned that the EU would take "political and financial" measures to "increase the leverage" against either Kosovo or Serbia if neither country took steps to normalise relations with the other. [Euractiv] [Euractiv]

"Member states remain ready to take further measures if no progress is seen and they rightly underlined that from future EU members, we expect European behaviour," Borrell said.

"Member states and the [European] Commission can consider taking political measures to limit political contracts and to put on the pipeline financial measure in order to tune our cooperation according to their behaviour," Borrel told reporters following a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg. [Euractiv]

High Court orders release of three Kosovo police officers

Three Kosovan police officers arrested and detained by Serbian police officers were released on June 26 after a Serbian court order.[Politico]

While Serbia claims that the Kosovar police officers were arrested in Serbia on June 14, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti alleged that the police officers were taken from Kosovo in an act of "revenge' for the earlier arrest of a Kosovo Serb, Milun Milenkovic, who had been arrested in Kosovo on suspicion of orchestrating attacks against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacekeepers on June 13. [Balkan Insight]

The ruling by the High Court in the Serbian city of Kraljevo effectively confirmed the indictment against

the three police officers while allowing for their return to Kosovo.

Serbia's arrest of the Kosovar police officers was condemned by the United States. European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, called for the release of the policeman "immediately and unconditionally." [Balkan Insight] [Reuters]

"This abduction consists of serious human rights violations and must be reprimanded. The Serbian aggression must be held accountable," Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti said. [Politico]

(jn/gc)

EU lawmakers question Hungary's ability to hold bloc's presidency

European Parliament lawmakers have passed a resolution questioning Budapest's ability to hold the presidency of the EU's Council of Ministers from July 2024 in light of what they say are "deliberate and systematic efforts" by the Hungarian government to undermine the bloc's values. [European Parliament] [Euronews] [DW] [Le Monde]

The rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers lasts six months and, while it does not carry executive powers, allows the holder to set the agenda, host meetings and steer negotiations. [Euronews]

The European Parliament "questions how Hungary will be able to credibly fulfil this task in 2024, in view of its non-compliance with EU law (...) as well as the principle of sincere cooperation" reads the resolution adopted by lawmakers on June 1. [Euronews]

The resolution is not legally binding but marks further political friction between Brussels and the nationalist government of populist Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. [Euractiv]

Last year, the executive European Commission froze billions in EU funding for Hungary over rule-of-law concerns and took Budapest to the bloc's top court over a Hungarian law deemed by Brussels to be anti-LGBT. [Europe Monthly August 2022] [Europe Monthly December 2022]

Poland's right-wing prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, Orban's ally in opposing interference from Brussels in domestic affairs, described the resolution

by MEPs as “a clear violation of European rules”. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

EU’s top court rules Hungary broke law on asylum seekers

The European Court of Justice has ruled that Hungary violated EU law by compelling asylum seekers to present themselves at the country’s embassies in Serbia or Ukraine.

The judgement by the EU’s top court, issued on June 22, said that rules introduced by the government in Budapest deprived third-country nationals of their right to seek asylum in Hungary effectively. [Euractiv] [Politico]

The rules have been a key component of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s anti-migration policies. [Politico]

Under the legislation, asylum seekers in Hungary or arriving at its borders are required to travel to the Hungarian embassy in Kyiv or Belgrade to request permission to file an asylum claim. Only 44 people sought international protection in Hungary in 2022. [Le Monde]

Orban’s right-wing government, which has adopted a tough stance on migrants and asylum seekers since Europe’s 2015 refugee crisis, has previously tried to justify the rules by saying they helped to prevent the spread of Covid-19. [Euractiv]

The European Commission, which brought the case against Hungary's government, will now decide whether to demand the repeal of the law or impose fines on Budapest. [Euractiv]

(ss/pk)

EU executive extends import restrictions on Ukrainian grain

The European Commission on June 5 announced the extension of a temporary arrangement whereby five of Ukraine’s neighbours – Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia – can ban imports of Ukrainian grain. [Reuters] [Politico]

The five neighbouring countries unilaterally introduced import curbs in April to tackle an increased influx of cheap Ukrainian grain and oilseeds to their markets, which pushed down local prices. The measures were then retroactively ratified by Brussels. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The import bans, whose scope is now set to be narrower, have been extended until mid-September, despite Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky calling for them to be lifted "unconditionally". [Politico]

The European Commission, the EU's executive, said in a statement that the measures continue to be necessary due to "the exceptional circumstances of serious logistical bottlenecks and limited grain storage capacity ahead of the harvest season". [European Commission]

However, German Agriculture Minister Cem Ozdemir, from the Green party, said that the commission's decision "not only takes away from our European solidarity with Ukraine but also plays into the hands of Putin". [Euractiv]

(msa/pk)

Over 95m EU citizens at risk of poverty or social exclusion: Eurostat

Over 95 million people across the European Union – almost 22 percent of the bloc's population, lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion last year, the EU's statistics office, Eurostat, has said.

The figure was fractionally lower than in 2021.

According to "Living conditions in Europe", an annual study published by Eurostat in June, women, young adults aged 18-24, people with a low level of education and the unemployed were more likely to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion than other groups. [Eurostat]

The Czech Republic had the lowest percentage of its population living in such conditions – 11.8 percent, while in Romania the figure was 34.4 percent – the highest in the EU.

(nc/pk)

Belarus offers visa-free travel arrangement for 73 countries

Belarus will offer visa-free travel for citizens of 73 countries during the month of July, a decision that has raised concerns of another migrant crisis in neighbouring Poland and Lithuania. [AP News]

President Alexander Lukashenko signed a decree allowing ticket holders for the annual Slavic Bazaar music festival to enter Belarus without a visa between July 4-23. [AP News]

Stanisław Zaryn, the deputy of the Polish Minister Coordinator of Special Services, said on twitter: "The migration facilitation introduced, if successful, may lead to an increase in the influx of people to Belarus, which Lukashenko's services will use to intensify the hybrid operation conducted on our eastern border."

The Lithuanian government thinks Belarus could try to provoke migrants at the border during the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation summit to be held in Vilnius on July 11 and 12, according to the Associated Press. [AP News]

Poland has already built a 186 kilometres-long wall along its northern border with Belarus, following the 2021 Belarus-Poland border crisis. Lithuania also has strict border rules and continues to monitor its border with Belarus. [SchengenVisaNews][NYTs][AP]

(aog/gc)

Hungary vetoes EU military aid for Ukraine

Budapest has vetoed a new EUR 500 million EU military assistance package for Ukraine, demanding that Kyiv should first remove Hungary's largest commercial bank from its list of "international sponsors of war."

Hungary reaffirmed its veto on June 26 during a meeting of European foreign affairs ministers in Luxembourg. [Euronews]

As in former tranches of European military aid for Ukraine, unanimous agreement from all 27 EU member states is required. [Euronews]

Hungary is unhappy that its OTP bank, which is continuing to do business in Russia, has been designated by Kyiv as a "sponsor of war" on a public list

of private companies that is intended to shame such organisations.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell described the holding up of aid for Ukraine as a “lamentable situation”. [Politico] [Euronews]

(ss/pk)

Romanian MEP says European court only way to enter Schengen zone

A Romanian member of the European Parliament (MEP) said on June 6 that the only way for Romania to enter the Schengen zone is through proceedings at the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

Romanian accession to the Schengen zone was not on the agenda of the CJEU and home affairs meeting in Luxembourg that same week, MEP Eugen Tomac said.

In February, Tomac filed a case against the Council of the European Union with the CJEU based on the Council not accepting Romania as a Schengen zone member in December. Opposition came from Austria – citing corruption concerns.

Because the vote requires unanimity and Austria has not changed its position, the subject cannot be discussed again at the next European Union interior ministers' meeting. [Euractiv]

Since December last year, Finland, Greece, Germany and Spain have all pledged support to Romania. [SchengenVisa] [RomaniaInsider]

(sw/gc)

ICJ opens case between Russia and Ukraine alleging genocide

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) opened a case on June 5 brought by Ukraine against Russia for allegedly claiming that acts of genocide were committed by Kiev in the eastern provinces of the country. [ICJ]

Ukraine filed an application in February last year to start proceedings against Russia concerning “a dispute relating to the interpretation, application and fulfilment of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention

and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Genocide Convention)."

In the application, Ukraine declared that "the Russian Federation has falsely claimed that acts of genocide have occurred in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts of Ukraine, and on that basis recognized the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic' and 'Luhansk People's Republic', and then declared and implemented a 'special military operation' against Ukraine." [ICJ]

Article 9 of the Genocide Convention provides that disputes relating to the interpretation, application and fulfilment of the Convention must be submitted to the ICJ at the request of any party to the dispute. [ICJ]

Russia's objection

Russia submitted preliminary objections to the ICJ in October 2022 as the Federation believed that the court did not have jurisdiction over it because the Genocide Convention does not regulate the use of force between states.

