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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

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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.

NATO leaders meeting at a July summit of the alliance denied Kyiv the early entry it wanted to the 31-member military club, triggering criticism from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Britain's defence minister, in turn, took Ukraine to task for a lack of "gratitude".

On the eve of the summit, Turkey lifted its opposition to Sweden joining NATO, a breakthrough that means the Nordic country is now on the verge of being admitted to the alliance, 14 months after applying.

Russia's decision to pull out of an international agreement that guaranteed safe passage for vessels carrying Ukrainian wheat and other grains through the

Black Sea sent agricultural commodity prices soaring and reignited concerns about a global food crisis.

The Wagner mercenary group's mutiny in June and the apparent fall of its chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has raised questions about Russia's foreign policy in Africa, even as Moscow tries to assure its partners that it will be business as usual in the continent.

At the same time, tremors have run through domestic politics in Europe.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte is to quit politics following general elections in November, after the collapse of his cabinet due to irreconcilable differences between coalition parties on the nation's migration policies.

In Spain, conservatives failed to secure a parliamentary majority despite gaining the most votes in the country's general election. Analysts said the outcome delineated the limits of the right-wing populism that has been spreading across Europe, fuelled by the cost of living, immigration and discontent with the political establishment.

Meanwhile, the effects of global warming have never been so evident. Thousands have been forced to flee as drought-hit southern Europe was scorched by fires. Scientists have claimed that temperatures observed at the peak of extreme heatwaves across the continent would be virtually impossible without human-induced climate change.

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

No commitment on membership for Ukraine at NATO summit

NATO leaders meeting at a summit of the alliance in Vilnius on July 11 and 12 denied Ukraine early entry to the military club, but vowed to deliver what Kyiv needs most: more hardware.

The conflict in Ukraine dominated debate at the NATO gathering in the Lithuanian capital, as Kyiv – a year-and-a-half into its war with Russia – pushed for assurances about its pathway to becoming a member of the alliance.

Though there is no question of Ukraine joining while the war rages on, NATO states have been Kyiv's strongest backers in the conflict and Ukraine's cause enjoys near-unanimous support among them. However, there are disagreements when it comes to Ukraine's future membership.

On the one hand, the governments of Germany and the US say Ukraine must follow the standard process and meet NATO's criteria before being offered membership. US President Joe Biden said publicly that Ukraine would need to make progress on "democratisation", though he did not elaborate on this.

On the other hand, most of Ukraine's Eastern European neighbours and the Baltic countries argue for an expedited timeline for Kyiv's entry and a roadmap to membership. Ukraine sees joining the alliance as key to its long-term security.

Lack of gratitude?

In the run-up to the Vilnius summit, a draft declaration emerged which suggested NATO's position would be noncommittal. This was received poorly by Kyiv and its backers. In a tweet posted on the eve of the summit, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky sharply criticised the proposal for creating "uncertainty" which Russia could benefit from. [Atlantic] [Deutsche Welle] [Economist] [Euractiv] [Forbes] [Irish Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Sky News]

Zelensky's tweet riled more than a few feathers among NATO states. Speaking at the summit, UK Defence Minister Ben Wallace took Ukraine to task for what he perceived as a lack of "gratitude". In response, Finland's Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen rebuked Wallace by saying that Western aid was not "charity", and that Ukraine was "fighting for us".

Meanwhile, the US, which is by far NATO's most important power and Ukraine's biggest supplier, is keen to keep the military alliance as a "third party" in the war rather than a direct combatant.

To that end, Washington's position is for Ukraine to be supported with aid in the short term, while leaving NATO membership a long-term aspiration. Though Germany has backed this stance, the US has been unable to sway many of its European allies to its position, in particular those neighbouring Russia.

Speaking with his Italian counterpart, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki made clear his country's view that Ukraine should receive "real" security guarantees from the alliance. [Atlantic] [Deutsche Welle] [CNN] [Financial Times] [RUSI] [New York Times] [Reuters] [Washington Post]

An official communiqué released by NATO in Vilnius on July 11 merely "affirmed" Ukraine's membership prospects and that, when "conditions are met", the alliance would be "in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join".

New NATO-Ukraine Council

While Kyiv did not receive the commitment it desired, the alliance launched a NATO-Ukraine Council, through which Kyiv and NATO members are to deepen cooperation. The Group of Seven, which consists of economic heavyweights France, Germany, Canada, Italy, Japan, the UK, the EU and the US, used the summit as an opportunity to announce the further institutionalisation of aid to Ukraine.

The G7 put forward a “multilateral framework” to guide support to Ukraine, though details are yet to emerge. Despite some acrimony and disappointment with the communiqué, Ukrainian and NATO officials left the summit pleased that progress was made.

Speaking to Politico Europe, one Ukrainian official said that his country had received “clear signals that our membership in NATO will not be a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia”, a prospect that has provoked fear in Kyiv.

As expected, the reaction from Moscow to the summit was anger. Referring to further pledges of Western support for Ukraine’s military, the Kremlin described these as “a mistake” that could be “very dangerous”. [BBC News] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [Guardian] [NBC] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [RFE/RL]

Ukraine grinds forward, fends off fresh Russian offensives

Ukraine’s counteroffensive is grinding on as battles rage in the country’s south. Though Kyiv’s Western partners are expressing frustration that the Ukrainians are not advancing as quickly as hoped, there is evidence Kyiv’s “attrition” tactics may be bearing fruit.

When Ukraine opened its counteroffensive in June, it did so with a flurry of engagements along the front line. While Kyiv’s forces advanced, an image emerged from Russian sources and spread like wildfire: a group of Western-supplied Leopard tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles bogged down and disabled in a minefield.

Though Ukraine has now recovered these vehicles and advanced deeper into Russian lines, the image stuck as a potent reminder of the challenge posed by Russia’s defensive preparation. However, rather than such setbacks becoming routine, Ukraine has not suffered a similar loss since – a fact observers say suggests a change in tactics.

Ukrainian forces have since focused on intense bombardment of Russian positions, taking aim at Russian artillery and supply depots behind the front lines. At the same time, they have largely abandoned assaulting defensive positions directly.

This tactic has enabled Ukraine to keep losses at a manageable rate as it contends with Russia’s superiority in helicopter gunships and myriad fortifications, but it comes at a cost. The tempo of the Ukrainian counteroffensive has slowed, resulting in less ground being taken last month than in June. The

fighting remains fierce as both sides deploy enormous numbers of men and materiel to the region.

Moscow, for its part, claims that Ukraine's counteroffensive has failed. While there is no sign of a breakthrough, Russian observers have been unsettled by Ukraine's switch in tactics. Russian general Ivan Popov, who was supported by Russian war bloggers and by Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, was dismissed as commander of Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army, after complaining about its inability to suppress Ukrainian artillery. The 58th Combined Arms Army has seen significant fighting in Ukraine's counteroffensive and has had heavy losses inflicted on it.

With Storm Shadow missiles taking over the role of striking supply depots, Ukraine has redeployed Western-supplied HIMARS artillery systems to the front line, where they are now being used to target Russian artillery emplacements. Similar tactics gave Ukraine victory in Kherson in autumn 2022, but it remains to be seen if attrition will be enough to drive well-dug-in Russian forces out of their positions. [Business Insider] [CNN] [Drive] [Euronews] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Irish Times] [Reuters] [New Lines] [New York Times]

Cluster shells controversy

Ukraine's shift to artillery-first fighting received a boost last month as the US pledged to deliver cluster shells to keep Kyiv's guns firing. The US is estimated to have between three and five million of these shells in its stockpile and the move to supply them to Ukraine could not have come at a more important time.

However, the decision is deeply controversial, even among America's NATO allies. Cluster munitions work by exploding in mid-air, and releasing smaller munitions known as "bomblets" over a given area. In many cases, a small number of bomblets do not explode and, if not recovered, pose a threat to civilians similar to that of landmines.

As a result, their use was banned by most of the world's nations at the Oslo Convention in 2008. Ukraine, Russia and the United States are not signatories to the convention, and Moscow has consistently used such munitions against both Ukrainian forces and Ukrainian cities since the beginning of the war. Ukraine has also used cluster shells, drawing on a small stockpile the country inherited from the Soviet Union.

Kyiv has undertaken not to use the shells in populated areas and is instead eyeing "area targets" such as

massed infantry, artillery positions or convoys. Ukrainian officials have also pointed to the millions of landmines already left by Russian forces along the front line, where the cluster shells will be used. Cluster munitions will add to the already daunting task of de-mining what has become the world's most mined country. [BBC News] [Business Insider] [CNN] [Euronews] [Forbes] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [New York Times] [Reuters] [Sky News] [Washington Post]

Ukrainian gains around Bakhmut

While much of the news from the front line has come from the south, there has been significant activity in the eastern Donbas region.

Ukraine has found success around the ruins of the eastern city of Bakhmut, where it has been steadily pushing back Russian forces on the city's flanks. Ukrainian forces have made the biggest gains south of Bakhmut, where they are likely pushing Russian forces out of the villages of Andriivka and Klischiivka.

The battle for Bakhmut will soon reach its one-year anniversary. Though operations are of a much smaller size in this region compared to Ukraine's main counteroffensive in the south, the fighting is significant. However, Ukraine's seizure of the initiative has not gone unanswered as Russian forces have launched offensives of their own. Kyiv claims that Moscow has amassed a force of around 100,000 men and several hundred tanks in Ukraine's eastern Luhansk region, along its border with the Kharkiv region.

While there is no evidence to confirm that the buildup is as large as claimed, there is certainly an offensive effort being made by Russian forces on that front. Since Ukraine drove Russian forces out of the Kharkiv region in September 2022, the front line there has largely remained static.

In June, Russia pushed against Ukrainian positions and captured ground. The terrain is difficult, with cliffs and large forests acting as checks on large mechanised movements. Russia has been unable to consolidate its gains, which have been rolled back by Ukrainian counterattacks.

Moscow has also pushed elsewhere on the frontline. A large number of Russian vehicles were lost outside the south-eastern city of Avdiivka following one such attack, while similar casualties were incurred outside Krasnohorivka, south of Avdiivka. [BBC News]

[Euronews] [Independent] [RFE/RL] [Reuters] [Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

Agriculture prices soar after Russia pulls out of grain deal

Russia's decision to pull out of an international agreement that guaranteed safe passage for vessels carrying wheat and other grains through the Black Sea sent agricultural commodity prices soaring and reignited concerns about a global food crisis as Moscow stepped up its attacks on Ukrainian ports.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on July 17 that the deal had "essentially stopped" and that Russia would no longer cooperate with the deal that was brokered by the United Nations (UN) and Turkey a year ago. Moscow has complained that sanctions were holding up a parallel agreement to allow payments, insurance and shipping for Moscow's own agricultural exports. [FT]

Russia also warned that it would consider all ships sailing through the Black Sea to Ukrainian ports potential military targets, including civilian crafts. It has since carried out missile strikes against Ukranian port cities after announcing its decision to withdraw from the agreement, including one of Ukraine's biggest Danube river ports.

Wheat futures for September delivery settled up 8.6 percent in Chicago on July 24, by the daily exchange price limit, at USD 7.5750 per bushel. Corn contracts for December closed up 6 percent at USD 5.6825 per bushel, the highest level in nearly a month. [Bloomberg]

Food Concerns

The development has also raised concerns about global food supplies, particularly for the nearly 350 million people across the world who face food insecurity. The World Bank had forecast in April that food prices were expected to fall by 8 percent in 2023, though it would still be at the second-highest level since 1975. [WorldBank]

But Russia's decision to terminate the Black Sea Initiative in effect ends a "lifeline" for hundreds of millions worldwide facing hunger and spiralling food costs, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said on July 17.

Countries in the Horn of Africa region, such as Somalia and Ethiopia, are heavily reliant on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine. Due to a harsh drought in the region, food prices are expected to be particularly hard hit, raising concerns about stability. [Reuters]

“Russia’s decision to suspend participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative will worsen food insecurity and harm millions of vulnerable people around the world,” Adam Hodge, a spokesperson for the US National Security Council, said in a statement. [UN][CNN]

The White House said the deal had been “critical” to bringing down food prices around the globe.

Since the initiative was struck, food prices have dropped over 23 percent from their peak in March 2022, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s Food Price Index. The accord had allowed over 35 million tons of vital food commodities to be exported from Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea to 45 countries on three continents, the U N said. [CNN][NYTimes][UN]

Drone attacks

The day of the deal’s expiration, the Ukrainian military utilised drones to strike and disable the Kerch Strait Bridge connecting Russia to Crimea. Russia shelled the Ukrainian port city of Odessa on July 18, effectively shutting down grain shipments from the main Ukrainian Black Sea port.

Russia claimed to be striking Odessa in response to the expiration of the grain export treaty, an anticipated and predicted escalation. Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Ambassador at Large Olha Trofimtseva publicly predicted that Russia would not renew the one-year agreement. [Reuters][NYT]

A drone attack also hit the Danube port of Reni, Bloomberg reported, citing people familiar with the matter, who asked not to be named discussing sensitive information. Romania said a grain silo, a fuel depot and cranes were damaged by the Russian attack. [Bloomberg][AP]

Shutting down Odessa as a Black Sea grain export centre may result in an increased amount of Ukrainian grain being redirected through its neighbours via land borders.

Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria agreed on July 19 to expand support for Ukrainian grain shipments by road, rail and non-Ukrainian Black Sea ports. The Romanian ports of Constanta, Galati

and Braila exported twenty million tons of Ukrainian grain transhipped from Ukraine via Danube barges between March and June. [Hill]

Africa Summit

Russia was criticised for pulling out of the deal as Russia hosted an African summit. Egypt has publicly blamed Russia for the collapse of the deal, while Kenya described Moscow's exit as a 'stab in the back'.

Just 17 African heads of state attended the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg on 27 July, down from 43 from in 2019. Together with calls for peace, the grain deal was a prominent and awkward talking point at an event intended to advance Russia's interests on the continent. Kenyan President William Ruto did not attend.

The Kremlin expressed its dissatisfaction over the poor turnout and pointed fingers at the United States and its Western allies. According to Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, they were accused of applying "unprecedented pressure" on African countries to disrupt the summit. [Tendies]

Russia promised to send grain free-of-charge to six African states - all with governments close to Moscow. However, at between just 25-50,000 tons each, the offer is a drop in the bucket for a continent once again paying the price for a war it is not involved in. "Russia is still a reliable supplier of food to Africa," Putin said, adding he would send grain free of charge to six African nations in the next few months. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CBS] [CNN] [France24] [Economist] [Guardian] [Reuters]

(ef-rw/gc)

Wagner mutiny raises questions about mercenary group's role in Africa

The Wagner Group's June mutiny and the apparent fall of Yevgeny Prigozhin has raised wider questions about Russia's foreign policy in Africa, according to analysts, even as Moscow tries to assure its partners that it will be business as usual in the continent.

The mercenary group has provided military support and has extensive business ventures across Africa, making it an important foreign policy component for the Kremlin's strategy in Africa. Wagner is currently known to operate in Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Burkina Faso, Libya, Sudan and Mozambique.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reassured the governments of both Mali and CAR that their working relationship with the Wagner group would not be disrupted. "At their request, several hundred servicemen are working in the CAR as instructors," Lavrov said. "This work, of course, will continue." [Politico]"

CAR President Faustin Archange Touadera said on July 28 that his country's relations with Russia had helped it to save its democracy and avoid a civil war after Russian mercenaries, including many from the Wagner militia, intervened in 2018 on the side of the government to quell a civil war that has raged since 2012.

Fidele Gouandjika, a top adviser to Touadéra, said Wagner's "instructors" came with Russia's blessing.

"If Moscow decides to withdraw them and send us the Beethovens or the Mozarts rather than Wagners, we will have them," he said. An additional Wagner contingent arrived in CAR this month to help secure a constitutional referendum on July 30. [Reuters]

Diplomats in CAR said there had been no obvious change on the ground since Prigozhin's rebellion, the Financial Times reported. Wagner's two most visible figures — Dmitri Syty, whose official role is director of a Russian cultural centre, and Vitali Perfilev, head of military actions — were still in Bangui, the capital, they said. [Financial Times]

Wagner has played a pivotal role in some of the continent's recent conflicts and has drawn its own funding from a mix of sources, but remains heavily dependent on Russian state backing, not least for logistical support, the Financial Times reported. Wagner has used Russian military bases and aircraft to transport everything from arms to personnel.

Ruthless Model

President Vladimir Putin has also claimed that the Russian state has "completely financed" Wagner in Africa. But in CAR and other countries, the mercenary group appears to have revenue sources from multiple businesses.

According to the US Treasury Department, M-Invest, a Russian mining company in Sudan, along with Meroe Gold, one of Africa's leading gold producers and an M-Invest subsidiary company, are "owned or controlled by Prigozhin." The group has established similar enterprises in CAR, harvesting minerals, timber, and producing beer and vodka, while in Mali the Wagner

group has expressed deep interest in setting up mining operations targeting the nation's rich gold deposits. [BBC]

"The Prigozhin network has become the dominant element of Russia's presence in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years," Maxime Audinet, a researcher from the Strategic Research Institute at Paris' École Militaire, said." With the Russian economy heavily reliant on the fruits of Wagner's overseas labour, many experts remain doubtful that the group's position in Africa will mirror the same fate as its contemporaries back in Russia." [Al-Monitor]

Wager has established a ruthless, self-financing "business model," involving military violence and control of gold and diamond mines, according to Nathalia Dukhan – senior author of the Architects of Terror report published by investigative group The Sentry. This will help the organisation adapt to its changing circumstances and makes it hard to dismantle, according to Dukhan.

"A virus survives," Dukhan said. "The monster will evolve, but it will not die." [Financial Times]

(cqk/gc)

Dutch Prime Minister will quit politics after cabinet collapses again

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte will resign as leader of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and will quit politics following general elections in November, a decision made after the collapse of his cabinet due to irreconcilable differences between coalition parties regarding the country's migration policies. [NL-Times] [Aljazeera]

"In recent days, there's been a lot of speculation about what motivated me," Rutte said in a speech in parliament before a debate on the collapse of the government. "The only answer is the Netherlands. I made the decision that I will not again be available as leader of the VVD. Once the new cabinet is formed after the elections, I will leave politics." [Aljazeera]

Rutte, one of Europe's longest-serving leaders, has been called "Teflon Mark" for his ability to hold on to power despite the regular challenges to his rule since first taking office in 2010. During that time, he has headed four coalition governments, managed the Covid-19 crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the ensuing Mediterranean migration crisis and

nationwide protests by farmers over nitrogen emission policies. [WashingtonPost] [Government]

It was the latest tension around migration that brought down his fourth cabinet. Last year, more than 21,000 people from outside the European Union (EU) sought asylum in the Netherlands, according to the Dutch government. More than 400,000 people immigrated to the Netherlands overall in 2022, the office said, an increase from the year before. [NYTimes]

Family reunification

A central point of contention surrounding migration policy was terms of family reunification and whether to create two classes of asylum: a temporary one for people fleeing conflicts, and a permanent one for people fleeing persecution.

Dutch news organisations reported that Rutte had called for limiting the entrance of children of war refugees who were already in the Netherlands and for making families wait at least two years before they could be reunited. Rutte denied those reports, according to Dutch broadcaster NOS. [NYTimes]

In the summer of 2022, Rutte's Cabinet managed to reach an agreement mandating a more even distribution of asylum seekers across the country – although some of the measures garnered heavy criticism. [NLTimes]

Arguments about migration policy continued to split the Dutch government, which already has imposed tougher immigration policies than some other EU members. Two parties in the governing coalition, the Christian Union and the centrist D66, determined that they could not come to terms with Rutte's party, leading to a crisis in the government. [NYTimes]

"One of the values that are important with the proposals is that children grow up with their parents," a statement by the Christian Union party said. "As a family party, that is what we stand for." The party said it wanted to work with "heart and soul for a humane and effective migration policy."

The large numbers of arrivals have strained the Netherlands' housing capacity, which was already suffering a shortage for the country's more than 17 million people.

Rutte had supported EU efforts to limit migration, visiting Tunisia in June with Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and EU leader Ursula Von der Leyen. In a joint statement, the leaders said the EU would

provide EUR 100 million to Tunisia for “border management” and search-and-rescue and anti-smuggling efforts. [European Commission]

Caretaker role

Rutte hopes to occupy a caretaker role until a new Cabinet is established, but he may face a motion of no confidence during the ongoing parliamentary debate. If the motion passes, he would be required to step down immediately. [Reuters][The Guardian]

Various opposition parties, including PvdA–GroenLinks, a centre-left political alliance between the Labour Party (PvdA) and GroenLinks (GL), and the far-right PVV, have announced their intention to submit or support a motion of no confidence against Rutte. [NLTimes]

Opinions among the Dutch public are divided, but predominantly negative regarding Rutte's continued role in a new Cabinet. Almost 72 percent of respondents say that Rutte should not return, with only 22 percent, mainly VVD voters, in favour of his return. [EenVandaag]

“Given the enormous effort that municipalities and election officials have put into the provincial council and water council elections on March 15, 2023, a responsible preparation period for the organisation of the election deserves special attention when deciding on the election date for the Tweede Kamer,” Chairman of the Electoral Council, Wim Kuijken, said. [NLTimes]

(pms-ava/gc)

As fires scorch southern Europe, scientists say climate change has made heatwaves worse

Temperatures that have been observed at the peak of extreme heatwaves across Europe and North America would be “virtually impossible” without human-induced climate change, a scientific study has claimed.

The report was released as drought-hit southern Europe was scorched by fires in July, a month labelled by the United Nations as the hottest in recorded history, forcing thousands to flee the flames. [BBC]

The study by academic collaboration group World Weather Attribution, issued on July 25, also said that climate change made blistering heat affecting China 50 times more likely than it would have been without human intervention. [Reuters]

The scientists claim man-made climate change increased the European heatwave's temperatures by 2.5°C.

Fires facilitated by searing temperatures caused havoc. Over 20,000 holidaymakers and residents fled from blazes raging on the Greek island of Rhodes, in the country's largest-ever wildfire evacuation. [BBC]

Country 'at war' with flames

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the country was "at war" with the flames, as the mercury in some areas hit heights of 45°C. [Reuters] [BBC]

Greece is now counting the cost after two weeks of out-of-control infernos – the majority of which were "ignited by human hand, either by criminal negligence or intent", according to the country's top climate change official.

Vassilis Kikilias, the Greek minister for climate crisis and civil protection, said that 667 fires had broken out during the crisis, adding that the proximity and simultaneity of blazes in some instances suggested the involvement of arsonists. [The Guardian]

Across southern Europe, similar extreme phenomena were observed. Italy was struck by heavy hail and storms in the north, and by wildfires and scorching heat in the south, notably on the island of Sicily.

Wildfires on Spain's Canary Islands archipelago forced 4,000 people to evacuate their homes in July. Albania, meanwhile, sweltered under record temperatures. *(See separate stories in this issue)*

Local officials across the affected regions warned that heatwaves and wildfires were damaging the tourism industry of areas heavily dependent on spending by international holidaymakers. [BBC]

(qv/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Flemish Minister-President calls for greater independence after 2024 elections

Flemish Minister-President Jan Jambon called for complete structural changes to the federal system to bring greater independence for individual states and provinces after the June 2024 elections.

In his address at an event in the city of Kortrijk on July 10 leading up to the Holiday of the Flemish Community the next day, Jambon, a member of the conservative and nationalist opposition party – the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) – highlighted Flanders' successes regarding economic growth, increased exports and low unemployment, while recognising that the education and healthcare sectors need improving. [LeSoir] [RTL]

To further improve these public services, Jambon called for a complete structural transformation toward greater independence, citing Article 35 of the Belgian constitution. [LeSoir] [RTL]

First introduced in 1993 by Jean-Luc Dehaene's federal government, the article establishes that all matters not explicitly attributed to the federal power should fall under Belgian provincial mandates – essentially increasing the power and autonomy of individual provinces, and decentralising the authority of the federal government in Brussels.

Article 35 has never been implemented, despite Flemish nationalists frequently calling for its implementation. High costs and logistical pressure have been attributed to the failure to implement the article. [LeSoir] [RTL]

Greater cooperation

Underscoring the differences around federalism in the country, former Belgian Prime Minister and current Minister-President of Wallonia Elio Di Rupo said on July

11 that he was "firmly in favour" of "stronger federal" cooperation between the three regions of the country, which include Flanders, Brussels and the majority francophone Wallonia.

His comments mark a clear opposition to Belgium adopting a confederalist system – an ambition of Jambon's right-wing Flemish party N-VA that would give greater autonomy to the regions and allow them to decide the extent to which they cooperate with other Belgian regions. [BrusselsTimes][DailyFREuro]

At the end of last year and ahead of next year's elections, the Flemish separatist right-wing party N-VA declared that it would not be part of Belgium's new federal government in 2024 without the implementation of confederalism. This would be a major complication for the country's federal government. It would additionally prevent Brussels from controlling the country's budget deficit. [BrusselsTimes][DailyFREuro]

Arguing that the priorities of the vast majority of people "clearly go beyond institutional issues," Di Rupo called on the authorities to focus on the "concrete, material" concerns of citizens, including health, food prices, energy prices, global warming and wages. He added that people expect the authorities to provide concrete solutions to these issues. [BrusselsTimes] [DailyFREuro]

Di Rupo made his comments while the Flemish Community celebrates its annual holiday on July 11. He evoked the victory of the Count of Flanders over the King of France outside Kortrijk in 1302, known as the 'Battle of the Golden Spurs' (the Guldensporenslag in Dutch). The Flemish lion flag will be present across the region – visible at the many celebrations, folk festivals and performances.

(sw-gt/gc)

Belgium: Parliament amends 2017 transgender law

The Belgian House of Parliament approved on July 6 amendments to the country's 2017 transgender self-identification law, allowing citizens to change their gender and first names several times in the Civil Registry without going before family court.

A second amendment is expected in the coming months, which would recognise non-binary identities. [RTLBE]

This follows a Constitutional Court ruling which determined that the existing 2017 legislation violated the principle of equality for both transgender and non-binary citizens.

The reforms are widely supported, with only two opposition parties against the amendments, namely the nationalist and conservative New Flemish Alliance and the right-wing Vlaams Belang party. [SudInfo]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Foreign Minister dodges no confidence vote

Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib of the Francophone Liberal party escaped a vote of no-confidence that had been re-tabled on June 30 by the opposition Flemish nationalist N-VA and far-right Vlaams Belang parties, two weeks after her decision to allow an Iranian delegation to be granted visas to attend a conference in Brussels.

Instead, a coalition of the liberal parties Open Vld and Reformist Party, the socialist party Vooruit and the Christian Democratic Party voted to declare the motion null and void. Two members of the coalition parties, Ecolo-Greens and PS, made a symbolic abstention, saying Lahbib must win back the confidence of their parties.[VRTNews][BrusselsTimes] [VRTNews] [Belga] [Reuters]

The federal coalition would have been threatened by a vote of no confidence. Although both groups voted to avert this, the French-speaking Socialists and the Greens continue to call for Lahbib's resignation. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Government turns to bonds for financing

The Belgian Debt Agency announced that the Belgian state raised EUR 3.2 billion through the placement of bonds with institutional investors, bringing the total amount raised this year to EUR 33.8 billion.

The Treasury has already raised 75 percent of the EUR 45 billion it will borrow through bonds in 2023, in line with the annual financing plan. The total amount targeted for the whole year is exceptional: never

before has the Federal Government planned to borrow such a sum on the bond market. [L'Echo]

Belgium is likely to find it increasingly difficult to service its debt in the foreseeable future as the European Central Bank (ECB) is expected to raise interest rates again.

In an effort to curb Europe's soaring inflation rate, much of which is driven by historically high food prices, the ECB has already raised interest rates eight times in the past year. [BrusselsTimes]

(gt/gc)

France: Macron keeps Prime Minister Bourne despite reshuffle

French President Emmanuel Macron announced on July 17 that Elisabeth Borne will maintain her position as Prime Minister in an attempt to ensure stability within his cabinet.

Last April, Macron promised to create a new "national dynamic" and to "draw all the lessons" from the crisis caused by the pension reform led by Borne. On July 20, the President reshuffled his ministers for key domestic portfolios such as education, housing and urban affairs. [LeMonde]

"We're in a spirit of continuity but let's not pretend as if there hasn't been something that stunned the country for a few nights," Macron said.

The most high-profile change took place for the education ministry, where Gabriel Attal, a rising star among Macronistas, replaced Pap Ndiaye, a target of right-wing, conservative attacks. [Reuters]

(ava/gc)

France: Paris riots spread to Brussels and Lausanne

The Paris riots escalated in the first weeks of July, spreading to francophone Belgium – Brussels – and Switzerland – Lausanne.

The riots initially began in Paris on June 27 after a 17-year-old boy of North African descent was shot in a car at close range in the north-western Paris suburb of Nanterre after the boy, allegedly driving without a

licence at high speed to evade police, attempted to again escape police custody. Many vehicles were burned, buildings damaged and looted, as well as the mayor's home attacked between June 29 and July 5. [CPG No. 7] [Reuters]

Given the ongoing civil unrest and violence, French President Emanuel Macron opted to cancel a trip to Germany scheduled for the first week of July. [AP]

The President also suggested a social media blackout at a meeting with more than 200 mayors in attendance on July 4 after learning that many protestors were using social media platforms TikTok and Snapchat to organise the rioting. After accusations of authoritarianism, the Elysee released a statement the next day clarifying that the President was not advocating for a "general blackout," but rather an "occasional and temporary" one. [TheGuardian]

France deployed over 40,000 police to contain the rioting, leading to thousands of arrests in the first week of July.

Civil unrest and rioting was not, however, contained to Paris, spreading to France's other urban centres, such as Marseille, Dijon, Saint Etienne and Lyon. Throughout the month of July, riots broke out in 297 different cities and towns in France, according to data collected by the Associated Press.

Many rural areas are now facing the problem of how best to recover from the resulting destruction of public property, arson, looting and rioting. Typically, rioting of this nature is known as "les violences urbaines" – urban violence – in France, making widespread violent riots in blue-collar towns and villages a first for the country.

The riots also spilled over to Brussels, Belgium. Rioters were first seen torching cars, smashing windows and using fireworks as weapons in and around Brussels' Anneessens square on June 30. Violence continued to spread throughout the capital city, leading to the closure of Anneessens metro station on July 1. Belgian police announced that 64 people were arrested in relation to the rioting. [Express] [AA] [LaLibre]

Rioters in the francophone city of Lausanne, Switzerland, were also seen smashing windows and attacking police with stones and Molotov cocktails overnight on July 1. After 100 people gathered to protest against the Paris police shooting earlier that evening, the protest devolved into rioting in the early hours of July 2. Police arrested six teenage minors and one adult in relation to the riots – while the arrestees

remain unidentified, police revealed that those arrested had Portuguese, Somali, Bosnian, Swiss, Georgian and Serbian citizenship. [AP 2] [AA 2] [Telegraph] [LeFigaro] [RTS]

The violence and rioting has now subsided in Belgium, Switzerland and France. However, the French government banned the sale, possession and transportation of fireworks on July 9 over the Bastille Day – the anniversary of the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 – weekend, fearing renewed riots. [CNN]

(sw/gc)

France: Court bans protest in Paris against police violence

A Paris Court on July 15 banned a protest against police violence in the capital amid tensions following riots over the police killing of a teenager of North African descent.

Some 50 organisations, trade unions and left-wing parties, including La France Insoumise, Europe Ecologie-Les Verts and the CGT union, denounced the Paris Police Prefecture's ban on the demonstration. “We strongly denounce this attempt to muzzle political expression in working-class neighbourhoods and the repression of social and environmental movements.” The organisations collectively signed a press release. [LeMonde]

Pierre Brunisso, from French NGO the Human Rights League, said the situation in France has become “more and more repressive” with protesters increasingly feeling they need to be granted “permission” to demonstrate from the police prefecture.

“The police headquarters supported by judges from Paris’s administrative court are blocking all channels for the democratic expression of perfectly legitimate demands," said Lucie Simon, a lawyer for the protest organisers. [France24]

The unrest was sparked after the French teenager of North African descent 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].

(ava/gc)

France: Supreme Court rejects slavery reparations in case from Martinique

France's highest court (*Cour de cassation*) has rejected a request from three groups seeking reparations for slavery in a case that originated in the French Caribbean island of Martinique. The court's decision cited a lack of evidence showing that individuals had personally and directly suffered damages from the historical crimes their ancestors endured.

One of the lawyers involved in the case, Alain Manville, criticised the ruling as a "political decision" and suggested that the court may have been influenced by the significant amount of money the French state would have had to pay in reparations.

Manville expressed hope for a more global approach, aiming to involve "all Afro-descendants," which he believes could lead to a different perspective from French judges. Another lawyer for the claimants, Patrice Spinosi, called the ruling "another missed opportunity" and added that his clients plan to take the case to the European Court of Human Rights. [AP News] [RFI]

(cg/gc)

France: Government implements new measures to fight LGBTQ+ discrimination

France will implement new legal measures to "put an end to the impunity" of perpetrators of LGBTQphobic acts, according to a government minister.

The Minister for Gender Equality, Diversity, and Equal Opportunities, Isabelle Rome, presented the plan on July 10, during a visit to the Paris headquarters of SOS, an organisation that combats discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community in France. [LeMonde]

The plan includes measures such as accelerated training for law enforcement officers, mapping the places where assaults take place, greater representation of LGBTQ+ parents in school, and a financial envelope of EUR 10 million for LGBTQ+ centres. [LeMonde]

Although the current government has taken steps to defend the rights of LGBTQ+ community, France has

suffered from discrimination, violence and anti-LGBTQ+ hatred in recent years. In 2008, France launched an international campaign for the universal decriminalisation of homosexuality, with a declaration at the United Nations General Assembly that was signed by 66 countries and the creation of a fund for civil society organisations. In 2011, France worked on drafting the Human Rights Council Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

(ava/gc)

France: Government to help consumers pay clothing repairs

Secretary of State for Ecology, Berangere Couillard, announced at La Caserne – a Parisian responsible and sustainable fashion incubator – on July 11 a new scheme to subsidise clothing repairs.

The scheme hopes to discourage fast fashion and ultimately reduce clothes wastage.

In her announcement, Couillard stressed that the "goal is to support those that do the repairs," referring to sewing workshops and clothing brands offering repair services. [LeMonde]

As it stands, French citizens throw away 700,000 tons of clothes each year – two thirds of which end up in landfills. The textile industry is one of the largest polluting industries worldwide. [LeMonde]

The new scheme consists of a EUR 154 million fund set up for the 2023 to 2028 period. It will be run by eco-organisation Refashion.

From October, consumers will be able to claim EUR 7 for repairing a heel and between EUR 10 and EUR 25 for clothing repairs.

The scheme is modelled off of the existing household appliance repair bonus and is part of a broader strategy starting in 2022 to reform the textile industry in the country. Reform objectives include improved brand traceability and increased financial support for organisations specialising in reusing and recycling clothing. [TheGuardian]

(sw/gc)

France: Legislation to protect undocumented workers delayed

President Emmanuel Macron laid out his priorities for the new parliamentary term in an interview with French TV channel Noumea on July 24 – shifting his initial mid-July timeline for an important immigration bill that would protect undocumented workers to September.

The new immigration bill hopes to fill the country's labour shortages with undocumented migrants by issuing them a one-year residency permit. This comes at a time when the political right has been increasingly calling to reduce immigration. [EuroNews]

Previously, Macron had pledged to move forward with the bill in the first two weeks of July. The legislation was delayed first by the protests over Macron's controversial pension reform, and then by rioting triggered by a police shooting of a 17-year old in Paris.

As a result of the delays, undocumented migrants have been left in a legal limbo, vulnerable to abusive labour conditions. [France24] [CPG No.7]

In his interview, Macron also detailed his other priorities for the new term, namely increasing the country's employment rate, reducing carbon emissions and increasing green investments, improving public services – particularly the schooling system –, lowering taxes, increasing social media protections for youth, as well as restoring law and order after the rioting.

This was the first time Macron addressed the French people since the riots and recent political upheaval – doing the interview remotely from the island of New Caledonia during a visit last month. When asked about the riots, Macron stated "our country needs a return to authority at every level," further stating that no police officers are above the law and any suspected of serious assault during the riots and protests will face an independent judiciary. [TheLocal]

(sw/gc)

France: Parliament approves increase in military budget

France's parliament approved a multi-billion-euro increase in military spending through the rest of the decade, prompted by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and growing global threats, that will modernise the country's nuclear arsenal, enhance intelligence

capabilities and develop more remote-controlled weaponry. [AP News][LeMonde]

French President Emmanuel Macron supported the increased defence budget, now totalling EUR 413 billion, making it the most significant defence spending increase in fifty years. Macron justified the increase as necessary to safeguard the country's freedom, security, prosperity and standing in the world. [AP News][LeMonde]

France is set to double the number of military reservists and strengthen its cyberdefense capabilities. Additionally, there will be an increase in weapons production capacity, not only to support Ukraine but also to ensure the French military's sufficient supply. France also hosts one of the largest domestic arms production industries in Europe.

The budget for the 2024-2030 period is more than a third higher than the previous military spending plan, amounting to EUR 295 billion euros for 2019-2025.

The bill passed by the National Assembly by a vote of 244-37 despite the lack of a government majority after the Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu had made commitments to various parliamentary groups. [AP News][LeMonde]

(cg/gc)

Germany: Centre-right opposition leader criticised for far-right AfD comments

The leader of Germany's centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Friedrich Merz, has come under intense scrutiny after suggesting the possibility of cooperating with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) at a local political level.

In an interview with state broadcaster ZDF on July 23, Merz ruled out the possibility of forming a coalition with the AfD at a national level but expressed a different stance regarding local politics. "Of course we are obliged to accept democratic values," he stated. "If a district authority or a mayor is voted in who belongs to the AfD, then of course you find ways to continue to work in that town." [Der Spiegel] [Die Zeit] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Guardian]

Merz' statement sparked a backlash within his own party. Within the CDU, Merz's statements were met with strong condemnation. Kai Wegner, the CDU mayor of Berlin, swiftly distanced himself from Merz's

stance, asserting that the CDU "cannot, does not want to, and will not cooperate with a party whose business model is hatred, division, and exclusion."

Markus Soder, the prime minister of Bavaria and a member of the CDU's sister party, the Christian Social Union, stated that the AfD's anti-democratic and hateful ideology was "not compatible with our values." CDU foreign affairs expert Norbert Rottgen defended the party's decision to maintain a firewall against the AfD, emphasising that the party had bindingly agreed to restrict cooperation with the far right."

Merz later said on Twitter: "To make it clear once again, and I have never said otherwise: the decision of the @CDU applies. There will also be no cooperation between the #CDU and the AfD at the municipal level." [Guardian] [Reuters]

The co-leader of the AfD, Tino Chrupulla, responded to Merz's comments with enthusiasm, interpreting them as a sign that the political "firewall" between the AfD and other parties was coming down. "Together we will tear down the wall in the states and in the federal government," he wrote on Twitter.

The AfD, a party known for its nationalistic and anti-immigration platform, has been gaining momentum in Germany. Notably, the party recently achieved a breakthrough victory by securing its first district council in the eastern state of Thuringia. It also clinched its first mayoral post in Saxony-Anhalt.

National Poll

Moreover, the AfD reached a new high in national opinion polls at between 18 and20 percent, ahead of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democratic Party and its coalition partners. [Der Spiegel] [Reuters]

AfD on July 29 voted for incumbent European Union (EU) Parliament member Maximilian Krah to lead its 2024 EU election campaign. Krah won the vote with 65.7 percent in favour. [Reuters]

"We are now the most exciting right-wing party in all of Europe," he was quoted as saying in his candidacy speech. [Reuters]

Several days have been set aside for the choice of candidates, with the party congress scheduled to be continued next weekend.

Thousands took to the streets to protest against AfD on July 28 and 29 as the party held a convention to choose its candidates for European parliamentary

elections next year. Protesters outside the conference venue in the city of Magdeburg waved banners with messages like "stand together against right-wing hate" or "Nazis out." [Reuters]

(if/gc)

German: Government implements austerity measures in the face of financial challenges

The German government announced plans on July 5 to reduce the nation's budget for the upcoming year by EUR 30.6 billion, following a decade of spending increases.

Finance Minister Christian Lindner attributed these austerity measures to mounting public debt resulting from the Covid-19 crisis and the energy crisis triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine. Lindner stressed the importance of adhering to Germany's constitutionally enshrined debt brake, which limits spending and borrowing to a fraction of gross domestic product.

"We are only at the beginning of the fiscal turnaround," Lindner wrote, adding that the state needs to reduce debt without burdening individuals and businesses with additional taxes. Chancellor Olaf Scholz also argued that the new budgets are aimed at securing the country's future. [Politico] [Die Zeit] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

These measures have sparked prolonged disagreements within the governing coalition, consisting of Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and Lindner's Free Democratic Party (FDP), as well as across the political spectrum. [Politico]

Paid Parental Leave and Family Support

The Greens have expressed dissatisfaction with the reduction of funding for Family Minister Lisa Paus, which would limit the duration of paid parental leave for couples, which currently stands at 14 months. The cuts to household allowances would primarily affect high-earning families, but the Greens fear that high-earning men may not take extended breaks from work, placing a disproportionate burden on women to raise children.

Family Minister Paus of the Green Party expressed regret over the imposed cuts, highlighting potential negative consequences for the government's efforts to

achieve gender equality. [Politico] [Der Spiegel] [Tagesschau]

Chancellor Scholz emphasised the government's commitment to providing a basic allowance for children from low-income households, a key initiative of the Greens. Still, tensions within the ruling coalition remain high, as the Greens and FDP took to Twitter to release shared government letters in an attempt to blame each other for the imposed cuts. [Politico] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Der Spiegel] [Die Zeit]

Education, Health, and Transport

The education sector will experience significant spending reductions, particularly affecting student funds for those from lower-income households. Furthermore, the EUR 200 flat-rate energy allowance for students will be discontinued. The health ministry will also eliminate federal subsidies for long-term care insurance starting next year. [Tagesschau] [Politico] [Der Spiegel]

The government's ability to support the renovation of Germany's ailing railway network will also be limited. Deutsche Bahn, the federally owned railway operator, estimates the need for EUR 45 billion by 2027 to upgrade infrastructure and accommodate more passengers. However, Lindner's budget plan only allocates around EUR 12 billion in the coming years. While the government intends to tap into the country's climate fund for additional funding, the exact amount remains uncertain. [Tagesschau] [Politico]

Defence

Despite overall cutbacks, the defence budget will see a slight increase from EUR 50 billion to EUR 52 billion, primarily to cover rising inflation costs. However, experts argue that this increase remains insufficient to support Germany's military buildup plans, as outlined in its new national security strategy.