For the first time after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia showed a change in attitude towards the court by showing up to the hearings previously avoided. [Reuters]

In March last year, the Court held a public hearing on Ukraine's request for the indication of provisional measures to stop Russia from continuing the invasion. Russia did not attend the hearing but sent a letter stating its critique of the court's too-stretched jurisdiction. [ICJ]

(ava/gc)

Sweden still waiting to join NATO as Turkey, Hungary stall

Sweden's hopes of joining NATO before or during the military alliance's annual summit in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, from July 11 to 12, could be dashed amid resistance from Turkey and foot-dragging by Hungary.

Even as Western leaders urge Ankara to greenlight Sweden's accession, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has voiced anger at the burning of a copy of the Koran in Stockholm in late June.

Following decades of official military nonalignment, Sweden and its neighbour Finland simultaneously

applied to join NATO in May 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine. [Europe Monthly June 2022]

Finland officially became a member of the Western alliance on April 4, but Turkey and Hungary have delayed Sweden's bid.

Budapest has accused Stockholm of "spreading blatant lies about Hungary". Sweden has been one of the most critical voices in the European Union over Hungary's problems with the rule of law. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Meanwhile, Ankara has accused Sweden of sheltering members of militant groups it deems to be "terrorists". [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Stockholm implemented a tougher new anti-terror law on June 1, but Erdogan said that such moves were "meaningless so long as [Kurdistan Workers' Party] supporters organise demonstrations freely" in Sweden. The Turkish leader's comments came during a phone call with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on June 25. [Al Jazeera]

Stoltenberg said the next day that he had agreed with Erdogan, the Swedish and the Finnish governments to call a "high-level" meeting in Brussels before the Vilnius NATO summit. The meeting is to be held on July 6 and will include foreign ministers, heads of intelligence, and national security advisors. [AA] [AP]

'Arrogant Western people'

The burning of a copy of the Koran outside a Stockholm mosque by two men on June 28, amid a major Islamic holiday, sparked outrage in Turkey and other Muslim countries.

"Those who allow these under the pretext of freedom of expression and turn a blind eye to this viciousness (...) will not reach their goals," Erdogan said in a video message for the Muslim Eid holiday. He did not specify which goals he was referring to. [Bloomberg]

"We will teach the arrogant Western people that it is not freedom of expression to insult the sacred values of Muslims," he added.

Stoltenberg told reporters in Brussels the same day that the burning of the Koran was "offensive and objectionable [but] not necessarily illegal in a sovereign legal system". [TASS]

After the incident, Morocco recalled its ambassador to Sweden, while other countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia condemned the act. [DW]

In Iraq, several hundred people protested outside the Swedish embassy in the capital, Baghdad. [New York Times] [Al Jazeera]

Hungarian MPs delay vote

Meanwhile, Hungarian lawmakers have postponed ratifying Sweden's NATO accession, making it unlikely that the Nordic country will join the alliance during the Vilnius summit. [AP]

Deputies decided at a committee meeting on June 29 not to include the ratification process on the agenda of a parliamentary session early this month.

"As it stands today, there won't be a ratification before the NATO summit," said Agnes Vadai, a lawmaker with the opposition Democratic Coalition party.
"[Hungarian Prime Minister] Viktor Orban moves in tandem with Erdogan," she added. [Reuters]

(msa/pk)

Pope sends cardinal on peace mission to Ukraine and Russia

Pope Francis sent Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, an expert in conflict mediation, on a peace mission to Kyiv on June 5 and 6 to hold talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

On June 28, Zuppi travelled to Moscow to meet Yuri Ushakov, a foreign policy advisor to Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Both trips were designed to brief Francis and help him plan the Vatican's next steps in attempting to attain peace in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. [ANSA]

Cardinal Zuppi, who is the president of the Italian Bishops' Conference, was appointed in May as the head of the Vatican's peace mission, which aims to try to end the war in Ukraine. In the 1990s, Zuppi acted as a mediator in Mozambique's civil war. [Reuters]

After talking to Zuppi, Zelensky said that any plan for a peaceful resolution of the conflict should be formulated by Ukraine, given that the war is being waged on Ukrainian territory. Zelensky added that, in this context, the support of the Vatican and of other partners in achieving a "Ukrainian peace" was welcome. [ANSA]

Pope Francis drew criticism when, in an interview published last year, he said that moves by NATO may have "somehow either provoked or not prevented" the war in Ukraine. But the same month he also implicitly accused Moscow of "armed conquest, expansionism and imperialism".

The Vatican has said it is willing to hold talks with both Kyiv and the Kremlin. [Religion News]

After Zuppi travelled to Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Interfax that he appreciated "the Pope's efforts in contributing to the cessation of the armed conflict," and that, although no agreement was reached during the visit, "dialogue will continue if necessary."

Zuppi also met Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, who, along with Putin, has been charged with the illegal deportation of children from Ukraine by the International Criminal Court.

In a statement, Lvova-Belova said that she and Zuppi had discussed "humanitarian issues related to military operations and the protection of children's rights." [Euractiv] [Vatican News] [Barrons]

(ps/pk)

Netherlands and Canada file torture case against Syria at the ICJ

The Netherlands and Canada are taking Syria to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, accusing it of numerous violations of the United Nations (UN) Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the court said in a statement on June 12.

The Dutch foreign ministry said it had been trying for more than two years to reach a solution with Syria through negotiations, but without success. [NLTimes] [Government]

The Netherlands said that Syria had been informed of the case before the International Court of Justice by the Dutch Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva. There, Syria is being asked to "comply with its obligations under the UN Convention against Torture, to which it is also a party." [NLTimes] [Government]

The Netherlands has said it was formally holding the Syrian regime responsible for human rights violations. Canada joined this process in 2021. Since the events of

the 2010 Arab Spring, the Syrian regime has allegedly used force to suppress civilian demonstrations. The country then descended into a bloody civil war, in which chemical weapons were allegedly used. [NLTimes] [Government]

(gt/gc)

Europe leads North America in renewable energy generation but lags China

The Statistical Review of World Energy released on June 26 by the Energy Institute showed the EU leads North America in renewable energy generation for 2023. [EI] [BP]

Previously published by BP from 1952-2022 until transitioning to the new institute supported by BP, the statistical report shows that European renewable energy generation was approximately 27 percent higher than North America at 1024 terawatt hours (TWh) for the year compared to North American solar and wind power generation of 817.8 TWh. China led the statistical ranking with 1367 TWh.

Europe added over 41 gigawatts of solar power in 2022, up 47 percent from 2021 according to the EC, and which the World Economic Forum credits with providing additional relief from the curtailment of Russian gas supplies. [EC] [WEF]

(rw/gc)

Romania co-chairs the fifth WPS-FPN meeting in Washington

Romania co-hosted the fifth capital-level meeting of the Women, Peace, and Security Focal Points Network (WPS-FPN) alongside the United States from June 6 to 8 in Washington.

Romania and the US are co-chairs of the WPS-FPN for 2023, following on from South Africa and Switzerland in 2022. [WPS-FPN]

First launched in 2016, the WPS-FPN is a cross-regional forum coordinated by UN Women intended to share best practices and experiences related to advancing the global WPS agenda – also known as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, passed in 2000.

The theme of this year's meeting was advancing the adaptability and evolution of WPS as a framework for implementing policy change.

Specific topics of discussion included how WPS can be applied to diverse policy initiatives, and how partnership with civil society can enhance adaptability, inclusivity and effective implementation of this framework for democratic change. [US government]

(sw/gc)

China opposes EU Commission move to stop using Huawei services

Beijing has criticised a European Commission decision to flag Chinese telecommunications giants Huawei and ZTE as representing a greater security risk to the EU than other 5G suppliers and to stop using services supplied by the two companies.

The Commission's decision follows moves by the US, UK, and Australia, which have banned the sale and import of equipment from the two Chinese firms. Ten out of the 27 EU member states have restricted or banned Huawei and ZTE from their 5G telecoms networks. [Reuters 1]

China said the European Commission lacked a legal basis and factual evidence for its decision, and accused the EU of a "brazen violation of the principles of market economy, free trade and fair competition." [Reuters 2] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

At the end of last year, Chinese vendors supplied more than 50 percent of 5G equipment in 31 European countries, according to independent research. [Center for European Policy Analysis]

(aml/pk)

EU, India discuss Brussels' Global Gateway strategy

The EU commissioner for international partnership, Jutta Urpilainen, met with India's external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, on June 11 to discuss how to synergize Brussels' Global Gateway strategy with New Delhi's development partnership programmes.

The meeting took place on the sidelines of a G20 development ministers' summit in the Indian city of

Varanasi. [Lokmat Times]

The Global Gateway Initiative, widely seen as an attempt to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, is a worldwide strategy by the EU to invest in infrastructure projects and establish economic partnerships. It is part of plans for European strategic autonomy, and for establishing bigger, more democratic and more sustainable trade networks for Europe and its partners.

Jaishankar also met with Germany's minister for economic cooperation and development, Svenja Schulze. Berlin wants to consolidate ties with New Delhi to broaden so-called triangular cooperation whereby both countries make their expertise available to developing nations, especially in Africa. [Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development] [AiR, No.24, June/2023, 2]

(aml/pk)

Singapore warns EU, US chip subsidies will drive up costs

Massive subsidies planned by the EU and the US for new microchip projects will upset a "finely balanced" global market and could end up "driving up costs", the chief executive of Singapore's Cyber Security Agency, David Koh, said on June 15. Singapore produces 5 percent of the world's semiconductor wafers. [POLITICO]

The US Congress last year passed the CHIPS and Science Act, a law that pumps some USD 52 billion into domestic chipmaking facilities and research labs.

The EU followed suit and put forward its EUR 43 billion Chips Act, which is intended to lay the financial groundwork for doubling the bloc's share of global chip output to 20 percent by 2030. [UK Government] [AiR, No.25, June/2023, 3]

(aml/pk)

Norway's international peace forum criticised for inviting Taliban

The Oslo Forum, an annual international meeting in Norway focusing on conflict mediation, has drawn criticism for inviting Taliban officials. [Oslo Forum 2023] [Reuters]

The Norwegian foreign ministry's decision to invite high-ranking Taliban officials to last year's gathering sparked a public outcry. This year's event, held from June 13 to 15, saw the invitation of lower-level officials from the Taliban foreign and interior ministries.

Norwegian engagement with the Taliban government at any level has provoked criticism from the Afghan diaspora and women's rights groups, who have accused Oslo of normalising relations with the regime in Afghanistan.

The latter has been accused of violating a range of human rights and has not been formally recognised by any Western government since taking over the country in 2021 as foreign troops withdrew. [Afghanistan International] [Reuters]

The Norwegian government has historically favoured political engagement with Afghan actors rather than geo-political isolation. [Oslo Forum 2023] [Khaama Press]

(hj/pk)

Belgium invests EUR 50 million to boost climate resilience in Sahel

Belgium will invest EUR 50 million to boost climate resistance in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal for its 2022 to 2027 Climate in the Sahel portfolio. Specific aims include the improvement of resource management and natural ecosystem restoration.

The Sahel region is a biogeographic area with a hot, semi-arid climate. It is located between the Sahara Desert in the north and the Gulf of Guinea to its south .

Due to climate change, the Sahara has expanded dramatically in recent years. This project hopes to restore degraded land. [BrusselsTimes]

(sw/gc)

EU leaders offer aid to crisis-hit Tunisia, seeking to curb migration

In an effort to curb rising migration to Europe, EU leaders offered Tunisia aid of EUR 1 billion to save its precarious economy in exchange for tighter border controls during talks with the country's president, Kais Saied, on June 10. [AP]

Tunisia lies only 150 kilometres from the Italian coast and is a key part of a route used by people-traffickers to smuggle migrants seeking a better life in Europe. The North African country is experiencing an economic crisis and its stability is of strategic importance to the EU. [AP]

An EU delegation including European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte promised a comprehensive plan of investments along with increased cooperation with Tunisia in the economic and energetic sectors. [Palazzo Chigi]

The planned measures include financial assistance, upgraded trade agreements, renewable energy projects, and an undersea high-speed broadband cable connecting Tunisia to Europe. [Palazzo Chigi]

To stem irregular migration, Von der Leyen said the EU aimed to "break the cynical business model of smugglers and traffickers" through steps such as providing EUR 100 million for border management in Tunisia, as well as for search and rescue operations at sea. [Palazzo Chigi]

Meloni said that the plan was an important move to tackle the issue of migration in an "integrated way", adding that she considered it "a result of Italy's diplomatic work." [Palazzo Chigi]

Saied, however, said that measures to curb migration should not be at Tunisia's expense, adding that his nation would not be "guarding borders on behalf of other countries." [Repubblica]

While visiting Tunisia earlier in June, Meloni offered support to help the country overcome its difficulties in drawing funds from the International Monetary Fund. Saied has refused to comply with conditions set by the IMF, including cuts to state subsidies and the privatisation of state enterprises, saying that such steps could cause civil unrest in his country. [AP]

On June 10, the Fitch Ratings agency downgraded Tunisia from CCC+ to CCC-, saying that delays in finding an agreement with the IMF were causing uncertainty about the country's financial stability. [ANSA]

French interior minister travels to Tunis

French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin travelled to Tunis on June 18 to meet with his German and Tunisian counterparts, Nancy Faeser and Kamel Feki, respectively, to strengthen security cooperation and tackle illegal immigration. [AfricaNews]

The meeting followed what is thought to be one of the deadliest migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean in recent years. A fishing trawler carrying 750 migrants capsized near Greece in mid-June while travelling from Libya to Italy. It is estimated that at least 500 migrants died. *(See separate story in this issue)*

Greek authorities are currently under heavy criticism for failing to respond quickly enough to avert such a high death toll. Athens has defended itself, arguing that the migrants refused help, preferring to continue on to Italy. [APNews]

(ps-ew/pk)

Austria, Malta stand firm on neutrality toward war in Ukraine

Austrian Defence Minister Klaudia Tanner and her Maltese counterpart Byron Camilleri on June 20 discussed the war in Ukraine and their policy of neutrality on the conflict. [Euractiv]

Tanner said in the run-up to the meeting: "While there are not many neutral states left, it is all the more important that we are heard accordingly."

Vienna's neutrality toward the war is a highly debated topic, both inside and outside the country. Tanner's refusal to send soldiers for demining operations in Ukraine was heavily criticised by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen.

However, Vienna has decided to allocate EUR 2 million to help remove mines in Ukraine. At a press conference, Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced that the money would be offered to the International Trust Fund (ITF), a humanitarian organisation specialising in the removal of explosive remnants of war. [Vindobona] [Vienna Times]

Vienna last year donated funds for demining in Ukraine through the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Austria has backed all EU sanctions against Russia. [IPS Journal] [Kildare] [Euractiv]

(mr/pk)

Belgian ambassador to Russia summoned over weapons used by anti-Putin militias

The Belgian ambassador to Russia, Marc Michielsen, was summoned by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs on June 6 over the use of Belgian weapons by anti-Putin militias fighting alongside Ukrainian troops in the Russian territory of Belgorod. The weapons in question are Special Operation Forces Combat Assault Rifles.

This came after the Washington Post published images showing a Belgian FN Scar rifle, Czech rifles, as well as Polish and American armoured vehicles in Russian territory, on June 2. The ambassador defended Brussels, stating that weapons sold to Ukraine are done so following very strict regulations – only to be used to defend its territory, not expand. [LeSoir]

This came just before the US Central Intelligence Agency shared information with Belgium that suggests Ukraine is implicated in sabotaging the Nord Stream Pipeline in September 2023. [RTBF]

(sw/gc)

EU delegation to Cyprus urges sanctions to be applied on Russia

A European Commission delegation met Cypriot officials in Nicosia on June 20 to stress the importance of sanctions against Russia being implemented. [CNA] [Cyprus Mail]

Cyprus officials outlined steps they have carried out to implement EU sanctions. [Cyprus Mail]

In April, 23 Cypriot individuals and around a dozen companies deemed to be “financial fixers” for Russian oligarchs were hit by UK and US sanctions. [Cyprus Mail]

Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides vowed to adopt a “zero tolerance policy” towards such practices. [Washington Post]

The British government said that Cypriot financial fixers had knowingly assisted sanctioned Russian oligarchs Roman Abramovich and Alisher Usmanov. [The Guardian] [Cyprus Mail] [Reuters]

(nc/pk)

Czech president says Russians living abroad should be under surveillance

The Czech president has said that Western security services need to strictly monitor Russian citizens living in the West amid Moscow's war against Ukraine.

"I believe that, as in the case of a number of world conflicts in the past, when there is an ongoing war, the security measures related to Russian nationals should be stricter than in normal times," President Petr Pavel told US-financed broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on June 14. [Radio Free Europe] [Reuters] [Politico]

Pavel, a pro-Western former NATO general, said he sympathised with Russians living abroad who had endured hardship because of the conflict, but added that heightened surveillance was simply "the cost of war".

Britain's defence ministry has estimated that 1.3 million people have left Russia since the start of the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. [BBC]

Support for Ukraine

Pavel also said he expected "strong language" from allies to offer long-term support for Kyiv at the July NATO summit in Vilnius. [Radio Free Europe]

He voiced backing for Ukraine becoming a member of both NATO and the EU, adding that the accession process could only start once the war ended.

The Czech Republic, itself a NATO and EU member, has been a staunch backer of Ukraine, providing Kyiv with humanitarian and military aid.