Chancellor Scholz announced plans to access a special fund of EUR 100 billion for military armament, aiming to fulfil the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's requirement of spending at least two percent of economic output on defence. However, some have raised concerns regarding Germany's ability to sustain meeting this target once the special fund begins to deplete in 2026. [Tagesschau] [Politico]

Criticism

The budget proposal has faced criticism across the political spectrum. Critics argue that adherence to the

debt brake will hamper progress, particularly in the context of the green transition and social matters. Although the government plans to take on EUR 16.6 billion in new debt next year, the maximum allowed under the debt brake, this amount has not been enough to assuage criticism. [Politico]

(if/gc)

German: Government clears path for LNG terminal in Rugen despite opposition

The German Bundestag granted on July 7 approval for the construction of a liquified natural gas (LNG) terminal in the port of Mukran on the Baltic Sea island of Rugen, despite strong opposition from local communities, as Europe's largest economy tries to diversify its energy supplies after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [TAZ] [Tagesschau] [NDR] [Der Spiegel]

Under the government's plan, two floating LNG terminals with a combined annual capacity of 10 billion cubic metres will be established at the Mukran port. The state will contribute approximately EUR 10 billion in financing for the conversion of a significant portion of the natural gas supply to liquified petroleum gas, with expected returns through ship and pipeline usage fees. [TAZ] [NDR] [Tagesschau]

Residents and tourism officials fear that the LNG terminal will deter visitors from Rugen, a popular vacation destination for Germans. In 2022, Rugen and its neighbouring island Hiddensee recorded around one million arrivals, according to German statistical agency Statista. Locals worry about potential pollution and its impact on the island's land and air quality. [NDR]

The state government of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania also opposes the current plans. State Environment Minister Till Backhaus voiced dissatisfaction over the federal government's lack of binding commitments to support the region. The municipality of Binz on Rügen plans to take legal action against the decision, seeking an interim injunction to halt the construction and connecting pipeline. [Der Spiegel] [NDR] [TAZ]

Environmentalists join the chorus of opposition, raising concerns about the project's impact on nature, fishing, tourism and the creation of new fossil fuel dependencies. A petition by the environmental organisation Naturschutzbund Deutschland calling for

the project to be stopped has garnered 63,000 signatures in recent weeks. [Twitter]

During the Bundestag debate, opposition members accused the SPD, Greens and FDP of rushing the project through parliament, disregarding the interests of the people and undermining public trust. Inga Latendorf from the Left Party noted that "the people don't feel they are being taken seriously; decisions are being made over their heads." [Der Spiegel]

(if/gc)

Germany unveils comprehensive strategy on China relations

The German government has acknowledged that China is "partner, competitor, and systemic rival" during its presentation on July 13 of its strategy on future relations with the Asian nation. This represents a significant departure from Germany's previous focus on bilateral economic ties with China under the conservative leadership of Angela Merkel. [Reuters] [New York Times] [Associated Press]

Issued a month after Germany's first national security strategy, the 64-page document reflects a broader initiative among Western nations to reduce their reliance on China, referred to by strategists as "de-risking." Despite China being Germany's primary trading partner since 2016, the strategy highlights concerns over Beijing's growing dominance in global affairs and its lack of condemnation towards Russia's offensive in Ukraine. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

During a press conference, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock emphasised the need for a policy shift, stating, "Anyone who listens to China knows with what self-confidence it will decisively influence the development of our world--more repressive at home and more offensive abroad. China has changed and so our China policy must change too." [Associated Press]

A crucial aspect of the strategy revolves around the reduction of Germany's economic dependency on China.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the German government has been particularly concerned about potential geopolitical risks linked to over-reliance on countries such as Russia and China.

"China is seeking to create economic and technological dependencies with a view to use these to assert

political objectives and interests," warns the strategy. Foreign Minister Baerbock further cautioned that a sudden disentanglement from China could pose challenges, citing the lessons learned from when Russia cut off gas flows to Western Europe last year. [New York Times] [Associated Press] [Reuters]

The document also reaffirms Germany's commitment to conducting business with Taiwan, the self-governed island that China views as a breakaway province. It emphasises that any change in the delicate status quo of the Taiwan Strait should be achieved through peaceful means and mutual consent, acknowledging potential risks of a military escalation in the region. [Reuters] [Associated Press] [New York Times]

The strategy also acknowledges China's crucial role as a partner in addressing global challenges, particularly in combating climate change and pandemics. "It will not be possible to overcome the climate crisis without China," states the document. [Reuters][Associated Press]

Mixed reaction

The strategy has received mixed reactions from companies and industry associations, with some supporting the approach and others calling for more assertiveness in de-risking efforts. Germany has strong links to the Chinese market not only as an export market but also for cars and other products produced on location by German companies.

Although the strategy does not impose any binding targets or requirements for companies, the government intends to engage in confidential discussions with companies significantly exposed to China.

Additionally, the government plans to review export control lists to ensure that German goods do not contribute to systemic human rights violations in China or support military rearmament. The strategy also supports the idea of potentially screening outbound investment controls on cutting-edge technology with potential military applications, in line with a concurrent initiative by the European Union Commission. [Reuters] [Associated Press] [New York Times]

Following the strategy's release, the Chinese embassy issued a statement opposing being labelled a "systemic rival" and warned against what it perceives as interference in its internal affairs, as well as any efforts to "distort and smear" the country's image. [New York Times]

The strategy will now proceed to Parliament for debate in September, allowing German lawmakers to shape the final version before implementation. [New York Times]

(if/gc)

Germany: Federal and state health ministers introduce hospital reform deal

Federal and state health ministers have reached an agreement on comprehensive hospital reform to address the rising economic difficulties clinics in Germany are currently facing.

In rural areas, smaller clinics struggle to maintain the quality of services of large institutions, while urban areas suffer from an oversupply of hospitals, up to a third of which are at risk of insolvency. Moreover, in recent years hospital revenues have failed to keep pace with rising inflation, leading to concerns over the quality of care provided to patients. [Tagesthemen] [Die Zeit]

The existing system in Germany allowed hospitals to perform a wide range of operations without specialisation, with payments to hospitals based on the number of patients treated. Under the proposed reform, hospitals will receive pre-treatment lump sums known as reserve budgets instead of a flat rate per patient, as this disadvantages rural clinics.

The aim is to support rural clinics with lower patient volumes and to enhance the quality of care in clinics across the country. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach describes the reform as a "revolution" in the health system by redefining incentives for hospitals. [Tagesthemen] [Die Zeit]

The reform also includes a "transparency clause" that specifies which procedures hospitals perform and how frequently. Health Minister Lauterbach plans to introduce an interactive online map by 2024, displaying the quality levels achieved by each hospital in Germany. His hope is that this will empower patients to make informed decisions about which hospitals suit their medical needs best. [Die Zeit] [Tagesthemen] [Der Spiegel]

Some federal states have expressed concerns that the transparency clause might devalue the care standards of certain hospitals and deter patients from visiting them altogether. [Der Spiegel] [Die Zeit]

Experts believe that while the reform may increase the survival prospects of smaller clinics, it may not be sufficient to prevent urban hospital insolvencies. Clinics unable to meet quality standards for specific medical areas may need to transfer those services to larger hospitals, while less efficient clinics may consider mergers or partnerships to meet financing requirements. Failure to do so could lead to reliance on outpatient services or, in extreme cases, closures. [Die Zeit] [Tagesthemen]

The draft legislation is expected to be decided upon by the German parliament after its summer recess, with implementation commencing in January 2024. Some laws are set to be enacted by 2025, and the responsibility for implementation will primarily lie with individual states. [Der Spiegel] [Tagesthemen] [Die Zeit].

(if/gc)

Ireland: RTE's top TV presenter embroiled in pay scandal

Ireland's highest-paid broadcaster, Ryan Tubridy, received undisclosed payments totalling EUR 345,000 from top national broadcaster RTE. [BBC]

Tubridy told Ireland's Public Accounts Committee that his name and reputation have been "sullied" as a result of the controversy, with RTE admitting to paying Tubridy more than was publicly declared between 2017 and 2022.

Of the total paid, EUR 225,000 was from Tubridy's commercial deal with Renault, who agreed to pay Tubridy EUR 75,000 each year for appearances. Renault withdrew from the agreement after one year in 2020, but RTE covered Tubridy's losses for 2021 and 2022. The remaining EUR 120,000 was an "error" from RTE, according to chairwoman Siun Ni Raghallaigh. [Sky News] [RTÉ] [The Journal] [Irish Independent] [BBC]

The pay scandal has attracted attention from Irish viewers since it was first revealed in late June 2023, with developments unfolding throughout July.

Moving forward, public trust must be restored in both RTE and Tubridy. Currently, 28 percent of the public believe RTE can regain their trust, while 37 percent feel that Tubridy should not return to RTE as a radio presenter. [BBC] [Irish Mirror]

(ew/gc)

Netherlands: Government wrongfully shared criminal sentences

The Netherlands mistakenly transmitted data to other European Union (EU) member states and the United Kingdom regarding 22,000 cases where prosecutors – not courts – imposed criminal sentences.

Outgoing Minister for Legal Protection Franc Weerwind acknowledged that this information should have been limited to sharing only criminal convictions, not penalties issued without a court hearing. The unlawful data transfer occurred between April 2012 and September 2022. [NL Times]

The government cannot inform all those impacted due to address unavailability or data protection regulations. The Netherlands has asked EU member states to remove the unjustly shared data, but it remains unknown which countries copied the convictions to their national registers, and no legal means can enforce their removal. [NL Times]

(pms/gc)

Switzerland's asylum procedures questioned by rights group

The World Organisation against Torture – alongside its NGO partners – submitted an alternative report to the United Nations Committee against Torture on July 10 regarding Switzlerand's accelerated asylum procedures.

The report identifies the country's new accelerated asylum procedures implemented in March 2019 – arguing that while asylum seekers have the right to legal assistance, its implementation is questionable. Under existing legislation, lawyers are paid by the state with a lump sum, the value of which does not change whether they appeal a negative decision.

Consequently, lawyers are incentivised to terminate their mandate immediately after a negative decision – after which an asylum seeker has between five and seven days to find a new lawyer.

A second concern raised by the report was the forced returns of individuals seeking asylum in Switzerland to Dublin Convention countries – i.e. European Union members, Iceland, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Norway – and "safe third world" countries. This is

because Switzerland does not carry out thorough human rights investigations and assessments in these destination countries, relying rather on ratified legal treaties to determine whether it is appropriate to send asylum seekers to these destination countries.

Another concern raised in the report is the lack of specific provisions in the country's criminal code defining and prohibiting torture. Torture is only indirectly criminalised through the offences of crimes against humanity and war crime. [OMCT]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Conservatives against, liberals for adding new national holiday

The legislative commission of Switzerland's upper house of parliament – known as the Political Institutions Committee of the Council of States – voted on July 7 against a new national holiday. In the final count, 10 voted against the holiday, with only one vote for.

This comes after the lower house, the National Council, voted in favour of the holiday on May 4 – with 94 votes for and 82 against. The centre-right Liberals party and the right-wing Swiss People's Party voted against, while the left-wing Social Democratic Party and Green party voted for. While divided, both centre parties, The Centre party and Green Liberal party, mostly voted for the new holiday. [20minutes]

The proposed public holiday is September 12, marking the anniversary of the creation of modern Switzerland in 1848 – when the federal constitution was created, replacing an alliance between cantons with a federal state.

This would be in addition to the Swiss national day currently celebrated on August 1, which marks the anniversary of when the Swiss Confederation was founded in 1291. Notably, the Swiss Confederation was an alliance between only three Swiss-German cantons – Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden – of which Switzlerand now has 26, ranging from Swiss-German, French, Italian and Romansch speaking municipalities.

Critics argue that a second national holiday would take away from the traditional August 1 festivities, while proponents argue that it is necessary to celebrate the more inclusive anniversary of direct democracy, rule of law and federalism in the country. [24heures]

The upper house is expected to make its final decision by vote during its next session. [LeMatin]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Federal Council opposes EUs Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms

Switzerland's Federal Council – the country's highest executive authority – released a report in July recommending against the European Union (EU)'s carbon border adjustment mechanisms (MCAF) model.

MCAF was approved by the EU in December 2022 and is expected to be implemented from October 1. Essentially a carbon border tax, MCAF requires that imports – such as metals and cement – be subjected to a tax on carbon emissions linked to their production. [RTS]

According to the Federal Council's report, however, MCAF is not necessary for Switzerland to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 – highlighting the system to be too vague regarding trade, law and regulation. The report goes on to say that MCAF is too expensive, coming at an annual cost of between CHF 5 million and CHF 10 million.

Instead, the report proposes amending Switzerland's Emissions Trading System to match that of the EU.

Critics of the report argue that MCAF is necessary because it would force Swiss exporters to provide proof of their products' origins, preventing the country from becoming a transit destination for polluting goods, as well as prevent Swiss companies from importing polluting products untaxed.

The Federal Council has pledged to reevaluate its position by mid-2026. [RTS 2]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Geneva hosts AI conference

The United Nations (UN) hosted a press conference, titled *AI for Good,* in Geneva with humanoid robots powered by artificial intelligence (AI) on July 7 to discuss the future of AI technology.

The humanoids featured in the conference included Sophia, the first robot innovation ambassador for the

UN Development Programme; Grace, a healthcare robot; Desdemona, a rockstar robot; Ai-Da, a portraitist robot; and Ameca, Geminoid and Nadine, who are modelled off of their creators.

The organisers had hoped to highlight the capabilities and limitations of AI when pursuing the UNs sustainable development goals. It was not disclosed to what extent the humanoids' responses were scripted or programmed in advance by their creators. [Reuters]

When asked whether they expect to replace existing jobs, the humanoids responded by saying that they expect only to work alongside humans. When asked about better and increased AI regulation, the humanoids disagreed with one another. Some advocated for AI regulation, others for no limitations – particularly Desdomana who stated "I don't believe in limitations, only opportunities." [France24]

After the release of AI-powered chatbot ChatGPT in November last year, there have been increasing talks on how best to regulate and monitor AI technologies at both state and international levels. [AP]

(sw/gc)

United Kingdom: New reforms set to increase average pension

The United Kingdom (UK) is scheduled to unveil the Mansion House Reforms on July 10 that will increase pensions by over GBP 1,000 per year for the average earner who saves consistently during their career.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt plans to introduce reforms that will encourage pension funds to make riskier investments in start-ups. Leading pension firms have committed to allocating 5 percent of their investments to early-stage businesses in sectors such as fintech, life sciences, biotech and clean technology by 2030, as announced by Hunt. [The Independent]

The proposed reforms aim to unlock up to GBP 75 billion in additional investment from defined contribution and local government pensions. The objective is to support economic growth and provide tangible benefits to pension savers. [Gov.Uk]

Despite having one of the largest pension schemes in Europe, valued at GBP 2.5 trillion, the UK's defined contribution schemes currently allocate only 1 percent of investments to unlisted equity. This limited

investment strategy is not only impacting returns for savers but also restricting funding opportunities for businesses. [Independent]

The Government plans to initiate a consultation on increasing the current allocations of local government pension schemes in private equity to 10 percent and expediting the transfer of their assets into pools valued over GBP 50 billion.

In addition, the Chancellor will outline strategies to enhance London's status as a preferred destination for financial listings, which includes simplifying the prospectus requirements for companies seeking to raise capital. The Chancellor will also announce the repeal of approximately 100 retained European Union laws pertaining to financial services, aiming to streamline the UK's regulatory rulebook. [GOV UK]

(pp)

United Kingdom: Pay rises for millions of public sector workers approved by PM

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has agreed to a pay raise of between six and seven percent for public sector workers, including teachers, doctors and police officers. The announcement comes after long-term negotiations and industrial action from various public sector groups – such as the 200,000-strong teachers strike in February. [Sky News] [The Independent]

The 6.5 percent pay rise for teachers in England prompted a suspension of further strikes and a joint statement with the government recognising teachers' "vital" role in society. The seven percent pay rise for police was a "step in the right direction," but does not take full account of rising inflation, Police Federation Chairman Steve Hartshorn said. [BBC] [The Independent] [Politico]

Sunak outlined several ways the pay rises will be funded, stating that the government would not increase taxes or borrowing. GBP 1 billion will be raised by charging migrants more money to apply for visas and access the National Health Service. [BBC] [The Guardian]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Defence ministry to spend GBP 1B improving hypersonic

missile ability

The UK's Ministry of Defence (MoD) is considering spending GBP 1 billion developing its hypersonic missile technology.

A Prior Information Notice (PIN) was issued describing the MoD's intentions to "accelerate development". [UK Defence Journal]

Currently, the UK does not have hypersonic missile capability, but the weapons have attracted Western attention due to their use by Russia against Ukraine. Hypersonic missiles are five times faster than the speed of sound, can travel unpredictably and fly at low altitudes, thus making them harder to detect or track. [UK Parliament] [Evening Standard] [The Independent]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: NHS junior doctors strike despite pay increase

British National Health Service (NHS) junior doctors in England took part in a five-day strike from July 13 to July 18, despite the government announcing a six percent pay rise. The British Medical Association (BMA) has called for a 35 percent pay rise. [Sky News]

Junior doctors account for 45 percent of the medical workforce in the United Kingdom. NHS health leaders warned that their five-day strike would cost over GBP 100 million.

Major strikes have been taking place since late 2022 due to pay disputes, with the BMA describing how unsatisfactory pay makes it "harder to recruit and retain junior doctors." In recent months, strike action has caused over 600,000 NHS appointments in England to be postponed or cancelled. [The Independent] [Sky News] [BBC]

Vishal Sharma, chair of the BMA's consultants committee, said the NHS is reaching a "tipping point" by not having enough doctors, which could result in the whole NHS becoming "unsustainable." NHS consultants in England were on strike on July 20 and 21, with further action planned for August 24 and 25. [The Guardian] [The Guardian]

(ew/gc)

United Kingdom: Government plans to cap enrollment in "low-value" university degrees

The British government will force universities to limit "low-value" degrees in England, which he defines as programs lacking prospects for graduate jobs, postgraduate studies or starting a business. [The Guardian]

If implemented, this policy will be the first restriction on student applications since the removal of the previous numbers cap in 2015. It is not expected to impact the majority of courses offered by Oxbridge or Russell Group universities, where students typically pursue "highly skilled" jobs. [The Guardian][Exmouth]

Universities and higher education providers offering poor value degrees are letting down thousands of students and costing the taxpayer millions, the Education Secretary also warned on May 26. Damian Hinds has called on institutions to drop or revamp courses delivering poor value for money as new analysis shows that on more than one in 10 of all courses, there is a 75 percent chance that graduates won't be earning enough five years after leaving university to start making loan repayments. [Gov.Uk]

The Office for Students (OfS) will administer the new student numbers cap from 2024-25, evaluating courses based on metrics such as pass rates and job outcomes. The OfS can penalise courses with insufficient positive outcomes for students. Additionally, foundation year courses will be subject to new limits, including a fee cap of GBP 6,000.

Sunak's announcements serve as the government's long-awaited and final response to the Augar review of tertiary education, which was launched by former Prime Minister Theresa May back in 2017 and includes changes to the student loans system, with increased repayments for most graduates. Nevertheless, these changes may not substantially improve the financial position of English universities, which have faced frozen undergraduate tuition fees since 2017 and incurred losses on UK student undergraduate courses. [The Guardian]

(pp/gc)

United Kingdom: Government approves construction of Stonehenge tunnel

The United Kingdom's Department for Transport granted on July 14 approval for the GBP 1.7 billion Stonehenge project, which is designed to speed up journey times on the A303, a major link to south-west England.

The tunnel received approval in 2020 from the then Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, despite objections from planning inspectors. The country's high court overturned the decision a year later due to concerns about the environmental impact on the nearby UNESCO world heritage site.

The scheme, supported by Wiltshire Council, involves renovating eight miles of the major road that stretches from London to South West England. [The Guardian]

The campaign group, Stonehenge Alliance, expressed "extreme disappointment" with the decision and raised concerns that the project could potentially lead to Stonehenge losing its World Heritage Site status. Kate Fielden, an archaeologist and spokeswoman for the Stonehenge Alliance, said that "we are shocked" that the government is prepared to implement a road scheme "when the country is in dire need of expenditure on far more important things." [BBC]

(pp/gc)

United Kingdom: Orkney Islands vote to explore alternative governance

The local councillors of the Scottish island of Orkney voted on July 4 to explore "alternative models of governance" due to continued fiscal disagreements with the United Kingdom (UK).

This led to widespread media speculation that Orkney could leave the UK or become a self-governing territory of Norway.

The motion was proposed by the Orkney Council leader, James Stockan, who argued that both the devolved Scottish government in Holyrood and the central government in Westminster had failed to address systematic underfunding. [Independent]

Both Westminster and Holyrood have committed to increasing public funding for British island communities such as Orkney, with the Scottish government pledging an additional GBP 4.6 million to Orkney's 2023-24 council funding. [BBC]

Orkney receives far lower public funding per capita than comparable British island communities such as Shetland and the Western Isles, according to the Guardian.

Norway is viewed as the most feasible candidate for an alternative relationship, due to the joint Norwegian and Danish claim to the islands until 1472 during the Viking age. [The Guardian]

Norway's government did not comment on the proposals. [BBC]

(hj/gc)

United Kingdom: Government response to Chinese spy threat inadequate, parliament report says

The British parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament's report warned on July 13 that the country's response to the Chinese spy threat was inadequate.