In late April, Pavel became the first head of state to visit Ukrainian troops in the east of the country since Russia's invasion. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(yl/pk)

Finland expels nine Russian diplomats on suspicion of espionage

Finland said on June 6 it was expelling nine diplomats from Russia's embassy in Helsinki for suspected spying.

The Finnish president's office said in a statement: "Their actions are contrary to the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations." [Reuters] [Politico]

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine last year, European security services have cracked down on alleged Kremlin spies, with numerous countries including Sweden and Norway ordering Russian diplomats out. [BBC] [Euractiv]

According to Western intelligence officials cited by Politico, some 400 Russian intelligence officers working under diplomatic cover – about half the total number active in Europe – have been expelled.

Russia, meanwhile, recently ordered Swedish and Norwegian diplomats to leave Moscow, and shut the Swedish consulate in St Petersburg in what has been labelled a tit-for-tat move. [AP] [Reuters]

(ts/pk)

Germany boosts military presence in Lithuania to strengthen NATO's eastern flank

Germany announced on June 26 plans to increase its military presence in Lithuania, fortifying the eastern defensive lines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius confirmed the commitment during his visit to Vilnius, stating that up to 4,000 German soldiers will be permanently stationed in coordination with NATO in the Baltic nation. "Germany stands by its commitment as a NATO member, as Europe's biggest economy, to stand up for the protection of the eastern flank," Pistorius emphasised after meeting with Lithuanian defence officials. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

The addition of 4,000 German soldiers will provide significant support to the Lithuanian armed forces, making it the Bundeswehr's largest overseas troop location. With a population of only 2.8 million and 15,000 soldiers, including 3,500 conscripts, the small Baltic nation is strategically positioned on the high-tension borders of Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

Germany's military has been on the ground in Lithuania since 2017, leading NATO's multinational battlegroup with a reinforced battalion of around 1,600 soldiers, including 780 from Germany. In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, the German government pledged to have a combat-ready force to defend Lithuania in the event of an attack. [Associated Press] [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

Previously, Germany had been hesitant to station soldiers permanently in NATO's eastern flank, relying instead on rotational deployments every four to six months. However, the war in Ukraine altered Europe's security landscape, prompting Germany to redefine its role as a country capable of assuming a strong leadership position in Europe. Earlier in June, Germany released its new National Security Strategy, emphasising the need to enhance its military capabilities. [New York Times] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Associated Press]

Lithuania has been pushing for a permanent full German brigade for months. Pistorius justified the decision to fulfil these demands by invoking Germany's history during the Cold War. "We were the ones who could always rely on our NATO partners to stand by us in an emergency and to stand up and fight with us for our freedom and security in Germany," he said. [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Associated Press]

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda recently called for a further increase in troop presence in light of the failed uprising by the Wagner mercenary force in Russia.

"The events of the past weekend in Russia have shown the instability of the Kremlin regime," he stressed. Pistorius clarified that the German brigade deployment could not be immediately relocated but assured that Germany would be prepared to respond swiftly in case of an emergency. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, also present in Vilnius, dismissed calls for an immediate troop buildup along the alliance's eastern flank. [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

Pistorius and Stoltenberg travelled together to Lithuania to participate in a military exercise designed to test the rapid reinforcement of the existing German-led NATO battlegroup to the size of a full brigade. This exercise scenario would unfold in the event of heightened tensions or outright conflict with Russia. Around 300 tanks, other vehicles, and approximately 1,000 soldiers have been deployed to Lithuania for the exercise, which is scheduled to last until July. [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Reuters]

(if/gc)

Hungary detains Norwegian for allegedly plotting ‘worse than Breivik’ massacre

Police in Hungary said on June 14 they had detained a Norwegian on suspicion of planning a massacre that aimed to outdo terror attacks 12 years ago by far-wing extremist Anders Breivik.

Hungary's National Investigation Office said that in a number of videos posted online, the 45-year-old suspect had threatened mass violence at unnamed locations. [Reuters]

The suspect is alleged to have modelled his planned attacks on Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway, many of them teenagers, by carrying out a car bombing in Oslo and a mass shooting on the island of Utoya in 2011. [CNN]

The Norwegian authorities informed their counterparts that the suspect arrested in Hungary had previously been convicted in Norway for a number of sexual and violent crimes. Pending further investigation, the suspect is in custody at a Hungarian psychiatric institution. [AP/ABC]

(hj/pk)

Iceland closes embassy in Moscow

Iceland said on June 9 that it will halt its embassy operations in Moscow.

"The current situation simply does not make it viable for the small foreign service of Iceland to operate an embassy in Russia. I hope that conditions will someday allow for us to have normal and fruitful relations with Russia, but that depends on decisions taken by the Kremlin," said Iceland's Foreign Minister Gylfadóttir. [Iceland Government]

The embassy will stop its activity from August 1. Iceland has also requested that Russia limit the operations of its Embassy in Reykjavík and that the level of diplomatic representation be lowered.

"All of Reykjavik's anti-Russian actions will inevitably prompt a response," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement. "We will take this unfriendly decision into account when we establish our relations with Iceland in the future." [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Italy's Meloni talks migration with Macron after diplomatic spat with France

In her first visit to Paris since becoming prime minister, Italy's Giorgia Meloni held talks with French President Emmanuel Macron that resulted in an understanding on a number of geopolitical issues, including migration and support for Ukraine.

Meloni also promoted Rome's bid to host the EXPO 2030 world fair. [Governo]

Meloni's visit on June 20 came a month after a diplomatic spat caused the cancellation of a planned trip to France by Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani following comments from French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, who said that "Italy is unable to manage the migration crisis".

At a press conference following talks with Macron, Meloni praised French-Italian cooperation on a number of strategic geopolitical issues including Rome's Mediterranean policy aimed at counteracting a spike in migrants heading to Europe across the Mediterranean, and the provision of the Franco-Italian SAMP/T anti-missile system to support Ukraine in defending itself against the Russian invasion. [Governo]

Macron said Paris shared Meloni's vision for regulating migration in the Mediterranean and agreed on the need to focus on transit countries in order to curb the number of those reaching European shores from North Africa.

During her visit to France, Meloni attended the general assembly of the Bureau International des Expositions, the institution regulating world expos, in an effort to promote Rome's bid to host the 2030 world fair.

France has long affirmed support for Saudi Arabia's bid to host the expo. [Governo] [POLITICO]

(ps/pk)

Italian, Maltese PMs call for cooperation on migration

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her Maltese counterpart Robert Abela said after holding talks in Rome on June 15 that cooperation between their countries is needed to address "irregular" migration from Africa. [Rai News] [Malta Today] [Ansa] [Italian Government]

The two leaders, whose nations are on Europe's migration frontline, agreed that better protection of the EU's external borders was vital. [Corriere di Malta] [Rai News]

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

Abela praised a plan by Meloni to offer aid and investment to East Africa, a move aiming to counteract the increase in migrants. The plan also aims to enhance cooperation with African countries in order to reduce Italy's dependence on Russian gas. [Malta Today]

Meloni and her hard-right Brothers of Italy party, which came to power after a decisive victory in parliamentary elections last September, have pledged to curb mass immigration. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Abela also said that Malta can serve as an example for Europe as a country which is keen on using wind and solar energy. [il Sole 24 Ore] [Euronews]

European Union interior ministers have agreed to a radical reform of the bloc's migration policy under which EU countries that refuse to take a share of reallocated migrants would be charged EUR 20,000 per refugee who is not allowed in. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(nc/pk)

Latvia's new-elected president will visit Estonia on first state trip

Newly elected Latvian president Edgars Rinkevics told Latvian Television he will go to Estonia for his first official state visit. After his trip to Estonia, he is planning a visit to Lithuania and Poland for the summer. Rinkevics, who was elected on May 31, has his inauguration scheduled for July 8. [LSM][Diena]

Rinkevics told Latvian Television he will carry the tradition of going to Estonia for his first official state visit. [Diena]

(aog/gc)

Moldovan interior ministry signs deal with GS Foundation

The Moldovan interior ministry signed a deal with the German Global Security Sector Reform Foundation (GS Foundation) on June 1 to strengthen the capacity of the General Inspectorate of Police and the Border Police, as well as to fight against crime and terrorism.

With the project, the GS Foundation will contribute to the public security in Moldova and offer a long-term solution to counteract illegal activities. The foundation will provide technical equipment and training to Moldovan police forces. [GS Foundation]

The cooperation will provide two projects that amount to EUR 6.8 million. The border police will also cooperate with the European Union Satellite Center (EU SatCen) to help exchange information crucial for decision-making for foreign and security policies of Europe. [Moldova Live]

(lc/gc)

Netherlands official tries to keep Eurostar train running between Amsterdam and London

Dutch State Secretary of Infrastructure Vivianne Heijnen is working to prevent a halt to Amsterdam-London trains for a number of months next year due to maintenance work.

The renovation of the central station of Amsterdam will prevent immigration officials from conducting passport checks at the departure area of the station. This led to a decision to halt the Eurostar service from Amsterdam between June 2024 and May 2025.

"It is unheard of that a planned renovation means travellers can no longer travel to London sustainably. A popular train must grow and flourish, you cannot just prune it," Freek Bos, director of Rover, an organisation representing passengers' rights, said. [NLTimes]

As the decision sparked increasing criticism, Heijnen has started efforts to keep the Eurostar high-speed train running between Amsterdam and London. [NLTimes]

On June 16, Heijnen made another "ultimate attempt" to counteract the months-long disruption of the train connection between Amsterdam and London,

according to her letter to the Tweede Kamer, Netherlands lower house. On June 14, the State Secretary had already made an "ultimate attempt", but it failed.

In case this problem cannot be solved, Heijnen suggests passengers depart from Rotterdam or Brussels. [NLTimes]

(ava/gc)

Portuguese, UK foreign ministers discuss defence

Portuguese Foreign Minister Joao Gomes Cravinho and his British counterpart James Cleverly on June 16 discussed cooperation in defence and the status of Portuguese nationals in the UK post-Brexit.

Cravinho said that further cooperation on defence “is a particularly promising area because of the war in Ukraine.” He added: “We have seen that there is a lot of potential for joint work.” [Portugal Resident]

A memorandum of understanding designed to increase UK-Portuguese cooperation in a variety of areas was signed by Cravinho and Cleverly after their meeting. [UK Foreign Office]

The UK foreign ministry announced that a new bilateral defence agreement is set to be signed with Portugal later this year, committing both countries to increasing security within the “Euro-Atlantic” area. [UK Foreign Office]

Cravinho also told journalists that a change in the residence status of Portuguese nationals in the UK after Brexit has reinforced the need for “constant and intense” dialogue between London and Lisbon. An estimated 400,000 Portuguese nationals live in the UK. [Portugal Resident]

The meeting with Cleverly was part of events marking the 650th anniversary of continuous peace between Britain and Portugal. [Portugal Resident] [UK Foreign Office] Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa also attended the ceremony after meeting Britain’s King Charles. [Portugal News] [Daily Mail]

(jw/pk)

Portuguese PM and Zelensky discuss training for Ukrainian pilots

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky have discussed training for Ukrainian pilots as Kyiv seeks more Western military resources to fend off Russia's invasion.

The two leaders held a private meeting during the second European Political Community summit in Moldova on June 1. [Ukrinform] *(See separate story in this issue).*

A report released by the Ukrainian government showed that Lisbon and Kyiv deepened discussions after Portugal offered to train Ukrainian pilots in late May. [President of Ukraine] [Portugal Resident]

Portugal, however, has ruled out sending its advanced F-16 warplanes to Ukraine, saying that it does not have such machines to spare. [Ukrinform]

During talks with Costa, Zelensky thanked Lisbon for the "comprehensive and consistent support of Ukraine by the Government of Portugal – military, political and humanitarian" amid the war with Russia. [Portugal News]

The two leaders also discussed the upcoming NATO summit, which takes place in Vilnius on July 11 and 12. Zelensky said he hoped that at the meeting Portugal would help create a clear path for Ukraine to join both the Western military alliance and the European Union. [Ukrinform]

(jw/pk)

Russian embassy in Romania told to cut 51 positions

Romania's foreign ministry informed Russia on June 8 that it must cut 51 embassy positions in Bucharest, matching the size of Romania's diplomatic staff in Moscow.

Only 40 staff members – 11 in diplomatic roles, 29 in technical and administrative roles – will be sent back to Russia because 11 positions were already vacant at the time. The embassy was given 30 days to comply. If not, the employees' accreditations will be revoked. [Pioneer]

Only two days before Bucharest's announcement, Russian diplomat to Romania, Valery Kuzmin, said on June 6 that Russian-Romanian bilateral relations are better than with any other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation member.

Immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Bucharest expelled eleven Russian diplomats. Russia responded by expelling eleven Romanian diplomats from the embassy in Moscow. [GroundUp]

(sw/gc)

Russia nuclear weapons in Belarus are a deterrent, Lukashenko says

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Russian nuclear weapons are being deployed as a deterrent against potential aggressors, the Belta news agency reported. "No one else in the world has fought with a nuclear power, and I don't want them to fight with us," Lukashenko said. [Belta]

Belarus' territory was used by Russia as a staging ground to send its troops into Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russian President Valdimir Putin said Russia will deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus immediately after facilities are completed. [Reuters][AP News] [Foreign Policy]

(aog/gc)

Slovenian PM complains of 'unjustified' border checks by Austria

Slovenian Prime Minister Golob has told Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer that Vienna's decision to extend controls at its border with Slovenia by another six months is "disproportionate and unjustified". [Slovenian government]

Austria announced its move in April, a month before the border checks were set to expire, saying the measure was needed to prevent illegal immigration. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

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

the European Commission has allowed Austria to continue border checks.

Golob said that despite an increasing number of migrants crossing the Slovenian-Croatian border, Ljubljana had no plans to introduce checks on its southern frontier. This means that Austrian tourists will not have to wait in unnecessary queues when returning home from holiday abroad, he added. [European news room]

Golob and Nehammer held talks in Austria on June 13, during which they also discussed economic cooperation between their countries. Austria is Slovenia's third-largest foreign trade partner. [Slovenian government]

(ss/pk)

Disaster as Ukraine's Kakhovka dam collapses

The Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro river in southern Ukraine collapsed on June 6, causing enormous flooding and unleashing a catastrophe that will scar the region long after the floodwaters recede. Amid their war, Russia and Ukraine blamed each other for the disaster.

Built in the 1950s by the Soviet Union, the Kakhovka dam provided hydroelectric power, while the reservoir created by its construction provided vital irrigation to southern Ukraine and cooling water to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

The dam had been under Russian control since its forces captured the Ukrainian city of Kherson in February 2022. Ukrainian military intelligence claimed that Russian forces planned to undermine the dam after their advance into Ukraine stalled in April last year. When Ukrainian forces evicted the Russian military from Kherson last November, the retreating Russians detonated explosives and collapsed a segment of the dam to prevent Ukrainian vehicles from using the structure to cross the Dnipro.

Ukraine had previously damaged the route using HIMARS rocket strikes. Despite this, observers did not believe the damage threatened the structural integrity of the rest of the dam.

In early 2023, Russian forces opened some of the dam's sluice gates which, combined with the damage, brought the reservoir to its lowest level in decades and

caused minor flooding along the Dnipro. Observers were unsure what benefit Russia would derive from this, other than to potentially deter Ukrainian raiding teams from using islands in the Dnipro delta as bases to attack Russian positions. [BBC News] [Drive] [EUReporter] [France24] [Financial Times] [Forbes] [Moscow Times] [Newsweek] [New York Times] [NPR] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [RTÉ] [Times]

Catastrophic consequences

In the early hours of June 6, the unthinkable happened and the dam collapsed. The consequences of this have been – and will continue to be – catastrophic.

The contents of the Kakhovka reservoir spilled out and rapidly flooded almost 600 square kilometres along the Dnipro's banks. Towns and villages on the river's Russian-occupied left bank have suffered the most, due to their low-lying position. The cities of Nova Kakhovka and Oleshky were badly flooded. Social media was filled with heartbreaking footage of stranded civilians, with videos being circulated of supplies being delivered to residents in Russian-controlled Oleshky by Ukrainian military drones.

Southern Ukraine's agriculture relied heavily on the Kakhovka reservoir, which fed a series of canals and waterways that irrigated the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and allowed them to become the farming powerhouses of Ukraine's economy. With the irrigation canals running dry, the economic livelihood of residents in the region has been imperilled.

In addition to this "great drying", scientific observers believe the dam's collapse will have catastrophic consequences for biodiversity and soil quality along the Dnipro banks in the future.

The reservoir also supplied cooling water to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest nuclear facility in Europe. Luckily, the plant's reactors have been offline for some time and require minimal water to keep cool. Solutions to these problems are not forthcoming from either side as the war continues. Russia has to date blocked UN aid for victims of the dam's collapse in territories it controls and has fired on rescue teams using artillery. [Atlantic] [Atlantic Council] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [CBS] [Deutsche Welle] [Europe Monthly May 2023] [Guardian] [Jamestown Foundation] [Le Monde] [Nature] [NPR] [POLITICO Europe] [Sky News] [TIME]

Experts agree that the events of June 6 were not the result of the structural damage the dam had previously

sustained, and say that the structure was deliberately destroyed.

According to an investigation by the *New York Times*, specialist engineers believe that a collapse of the magnitude seen on June 6 could only have happened through a catastrophic failure of the dam's immense concrete foundations. According to one expert, "a large explosion" would be needed to cause this.