The report pointed to China's infiltration in all sectors of the British economy, criticising the government's lack of acknowledgement of the implications. The report investigated China's interference in academia, industry, technology, investment deals and critical national infrastructure in the country. [BBC]

Committee Chairman Julian Lewis expressed concern over China's potential access to blueprints and setting standards. The report revealed that overt Chinese acquisition routes have been accepted, raising national security risks. [BBC] [Independent]

The government's prioritisation of the economy over national security through accepting Chinese investments in British tech was flagged by the committee. It said ministerial acceptance of Chinese involvement in critical infrastructure, including the civil nuclear sector, was "unacceptable." [Politico]

The report warned of significant failure with potential long-term consequences and called for prioritising security concerns over economic interests. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak acknowledged the "epoch-defining challenge to the international order" posed by China. [BBC]

The committees said it was surprised at the delayed process for identifying and protecting British assets

and identified this as a significant failure with potential long-term ramifications.

(pp/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Armenia: Country ranks 4th in terms of semiconductor exports

Armenia ranked fourth in a list of world exporters of semiconductors for the defence industry, Azernews reports, citing Bloomberg analysts. [AzerNews][ARKA]

Since Armenians do not produce semiconductors and complex equipment, the country is being used as a transit point for semi-conductors to Russia. [AzerNews] [ARKA]

After Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Armenia unexpectedly became the world's fourth largest exporter of semiconductors ready for combat to Russia. Minister of Finance Vahe Hovhannisyan reported that exports from Armenia to Russia in 2022 increased by 187 percent compared to 2021. [AzerNews][ARKA]

(gc)

Azerbaijan: Police arrest Afghan man for planning attack on Israel's embassy

Azerbaijani security forces arrested a 23-year-old Afghan national on suspicion of planning an attack on

Israel's embassy in Baku, the State Security Service said on July 10. [dtx]

The statement did not specify that he was suspected of targeting Israel's mission, but The Times of Israel has learned that he was observed near the embassy in the Hyatt Regency hotel and is currently being questioned by Azerbaijani officials. [TimesofIsrael]

"Fawzan Mosa Khan, a citizen of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, born in 1990, in conspiration with other individuals has been planning to commit terrorist act accompanied by explosion, fire or other similar events resulting in the death of people, health injuries, property damage and other socially dangerous incidents in order to create panic among the population, influence decision-making by state authorities and international organisations," the State Security Service said in a statement.

(gc)

Georgia: Cruise ship with Russian tourists leaves port amid protests

A cruise ship carrying some 800 passengers, including Russian nationals, was forced to leave the Georgian Black Sea port of Batumi on July 27 after arriving the same day from the Russian port of Sochi, amid protests by Georgian civil society groups. [RFERL]

The protests in Batumi and in the capital, Tbilisi, broke out after some Russian tourists on the ship told Georgian media that they supported Russia's 2008 war against Georgia and that Moscow had "liberated" Abkhazia, the breakaway region Georgia lost control of during the conflict.

Protesters burned the Russian flag and unfurled banners with anti-Russian slogans. [RFERL]

(gc)

Georgia: Mob swarms LGBT festival in capital

Hundreds of opponents of gay rights swarmed the site of an LGBT festival in Tbilisi, vandalising the stage, setting fires and looting the event's bar, the Associated Press reported. Deputy Georgian Interior Minister Aleksandre Darakhvelidze said participants in the Tbilisi Pride Fest were safely evacuated from the scene.

Festival organisers called on people not to come to the lakeside park where the event was to be held. Georgian news media estimated about 5,000 people marched toward the site. Many of them waved Georgian flags and carried religious icons. [AP]

Georgian leaders do support an expansion of LGBTQ+ right. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, during a speech at a conservative conference in Budapest in May, asserted that LGBTQ+ "propaganda" was destroying traditional family values. He vowed in that speech to "not allow the violence of the minority against the majority." [Politico]

Speaking at the parliament on June 30, Garibashvili said, referring to sexual minorities: "It is publicly known what's happening in Europe, in America … This is a catastrophe!" He proposed opening discussions in parliament about regulating "gay propaganda" by law. [Politico]

Ultra-conservative and far-right groups used this very rhetoric to mobilise hundreds of supporters to protest and storm Georgia's annual Tbilisi Pride Festival. The protest groups were organised by the far-right Alt-Info group, which beat journalists during Pride month two years ago without consequence. [Politico]

(gc)

Moldova: Intelligence agency says it has cracked Russian spy network

Moldova has successfully dismantled a Russian spy network that allegedly aimed to spread disinformation on social media outlets against Moldova's pro-Western leadership, the country's intelligence agency said on July 10. [Balkan Insight]

Two Russian citizens named as Iurii G. and Vadim I. operated the spy network since 2020 with support from Russia's

Federal Security Service (FSB), the director of Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), Alexandru Musteata, said. The network received about USD 500,000 in 2021 through illicit financial channels from Russia, Musteata added.

"The activity of the Russian citizens and the agency network was aimed at influencing the social-political processes of Moldova in the interest of the Russian Federation," Musteata said during a press briefing. "At the same time, to maintain dependence on Russia, the

two carried out informational operations to shape public opinion.” [BNN]

An unnamed individual recruited by the perpetrators was responsible for identifying financial channels, providing logistical support and recruiting other Moldovan citizens to the FSB. The individual is in custody, facing charges of treason and expected to be sentenced to between 12 and 20 years in prison.

The SIS and Prosecutor’s Office for Combating Organised and Special Cases worked together to break up the spy network.

Moldova limits Russian embassy staff

The country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has limited the diplomatic staff that Russia can have at its Chisinau embassy. The decision came after Russian ambassador Oleg Vasnetsov was summoned regarding media reports of equipment installed on the Russian embassy’s rooftop for spying. [Reuters]

The Chisinau administration imposed restrictions on the diplomatic staff of Russia in Moldova and ordered 45 Russian embassy employees to leave the country. "Diplomats and technical personnel will have to leave before August 15," Moldovan Foreign Ministry spokesman Igor Zaharov said in a statement. [Euro News]

"This decision comes as a result of numerous unfriendly actions towards the Republic of Moldova, unrelated to diplomatic duties, as well as attempts to destabilise the internal situation in our country," said the ministry. [Anadolu Agency]

Russia's diplomatic mission in Moldova currently has 80 personnel. In line with Moldova's new decision, Russia's diplomatic staff in the country will consist of 10 diplomats and 15 administrative, technical and service positions.

(lc/gc)

Moldova: Tajik man kills two security officers at Moldova International Airport

A Tajik man killed two security officers at Moldova International Airport after being denied entry to the country, leading to a confrontation with border police and his own death.

The 43-year old, Tajik national Rustam Asurov became agitated when border police asked questions about his arrival. He seized a gun from a guard while being escorted away, Prime Minister Dorin Recean said. Asurov was shot around 10 times during the incident before dying, Moldovan politician Dragos Galbur said. [Reuters]

Moldova's acting chief prosecutor Ion Munteanu said the incident is being investigated as a possible terrorist attack but the initial investigation failed to link the perpetrator to any armed groups. Prosecutors said Asurov was wanted in Tajikistan for the abduction of a banking officer in June. [Reuters]

After the incident, President Maia Sandu declared July 4 as a day of mourning for the police officers who lost their lives. Interior Minister Ana Revenco, Minister of Science and Education Anatolie Topal and Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Lilia Dabja resigned after the incident.

Recean thanked ministers for their work and accepted their resignations but did not give any information on the reason for their resignations. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Wagner mutiny revives questions about Putin's rule

Since Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group's mutiny attempt in June, there has been intense speculation about how Russian President Vladimir Putin would respond to what appeared to be the greatest threat to his rule – as president or prime minister – since taking power in 1999.

The director of the CIA offered a critical assessment of the damage done to Putin by the mutiny, saying the rebellion had revived questions about Putin's judgement and his detachment from current events. Speaking at the Aspen Security Forum, an annual national security conference, CIA director William J. Burns said that for much of the 36-hour rebellion, Russian security services, the military and decision-makers "appeared to be adrift." [NYTimes]

"For a lot of Russians watching this, used to this image of Putin as the arbiter of order, the question was, 'Does the emperor have no clothes?'" Burns said, adding, "Or, at least, 'Why is it taking so long for him to get dressed?'"

Prigozhin had been bitterly critical of the Kremlin's argument for the war against Ukraine. The Telegram channel where Prigozhin posted a video challenging Russia's main argument for invading Ukraine was watched by a third of the Russian population. [NYTimes]

"That video was the most scathing indictment of Putin's rationale for war, of the conduct of the war, of the corruption at the core of Putin's regime that I have heard from a Russian or a non-Russian," Burns said. [NYTimes]

Limited Crackdown

Despite US officials predicting that repercussions would be widespread, the Russian internal crackdown has been largely limited.

"A month after Wagner mercenary boss Yevgeny Prigozhin's short-lived uprising, it's clear that the fallout has been quite different to what many expected," Tatiana Stanovaya, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, wrote on July 27. "Wagner has not been radically restructured, Prigozhin has not been murdered or jailed, and there has been no purge of Wagner sympathisers in the army, nor any major moves against the country's 'ultra-patriots." [Carnegie]

Russia's top general, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, was shown ordering subordinates to destroy Ukrainian missile sites in a video on July 10, his first appearance in public since the failed mutiny. He had been noticeably absent from defence press publications, nor had he appeared publicly on any Russian state TV since the failed mutiny. [AlArabiya]

Gerasimov's deputy, Sergei Surovikin or "General Armageddon" – a moniker assigned to him by the Russian press during his tenure commanding troops in Syria – was also notably absent from public life amid reports he has been detained over his rumoured role in the insurrection.

The Kremlin has been non-committal about his whereabouts.

When questioned about General Surovikin's absence, the head of the Russian Duma's defence committee Andrei Kartapolov remarked that, "He is unavailable right now" and is "taking a rest." [New York Times] [Reuters][ABC][Politico]

US intelligence has reported that Surovikin, who "was considered to be an ally of Yevgeny V. Prigozhin" had prior knowledge of the mercenary group's mutiny. The

Moscow Times reported that Surovikin was arrested and is being questioned, as of June 29. This has yet to be verified. [New York Times][MoscowTimes]

Damaged Reputation

Despite uncertainty about Putin's reaction, Wagner's attempted mutiny has had an impact in the country.

The mutiny has "damaged the reputation of Russia's military leaders and helped bring to the surface unhappiness that has accumulated further down the ranks," Tatiana Stanovaya, a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, wrote on July 27. "The main beneficiary, many people rightly believe, was the Defense Ministry. Indeed, it handed Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu an opportunity to investigate Prigozhin's allies inside the armed forces." [Carnegie]

This includes Surovikin, the main intermediary between the Defense Ministry and Wagner. Major General Ivan Popov, the widely respected commander of Russia's 58th Combined Arms Army, was also removed from his post and sent to serve in Syria. Russian Telegram channels are also rife with rumours about the removal of Major General Vladimir Seliverstov, leader of the 106th Airborne Division, and Colonel General Mikhail Teplitsky, commander of Russia's airborne forces. [Carnegie]

"The person who suffered the most as a result of the mutiny was Putin himself," Stanovaya continued. "However confident he may feel in the aftermath, he messed up. He created a monster that escaped from his control and spooked the elites. Everyone saw that the Kremlin was paralyzed with indecision, and that Prigozhin escaped any real punishment."

(cqk/gc)

Russian ruble tumbles after failed Wagner mutiny

The Russian ruble sank to its lowest level against the US dollar since the aftermath of the country's invasion of Ukraine on July 6 as the repercussions of Wagner's aborted insurrection pressured the currency already under the weight of western sanctions. [FT]

The currency has lost a third of its value since December, and traded in early July at just above 90 rubles against the US dollar. Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed mutiny accelerated the depreciation of the ruble, with Russians withdrawing some 100 billion in rubles (USD

1.1 billion), an amount of withdrawals comparable to when the Kremlin announced a mass mobilisation in September, according to Natalia Lavrova, chief economist at BCS Global Markets. [FT][Moscow Times]

The Russian Central Bank included this “cash dash” in its monetary policy evaluation report given the demand for cash. “The need for cash increased in June and led to a 500 billion ruble liquidity outflow,” the Russian Central Bank said. [Moscow Times]

The ruble has been one of the worst-performing currencies in 2023 thanks to sanctions and economic headwinds resulting from Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, with investors eyeing the impact of Western trade restrictions and increased military spending on the Kremlin's coffers. The value of the ruble against the dollar is now 21 percent lower than levels at the start of the year. [BusinessInsider]

Officials couldn’t agree

Top Russian officials couldn’t agree on what’s dragging down the ruble but signalled little alarm at the rate of depreciation that has brought the currency to its weakest levels since the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, Bloomberg reported. [Bloomberg]

As the ruble weakened past 93 per dollar, Bank of Russia Governor Elvira Nabiullina attributed the declines largely to a deterioration in trade that’s seen exports drop sharply while imports inch up. The Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, however, didn’t rule out that “speculative games” could also be to blame. [Bloomberg]

Speaking at a conference in St. Petersburg, Nabiullina said “foreign trade for the most part explains” the ruble’s current performance and also pointed to higher budget spending that’s fueling demand for imports. The depreciation presents no risks to financial stability, she said, meaning interventions in the currency market aren’t warranted. Nabiullina described as “conspiracy theories” a view that a devaluation is being orchestrated for the benefit of the budget. [Bloomberg]

“We don’t target the ruble exchange rate,” she said. “For us, any exchange rate is acceptable, we take it into account in making a decision on monetary policy.” [Bloomberg]

Interest rate hike

Russia's central bank hiked its key interest rate by a greater-than-expected 100 basis points to 8.5 percent

on July 21, raising the cost of borrowing as the weak rouble added to inflation pressure from a tight labour market and strong consumer demand. It was the first time the bank had raised rates in more than a year. [CBR]

It had gradually reversed an emergency hike to 20 percent made in February last year after Russia sent its armed forces into Ukraine, which prompted the West to impose sanctions on Moscow. The central bank's last cut to 7.5 percent was in September.[CBR][RTE]

"Pro-inflationary risks have increased significantly over the medium-term horizon," the bank said in a statement. "The increase in domestic demand surpasses the capacity to expand production, including due to the limited availability of labour resources." [CBR][RTE]

The annual inflation rate accelerated to 3.6 percent in July after 2.5 percent and 3.3 percent in May and June, respectively, according to the central bank. [CBR]

“Increasing foreign trade and financial restrictions can further weaken demand for Russian exports, contributing to inflation through exchange rate movements,” it said. “The increasing complexity of production, supply chains and payments due to external restrictions could lead to higher import prices.” [CBR]

Taking into consideration new data on the changes in economic activity in the baseline scenario, the central bank forecasts that the gross domestic product growth rate will be between 1.5 and 2.5 percent in 2023, 0.5 and 2.5 percent in 2024, 1.0 and 2.0 percent in 2025, and lastly between 1.5 and 2.5 percent in 2026. [CBR]

Digital Ruble

Separately, Russia is moving forward with its central bank digital currency (CBDC) as President Vladimir Putin signed the digital ruble bill into law on July 24, according to an official government document. With this approval, the digital ruble law is officially scheduled to take effect from August 1, with all but one rule ready to be enforced. [CoinTelegraph]

Article number three — which includes amendments to several Russian federal laws, including those related to bankruptcy and inheritance — is expected to take effect from August 2024. [CoinTelegraph]

The new legislation officially empowers the Russian central bank to launch the first CBDC pilot with real consumers in August. Previously, the government

expected to roll out trials in April in collaboration with 13 local banks, including heavyweights like Sberbank.

(ef/gc)

Russia: First transgender politician drops out of local elections

Russia's first transgender politician will not run for this year's upcoming gubernatorial elections as federal lawmakers pursue a ban on surgical sex changes.

On July 10, Yulia Alyoshina only received 19 signatures from municipal deputies and village heads out of the 502 that she needed to be allowed onto the ballot.

"I was told by municipal deputies and village heads that the [gender reassignment ban] bill was being considered and that they couldn't give me their signatures," Alyoshina said." They told me: "How can we publicly support a transgender person if the State Duma prohibits transgender people in Russia?" [The Moscow Times]

Russia's LGBTQ community has been under growing pressure for a decade, with pressure increasing exponentially since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [NBCnews]

On June 14, Russian lawmakers gave initial approval to a bill that would outlaw gender-transitioning procedures in an attempt, according to Senior lawmaker Pyotr Tolstoy, to "protect Russia with its cultural and family values and traditions and to stop the infiltration of the Western anti-family ideology." [APnews]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Government tries to stem use of abortion-inducing drugs

Russia's Health Minister Mikhail Murashko announced on July 18 an initiative to control the circulation of abortion-inducing drugs in pharmacies, and criticised the trend of women prioritising their education and careers over having children as an "improper practice."

"Many problems arise as a result: infertility, miscarriage, IVF. Reduced time for the birth of the third or fourth child," Murashko said. "The situation should be reviewed." [The Moscow Times]

Drugs for abortion will now be subject to subject-quantitative accounting together with other psychotropic substances and potent and poisonous substances. [TASS]

(ava/gc)

Russia: Wagner closes main paramilitary base

Members of the mercenary Wagner Group have announced the closure of the group's main base in southern Russia as it redeploys in neighbouring Belarus following a failed mutiny against Russia's military leadership. The Molkino military base in the Krasnodar region had served as Wagner's main training grounds. [The Moscow Times]

Footage shared on Telegram on July 17 showed the fighters ceremoniously lowering the Wagner flag at the Krasnodar training ground. [Telegram]

The closure of the base comes after the group's failed mutiny and attack against Russian military headquarters. An agreement mediated by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko allowed Wagner fighters to go into exile in Belarus in exchange for the Kremlin dropping criminal mutiny charges. [Reuters]

The Belarusian government showed a military camp intended to house Wagner fighters to members of the media on July 7. The BBC reported that the camp has enough tents to host up to 5,000 people. Ukraine's border agency has confirmed that Wagner fighters arrived in Belarus on July 16. [CNN] [AP News]

Poland's deputy minister of special services, Stanislaw Zaryn, wrote on Twitter that the number of Wagner mercenaries currently in Belarus is estimated to be in the hundreds. [BBC] [Reuters]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claimed that Wagner mercenaries in Belarus want to invade Poland. During a televised meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko said Wagner fighters "are asking to go to the West." Lukashenko added that the mercenaries said: "We'll go on an excursion to Warsaw." [Euronews[Euronews]]

Under the mutiny deal brokered by Lukashenko, many Wagner fighters are now in exile in Belarus. AP News reported that they have been conducting joint exercises with the Belarusian army near Poland's border since July 20. [AP News]

Nuclear base

A contingent of the mercenary Wagner Group allegedly tried to reach on July 11 Voronezh-45, a fortified Russian base that holds nuclear weapons, said Ukraine's head of military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov, adding that Wagner fighters wanted to seize small Soviet-era nuclear devices in order to "raise the stakes" of their mutiny.

Budanov did not provide evidence for his assertion and he declined to say what discussions, if any, had taken place with the United States and other allies about the incident. Other sources were unable to confirm Budanov's claim. [Reuters]

Reuters tracked a 75-vehicle Wagner convoy as close as 110 kilometres from the Voronezh-45 military base. Local residents reported sporadic gunfire and explosions along Wagner's route, including the downing of a Russian military helicopter in the Voronezh region town of Talovaya. [The Moscow Times]

(ava-aog/gc)

Russia: Government wants citizens to return home after fleeing conscription

Russia wants hundreds of thousands of citizens who fled abroad after the launch of the country's military offensive against Ukraine to return, the Moscow Times reports, without citing where it got the information.

Russia estimates that between 700,000 and 1.5 million citizens have left the country since the February 2022 invasion. They fled either out of opposition to the war or fear of being sent to the frontlines. The mass exodus of predominantly young and educated workers could hurt the country's economy. [The Moscow Times]

President Vladimir Putin in June claimed that half of the Russians who left the country after the start of the conflict have since returned, with more still returning. [The Moscow Times]

"Our citizens who remain in Western countries need to think about where they went, what they found, and what awaits them," State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said. Senator Andrei Klimov suggested that Russians returning to the country from abroad could be tried for treason, a disincentive for returning. [Telegram][The Moscow Times]

Despite these efforts, no substantial incentives to lure back Russian emigres have been offered. [Kommersant]

(ava/gc)

Russia labels NGO Wild Salmon Centre an "undesirable" organisation

Russia labelled the US Wild Salmon Center (WSC) as an "undesirable" organisation on July 18, accusing the NGO of hurting the country's economy.

The Russian Prosecutor General's Office said that the organisation is financed by private commercial and non-commercial institutions, including Google, as well as the United States Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture and Department of the Interior.

"The declared goal of the organisation is 'preserving pacific salmon,'" the Prosecutor General's Office wrote in the decision. "In practice, the work of WSC in the Russian Federation is used as a cover for the implementation of projects aimed at constraining Russian economic development." [Novaya Gazeta]

Founded in 1992, the Wild Salmon Center advocates for the protection of Pacific salmon.