Ihor Strelets, an engineer with over a decade of experience in working on the Dnipro river's water resources, said that the dam was designed by its Soviet engineers to withstand external attacks. Strelets believes that the structure could have been brought down by an internal explosion and that a small passageway, which runs from the dam's machine room and through its foundation, was the most likely spot to plant the explosives necessary to breach the immense construction.

From there, further damage would be caused by the volume of water rushing through the breach, leading to a collapse. At around the time the dam came down, seismic sensors in Ukraine, Norway and Romania detected activity consistent with a large explosion in the area, while nearby residents claimed to have heard a series of blasts.

Neither side has particularly strong motives for blowing up the dam, however. For Ukraine, the destruction only further immiserates its population and makes restoring control over the left bank of the Dnipro much more difficult. While some have pointed to the newly-dried reservoir as potentially opening up a new avenue of attack for Ukraine, experts dismiss this given the marshy quality of the new land and the complete lack of cover for any large-scale movements.

For Russia, which claims the territories worst affected by the collapse as its own, the only possible benefit of blowing up the dam would be to prevent a Ukrainian offensive across the Dnipro, which experts have long assessed as impractical and unlikely. Furthermore, if this was the plan, it hasn't worked – Ukraine continues to raid positions on the Russian-occupied left bank with relative impunity. An alternative motive for Russia may have been to distract or "punish" Ukraine, which launched its long-awaited counteroffensive around the same time as the dam's collapse.

Evidence points to Russians

While a "smoking gun" remains absent, the best available evidence appears to point to the Russian military as the perpetrator.

Experts believe the collapse of the dam couldn't have been triggered by an external attack, especially given Ukraine's lack of heavy ballistic missiles. With Russia controlling the only access point to the power plant, and to the passageway identified by Ihor Strelets, it is unlikely that Ukrainians would have been able to infiltrate and plant explosives without being engaged by Russian forces in the area.

Russia also passed a suspiciously specific piece of legislation just days before the dam's collapse. Federal Decree No. 873 came into force on May 31 and ominously stipulates that "...the technical investigation of accidents at hazardous production facilities and accidents at hydraulic structures, which occurred as a result of military actions, sabotage and terrorist acts, shall not be carried out" in areas of occupied Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Kyiv has published audio recordings that it claims are intercepted phone calls between Russian operatives discussing plans to destroy the dam. Ukraine has also published a photograph showing a car packed with unidentified barrels parked near the dam days before the disaster.

Russia's denials have been scattershot and inconsistent, with Moscow's ambassador to the UN claiming the dam was blown up to "distract" from Ukraine's "bogged down" counteroffensive. His claim doesn't hold water – experts assess that Ukraine's counteroffensive began either on June 5 or 6. [Associated Press] [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [Bloomberg] [CBS] [CNN] [Euronews] [Guardian] [Hill] [Insider] [NBC] [New York Times] [Newsweek] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [RFE/RL] [RTÉ] [Sky News]

Responsibility for the destruction is yet to be conclusively determined, and almost certainly won't be determined unless independent engineers gain access to the dam. But as the US deputy ambassador to the UN, Robert Wood, pointed out, the dam's collapse and its consequences would never have occurred were it not for Moscow's unjustifiable aggression.

(wb/pk)

Turkey and Greece defence ministers agree on cooperative agenda

Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler met his Greek counterpart Alkiviadis Stefanis during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defence ministers meeting at NATO headquarters on June 15. [Daily Sabah]

The ministers agreed on a cooperative agenda to further develop political ties after they have improved during the last months. "In a meeting characterised by a constructive and cordial atmosphere, Ministers Guler and Stefanis agreed on developing a cooperative agenda based on good neighbourly relations and friendship between Türkiye and Greece," the Turkish defence ministry said on Twitter.

During the NATO meeting, Guler also met his Lithuanian, French and British counterparts to discuss bilateral relations between the countries.

(lc/gc)

Turkey summons Swiss ambassador after demonstrations against Erdogan

Turkey summoned Swiss ambassador Jean Daniel Ruch after demonstrations against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held in Zurich on June 14. The demonstration included burning of an effigy and banners. [Reuters]

Deputy Foreign Minister Mehmet Kemal Bozay told the ambassador that any demonstration against Erdogan is unacceptable. Bozay also requested an investigation to determine the perpetrators of the demonstrations. [BBC Turkish]

Spokesperson of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Omer Celik said: “We condemn the heinous attack by the supporters of the terrorist organisation PKK in Switzerland, targeting the Turkish flag and our President Mr. Erdogan. We strongly condemn the condoning of the Swiss authorities to this despicable act.” [Sözcü]

(lc/gc)

Kyiv, Budapest row over Ukrainian PoWs handed to Hungary

A handover of prisoners of war by the Russian Orthodox Church to Hungary, announced on June 8, triggered a dispute between Kyiv and Budapest as Ukraine said its government was not informed and that requests for contact with the group were ignored.

The Hungarian deputy prime minister responsible for church affairs, Zsolt Semjen, said in a Facebook post

on June 9 that Budapest had “brought home 11 Transcarpathian prisoners of war from Moscow”.

A day earlier, the Russian Orthodox Church had released a statement saying the prisoners were transferred “as part of inter-church cooperation, at the request of the Hungarian side”.

The men are from Ukraine’s western Zakarpattia Oblast, where many Ukrainian citizens are of ethnic Hungarian origin. [Kyiv Independent]

Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said on June 19 that Budapest was ignoring Kyiv’s requests for contact with the group. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

“This, as well as information received from the relatives of some of them, indicates that the Hungarian authorities’ assurances of the alleged free status of Ukrainian defenders in Hungary are not true,” Nikolenko added in a Facebook post.

Nikolenko had earlier said that Kyiv found out about the transfer through the media. [Reuters]

The Hungarian prime minister’s chief of staff, Gergely Gulyas, said on June 19 that the men could leave Hungary “freely at any time”. He added: “We do not check or monitor them.” [AFP]

“They are not considered as prisoners of war in a legal sense as they had been released in Russia, after which the Orthodox Church in cooperation with the (Hungarian) Maltese Charity Service transported them to Hungary,” Gulyas told a press briefing in Budapest. [AFP]

Nikolenko announced on June 20 that the Ukrainian embassy in Budapest had “managed to remove three Ukrainian prisoners of war from Hungary”.

(msa/pk)

United Kingdom, Switzerland sign agreement to recognise professional qualifications

The United Kingdom and Switzerland signed an agreement to recognize professional qualifications as the two countries negotiate a free trade agreement.

The agreement streamlines the process for British professionals to work in Switzerland by facilitating the

assessment of applications, application fees and work requirements. The agreement will allow British lawyers to work in Switzerland. [UK Parliament] [GOV UK]

The agreement will start in January 2025, following the completion of domestic procedures of both countries. [UK Parliament] [GOV UK]

(pp/gc)

United Kingdom commits GBP 60 Million to NATO's Ukraine Fund

British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace announced during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels on June 16 an additional GBP 60 million of funding to the NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), bringing the United Kingdom's total support to over GBP 80 million since February last year.

The CAP supports various capacity-building programs such as cyber-security and logistics, providing essential resources including secure communications, combat supplies, protective gear, and equipment to counter threats. An agreement was reached to establish a new Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure in the UK, as part of NATO's long-term plan to enhance the security of vital undersea infrastructure.

Wallace also announced the establishment of a new centre to enhance coordination and information sharing among allies and industry for critical undersea infrastructure. The centre will address challenges, share practices and leverage innovative technologies.

Prior to the meeting, the UK announced the delivery of additional air defence missiles to Ukraine, emphasising the international community's commitment to supporting Ukraine with equipment and training. [GOV UK]

(pp/gc)

Austrian man detained in Afghanistan after writing article on Taliban

The foreign ministry in Vienna said on June 13 that an Austrian man has been detained in Afghanistan after travelling to the country in May.

Austrian news outlet Der Standard, which first reported on the case, said the man was arrested following the publication of an article he wrote titled “Vacation with the Taliban” in a far-right magazine. The article provides a positive account of life under Taliban rule.

Der Standard identified the man as 80-year-old “Herbert F.” It said that he is a far-right extremist and co-founder of the National Democratic Party, a minor far-right grouping which was banned in 1988.

The man has been accused of spying, Der Standard reported.

The Austrian foreign ministry said it has been “actively seeing a solution” since becoming aware of the arrest. [AP News][Alarabiya News]

(ab/pk)

Azerbaijan and Pakistan reach Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) deal

Pakistan and Azerbaijan have bolstered their energy cooperation with the approval of a liquefied natural gas (LNG) purchase agreement framework.

This development comes as Pakistan seeks to address its energy needs and overcome a prolonged period of gas shortages and power outages. The collaboration between the two nations aims to enhance Pakistan's energy security and promote bilateral trade and investment in various sectors.