The WSC said that it "is working to ensure that Russia's prime salmon territories stay intact, through protected areas, sustainable fisheries, scientific research, ecotourism and sportfishing development, and community-based conservation initiatives." [WSC]

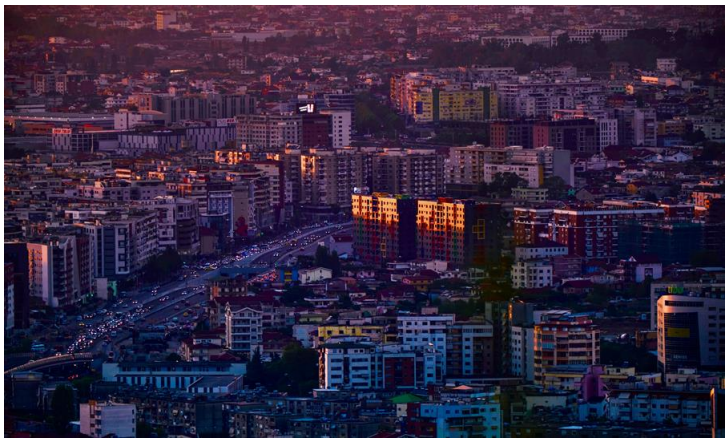
WSC's labelling as "undesirable" is the latest episode in Russia's recent crackdown on environmental conservation initiatives, particularly those linked to foreign-based organisations.

In May and June, Russia also labelled Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund "undesirable," pointing to the groups' perceived hindrance to the country's economic development. [The Moscow Times]

(ava/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern

Europe



Albania: Investigators arrest 15 citizens, some top officials, for alleged criminal activity

Albania's Special Prosecution against Organised Crime and Corruption, SPAK, has arrested 15 citizens suspected of crimes, including top police officials and prosecutors, as part of an operation that started in January. [BalkanInsight]

"During the investigations carried out by SPAK, it has been possible to document that persons with a criminal record, convicted of serious criminal offences, have also committed other criminal events for which investigations are ongoing," SPAK said on July 28. [BalkanInsight]

"Criminal offences committed by public officials, high-level state police officers, high-level state police officers, and prosecutors have also been documented, which violated the orderly functioning of the rule of law," it added. [BalkanInsight]

In collaboration with Eurojust, Europol, as well asBelgian, Dutch and French police, it had investigated several Albanian citizens involved in crime in Albania and other European countries, SPAK said. [BalkanInsight]

They are accused of murder, corruption, abuse of duty, false expertise, forgery of documents, illegal deprivation of liberty, trafficking narcotics, illegal possession and production of weapons and ammunition and working as a "structured criminal group." [BalkanInsight]

(gc)

Bulgaria: Parliament approves new provisions against hate crimes

Bulgaria's Parliament has approved the second reading of several amendments to the Penal Code, including provisions against hate crimes, among them harsher penalties for murder, assault, abduction and denial of employment rights if the motive is the victim's sexual orientation. [SofiaGlobal]

These amendments, tabled by the We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria coalition, include that if premeditated murder is committed on the basis of homophobic or racist motives, the sentence may be imprisonment of 15 to 20 years, life imprisonment or life imprisonment without parole. The amendments also step up punishments when people with alternative sexuality are victims of bodily injury, kidnapping, or illegal imprisonment. [SofiaGlobal]

Separately, Bulgarian coalition partners We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria jointly condemned the pro-Russian party Revival for promoting violence, homophobia and "misanthropic propaganda" – with the most recent case being the targeting of a politician of Jewish origin, Solomon Passy. [BalkanInsight]

Earlier, acting on an alert from the Shalom association of Jews in Bulgaria, the prosecution announced that it will investigate Revival for a Nazi-themed image published on the party's official Telegram channel. [BalkanInsight]

The image is of the face of Solomon Passy, former MP and founder of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, pasted on the figure of a prisoner in concentration camp garb being taken away by Nazi soldiers, presumably to be gassed. [BalkanInsight]

(gc)

Greece: Prime Minister outlines government agenda after election win

Greece's re-elected Prime Minister Kriyakos Mitsotakis pledged on July 6 that his cabinet will fix the "sins of the past" by cutting taxes and raising wages after being sworn into office following his election victory on June 25. [Reuters]

During Mitsotakis' parliamentary address, he unveiled the agenda that his cabinet will follow until the end of their term in 2027. He repeatedly stressed the importance of reforms and signalled his party's mandate to drive economic growth.

After the parliamentary address he tweeted: "I firmly believe that the best days are ahead of us." [Greek City Times]

Mitsotakis announced a EUR 9 billion program that includes one-off handouts to pensioners, pay rises to public sector employees and an increase in the tax-exemption threshold by EUR 1,000 for households with children, starting from 2024. [Reuters]

Greece's newly elected lawmakers were sworn into office on July 3 after the religious ceremony. In the 300-seat parliament, Mitsotakis's New Democracy Party has a majority with 158 seats, compared to main opposition party Syriza which holds 48 seats. [AP]

EU immigration criticised

Greece should not be burdened with the task of managing uncontrolled migration or be the only country accused of not saving people at sea, the country's Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on July 10. [Reuters]

Mitsotakis criticised the European Union (EU) member states for not effectively supporting Athens' search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. He called the issue "fundamentally a European problem" and called on the EU bloc to cooperate further on a comprehensive solution. [Daily Sabah]

Mitsotakis' criticism comes after a fishing boat travelling from Tunisia to Italy believed to carry between 500 to 700 people sank off Greek waters in June 2023. The Greek coast guard rescued 104 people and called off the rescue mission on July 7. [Reuters]

(lc/gc)

Kosovo agrees to hold new elections in ethnic-Serb majority regions

Kosovo will hold new elections in four majority ethnic-Serbian municipal regions of northern Kosovo, following months of protests.

In a social media post, Prime Minister Albin Kurti said that he would be willing to hold new mayoral elections

if a minimum of 20 percent of the electorate in the municipalities support a petition for the polls. [Reuters]

Following fresh elections, Kurti said he would instruct the four mayors elected in the Serbian boycotted elections held in April 2023 to hand their posts to any newly elected candidates. Kurti also announced a reduction of police presence in the four municipal regions. [Radio Free Europe][Reuters]

Kosovo's Foreign Minister, Donika Gervalla, noted that while Kosovo has agreed to hold fresh elections in the four-majority ethnic-Serbian municipal regions after the summer, that in order for the new elections to be successful, cooperation from the Serbian population is fundamentally necessary [Euractiv].

"But there is a specific procedure, which we have agreed upon and which requires the necessary cooperation from the other side," Gervalla said. If Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic "continues with his pressure for Serbs not to participate, then it will be impossible for us to hold elections in an unbiased manner," he added.

"Vucic is not concerned about the four municipalities, just as the issue's essence has not been the licence plate problem," Gervalla said. "We need a long-term strategy with our partners because if we only solve conflicts and crises caused by Serbia, we will not make any progress," she continued [Euractiv].

Fighting erupts in parliament

A fight in Kosovo's Parliament erupted on 14 July 2023 after an opposition party member threw water at Kosovo's Prime Minister during a speech on defusing tensions with neighbouring Serbia. [ABC]

Prime Minister Kurti was speaking when Mergim Lushtaku, a member of the centre-right Democratic Party of Kosovo, one of the largest political parties in Kosovo, threw water at him [ABC].

The fight erupted after Kurti announced that he would reduce the number of special police officers stationed outside the four municipal buildings in the majority ethnic-Serb areas in northern Kosovo and hold new mayoral elections in the four towns [ABC].

Kurti's policy change has angered opposition parties, who claim that Kurti experimented with his approach to the elections in the regions and in doing so had undermined Kosovo's international standing and relationships with key Western allies [Al Jazeera].

(jn/gc)

Serbia: Anti-Putin activist banned from entering country

A prominent critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin has been denied entry to Serbia, despite holding a permanent residence permit when he returned to the Balkan nation with close political ties to Moscow. [Reuters]

The decision against Pyotr Nikitin, a Russian lawyer residing in Serbia, was made following the request of Serbia's Security and Information Agency (BIA), his lawyer Cedomir Stojkovic said. The BIA sought "a protective measure of expulsion of a foreigner," he added. [Reuters]

"This is unlawful as Nikitin's children are here," Stojkovic added. "This is a separation of a family, he is a resident, but the police can nevertheless deport him."

"I have been in the border zone at the Nikola Tesla airport (Belgrade) the entire night with no sleep," Nikitin said. "I will stay here until they let me go home or deport me forcefully."

Nikitin has been living in Serbia since 2016, is married to a Serbian citizen and has two children who hold Serbian citizenship. He is the founder of the Russian Democratic Society in Serbia, an association helping anti-government Russians.

(lc/gc)

Serbia: Belgrade will stop arms exports after US sanctions

Serbia adopted a resolution on July 14 to suspend the export of arms and military equipment produced by the Serbian defence industry until August 14 after the United States imposed sanctions on a senior government official. [Ministry of Defence]

The export ban decision, proposed by President Aleksandar Vucic, came days after the United States sanctioned Serbia's Security Information Agency Chief, Aleksander Vulin. Washington has accused him of corruption and promoting Russian interests and aggression towards Ukraine. [Balkan Insight]

The US accused Vulin of having alleged relations with Serbian arms dealer Slobodan Tesic, according to the Department of Treasury statement. Vulin has allegedly helped Tesic arrange illegal arms shipments from Serbia to Russia, the department said.

"Vulin's acts have advanced corruption within Serbia's governing institutions," it said. These acts include leveraging his authority for personal gain – particularly regarding involvement in a drug trafficking ring – it said.

He has allegedly used his public positions to support Russia, facilitating Russia's malign activities that degrade the security and stability of the Western Balkans and providing Russia a platform to further its influence in the region," the treasury department said. [US Department of the Treasury]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Member of opposition party calls for CHP chairman to resign

The Mayor of Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey by population size, launched a website called Change for Power to emphasise the need for internal changes within the Republican People's Party (CHP), the country's main opposition party. [Euro News]

Ekrem Imamoglu, a member of CHP, announced the launch of the website on his Twitter account.
"Invitation to change: change in CHP, change in Turkey, we are waiting for your participation in the process of change for power, your opinions and suggestions," he said.

A newly formed opposition group within CHP has accused the Chairman of the party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, of losing nearly ten elections, including the presidential election on May 14, without resigning. Mayor of Bolu, Tanju Ozcan, called for the resignation of Kilicdaroglu, who has headed the party since 2010, announcing on Twitter that he will walk from Bolu to the headquarters of CHP in Ankara in protest against the chairman.

Ozcan started his 186 kilometre walk on July 3. Ozcan and his supporters are wearing merchandise that says "change" during their walk. When he arrived in Ankaka, he emphasised the need for change within the CHP's administration. After his comments in front of CHP's headquarters, Ozcan was expelled on July 26 from the party.

“The decision is lawless, I am going to court,” he said. “I will fight until the end and my A plan is to make a change.”

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Reuters appeals to court order on article about Erdogan’s son

Reuters appealed a Turkish court order on July 3 to remove a news article published by the news agency that stated US and Swedish prosecutors are studying a graft complaint naming Bilal Erdogan, son of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. [Reuters]

A Turkish court banned the publication of the article under the county’s disinformation law and gave the news agency seven days to file an appeal. Reuters appealed the ruling, saying “the decision made by the court is against freedom of expression clauses in the Turkish constitution.” [Euro News]

The report, published on June 26, covers an anti-corruption case started by prosecutors from the United States and Sweden to investigate a proposal made by the Swedish affiliate of a US company, Dignita Systems AB, to pledge tens of millions of dollars if Bilal Erdogan helps the company to secure a dominant market in Turkey. [Reuters]

Fahrettin Altun, Turkey’s presidential communications director, denied any connection between Erdogan’s son and Dignita Systems AB. “We condemn Reuters for serving this false news story, as they have once again demonstrated to the entire world just how crucial our struggle against disinformation is,” Altun said. [Twitter]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Central bank raises interest rates for second time

Turkey’s central bank raised interest rates for the second time since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan won the presidential elections for his third term in office, as the government tries to tame rampant inflation.

Monetary policymakers raised the one-week repo rate by 2.5 percentage points to 17.5 percent. The central bank “decided to continue the monetary tightening process in order to establish the disinflation course as

soon as possible, to anchor inflation expectations, and to control the deterioration in pricing behaviour," it said in a statement. [NTV]

"The policy rate will be determined in a way that will create monetary and financial conditions necessary to ensure a decline in the underlying trend of inflation and to reach the 5 percent inflation target in the medium term," the central bank added.. "Monetary tightening will be further strengthened as much as needed in a timely and gradual manner until a significant improvement in the inflation outlook is achieved." [Central Bank]

The interest rate rise marks the latest sign that Turkey is attempting to redirect its economic policies after Erdogan was re-elected in May. New finance minister Mehmet Simsek has vowed to restore "rational" policies after years of Erdogan's unorthodox measures, including keeping rates low, which fuelled runaway inflation and a huge trade deficit.

Limited Scale

Local businesses had anticipated an interest rate hike to 20 percent, according to a poll by the central bank before the July 20 decision. The lower rate hike prompted concerns that policymakers were prioritising overall economic growth over fighting inflation, the Financial Times reported. [FT]

Several analysts said they were concerned that policymakers were moving too slowly, given that inflation is running at almost 40 percent. There are worries that Erdogan, a life-long opponent of high interest rates, will intervene and overrule the central bank ahead of important local elections early next year, according to analysts.

"It's too early to slow the pace of tightening as they've done," said Liam Peach at Capital Economics in London. "There's still a huge gap between where rates are and where inflation is — it rings alarm bells." [FT]

Paul McNamara, a London-based investment director at GAM Investments, said that they are becoming more positive on Turkey's economy, and that these moves will make foreign investors more likely to choose Turkey to invest.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development stated that the latest developments regarding fiscal and monetary tightening are steps in the right direction to regaining economic credibility. [Reuters] [Reuters]

Fatih Akcelik, an analyst at JPMorgan, said it appeared the central bank was aiming for a “gradual tightening to avoid a recession ahead of the March 2024 local government elections.” The Wall Street bank now expects Turkey’s economy to grow 4 percent this year, compared with its previous 3.2 percent forecast. [FT]

JP Morgan also increased its yearly inflation projections to 57 percent. [Reuters]

New houses

In addition to the interest rate increase, a TRY 1.12 trillion (USD 43 billion) budget boost was accepted in the final session of the Turkish Parliament in July. Simsek stated that more than 300,000 houses will be built within one year in the areas affected by the February earthquakes. [Reuters] [NTV]

"The package, which is being discussed in the parliament, aims to reduce the impact of the additional costs caused by the earthquake on the budget. These regulations will also indirectly support taking the current account deficit under control." [Reuters]

The government is funding this large budget with a series of VAT increases, consumer loan tax increases, vehicle and corporation tax increases, and new fuel duties. In a bid to reduce the market liquidity, the Turkish Central Bank has also introduced a 15 percent rate on required reserves for FX-protected lira deposits. [Reuters][Reuters] [NTV]

The central bank also announced that its foreign currency reserves increased in July by 23.6 percent to USD 59.6 billion. Compared to previous announcements, this dramatic increase demonstrates the results of fiscal discipline in the short term. [TCMB]

(ef/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Cyprus: Recent migrants to be barred from EU resettlement system

Migrants who arrived in Cyprus from January and who have applied for international protection will not have the opportunity to be relocated to other EU countries, authorities on the island nation have announced. [Reuters] [InfoMigrants]

Referring to a voluntary EU burden-sharing system, Interior Minister Constantinos Ioannou said that Cyprus aimed to ensure "that the resettlement programme is not attracting nationals of specific countries who, possibly abusing the system, are using Cyprus as a transit" route to other EU member states. [InfoMigrants]

Cyprus has had the highest number of new asylum applications in the EU in proportion to its population for the last six years. It recently launched a social media campaign to discourage illegal immigration. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(nc/pk)

Italy: Mines of raw materials critical for green tech to be reopened

Italy plans to reopen mines of critical raw materials (CRMs) that are vital to the green-tech and digital sectors, enterprise minister Adolfo Urso has said.

The move comes as the European Union seeks to reduce its reliance on Chinese exports of such materials. CRMs are needed to produce technology like electric car batteries as nations try to reduce emissions and counteract global warming.

The EU aims to produce 10% of the CRMs it uses by 2030. [AGI]

Italy is rich in materials such as lithium cobalt, nickel, copper, zinc, beryllium and tungsten, but 30 years ago it closed its CRM mines due to a lack of profits. [Decode39]

Urso announced on July 13 that Italian firms seeking to take part in CRM mining projects will be able to present their plans by late 2023.

With decarbonisation targets requiring an ever-growing stream of CRMs, Urso stressed the importance of achieving self-sufficiency in such materials, adding that "clear risks" exist to Italy's supply chain.

On June 26, Urso met with his German and French counterparts to coordinate EU efforts in the field of CRMs. Another meeting will be held in Rome on October 30 to discuss strengthening the CRM supply chain at the EU level. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Lower house approves bill to make surrogacy a crime

Italy's lower house has approved a bill that makes it a crime for people who want a child to use the help of a surrogate mother.

The legislation was passed on July 26 by the country's conservative-dominated parliament with 166 votes in favour and 109 against, with four abstentions. The law will now need to be approved by Italy's upper house. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Under the new rules, couples who resort to surrogacy practices abroad may face up to EUR 1 million in fines and a jail sentence of up to two years upon returning to Italy.

The opposition lacked consensus on the issue both within and among parties. While Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), has repeatedly expressed support for surrogacy practices, the majority of her party opposed them and abstained in the lower house vote. [Sky TG24]

The secretary of the centrist opposition +Europe Party, Edoardo Magi, proposed, without success, an amendment allowing voluntary surrogacy deprived of any financial profit for a surrogate mother. [Il Fatto Quotidiano]

Though surrogacy is most common among heterosexual couples, many LGBTQ+ people protested against the bill as it blocks their opportunity to conceive biological children. [ANSA] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Foreign Minister Tajani elected Forza Italia chief after death of Berlusconi

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani was on July 15 elected as leader of the centre-right Forza Italia party, a junior partner in a ruling coalition led by the hard right, after the death of ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi had been Forza Italia's only leader since it was established in 1994. Tajani is taking over on a temporary basis until the party's next congress. [ANSA]

Despite being a member of Forza Italia since its foundation, Tajani has spent most of his career abroad as a European Commissioner and president of the European Parliament.

After being elected to head Forza Italia, Tajani said: "It is not easy to lead a political movement that has had Silvio Berlusconi as its leader for almost 30 years." [Reuters]

Berlusconi, a former four-time premier, media mogul, football kingpin and billionaire, died of leukaemia on June 12 at the age of 86. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Lower house backs probe into handling of Covid-19

Italy's lower house has voted in favour of holding a parliamentary inquiry into the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the former government led by Giuseppe Conte, head of the populist Five Star Movement Party.

The move by lawmakers was condemned by Conte. [Euronews] [La7]

If approved by Italy's upper house, the inquiry will be tasked with investigating the timing and efficiency of measures that were put in place to prevent the pandemic spreading, and the Italian authorities'

relationship with the World Health Organization. [Camera dei Deputati]

The investigation will also evaluate the tools and guidelines provided to regional and local authorities to tackle the crisis, as well as any abuse or irregularity in the government's handling of the pandemic. [Camera dei Deputati]

During the lower house's vote to back a parliamentary inquiry, Conte accused the government of committing an "act of cowardice", adding that the executive holds "power due to their numbers but lacks any moral... authority." Conte and other Five Star Movement MPs then left the parliamentary chamber.

Conte and former Health Minister Roberto Speranza were in early June acquitted of charges of not enforcing a timely lockdown in one of the first Italian towns hit by Covid during the early stages of the pandemic. [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Sports minister denies allegations of homophobia

The sports minister in Italy's hard-right government has denied allegations of homophobia after drawing criticism for referring to the "ostentatious" way a high-profile footballer came out as gay.

Czech international Jakub Jankto, who came out in March, is the first openly gay player in Italy's top flight Serie A league.

In an interview, Sports Minister Andrea Abodi said that, while he "doesn't love ostentation", he sees Jankto as an athlete and a person first, while issues related to his "personal choices" come second.

Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left opposition Democratic Party, branded the minister's words "a classic homophobic argument". Schlein added that Abodi should support the rare athletes who publicly reveal they are gay. [Metropolis]

In a tweet, European Parliament Vice-President Pina Picierno said Abodi's comment highlighted "the homophobic and retrograde political culture" of Italy's conservative government. She added that the government "seems to want to erase years of victories and progress" on LGBTQ+ issues. [ANSA]

Abodi said in a tweet that while he disagrees with some expressions of the LGBTQ+ movement, respect for other people is “an unequivocal principle that must be guaranteed”.

(ps/pk)

Italy: Tourism minister slams ‘dirty’ claims of shady businesses practices

Italian tourism minister and entrepreneur Daniela Santanche, a member of the ruling hard-right Brothers of Italy party, has rejected accusations that she failed to pay suppliers of her businesses, owed redundancy payments to former employees, and used Covid aid improperly.

A probe by an investigative television programme raised questions over alleged financial misrepresentation and bankruptcy fraud involving Visibilia Editore Group, a publishing company, and Ki Group, an organic food firm, both run by Santanche until 2022. [ANSA] [Sky TG24] [OPEN]

During a parliamentary hearing, Santanche claimed she was a victim of “dirty, disgusting practices” by the media.

While opposition parties called on Santanche to quit, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni told reporters that she considered the case “extra-political” because it “does not concern [Santanche’s] activities as a minister, which she is carrying out very well.” [ANSA]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Head of Senate criticized for ‘undermining’ woman who accuses his son of rape

The chairman of Italy’s Senate has come under fire for questioning the credibility of a woman who accused his son of rape.

Senator Ignazio La Russa said he was sceptical of the woman’s allegations, citing her alleged cocaine consumption. He added that she had delayed reporting the incident.

La Russa said on July 7 that “after lengthy questioning” he was certain of his son’s innocence. He added that “it

raises many questions that the complaint was filed after 40 days." He also said the woman's defence lawyer had taken the time to "put the facts together." [OPEN]

Elly Schlein, the leader of the opposition centre-left Democratic Party, said the senator's comments were "disgusting". She criticized La Russa for "blaming a woman who reports abuse." [Sky TG24]

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni voiced "understanding for the pain that La Russa is going through." She added that the accusations against the senator's son require careful examination. [La7] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Meloni heads the ruling hard-right Brothers of Italy party, which has post-fascist roots. La Russa, who has admitted collecting fascist relics in his home, is a co-founder of the grouping.

(ps/pk)

Italy: Wildfires and storms cause havoc, hit tourism industry

Wildfires, storms and a heat wave hit Italy in late July in a mix of extreme weather events that have impacted the country's tourism industry. While the north was battered with heavy hail and storms, the south faced raging wildfires and searing temperatures.

A storm on July 25 disrupted public transport and traffic in the northern city of Milan. A plane from Milan to New York was forced to land in Rome after hail made a hole in its cockpit. [ANSA]

Milan Mayor Giuseppe Sala said that climate change "is transforming our lives." [Sky TG24]

Meanwhile, wildfires spread on the southern island of Sicily, a region that has been dealing with extreme temperatures, causing disruption to the tourism industry.

In Catania, eastern Sicily, a fire led to the closure of the city's airport on July 16, causing hundreds of flights to be cancelled. [ANSA]

Extreme heat in Catania caused electricity cables to melt, leaving citizens with no power and water for days.

Wildfires also broke out in the western Sicilian city of Palermo, causing the closure of its airport on July 25

and adding to air traffic disruption after the closure of Catania's airport. [Sky TG24]

(ps/pk)

Italy: Complaint filed over air strike for 'violence' against holidaymakers

A consumer rights association has lodged over 100 complaints to Italian prosecutors over a strike by airport workers on July 15 which hit travellers and holidaymakers.

Consumer group Codacons called the industrial action a "form of unprecedented violence towards citizens and tourism operators."

According to Codacons, 250,000 travellers were affected by the strike, while tourism operators incurred losses totalling "hundreds of millions of euros." [ANSA]

The strike, which caused the cancellation of 1,000 flights, was carried out by airport workers and by employees of Malta Air and Spanish low-cost airline Vueling.

Transport Minister Matteo Salvini said he understood the striking workers, adding that they "were unheard for years". But he said he hoped "common sense" would prevail on the day of the strike so that holidaymakers would be provided with transportation. [Il Corriere della Sera]

(ps/pk)

Malta: Ex-PM Muscat denies taking bribe over power plant deal

Testifying before a Maltese parliamentary committee, former Prime Minister Joseph Muscat on July 11 denied receiving bribes over a government contract to build a power plant. [Times of Malta]

This was the third time Muscat, who was premier from 2013 to 2020, has appeared before such a committee to answer allegations that he and two former ministers in his government had received kickbacks.

The parliamentary committee is probing how a government contract to construct a power plant in the southern town of Marsaxlokk was awarded to a

consortium headed by Yorgen Fenech, a millionaire businessman. [Newsbook] [Times of Malta] [Malta Today]

Muscat is also involved in another corruption case before the Maltese courts involving a controversial deal to sell three public hospitals to the Vitalis Global Healthcare company. [Independent] [Malta Today][Times of Malta]

(nc/pk)

Malta: Former energy minister awarded damages in libel case against slain journalist

Former Maltese Energy Minister Konrad Mizzi was on July 14 awarded EUR 1,000 in damages in a libel case he brought against slain investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. [Times of Malta] [Times of Malta] [Euractiv]

After the reporter was killed by a car bomb in 2017, her relatives stepped in and assumed responsibility for a number of lawsuits against her. [Times of Malta]

Mizzi sued Caruana Galizia over her claims that he had an extramarital affair with his communications consultant. [Times of Malta]

Caruana Galizia's sister, Corinne Vella, said: "The court has found in Konrad Mizzi's... favour because, with the only person who knew anything about the investigation dead, her sons and husband could not mount an effective defence." [Times of Malta] [Malta Today]

Caruana Galizia was investigating a web of corruption when she was murdered six years ago. [Euractiv] [Corriere di Malta][Malta Today] [Independent]

(nc/pk)

Malta: Survey shows plummeting optimism on economy

A new survey has found that Maltese people's optimism about the "general situation" in their country has plummeted since early this year, with less than half the population – 48% – feeling positive, compared to

almost three quarters – 73% – at the beginning of 2023. [Times of Malta] [Malta Today] [Europa.eu]

The Eurobarometer survey, which was conducted in May and June, found that the cost of living remains the top concern in Malta, with 56% of respondents listing it as one of the most pressing issues, well above the EU average of 45%.

The study found that Maltese people's optimism on a range of issues has fallen since early this year, including on the economy, their personal job situation and their household finances. The survey also found that corruption is a major concern. [Malta Today] [Times of Malta] [Independent]

Eurobarometer surveys are conducted on various topics by the European Commission. [EUI.eu]

(nc/pk)

Malta: LGBTQ+ groups condemn hate speech after Pride event

A coalition of eight LGBTQ+ groups has condemned "degrading comments" which were posted on social media after a "Dancing with Pride" event in Malta's capital, Valletta, on July 8.

The organisations said the comments resulted in hate speech against the island's LGBTQ+ community.

"We request maturity and responsibility from persons with a wide-reaching audience who unfortunately choose to use their public platform to promote discrimination and prejudice," the groups said in a joint statement.

Discrimination of this kind is uncommon in Malta, which is Europe's most progressive country in terms of LGBTQ+ rights, according to the International Lesbian and Gay Association. [DW] [Times of Malta] [Malta Today] [Lovin Malta] [Europride]

(nc/pk)

Portugal: Defence minister resigns amid corruption probe

Portugal's Defence Minister Marco Capitao Ferreira has resigned amid a corruption inquiry.

The Policia Judiciaria, the national police force responsible for investigating serious crimes, searched Capitao Ferreira's home and offices on July 7.

The searches are part of an ongoing criminal inquiry named Operation Perfect Storm, which is investigating suspected corruption and money laundering in Portugal's ministry of defence between 2018 and 2021. Capitao Ferreira has become the 20th suspect in the inquiry. [Portugal Resident]

Portuguese newspaper Expresso reported that the searches were conducted after it was revealed that in 2019, before Capitao Ferreira entered the Cabinet, he had signed an advisory contract with the government worth EUR 50,000 for just five days' work. [Expresso]

Capitao Ferreira has refused to attend a hearing of the parliamentary defence committee, citing his status as a person being investigated in the ongoing inquiry as the reason. [Diário de Notícias]

Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa has refused to comment on the resignation of Capitao Ferreira. Costa said: "I dedicate myself little to political analysis and more to doing what I have to do, which is to govern." [Novo Semanario]

There have been 13 departures in the last 15 months from the Portuguese government, but Costa refused to comment on the topic.

Political commentators have expressed anger over what they said was Costa's failure to publicly give an adequate response.

Despite a rift between Costa and Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the latter defended Costa's comments by saying they had been taken "out of context." [Reuters] [Portugal Resident]

(jw/pk)

Portugal: Leader of parliament demands explanation after opposition party offices searched

A top parliamentarian has demanded an explanation from investigators in Portugal who searched opposition party PSD's offices and homes of the grouping's members.

Augusto Santos Silva, the leader of Portugal's parliament, said there was a "clear violation of secrecy

of justice" because the searches in PSD politicians' homes took place in front of television cameras. [Portugal Resident] The PSD is a centre-right party which is in opposition to the ruling Socialists.

The PSD is accused of crimes including embezzlement and abuse of power. It has vowed to cooperate with the authorities. [SIC Notícias]

Santos Silva said the searches were "of such magnitude" that they could appear excessive if not explained properly. [Acoriano Oriental]

Over 20 searches were carried out on July 12 by the Public Prosecutor's Office, a constitutional body within Portugal's judiciary responsible for investigating criminal activity in public office. [Portugal Resident] [SIC Notícias]

Fourteen of the searches were at the homes of PSD party members, and five at party offices. [SIC Notícias] One of the homes searched was that of former PSD leader Rui Rio. [Portugal Resident]

Reporting on the searches, news outlet Portugal Resident commented that Santos Silva was just the "latest voice of indignation to the perceived circus… which almost every pundit and political commentator has agreed showed excessive disproportionality on the part of judicial authorities." [Portugal Resident] [SIC Notícias]

(jw/pk)

Portugal: President cancels official visits after fainting

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa cancelled a number of official visits after fainting during a tour of a university in Lisbon.

Rebelo de Sousa collapsed on July 5 while visiting the faculty of science and technology at Nova University, one of the most prestigious engineering schools in Portugal. [Correio de Manha]

He was rushed to hospital and was forced to scrap scheduled visits to Porto and Aveiro, both on Portugal's north-western coast, on July 7. An official visit to the central city of Tomar planned for two days later was also cancelled. [Correio de Manha]

Speaking to journalists after being released from hospital on the same day he was admitted, the

president said he had fainted because of a sudden drop in blood pressure. [EuroWeekly News]

However, he insisted that he "feels good." Prime Minister Antonio Costa said the president would not slow the pace at which he works, adding: "It is not in his nature." [Portugal Resident]

It is the second time the Portuguese president has fainted in public – the previous such incident was in 2018. [Portugal Resident]

(jw/pk

Spain: Leftist PM Sanchez holds off right-wing surge in general election

Conservatives failed to secure a parliamentary majority despite gaining the most votes in Spain's general election on July 23, leaving incumbent Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez with the clearest path to forming a new government. [Politico]

The results delineated the limits of the right-wing populism that has been spreading across Europe, fuelled by the cost of living, immigration and discontent with the political establishment, commentators said.

The centre-right People's Party (PP) finished first in the Spanish ballot, but even with the support of far-right Vox, it remains seven seats short of a majority. [The Guardian]

Before the elections, polls had predicted that the PP and Vox would be able to form a coalition government. The two parties have already struck several coalition agreements in a number of Spanish regions and localities following local elections in May. [The Guardian]

After the results of the parliamentary ballot were announced, PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo insisted on his right to attempt to form a minority government, arguing that the country has always been governed by the leader who secures the most votes. [Politico]

However, if Sanchez can get Spanish separatist parties to support his left-wing coalition, he will have the backing of more MPs than Feijoo. [Politico]

Following the results, an upbeat Sanchez told supporters outside the headquarters of his left-wing Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) that "the reactionary

bloc of the People's Party and Vox has been defeated." [Financial Times]

Repeat election?

A repeat election is now a possibility if the two largest parties, PSOE and the PP, are unable to secure a majority in the lower house within the first two months of Spain's new parliamentary term, beginning on August 17. [Reuters]

This would leave Spain, which holds the rotating EU presidency, in political limbo before having what would be its sixth general election in the last eight years. [Financial Times]

Spain was due to hold its ballot at the end of this year, but Sanchez moved the date forward following his party's poor local and regional election results in May. [Politico]

Vox's promises to deny human-induced climate change, oppose immigration by Muslims, scrap LGBTQ+ laws and challenge the idea of gender-based violence have been cited by news outlets as the reason that Spanish voters refused to deliver the Vox-PP coalition government that was widely predicted before the ballot. [Financial Times] [The Guardian]

Vox won 19 fewer seats than it did in Spain's last general election in 2019. [Financial Times]

Vox leader Santiago Abascal accused the PP of demotivating voters by acting as if victory was assured, referring to Feijoo's failure to turn up for a debate in the week before the election. [Financial Times]

The results were underwhelming for both the PP and Vox considering the polling predictions which, even on the day of the election, forecast that the two parties would have enough seats to form a government. [Sky News]

There have already been questions over Feijoo's leadership of the PP after his speech following the results was drowned out by crowds shouting the name of Madrid's populist regional president Isabel Diaz Ayuso, seen by some as a potential future chief of the party. [Politico]

Separatist parties become kingmakers

While Feijoo will have the first go at forming a government, Sanchez has a higher chance of remaining prime minister if he can gain the support of separatist parties that he needs to be able to form a

majority. [Financial Times] [Reuters] [Financial Times] [The Times]

Meanwhile, Feijoo's position is complicated by the fact that his potential partner Vox is fiercely opposed to separatist political groupings, making it hard to conceive of one of them joining a conservative alliance. [Financial Times]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Court strips Catalan separatist MEPs of legal immunity

An EU court has ruled that three Catalan separatists should be stripped of the legal immunity they had as members of the European Parliament, paving the way for them to be potentially extradited and put on trial by Spain's Supreme Court.

The ruling by the EU's General Court on July 5 is a blow for Carles Puigdemont, the leader of Catalonia's failed bid for independence from Spain in 2017 and the former president of that region's parliament, and for two other European Parliament lawmakers, Toni Comin and Clara Ponsati.

The three fled Spain after the independence attempt in order to avoid prosecution and were later elected to the European Parliament.

Spanish authorities have been seeking the extradition of the Catalan separatists for the past six years. [Reuters] [Politico] [La Vanguardia]

After the EU General Court verdict, Spain's state prosecutor's office asked a Spanish Supreme Court judge to issue an European arrest warrant for Puigdemont and Comin.

The ruling by the EU's General Court follows a 2021 vote in the European Parliament in favour of scrapping the immunity of Puigdemont, Comin and Ponsati.

Puidgemont has claimed that the vote was politically motivated because it occurred at the request of Spain's Supreme Court. The EU's General Court dismissed these claims.

Puidgemont, who is in self-imposed exile in Brussels, said he would appeal the latest ruling at the Court of Justice of the European Union. [Politico]

Separatist leaders declared the independence of the north-eastern Catalonia region of Spain in October

2017 after a contested referendum. The ballot was deemed illegal by the national government, and the independence movement's leaders were convicted for sedition and rebellion, imprisoned or forced to flee abroad.

In January 2023, Spain's Supreme Court dropped sedition charges against Puigdemont, but he still faces charges of embezzlement and disobedience, which carry jail terms of up to eight years. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Thousands evacuated amid La Palma wildfires

More than 4,000 people were evacuated from their homes following wildfires in La Palma, part of Spain's Canary Island archipelago, northwest of Africa.

The fire started on July 15 in the northern part of the island and spread to multiple villages. [Al Jazeera]

The president of the Canary Islands, Fernando Clavijo, told reporters: "There has been some resistance by local people to leaving their homes, but I appeal to people to be responsible." The fire affected over 11,000 acres, according to Spanish authorities. [Reuters]

Ten aerial units and 300 firefighters tried to bring the wildfires under control. The firefighters burnt an area to ensure the blaze stopped at a road and did not spread further. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Spain's minister for ecological transition, Teresa Ribera, linked the wildfire and heat waves across Europe to climate change, describing Spain as being "literally under fire." [DA News] [The Hill]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Amid drought, activists block golf course holes in protest at water use

Climate activist group Extinction Rebellion Spain has blocked golf course holes with seedlings and cement in a nationwide protest against the sport's high water consumption.

Ten golf courses were targeted in six Spanish provinces, including Madrid, Valencia, Ibiza and Navarra. [Sky News]

Extinction Rebellion said in a statement the aim was "to denounce the waste of water in the context of one of the worst droughts that Europe has suffered." [CNN]

Citing data from Spanish non-profit organisation Ecologists in Action, the climate activists claimed in a Twitter post on July 2 that golf courses in Spain use more water than the cities of Barcelona and Madrid combined. [CNN]

Extinction Rebellion said only 0.6% of the population plays golf, adding that "rich people and their leisure activities that gobble up essential resources are a luxury we cannot afford." [Sky News]

The whole of Spain has been hit by drought since early 2022. Environment Minister Teresa Ribera said: "As a consequence of the climate change we're experiencing, we're seeing far more frequent and intense events and phenomena." [The Guardian]

Extinction Rebellion is demanding restrictions be put in place to limit the amount of water that golf courses and other leisure activities use. [CNN]

(jw/pk)

Vatican City: Pope urges more action on climate change

Pope Francis has called on world leaders "to do something more concrete" to limit polluting emissions, as heatwaves and extreme weather events hit Europe and other parts of the world in July.

"It is an urgent challenge, it cannot be postponed, it concerns everyone," the pope told crowds that gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on July 23 to listen to his regular Sunday message.

The pontiff has previously urged accelerated efforts to move away from climate-warming fossil fuels. [Vatican News][Reuters] [Il Messaggero] [La Repubblica]

(nc/pk)

Vatican City: 'God loves us just as we are,' pope tells transgender person

Pope Francis has told a young transgender person that "God loves us just as we are," in comments underlining his views on the LGBTQ+ community, which are less judgmental than those of his predecessors.

The pope was responding to a person who said they were "torn by the dichotomy between faith and transgender identity."

Francis said: "The Lord always accompanies us, always. Even if we are sinners, He draws near to help us." [AGI] [NBC/Reuters] [ANSA]

His comments came in a "popecast", a podcast released on July 25 by the Vatican City's official news platform, Vatican News. [AGI]

Conservatives have contested Francis's more welcoming and less judgmental attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community, although he consistently refers to traditional Catholic teaching that says same-sex attraction is not sinful but sexual acts by people of the same sex are.

An upcoming world summit of bishops, due to convene this October and in 2024, is expected to discuss the Church's stance towards LGBTQ+ people, women and Catholics who have divorced and remarried outside the Church. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(nc/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: MPs tighten law to fight 'paralyzing poison' of graft

Austrian lawmakers on July 7 tightened anti-corruption laws. The move, which closes a legal loophole, allows people in public office to be prosecuted for corruption committed before they took up their post. [AFP/Macau Business] [RFI] Local]

The new legislation will enter into force in September, and stipulates tougher penalties for corruption offences.

“We need a complete overhaul,” President Alexander Van der Bellen said in a televised address on July 6, calling corruption a “paralyzing poison”. He added: “A transparent, comprehensible and, above all, perceptible general restructuring… is needed.”

However, anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International criticized the new rules, saying that they still allow donations to organisations close to people in public office in exchange for favours.

Former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, once hailed as the poster boy of European conservatives, quit in 2021 after prosecutors started investigating him and nine others on suspicion of bribery, breach of trust and corruption. [Europe Monthly November 2021]

(mr/pk)

Austria: Top court dismisses children’s bid for tougher steps on global warming

Austria’s Constitutional Court on July 7 rejected a lawsuit filed against the government by 12 minors who demanded tougher steps to tackle global warming.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs, born between 2006 and 2015, had claimed that the children were being denied their constitutional rights, arguing that Austria’s law on the environment did not offer them enough protection against the impact of climate change. The lawsuit was the first of its kind in the central European country.

The children’s lawyer, Michaela Kroemer, said that their right to “generational justice” enshrined in Austria’s constitution was being breached.

But the country’s top court ruled that the lawsuit was inadmissible, adding that the changes to the climate law demanded by the children would not solve the underlying problem. [AP News] [AFP/Malay Mail]

(mr/pk)

Austria: Climate protesters disrupt opening of Salzburg festival

Three members of climate activist group Last Generation disrupted the opening night of the Salzburg Festival in Austria on July 21. The festival, founded in 1920, is one of the world's most prestigious opera and theatre events.

A video posted on the internet showed members of the activist group loudly interrupting a performance. "We are the last generation capable of preventing the point of no return," one shouted.

The group said in a statement: "Especially now, when global heating is getting more out of control and is making itself felt all over the world with ever more extreme temperatures and ever more destructive weather, [people] can no longer look away." [The 360 Post] [AFP/Entertainment Enquirer]

(mr/pk)

Czech Republic: Lawmakers back austerity package

The Czech parliament's lower house has approved the centre-right government's austerity package to cut spending by 151 billion crowns (EUR 6.28 billion).

The package, approved on July 14, includes spending cuts, tax hikes and pension reforms to rein in the country's ballooning budget deficit, which was fuelled by spikes in government expenditure during the Covid pandemic, energy price subsidies, and inflation-linked pension payouts. [Bnn]

"We admitted openly that state finances are not in good shape and that we have to continue the trend of lowering the deficit," said Finance Minister Zbynek Stanjura. [Reuters]

He added that the government's response was necessary, given the country's surging debt servicing costs, and its commitment to meet the NATO-agreed goal of investing 2% of national wealth in defence from 2024. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Under the austerity plan, the government will raise corporate tax, property tax, and income taxes for high earners. It also plans to cut various state subsidies, operating costs and salaries. [Bnn]

The Czech central bank said that loose fiscal policy contributed to the country's inflation, which slowed to 9.7% in June from a three-decade high of 17.5% in January. [Trading Economics]

In May, central bank governor Ales Michl said the government was responsible for mounting inflationary pressure, warning that the bank would have to raise interest rates if ministers failed to provide a "long-term credible consolidation package". [Europe Monthly June 2023]

The government said the austerity package would reduce the public sector deficit from 3.5% of gross domestic product this year to 1.8% in 2024. However, this figure is now in question as the Czech Republic plans to draw a loan from the EU's post-Covid recovery funds, which is set to increase the country's deficits. [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: President calls for online voting

President Petr Pavel has called for online voting to be introduced in the Czech Republic for national and local elections, saying that the country should keep up with modern technology.