The Economic Coordination Committee of Pakistan's finance ministry approved the framework agreement between Pakistan LNG Limited and the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR). The agreement paves the way for Azerbaijan's SOCAR Trading to supply one LNG cargo to Pakistan every month at a cheaper price than the market rate. The exact details of the deal, including pricing and contract type, have not been disclosed publicly. [Reuters]

Pakistan's decision to engage with Azerbaijan in LNG trade marks a significant step forward for the country, which had been unable to procure cargoes of LNG for approximately a year due to high global prices triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With a population of 220 million, Pakistan faces extensive power outages due to gas shortages, which have hampered the operation of its power plants. The country's balance of payments crisis further limited its

ability to compete in the high-priced LNG market, with foreign reserves reaching critically low levels.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to Azerbaijan played a vital role in solidifying the energy cooperation between the two nations. During his meeting with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, they agreed on various areas of collaboration. In addition to LNG shipments, both leaders highlighted their commitment to expanding cooperation in energy, banking, financial services, and IT sectors. Azerbaijan expressed its willingness to invest in Pakistan's sustainable energy sector, particularly in solar power generation. [Tribune]

The partnership between Pakistan and Azerbaijan extends beyond economic and energy ties. The two countries emphasised their support for each other on regional issues, with Pakistan appreciating Azerbaijan's unwavering support for the rights of Kashmiris and condemning Indian acts of terror and human rights violations in the occupied territory. Pakistan reiterated its commitment to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and praised the bravery of Azeri forces. [Dawn]

(at/gc)

France seeks removal of Lebanese envoy immunity after rape accusation

French authorities asked Lebanon to lift the immunity of Beirut's Ambassador to Paris Rami Adwan after rape allegations and alleged acts of intentional violence by the envoy. Lebanonese Foreign Ministry officials are expected in Paris to investigate Adwan's behaviour after the alleged complaints of rape and violence.

The accusations come from two young women who worked under him at the embassy. The first lodged a complaint in June last year alleged she was raped in May 2020 at the ambassador's apartment. The second lodged a complaint in February 2023, alleging a series of physical assaults. [LeMonde]

"In view of the seriousness of the facts mentioned, we consider it necessary for the Lebanese authorities to lift the immunity of the Lebanese ambassador in Paris in order to facilitate the work of the French judicial authorities," the French foreign ministry said in a statement. [ArabNews]

(ava/gc)

France's Macron urges Iran to stop supporting Russian invasion of Ukraine

French President Emmanuel Macron urged on June 10 his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi to immediately end Tehran's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In February, Iran smuggled new types of advanced long-range armed drones to Russia for use in its war on Ukraine through boats and a state-owned airline. Iran sent at least 18 drones to Vladimir Putin's navy after Russian officers and technicians made a special visit to Tehran in November 2022. [The Guardian]

Macron warned Raisi about the consequences of delivering drones to Russia and urged Iran to "immediately cease" the support it is giving Russia in the war against Ukraine. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

Lithuania PM discusses war in Ukraine, Iranian threat with Israeli counterpart

Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte met with her Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu on June 12 in an official visit to Jerusalem. According to i24, the two discussed the war in Ukraine and the Iranian threat in the Middle East. [i24]

"I want to assure you that we will continue to call for more sanctions. But at the same time, we all know that Israel's defensive systems remain the best antidote to Iranian weapons," Simonyte said. [i24]

After meeting Netanyahu, Simonyte's spokesperson said that she also "raised the issue of Israel's support to Ukraine, stressing the importance of preserving the rules-based world order." [JPost]

(aog/gc)

Finland, US agree to cooperate on 6G

Finland and the United States have signed a declaration pledging to work together to develop advanced 6G wireless technology, a move aiming to reduce the West's technological dependence on China. [Agenzia Nova]

The declaration was inked in Helsinki on June 2 by Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who said the two governments would plough billions of dollars into such systems. [The Morning News]

The move aims to counter Beijing's influence in tech amid security concerns about Chinese-built 5G networks, The Morning News outlet reported.

Blinken said the agreement would help build networks "in a way that is transparent". Haavisto said 6G systems needed to be "democratic, transparent" and to respect human rights. [Euractiv]

With the declaration, Finland joins the UK and Japan as a partner of the US in plans to establish 6G networks. [The Morning News]

(ts/pk)

Finnish energy firm Fortum to work with US's Westinghouse in exploring nuclear power

Finnish energy firm Fortum has signed an agreement with US company Westinghouse Electric to jointly explore the development and deployment of new nuclear power production in Finland and Sweden. [Reuters]

Fortum said the agreement would help it achieve its objective of delivering "reliable clean energy and [driving] decarbonisation in industries in the Nordics." [Fortum]

The move by the Finnish company comes as European nations seek to ensure their energy security while moving away from Russian oil and gas.

After Finland's new Olkiluoto 3 reactor started regular production in April, nuclear power now accounts for around 40 percent of the country's electricity production. [Reuters] [Europe in Review May/2023]

(ts/pk)

Dutch intelligence warned CIA of Ukraine's plan to attack Nord Stream pipelines

The Dutch military intelligence service MIVD had warned the US Central Intelligence Agency about an alleged Ukrainian plan to blow up the Nord Stream pipeline in June 2022, leading to a warning from Washington to Kiev not to attack the pipeline, Dutch national broadcaster NOS reported on June 13. [Reuters][NLTimes][CNN]

In September, unexplained explosions ruptured both the Nord Stream 1 pipeline and the newly built Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which carries gas from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea. The explosions occurred in Sweden's and Denmark's economic zones, which both said they were deliberate, but have yet to determine responsibility. Responsibility has been denied by Ukraine. [Reuters][NLTimes][CNN]

(gt/gc)

Switzerland meets with US to discuss cybersecurity cooperation

Swiss and American interdepartmental delegations met in Washington on June 7 to discuss and strengthen bilateral cooperation in cybersecurity and digital industries.

This is the second such meeting. The first took place online in July 2020.

Specific topics discussed include the application of international human rights law to cyberspace, and the role of Switzerland as a host state in the digital era – much like it is in the international relations and peacekeeping sectors. [Government]

(sw/gc)

US to open northernmost diplomatic station in Norway

The US will open a new diplomatic station in the northern Norwegian city of Tromso, which will host America's only such post within the Arctic Circle, Secretary of State Antony Blinken has announced. [RCI]

Blinken said on June 1 that the US aimed to ensure "that the Arctic remains an area of peaceful cooperation" as the strategic importance of the region grows, with a shrinking ice cap opening up new sea freight corridors. [Reuters]

The US announcement came after Norway began its two-year term as the chair of the Arctic Council in May. The eight-state council is an intergovernmental organisation that focuses on climate challenges and the representation of indigenous groups in the Arctic region.

The council has produced legally binding climate treaties, and the exclusion of Russia from the body's activities due to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has caused concern for the future of multilateral agreements in the Arctic Circle. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

(hj/pk)

Norwegian firms boycott US confectionery maker Mondelez over sales in Russia

A string of high-profile Norwegian companies have boycotted products from US confectionery maker Mondelez International in protest at the firm's continued operations in Russia following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

Mondelez, which produces snacks under brands including Oreo and Toblerone, came under pressure after it was designated by the Ukrainian National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption as a "sponsor" of Russian aggression in Ukraine. [Ukrainian Sanction List]

No Mondelez products will be sold by organisations including Norwegian Air, the Norwegian Football Association and a number of hotel conglomerates. SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) is also banning Mondelez confectionery. [IceNews]

(hj/pk)

Belarus wants to increase commercial, industrial ties with China

Belarus's Industry Ministry of Belarus and the China Chamber of Commerce for Import and Export of Machinery and Electronic Products signed on June 2 a memorandum of cooperation to expand commercial and trade ties, including in agriculture and food exports. [BelBy]

About 100 Chinese companies have since registered with the National Center for Marketing of Belarus.

Western sanctions against Belarus have solidified ties to China. [Belta]

Belarus reported an increase in total agricultural production of 5.4 percent from January to May 2023. According to the country's Agriculture and Food Minister of Belarus Igor Brylo 60 percent of all milk, meat and grain produced is exported. [Belta] [Belta]

(ef/gc)

Taiwan's foreign minister visits Czech Republic amid warning from China

Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu held talks with the head of the upper house of the Czech parliament in Prague on June 13, soon after China cautioned Europe against official exchanges with Taiwan's top diplomat. [Reuters]

Four days earlier, the Chinese foreign ministry had urged Europe not to engage with Taiwan.

The Czech Republic said that it would not change its Taiwan policy, which allows for economic and cultural relations but no official diplomatic ties.