"Let's go to the 21st century. Let's make voting electronic," Pavel said on July 21. He added that online voting would make it easier for Czech citizens living abroad to cast ballots. [Brno] [Radio Prague]

Pavel said that political parties would support online voting if the public displayed enough interest in the idea. [expats.cz]

(yl/pk)

Czech Republic: Senate committee against ratifying Istanbul Convention

The constitutional and legal committee of the Czech Senate has advised against ratifying the Istanbul Convention, claiming this is an ideological document lacking practical instruments to effectively protect women from violence.

The Istanbul Convention is officially known as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and

combating violence against women and domestic violence.

The Czech Republic is one of the few countries yet to ratify the convention. The document needs to be approved by both chambers of parliament, as well as the president. [Expats] [Radio Prague International]

(zlh/pk)

Czech Republic: Gov't misses deadline for submitting energy-climate plan

The Czech Republic has failed to meet the deadline for submitting its new energy-climate plan to the European Commission. [Greenpeace]

Every member of the European Union is obliged to present such a plan, outlining the country's strategy for developing its energy and climate policies.

The Czech ministry of industry and trade, responsible for formulating the plan, has announced that it intends to submit the document in September. [Expats]

(zlh/pk)

Hungary: Critics say new education law is revenge on teachers for protests

The Hungarian parliament on July 4 passed an education bill which critics say will increase workloads in an act of retaliation by the right-wing government for months of demonstrations by teachers seeking better pay and conditions. [abcnews].

The new law was put forward by Prime Minister Viktor Orban's ruling party, which has promised an increase in pay and a "merit-based system" to reward teachers who work more. [euronews]. However, critics say that the changes will only benefit individuals with close ties to the government, rather than rewarding achievement.

According to Hungary's Democratic Trade Union of Teachers (PDSZ), the bill will also increase teachers' workloads and allow them to be transferred to random schools. Opponents of the government have dubbed the bill the "revenge law".

Since 2022, the PDSZ has organised mass protests for improved pay and working conditions. According to

Euronews, Hungary has the lowest pay for educators among EU nations that are part of the OECD, with junior teachers earning as little as EUR 500 a month.

Teachers have also protested against what critics say is the government's erosion of democratic standards. The PDSZ says that since the education bill was drafted last year, the authorities have dismissed teachers for taking part in demonstrations. [abcnews].

The union estimates that there are 16,000 teacher vacancies in the country and has warned that 5,000 more teachers could leave once the new law comes into force in September. [rferl].

(ao/pk)

Poland: Election laws criticised by MEPs

The European Parliament passed a resolution on July 11 voicing "deep concerns" over voting laws passed in Warsaw in the run-up to Poland's parliamentary elections this autumn. [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Polskie Radio] [TVN24] [Polsat News]

The resolution, which is not legally binding, criticises what it says are "deliberate and systematic efforts" by the Polish government to erode the bloc's core democratic values. Critics have claimed that changes to Poland's electoral laws earlier this year are designed to give an advantage to the country's ruling nationalists. [Euronews] [Polskie Radio]

The resolution by MEPs also calls for a "full-scale election observation mission" by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the upcoming Polish elections. [Euronews]

The OSCE, which observes elections throughout its 57 member states to ensure free and fair processes, reported that it is considering an observation mission to Poland, but not the full-scale one that MEPs have requested. [Euronews] [OSCE]

"While the mission would visit a limited number of polling stations on election day, comprehensive and systematic observation of election day proceedings is not envisaged," said a report published by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). [OSCE]

The resolution passed by the European Parliament said that recent changes to Polish election laws could discriminate against people voting from abroad, and

accused the chamber of Poland's Supreme Court which would handle any electoral disputes of not being "an independent and impartial tribunal." [Polskie Radio]

The EU had previously said that sweeping changes introduced by Poland's ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party in recent years have undermined the political independence of the country's judiciary and eroded rule-of-law principles. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

An amendment to Polish election laws that was passed in January aims to increase the number of polling stations in villages with small populations and provide free transport for the elderly and disabled during the parliamentary elections. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Law and Justice said the changes are designed to strengthen voter turnout, and so boost democracy. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Opposition parties, meanwhile, point out that voters in rural areas and small communities often back the governing right-wing coalition. They also argue that changing the rules in the run-up to an election is deeply undemocratic. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

Concern at 'Russian influence' law

European lawmakers also voiced concern at a "Russian influence" law recently passed in Poland, which critics say could be used to interfere with free and fair elections. [Polskie Radio] [Europe Monthly June 2023]

The law, which went into effect on May 31, sets up a commission to investigate alleged Russian influence on Polish politics in the years spanning from 2007 to 2022. In the law's initial form, the commission would have had the power to effectively ban anyone found to have been influenced by Moscow from holding public office for ten years. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Following international pressure, amendments were made to the law in June stripping the new commission of this power. However, according to Polish President Andrzej Duda, the commission would be allowed "to state that a person who has been found to be acting under Russian influence does not guarantee the proper performance of public duties." [Polskie Radio]

Critics have said that even in its watered-down form, the law will enable the commission to tarnish the image of opposition politicians, damaging their chances of being elected.

Poland is the subject of a lawsuit launched by the European Commission in June over the legislation. [Politico] [Polskie Radio] [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

Poland: Gov't plans migration referendum on election day, critics cry foul

Polish lawmakers have approved plans to hold a referendum on a proposed EU migrant-relocation scheme at the same time as parliamentary elections this autumn. [ABC News] [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

Poland's governing nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party says that holding the referendum and elections at the same time is a cost-cutting measure. But the opposition says the government is distorting the facts and cynically framing immigration as a problem for Poland in a ploy to alarm the public and secure more votes for the ruling party. [ABC News] [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland]

"I can confirm we plan the parliamentary elections and a referendum on migrant relocations to be held at the same time," said Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, adding that this would reduce the costs of the ballot. [Euractiv]

Law and Justice strongly opposes a recently approved EU migration and asylum plan, which would, among other things, redistribute migrants to the EU across the bloc's member states. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Countries which refuse to accept migrants under the plan would instead have the option to pay a "solidarity payment" of EUR 20,000 per person, which Warsaw says amounts to a punitive fine. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

However, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson said that countries experiencing high pressure from migration – including from an influx of Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia's war – would be exempt from the rules, adding: "Countries that are under such pressure, as Poland is now, will benefit" from the scheme. [Notes From Poland]

Distraction tactic?

Donald Tusk, who heads the opposition centre-right Civic Platform party and is seen as Law and Justice's main challenger in the upcoming elections, says that

the ruling party is using an artificially whipped-up migration issue to distract voters from more pressing problems like inflation and discontent at Poland's strict abortion laws. [Reuters]

Critics also say that the decision to hold the referendum on election day exposes hypocrisy by Law and Justice, which postponed local elections scheduled to take place this year, citing organisational difficulties with holding local and parliamentary elections simultaneously. [Notes From Poland]

Morawiecki responded by arguing that the referendum would be "as simple as possible" with "one question about illegal immigration to Poland – this great problem that the whole of Western Europe is now facing." Local elections, on the other hand, are complex, Morawiecki added. [Notes From Poland]

A survey has suggested that three-quarters of Poles are against the planned EU migrant-relocation scheme, but another study found that only about half of respondents supported a referendum on the issue. [Euractiv]

Poland and Hungary were the only two countries to oppose the EU plan, which was nevertheless approved by the bloc's interior ministers in June as it required majority support and not unanimity. [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Slovakia: Ex-PM Pellegrini rules out election coalition with pro-Russian party

Former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, who has said he wants to uphold Slovakia's pro-Western trajectory, has turned down calls from Kremlin-friendly frontrunner Robert Fico to form a coalition for the country's early parliamentary elections on September 30.

Pellegrini said Fico, a populist former premier who compared German NATO troops in Slovakia with Nazis, aimed to increase his popularity in the polls by vowing to halt military support to Ukraine and condemning the EU's sanctions on Russia. [Bloomberg]

'Party of the past'

Pellegrini, whose centre-left opposition Hlas party is in second place in the opinion polls, said: "I guarantee the continuity of our foreign policy orientation." He added

that Fico's left-wing opposition Smer grouping is "the party of the past".

However, he did not rule out the possibility of a future alliance between Hlas and the Russia-friendly Smer after the September snap elections.

While Pellegrini identifies himself as pro-EU, some observers say his stance on mainstream European Union issues has been ambiguous.

He told Bloomberg that Slovakia does not have enough military equipment to donate hardware to Kyiv, especially after sending its fleet of MiG-29 jets, battle tanks and an S-300 air defence system to Ukraine.

He also criticised the former pro-Western Slovak government for donating MiG-29s, saying it lacked the authority to do so after losing a vote of confidence in parliament. [The Business Soiree] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Eduard Heger, a former prime minister who leads the new pro-Western Democrats party, said in March that he refused to collaborate with Pellegrini's Hlas because it was too influenced by Smer, though it split from the latter in 2020. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Pro-Western course at stake

The chances of a West-friendly coalition government being formed after the elections could depend on whether smaller pro-EU parties surpass the 5% threshold needed to make it into parliament. Many small groupings – including Heger's Democrats, which are polling at 4% – are struggling to meet the threshold. [Europe Monthly July 2023] [Politico]

Meanwhile, Fico's left-wing Smer party has been topping the polls since early March. His potential return to office has raised fears that he will damage EU unity on Russia and undermine the bloc's policies on migration and energy.

Fico has been capitalising on anti-war sentiment among Slovaks. The former three-time prime minister has warned that backing Ukraine will not only drag Slovakia into the conflict with Russia but also exacerbate a cost-of-living crisis across Europe.

Fifty-six percent of Slovaks believed Ukrainian refugees had damaged the country's economy, while 70% thought the government in Bratislava had provided more support for Ukrainians than to its own citizens, according to Eurobarometer poll results released by the European Commission in March.

Fico's Smer is open to forming a coalition with the far-right Republika and the Slovak National Party (SNS), both of which have neo-Nazi origins, fiercely criticise the LGBTQ+ community and advocate cutting aid to Ukraine. [Bnn] [Euractiv]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Interior minister sacked after row with police chief

Slovak Interior Minister Ivan Simko has been fired after just two months in his post following a row with the head of the police, increasing political turbulence in the country ahead of early parliamentary elections scheduled for September.

Police chief Stefan Hamran, along with 19 high-ranking police officers, threatened to resign if Simko remained in office. [Balkan Insight]

"Both parties reached a point at which it was impossible to renew confidence," President Zuzana Caputova said on July 20 after revoking Simko's mandate. [Bne]

The dispute started with social media posts in which Simko criticised the police's handling of a case in which a woman was murdered by a stalker. [Euractiv]

Simko implied that the police should be under political control. The Slovak Spectator

Simko, a member of the centre-right extra-parliamentary Christian Democrats party, was the sole minister with a political background in a cabinet consisting of experts without any party affiliation. [Bnn]

Prime Minister Ludovit Odor will now lead the interior ministry. [Euractiv]

While Odor's technocrat government failed to secure a mandatory vote of confidence in June, it is set to remain in office until Slovakia's early parliamentary elections. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Central bank chief denies bribery as trial starts

The head of Slovakia's central bank has pleaded not guilty to bribery charges in a trial that opened on July 3, saying he would not heed calls for him to resign.

Peter Kazimir is accused of handing a bribe of EUR 48,000 to a former Slovak tax administration chief during his term as the country's finance minister in a previous government. The alleged purpose was to influence evaluations of certain companies' requests for VAT refunds.

Kazimir said: "I have never influenced any tax proceedings in favour of any taxpayer during my time as finance minister." [Bloomberg] He added that he would continue to lead the central bank, despite calls for him to step down.

In April, Slovakia's Special Criminal Court ordered Kazimir to pay a fine of EUR 100,000 or serve two years in jail for bribery.

There was no full trial and the verdict was based on evidence submitted during an investigation. Kazimir then launched an appeal, leading to a full trial. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Should his conviction stand, he would face up to five years in prison. [AP News]

Slovak Central Bank statutes allow board members to remain in their positions despite having a criminal record until a final court verdict is reached. In Slovakia, obtaining a final verdict can take several years. [Reuters] [AP News]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia: Anti-graft official suspected of misusing subsidies

A senior official appointed to tackle corruption in Slovakia's agricultural ministry was arrested – and then released without charge – for suspected misuse of EU and state funds, underscoring the country's struggle to fight graft.

Josef Kiss, the head of Slovakia's Agricultural Payment Agency, was one of five officials taken into custody for alleged corruption. He denies wrongdoing. [Bnn]

The Agricultural Payment Agency, in charge of allocating EU and state subsidies to farmers, has a history of being linked to allegations of financial misconduct.

Corruption scandals prompted the EU to cut the agency's subsidies by 10% in 2020 and 25% in 2021. [Euractiv]

The centre-right government led by the OĽaNO party, which presented itself as an anti-graft administration, appointed Kiss in 2021 to replace his predecessor Juraj Kozuch, who was facing bribery charges.

Kiss's main task was to clamp down on malpractice in the agency to ensure the continuity of EU funds. [The Guardian]

The OĽaNO government itself faced accusations of financial misconduct, despite having promised to combat corruption. In May, then-Agriculture Minister Samuel Vlcan resigned amid allegations he had a conflict of interest over state subsidies worth EUR 1.4 million for his family-owned waste treatment company. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Eduard Heger announced his resignation as Slovakia's prime minister three days after the Vlcan scandal as his pro-Western caretaker cabinet started disintegrating. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

(yl/pk)

Slovenia: EU says progress made on rule of law standards, but more to be done

Slovenia has made progress in improving its justice system, safeguarding media freedom and combating corruption, the European Commission has said in its latest Rule of Law Report.

However, the report highlighted problems that need to be addressed. The Commission urged Slovenia to implement additional measures, particularly in ensuring protection for journalists. [Slovenia Times]

The EU's executive also said the independence of the judiciary should be guaranteed during ongoing reforms of Slovenia's system of judicial appointments.

Additionally, the report recommended that the remuneration of judges and state prosecutors should be increased. [European Commission] [Gov.SI]

(ss/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark: Giant green energy fund raises EUR 5.6bn, targets EUR 12bn

Denmark's Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners (CIP), one of the world's leading renewable energy investment companies, has said it has raised EUR 5.6 billion for a fund that is one of the largest ever intended to accelerate a transition away from fossil fuels. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [Recharge] [CIP]

Jakob Baruel Poulsen, a managing partner at CIP, said the fund already had investors lined up to more than double that figure within the next year. [Bloomberg]

CIP launched the flagship fund at the beginning of 2023, with a target of raising EUR 12 billion. [CIP]

According to Thomas Koenig, another partner at CIP, the fund will help accomplish goals of reaching net-zero emissions and achieving energy independence, crucial in light of Russia's war against Ukraine. [Reuters] [Recharge]

(ts/pk)

Denmark: Gov't considers banning Quran-burning protests

The Danish government has said it is considering banning Quran-burning protests in some circumstances, including when such incidents take place outside embassies.

The announcement comes after a string of controversial demonstrations in Denmark and Sweden during which the Islamic holy scripture was desecrated. The incidents heightened tension with Muslim nations. *(See separate article in this issue)*

While the Danish foreign ministry acknowledged that such protests have a negative political impact internationally, it also stressed that the constitutional right of freedom of expression must be protected. [BBC][Euronews][Politico]

(ts/pk)

Denmark: Defence minister to return after sick leave for stress

Denmark's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Jakob Ellemann-Jensen is expected to resume work in early August after six months of sick leave due to stress.

Ellemann-Jensen has announced that he will return to his duties after the Danish parliament's summer break. [CPH Post] [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

He is also set to return as the leader of the centre-right Venstre party, which is part of Denmark's governing coalition.

In Ellemann-Jensen's absence, Troels Lund Poulsen had been acting defence minister and caretaker leader of Venstre. He will step down from those positions to return to his former post of economy minister. [Reuters] [CPH Post]

(ts/pk)

Finland: Racism scandal rocks right-wing government

Finland's recently formed Cabinet, seen as the most right-wing in the country's recent history, has been struggling to contain a spiralling scandal over racism that has prompted street protests and raised concerns about the government's stability.

The discovery of racist blog post comments attributed to Finance Minister Riikka Purra, the leader of the far-right Finns party, has fanned the flames of a controversy that has been rumbling for weeks. [Guardian] [Politico] [BBC]

Purra's party, known for its nationalist and anti-immigration stance, secured second place in April's parliamentary elections and holds nine Cabinet positions. [Guardian] [BBC]

The comments in question, mostly from 2008, were found under the username "riikka" on a blog run by former Finns Party leader Jussi Halla-aho, who is now the Parliamentary Speaker. The comments contained offensive language, including racial slurs, anti-immigrant remarks, and threats of violence. [Guardian] [Politico] [BBC]

Halla-aho, who has recently declared his candidacy for presidential elections next year, was convicted in 2012 of inciting hatred against an ethnic group. [Politico] [Yle]

Purra has neither confirmed nor denied writing the posts. However, Finnish media outlets have correlated Purra's activities and personal information with the content of the posts. [Guardian]

Purra has made it clear that she has no intention of stepping down from her position. [Guardian]

In June, another minister from the Finns Party, Vilhelm Junnila, resigned after it was revealed that he had made jokes about "Heil Hitler" salutes while speaking at an event attended by neo-Nazis. He also controversially advocated mass abortions in Africa as a supposed means to combat the climate crisis. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Anti-racist protest

The opposition and some ruling coalition politicians have voiced outrage at Purra, leading to a petition signed by over 121,000 people demanding her immediate resignation. On July 19, thousands marched in an anti-racist protest in Helsinki, pressing the Finnish government to take action against racism and calling for Purra to quit. [Yle] [Yle]

Meanwhile, a joint statement by 26 Muslim communities in Finland condemned a 2019 blog comment by Purra in which she appeared to refer to burqas, a full body covering garment worn by some Muslim women, as "unidentifiable black sacks." [Yle]

Finland's government, led by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, has established a working group to address racism and discrimination. Orpo took to social media to insist that his administration had "zero tolerance for racism." [Yle]

Many politicians, including former Prime Minister Sanna Marin, have called on the authorities to unequivocally denounce racism, hate speech and violence. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

President Sauli Niinisto said the government "would be wise to adopt a clear zero-tolerance stance on racism". [Yle]

More backlash

Adding to the government's woes, other members of the Finns Party are also facing a backlash for controversial comments. Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat recently published a series of private messages by Willie Rydman, who replaced Vilhelm Junilla as economy minister.

Messages that were allegedly exchanged between Rydman and his then-girlfriend in 2016 use racist language to describe people from the Middle East as "desert monkeys" and "incomprehensible monkeys". [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

As the scandal deepens, concerns are growing about the government's stability. Some members of the liberal Swedish People's Party of Finland, which is part of the ruling coalition, want the grouping to leave the government. [Yle]

Opposition parties called for parliament's summer recess to be halted, aiming to organize a vote of no-confidence against Purra. However, far-right parliamentary Speaker Halla-aho refused to call the chamber back into session, citing a lack of urgency. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland: New right-wing immigration policy under fire

Curbs on immigration planned by Finland's new government, which includes a far-right party, have been strongly criticised by campaigners who say the changes would erode human rights, while fuelling hate speech and racism. [Helsinki Times]

The government headed by conservative Prime Minister Petteri Orpo has proposed halving the number of refugees Finland takes in from 1,050 last year to 500, and giving fewer social security benefits to refugees than to permanent residents. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Government]

Orpo's coalition government, formed after parliamentary elections in April, is seen by analysts as the most right-wing in Finland's recent history. It includes the far-right, anti-immigration Finns Party, which secured the second-highest number of votes in the election. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Rights campaigners have voiced concern over the new administration's plans for tougher rules on permanent residency and citizenship.

Under the proposed changes, immigrants would be eligible for permanent residency status after six years in Finland, rather than the current four years, with exceptions for those who obtain a degree in the Nordic country, are proficient in the Finnish language and earn an annual income exceeding EUR 40,000.

Immigrants would have to be resident in Finland for eight years, rather than five, to be granted citizenship. [Finnish Government]

Rights group Amnesty International's branch in Finland said that the government wanted to discourage immigrants from bringing over their families.

'Migrants should be seen as humans'

"Migrant workers should be seen as humans, as individuals with human rights... Even now it has been very difficult for people to get their families even visiting visas from certain countries," said Pargol Miraftabi, a legal advisor for Amnesty Finland. [Helsinki Times]

Another disputed aspect of the proposed changes is the cancellation of residence permits and deportation for immigrants who are unable to find a job within three months. The African Anti-Racism Society Finland (AFARS) NGO argued that this measure is too severe, and overlooks the difficulties job seekers encounter when looking for employment.

The three-month rule "will cause a lot of mental stress and force people to make short-term decisions due to the time pressure. People will not have time and space to re-educate or upskill themselves and reach their full potential," said Eugene Ufoka, chairperson of AFARS. [Helsinki Times]

Multiple protests against the government's plans to cut immigration were held in June in Helsinki by hundreds of immigrants and concerned citizens. [Guardian] [Helsinki Times]

"It is crucial that civil society, NGOs and others remain active and try to impact the legislative process," said Amnesty legal advisor Miraftabi. [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Half of citizens want more foreign policy powers for president

Finns increasingly want their country's president to have more powers in shaping foreign policy, according to a recent poll by Finnish business and policy think tank Eva. [Yle] [Eva]

Almost half of the survey's respondents said that the president should have more authority in foreign affairs, compared to 34% in a similar poll conducted in 2007. [Turun Sanomat]

The findings indicate a shift in sentiment regarding the importance of foreign policy, possibly influenced by Finland's accession to NATO, according to Eva managing editor Sami Metelinen.