Shortly after being elected in January, Czech President Petr Pavel held phone talks with Taiwan's President Tsai-Ing Wen, a move which China said it "deplores". Beijing claims Taiwan as its territory under its "One China Policy". [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Reuters] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [AiR, No.24, June/2023, 2]

(aml/pk)

Estonia opens embassy and business hub in Singapore

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas opened the Estonian embassy and business hub in Singapore together with Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore Lawrence Wong on June 5. [ERR]

"Over the years, we have built a close bilateral relationship with Singapore. Estonia and Singapore are both small countries with open economies," Kallas said in her speech at the opening of the embassy. "We are also one of the most advanced digital societies in the world, which value innovation and technology as well as high-quality education. We have a lot to learn

from each other and to offer to the rest of the world." [Baltic Times]

Estonia's first ambassador in Singapore, Priit Turk, spoke on the opening of the business hub.

"The embassy and the business hub seek to increase the visibility of Estonia and our companies in Singapore and the surrounding countries in order to help companies enter the market here and find cooperation partners, as well as bring investments to Estonia. All the more so since Singaporean financial companies are important global investors and foremost invest in new technologies and research-intensive solutions," he said. [Baltic Times]

The embassy and business hub are located in the Central Business District of Singapore. [Baltic Times]

(aog/gc)

German Defence Minister Pistorius visits India, Indonesia

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius was on a three-nation tour in Asia from 2 to 8 June, as Germany and the European Union are showing a greater interest in the geostrategic situation in the Indo-Pacific region. Pistorius began his trip in Singapore where he participated in the Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional security forum. [Air, No.23 June/2023, 1] [Bundesministerium der Verteidiung, in German] [Deutsche Welle]

In Indonesia, Pistorius met with his counterpart to discuss the possibility of conducting a multilateral joint military exercise next year when Germany sends frigates to the region. Upon the successful Indonesian acquisition of two minesweepers from Germany, the possibility of acquiring submarines was also discussed. [Indonesian Ministry of Defense, in Bahasa Indonesia] [Twitter German's Federal Minister of Defence, in German]

In India, Pistorius agreed to facilitate cooperation in military procurement. The talks with his counterpart Rajnath Singh centred around a planned deal that would see Berlin supply conventional submarines to the Indian Navy. It was furthermore announced that the two countries plan to conduct a joint marine exercise in 2024. [tagesschau, in German] [Air, No.23 June/2023, 1]

(aml/gc)

Germany and China officials meet in Berlin

Representatives from Germany and China met in Berlin on June 20 for their seventh round of bilateral talks. The meeting started with the arrival of Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Berlin on June 19.

The following day, Premier Li and his delegation engaged in a summit with German Chancellor Olaf Sholz and nine federal ministers. The visit marked Li's first overseas trip since assuming office in March. [Reuters] [Tagesthemen] [Deutsche Welle]

Scholz underlined the importance of direct dialogue, stating that this was "even more important than usual in these extraordinary times full of global challenges and crises." Li expressed Beijing's intention to enhance its relationship with Germany, calling for "cooperation in science, industry and business" to "contribute to the stability of the world economy." [Der Spiegel] [Tagesthemen][Deutsche Welle]

Scholz highlighted China's crucial role in addressing climate change, stressing that global progress would be limited without active Chinese involvement. Both countries expressed their commitment to limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Scholz also revealed plans for a German-Chinese environmental forum to facilitate further discussions and cooperation on environmental issues. [Deutsche Welle] [Tagesthemen] [Der Spiegel] [Tagesschau]

Recent years have witnessed challenges in the Germany-China relationship, including tensions surrounding the Taiwan Strait and concerns about the treatment of the Uyghur minority in the Chinese region of Xinjiang. The geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States, a key German ally, has further intensified these disagreements. [Deutsche Welle] [Tagesschau]

China's close ties with Moscow amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine have further strained relations between Germany and China. At the press conference, Chancellor Scholz called on China to contribute to a peaceful resolution of the war in Ukraine, emphasising China's "very special duty" as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Premier Li did not respond to these appeals. [Der Spiegel] [Tagesschau][Deutsche Welle]

China remains Germany's most important trading partner, surpassing even the United States. The

economic interdependence between the two countries has been a driving force behind Germany's growth over the past two decades, with China's expanding economy and demand for German cars and machinery playing a significant role. In the last decade alone, the trade volume between the two countries has nearly doubled, reaching approximately EUR 300 billion. [Deutsche Welle]

(if/gc)

Italy stops Chinese investor Sinochem from appointing Pirelli CEO

In a bid to reduce Chinese influence on giant Italian tyre maker Pirelli, the government in Rome has put in place restrictions preventing China's state-owned Sinochem, the largest shareholder in the firm, from appointing the company's CEO. [Repubblica]

Italy's decision, based on national security grounds, was enabled by "golden power" rules that allow the government to intervene in order to safeguard strategic national assets.

In Pirelli's case, a sensor installed on the company's tyres was deemed to be a "critical technology of national interest."

Sinochem will now have restricted access to strategic information, and higher vote thresholds will be set when the company's board takes strategic decisions. [Repubblica]

The government decision allows Camfin, an Italian company that holds 14.1 percent of shares in Pirelli, to permanently designate the tyre maker's CEO. Despite the setback for Sinochem, several sources told Reuters that the Chinese firm is unlikely to sell its 37 percent stake in Pirelli. [Reuters]

(ps/pk)

Russia receives support from North Korea

North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un offered his support to Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 12.

On the occasion of the national day of Russia, Kim sent a message of congratulations to Moscow reiterating its "full support and solidarity" praising Putin's "correct decision and guidance... to foil the hostile forces'

escalating threats." The message did not directly mention the invasion of Ukraine nor Moscow's involvement in the armed conflict. [The Moscow Times]

Putin responded to Kim's overtures by calling for closer ties between the countries, saying that Russia and North Korea would "continue to expand the comprehensive and constructive bilateral relations" to strengthen the security and stability of the Korean peninsula and north-east Asia. [The Guardian]

(ava/gc)

Portugal signs defence cooperation deal with South Africa

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and his South African counterpart Cyril Ramaphosa have signed an agreement pledging to increase military cooperation between their countries. The deal was inked on June 6 during a three-day state visit by Rebelo de Sousa to South Africa. [President of Portugal]

Ramaphosa said that he and Rebelo de Sousa held talks focusing on "opportunities of mutual benefit in defence, science and innovation, education and energy." [PublicNow]

The new defence agreement will provide a "legal framework" for closer cooperation, Ramaphosa added. [PublicNow]

The two leaders also discussed the ongoing conflict in Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony which has experienced widespread violence in its northern regions. [Africa News]

Rebelo de Sousa's visit took place on Portugal Day, an annual celebration of Portuguese culture and history around the world.

Ramaphosa said cultural links between the two countries were strong, adding: "South Africa is home to the world's third largest community in the Portuguese Diaspora." [South African Government]

(jw/pk)

Romania recalls ambassador to Kenya after comparing Africans to monkeys

The Romanian ambassador to Kenya, Dragos Tigau, was recalled on June 10 after comparing Africans to monkeys during a meeting at a United Nations building in the capital city of Nairobi. [NewTimes]

Tigau made the comments on April 26. According to the news agency AFP, Tigau said: "the African group has joined us" after spotting a monkey in the window. [PeopleDaily]

The incident was first made public on June 8 by Kenyan ministry of foreign affairs official Kamau Macharia via Twitter. Macharia said that he was “appalled” and “disgusted,” referencing that there had been attempts to cover up the incident. Many African officials began demanding an apology the next day. [Twitter]

Romanian officials announced that they had only been informed of the incident on June 10, at which point they began the process of recalling Tigau. The government has also issued a formal apology.

(sw/gc)

South African president tells Russia’s Putin ‘war must be settled’

South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on June 17 that the fighting in Ukraine has to stop.

During a visit to Russia as a part of an African delegation pushing for peace between Kyiv and Moscow, Ramaphosa brought the voice of a continent that has badly suffered from the repercussions of the Ukraine conflict, particularly with rising grain prices.

“This war must be settled, through negotiations and through diplomatic means,” South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa said. [The Moscow Times]

Many countries, including SA, have found strong condemnation of Russia difficult given Soviet support of their liberation movements during the cold war. “This war is having a negative impact on the African continent and indeed on many other countries around the world,” Ramaphosa said ahead of formal talks with the Russian president. [Africa News]

(ava/gc)

Team:

Aiyana Vittoria Amplatz (ava), Anna Berk (ab), Antonia Lawrenz (aml), Assaf Yona Olshansky Gefen (aog), 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), Iva Fehr (if), Jack Waters (jw), Jemina Nuredini (jn), Katherine Mansfield (km), Lara Cin (lc), Maria Rusu (mr), Maria Simon Arboleas (msa), Nicoletta Conforti (nc), Paolo Salvatori (ps), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Pin Pichairat (pp), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rex Wempen (rw), Rohini Singh (rs), Simona Štibraná (ss), 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