President Sauli Niinisto "played a key role in Finland's accession to NATO, and this may have contributed to Finns' desire for the president to continue to lead foreign policy," Metelinen said. [Eva]

Finland officially became a member of the Western military alliance on April 4. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Metelinen added that the prevailing geopolitical climate may be contributing to a growing preference for stable and non-partisan leadership in foreign affairs. [Yle]

"The President of the Finnish Republic is directly elected by the people and is not bound by... a government programme like the prime minister," he said. [Eva]

According to the survey, around 70% of respondents did not want the prime minister to be in charge of foreign policy matters, as opposed to 40% in 2007. [Yle]

Since the 1980s, a series of reforms have resulted in the gradual reduction of the president's powers, culminating in a new constitution in 2000, which designated foreign policy as the president's primary responsibility. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Far-right parliamentary Speaker announces presidential bid

The former leader of the far-right Finns Party and current Speaker of Finland's parliament has announced he wants to run for president. [Yle]

Jussi Halla-aho, whose political career spans over a decade and a half, was elected parliamentary Speaker in June. From 2017 to 2021, he was the head of the Finns Party, which is now a member of the country's ruling coalition. He is known for his hardline rhetoric on immigration, which has resulted in convictions for hate speech. [Yle] [Bnn]

In a video message on social media platform YouTube, Halla-aho said: "I'm sure everyone has some kind of image of me, for some it's obviously very bad, but I hope that in the next six months there will be opportunities to correct that image, at least from my point of view, to better reflect reality." [Yle] [Daily Finland]

The Finns Party is set to choose its presidential nominee during a congress scheduled for August 12-13. Party leader Riikka Purra has voiced support for Halla-aho's candidacy in the election, which takes place in January. [Yle]

In a recent survey by Finnish national broadcaster Yle, Halla-aho was in fourth place, with 6% support. [Yle] [Daily Finland]

The poll found that the leading contender for the presidential race is former foreign minister Pekka Haavisto from the centre-left Green League opposition party, with 28% support.

Behind him is Olli Rehn, the governor of the central bank and a former member of parliament for the liberal opposition Centre Party, with 15% support. [Yle] [Daily Finland] [Europe Monthly July 2023]

The Finnish presidential election takes place through a direct vote, with citizens choosing their head of state for a maximum of two consecutive six-year terms. Sauli Niinisto, the incumbent, has held the position since 2012. [Yle]

A new Finnish coalition government, formed after parliamentary elections in April, was formally appointed on June 20. It is seen as the most right-wing in Finland's recent history. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Police seize 3D-printed firearms from suspected Neo-Nazi group

Finnish police have seized firearms made by a 3D printer in a swoop on four members of a far-right extremist group suspected of planning terrorist attacks. [Yle] [Ground News]

According to police, preliminary investigations revealed that the group, based in the city of Lahti in southern Finland has strong anti-immigrant views, and used a 3D printer to make FGC-9 submachine guns. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

The suspects are believed to be influenced by "accelerationist" ideology, which advocates using violence to hasten the collapse of democratic society. [Yle][Helsinki Times]

"Police believe that the targets of the planned violent attacks were selected on the basis of their skin colour, political views or other ideological views. In addition to individual targets, the suspects also discussed planning attacks on various types of infrastructure, including the power grid and railways," said Detective Inspector Tuomas Kuure. [Yle]

Finland's Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said: "That we have groups which want to erode society by means of violent acts – that's concerning." [Helsingin Sanomat]

In May, Finnish police concluded a separate inquiry into a far-right extremist group in the town of Kankaanpaa in southern Finland. The case marked the first time that charges were filed against a far-right group in Finland. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Nation struggling to meet climate targets

Finland continues to fall short of meeting its climate targets and obligations, despite achieving a modest 4% reduction in emissions in 2022, according to a government report released on July 14.

The findings indicate that additional efforts are necessary for Finland to fulfil its EU obligations and

achieve its national carbon neutrality target. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

According to public statistical organization Statistics Finland, the country's greenhouse gas emissions, excluding the land use sector, fell by 4% in 2022 compared to the previous year. [Yle]

The report pointed to challenges in the land use sector, including forestry. In Finland, forests and soil have traditionally served as vital carbon sinks – ecosystems with the capacity to absorb more carbon from the atmosphere than they emit. [Finnish Government]

"We are so used to our forests, our land use sector being a permanent carbon sink. And now it seems that this is not the case," said Outi Honkatukia, climate unit director at the environment ministry, which released the report. [Yle]

Vital role of forests

According to the report, the net carbon sink in the land use sector has considerably diminished, a change mainly attributed to a reduction in forest growth and the impact of heightened logging activities.

Two years ago, the land use sector unexpectedly transitioned from being a net sink to a source of emissions. However, in 2022, due to reduced forest harvests, the sector returned to becoming a small net sink. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

A recent survey by public broadcaster Yle found that more than half of Finns believe their country should take the lead in mitigating global climate change, even if it entails costs for the nation's citizens.

Finland's new right-wing coalition government under Prime Minister Petteri Orpo has made a commitment to upholding national targets of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 60% by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2035.

However, the government has also emphasized that climate action must not impose additional burdens on citizens or jeopardize the competitiveness of industry. [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

Iceland: Public support for government plummets

Iceland's government, led by Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdottir, is facing its lowest level of public support since taking office in November 2021, with only 35 percent of respondents expressing their backing – a 2.6 percent decline from the last survey earlier this year. [RÚV]

The opposition Social-Democratic Alliance remains the strongest party in the country. Recent controversies, including the replacement of the Minister of Justice and a temporary whaling ban, have contributed to the declining support and revealed divisions within the governing coalition. [RÚV]

The Gallup poll also indicates that the Progressive Party, part of the coalition, suffered the most significant loss in support, falling to around nine percent. On the other hand, Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir's party, the Left-Green Movement, received six percent of support. [Iceland Review]

The Central Bank's critical report on the sale of state-owned Islandsbanki likely added to the public's negative perception of the government. With public approval at a record low, the stability of the current government could be at risk, warranting close attention to the political landscape in upcoming months. [Iceland Review]

(pms/gc)

Norway: Mineral find could meet demand for electric cars, fertilisers for 50 years

Norwegian firm Norge Mining has announced the discovery of an estimated 70 billion tonne deposit of phosphate rock that it says could hypothetically meet global demand for electric car batteries, solar panels and fertilisers for the next 50 years.

The announcement of the find in south-west Norway has almost doubled proven global reserves overnight. [Euronews]

Phosphorus, a refined form of phosphate, is viewed as an essential chemical in agriculture, and is also indispensable in the production of electric vehicle batteries and solar panels. [EURACTIV]

The EU classifies phosphorus as a "critical raw material", yet at the moment the bloc is almost entirely dependent on imports from geopolitical rivals such as China.

The US Geological Survey estimated in 2021 that proven world reserves of phosphate totalled some 71 billion tonnes.

While the new discovery in Norway is crucial for a green transition to solar power and electric cars in Europe, phosphate extraction and processing is heavily carbon intensive. [Mining Technology]

Norge Mining founder Michael Wurmser said in an interview with news outlet Euractiv that his company would hold itself to stricter environmental standards than its competitors by employing so-called carbon capture and storage technology.

Most of the phosphorus refining industry is currently concentrated in China, Vietnam and Kazakhstan, Wurmser added.

(hj/pk)

Norway: Junior minister resigns over conflict of interest scandal

The Norwegian minister for higher education resigned on July 21 after he bought shares in a defence firm in breach of rules on conflict of interest. [Bloomberg]

Ola Borten Moe purchased stock worth some EUR 35,000 in an arms manufacturing company prior to attending a meeting at which a government contract was handed to a subsidiary of the firm, he admitted in an interview with Norwegian business newspaper E24.

Moe has also resigned as deputy leader of the Norwegian Centre Party, which is part of the governing coalition. [NorwayInEnglish]

(hj/pk)

Norway: Far-left leader quits after stealing sunglasses at airport

The leader of Norway's far-left opposition Red Party resigned on July 24 after being caught stealing sunglasses worth EUR 100 from a duty-free shop at Oslo airport.

Bjornar Moxnes, 41, was fined 3,000 crowns (EUR 250) for the theft. [dayFREuro]

The Red Party national executive committee has chosen Marie Sneve Martinussen to replace Moxnes, who had been the grouping's leader for the past 11 years. [Politico]

(pp/pk)

Norway: Green-tech projects gain EUR 510m from EU

Five projects based in Norway have been awarded a total of EUR 510 million from the European Union's innovation fund for green technology initiatives.

The programme, which is financed via the EU's climate quota system (EU ETS), aims to help the bloc fulfil its environmental commitments and facilitate a transition to a more sustainable economy. Norway is involved in the programme despite not being an EU member.

The beneficiaries of the funding include Fortescue Future Industries, which produces renewable energy, battery manufacturer Freyr, advanced-materials firm Vianode, solar power company Norsun, and Nordic Electrofuel, an e-fuel firm. [Reuters] [Bnn]

Freyr has been allocated EUR 100 million. The company began construction work on a USD 1.6 billion manufacturing facility in sub-arctic northern Norway in June 2022, focusing on supplying battery cells needed in Europe's green transition. [GCR]

The firm has said it intends to supply 50 gigawatt hours (GWh) of battery cell capacity by 2025 and 200 GWh of annual capacity by 2030. [FREYR] [EnergyStorage]

(pp-hj/pk)

Norway: Geophysical survey of gas discovery planned

OMV Norge, a Norwegian subsidiary of Austrian oil and gas company OMV, is to carry out a geophysical survey of its gas and condensate discovery off the Norwegian coast.

Berislav Gaso, executive vice president at OMV, said that the resources in the Berling discovery are "expected to further strengthen Norway's position as an important European supplier of natural gas." [Marine Link]

OMV intends to start drilling in the Berling field by the third quarter of 2026. [Offshore Technology].

The Norwegian Ministry of Petroleum and Energy approved OMV's plan for the development and operation of the Berling project in June.

(pp/pk)

Norway: Twelve government ministries targeted in cyberattack

The Norwegian government was hit by a cyberattack on July 24 which infiltrated the servers of 12 ministries.

In a statement, the government said the attack was of unknown origin, and that an investigation was underway.

The vulnerability which permitted the cyberattack, discovered in a staff management program used by the 12 ministries, was promptly addressed and neutralised, according to the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. [ITGuru]

Neither the Prime Minister's Office nor the defence, foreign or justice ministries were impacted, as they do not use the affected platform. [Euronews]

(hj/pk)

Norway: Facebook owner Meta told to stop ads tracking users

The Norwegian Data Protection Authority has ordered Facebook and Instagram owner Meta to halt advertising that tracks users and their physical locations. [Search Engine Journal]

The order was served to Meta on July 14. The company faces a fine of NOK 1 million (EUR 89,000) for every day the instruction is violated in Norway from August 4. [Reuters]

The data protection authority said that Meta's system of advertising requires a greater degree of government oversight, adding that the status quo allows the "unfair discrimination of various groups" and offers potential for the "targeting of political adverts in election campaigns."

On July 4, the Court of Justice of the European Union found Meta guilty of unlawfully collecting sensitive data from EU citizens without their explicit consent. [Politico I]

Meta additionally faces fines totalling EUR 390 million from the Irish Data Protection Commission following a ruling on the company's targeted advertising system in January. [Politico II]

(hj/pk)

Norway: Guidelines on treating children with gender dysphoria reviewed after criticism

The Norwegian directorate of health, the Helsedirektoratet, is reviewing guidelines on treatment for children suffering from gender dysphoria, following criticism. [British Medical Journal]

The Helsedirektoratet had been under pressure from the independent Norwegian Healthcare Investigation Board (UKOM) to review the guidelines following a critical report published in March.

Much of UKOM's criticisms related to what it said was poor information on the side effects of treatment and the limited involvement of parents in the treatment of their children. [British Medical Journal]

Gender dysphoria – a condition in which a person feels there is a mismatch between their sense of their gender and the sex they were assigned at birth – is an increasingly controversial medical issue in Europe. The Netherlands is seen as the "gold standard" for quality of care, according to The Atlantic.

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Tougher migration rules planned to cut flow of asylum seekers

Sweden's centre-right minority government, which is reliant on a far-right party for a majority in parliament, on July 13 announced plans to reduce the number of asylum seekers coming to the Nordic country.

The plan to tighten immigration requirements for family members of foreign residents has been criticised by opposition politicians, who are worried at

the influence of the far-right Sweden Democrats party on the nation's politics. [Euractiv] [The Local]

The government intends to change the law so that a residence permit could be declined for a person under 21 who wants to come to Sweden to join a partner or spouse. A residence permit could also be declined if the partner or spouse they want to join is under 21. Currently, such partners or spouses must be older than 18. [The Local]

Sweden's migration minister, Maria Malmer Stenergard, said that the age limit of 21 is the highest allowed by EU law. She added that the new rules are intended to prevent forced marriages. [The Local]

The revised rules are expected to take effect on December 1, if approved. [Schengen Visa Info]

The opposition has criticised the government's plans. Abir Al-Sahlani, an Iraqi-born member of the European Parliament from Sweden's liberal Centre Party, told the Euractiv news outlet: "We can see quite obviously here what the results are of cooperation with the far right."

Transport of people without ID could be banned

The Swedish authorities have additionally floated plans to temporarily ban people without ID documents from travelling on buses, trains and passenger ships as a further measure against illegal migration.

The new powers, proposed on July 18 by the Swedish Department of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure, would come into play only if there was a "serious danger to public order", the department said on its website.

Under the proposal, people travelling without an ID would be fined a minimum of SEK 30,000 (around EUR 2,600). The maximum fine would be SEK 250,000. [Schengen Visa Info]

The government previously enacted similar restrictions in 2015 to stem an influx of undocumented migrants into the country, according to public broadcaster Sveriges Radio. The new law, if passed, would come into force in March 2024.

A three-way, centre-right coalition took power in Sweden last October following parliamentary elections. The far-right Sweden Democrats are not officially in the government and do not have any ministerial positions, but without their cooperation, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson would not have a majority in parliament. [Europe Monthly October 2022] [Europe Monthly November 2022]

(pp-hj/pk)

Sweden: Kurdish man jailed in first use of new anti-terror laws

A district court in Stockholm on July 6 jailed a man for crimes including attempts to finance an outlawed Kurdish separatist organisation, in the first such case after Sweden brought in new anti-terror legislation. [BBC]

The 41-year-old Turkish Kurd was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison following an attempt to extract money from a Kurdish businessman at gunpoint in Stockholm. The jailed man had aimed to secure funding for the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). [France24] [BBC]

Ankara has long claimed that Sweden has harboured PKK sympathisers, even though the group has been designated a terrorist organisation by the EU, the United States and Turkey. [Foreign Policy]

The court sentence came amid tensions between Ankara and Stockholm following controversial protests in Sweden in which a copy of the Koran, the religious scripture of Islam, was burned.

Stockholm's efforts to join NATO were delayed by Turkey's demands that Sweden extradite dozens of people Ankara regards as terrorists. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(hj/pk)

Sweden: Court ruling challenges state-run alcohol monopoly

A Supreme Court ruling on July 7 allowed a foreign online wine retailer to sell directly to customers in Sweden, a decision that challenges a long-standing retail monopoly enjoyed by the Nordic nation's state-run alcohol company.

The ruling, which overturned a lower court's verdict, found that sales by Winefinder ApS, a retailer based in Denmark, did not violate Sweden's alcohol laws.

State monopoly Systembolaget had taken legal action against Winefinder and its Swedish parent company in an effort to prevent direct sales and delivery to

consumers in Sweden, which has a restrictive alcohol policy.

The Patent and Market Court of Sweden had previously found Winefinder guilty of unlawfully selling alcohol. [Reuters] [BNN Bloomberg]

(pp/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU proposes legislation to pull out of 1994 Energy Charter Treaty

The European Union (EU) proposed legislation on July 7 to withdraw from the 1994 Energy Charter Treaty (ECT) that was established to enable private finance of energy infrastructure in Eastern Europe following the fall of the Soviet Union. [Euronews]

Brussels had led a push to reform the treaty, and make it more difficult for fossil fuel companies to sue over changes in policy like banning offshore drilling or coal phaseouts that affect their investments. But that effort stalled, and eight EU countries — Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Spain — threatened to quit the treaty. [Politico]

Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Poland were among those who had previously announced their intention to pull out in a unilateral fashion, following in the steps of Italy, which left the convention back in 2016. [Euronews]

"The outdated Energy Charter Treaty is not aligned with our EU Climate Law and our commitments under the Paris Agreement," said Frans Timmermans, the European Commission's executive vice-president in charge of the Green Deal. "It's time for Europe to withdraw from this Treaty, and to put all of our focus on building an efficient and competitive energy system that promotes and protects renewable energy investments." [Euronews]

EU Energy Commission Kadri Simson said in a statement that “keeping an unmodernised Energy Charter Treaty is not a viable option for the EU.” The treaty in its current form is not in line with the EU’s investment policy or our energy and climate goals, Kadri added. The Commission said it "is also withdrawing its previous proposal to ratify the modernised Treaty, which did not gather the required majority among Member States."

The ECT was originally intended to protect Western investors who were seeking to do business in former Soviet states but feared being the target of discriminatory access, expropriation, nationalisation and other unexpected circumstances. The ECT provided them protection by establishing a tribunal at the World Bank in Washington, designated the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID).

On July 27, the German First Civil Panel of the Federal Court of Justice released a legal decision that EU member states could invoke national judicial protection against arbitral proceedings essentially abrogating the international ICSID Convention of 18 March 1965 by German court order. [BGH]

ECT signatories remain bound by a 20-year sunset clause and legal action under the treaty continues.

Fifty three countries and the EU itself signed the 1994 treaty, which went into effect in 1998. In 2018, multiple EU members raised concerns the treaty was not consistent with EU climate goals as it protected long term fossil fuel contracts under international law. Between 2019-22 the European Commission negotiated modifications to the treaty, but the modifications were not passed by Member states during a 2022 vote and a withdrawal process commenced, culminating in this year’s July 7 proposal to formally withdraw. [EC]

(rw/gc)

EU set to impose new sanctions against Belarus

European Union (EU) countries informally agreed to impose new sanctions against Belarus on July 18. Andrzej Sados, the Polish Ambassador to the EU, said: "The stalemate regarding sanctions on Belarus has been broken for the first time in a year." [TVP World] [Politico]

The package of sanctions is set to target battlefield equipment. According to Politico, the package will mirror the sanctions against Russia. [Politico] [Yahoo News]

(aog/gc)

EU Parliament adopts new resolution to encourage Romania, Bulgaria Schengen accession

The European Union (EU)'s parliament announced on July 12 its adoption of a new resolution, urging the EU Council to seriously consider and accept Romania's and Bulgaria's bids for accession to the Schengen zone before the end of 2023.

The parliament's announcement stressed that both countries have met the criteria to join Schengen, as well as having the support of 526 Members of European Parliament (MEPs) – with only 57 MEPs in opposition. [SchengenVisaInfo] [RomaniaInsider]

Both the announcement and resolution stressed the social, economic and environmental damages that both the populations and businesses of Romania and Bulgaria face due to their exclusion from the Schengen zone and the accompanying travel and cross-border trade delays. [Euractiv]

In December 2022, Austria blocked both Romania and Bulgaria from joining the Schengen zone. Ever since, an increasing number of countries have pledged support to Romania and have appealed to Austria to lift its veto. [CPG No.5] [CPG No. 6]

(sw/gc)

Refugee status can be revoked for serious crimes by dangerous individuals: top EU court

The EU's highest court, the European Court of Justice, ruled on July 6 that countries in the bloc can remove the refugee status of people convicted of serious offences and who are deemed a danger to the community.

The court underlined that both conditions must be met for refugee status to be revoked.

"The individual concerned must, inter alia, constitute a genuine, present and sufficiently serious threat to one of the fundamental interests of society," the court said.

It added that EU countries are not required to revoke refugee protection in such cases, though they may choose to do so. [Reuters] [Court of Justice of the European Union]

(cg/pk)

MEP's house searched in Qatargate corruption inquiry

Police raided the home of Belgian Socialist MEP Maria Arena on July 19 as part of an inquiry into the "Qatargate" corruption scandal centred on the European Parliament.

Investigators are probing a corruption scheme in which European lawmakers and aides are suspected of taking money from Qatar in exchange for peddling influence and information. [Europe Monthly February 2023]

While several lawmakers from Arena's centre-left Socialists & Democrats group have been embroiled in the inquiry, Arena herself has not been charged or questioned by Belgian prosecutors.

Arena, the fourth MEP linked to the scandal, has strongly denied wrongdoing. [Politico] [Financial Times]

(cg/pk)

Hungary to emphasize family policy during EU presidency

Hungary aims to prioritize policies that support families during its six-month EU presidency in the second half of next year, a stance that aims to counteract the demographic crisis facing the bloc. [Euractiv]

A recent report by the European Commission predicts a decrease in the proportion of people aged 15 to 29 compared to the overall population, which is also shrinking.

These demographic changes are set to reduce the number of people of working age in the EU, leaving member states with the option of encouraging migration or focusing on policies to boost fertility rates. [Euractiv] [CNE News]

The rotating presidency of the EU's 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]

European Parliament lawmakers in June passed a resolution questioning Budapest's ability to hold the presidency in light of what they said were "deliberate and systematic efforts" by the nationalist and populist Hungarian government to undermine the bloc's values. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Last year, the executive European Commission froze billions in EU funding for Hungary over rule-of-law concerns.

(ss/pk)

European power prices repeatedly fall below zero as renewables outpace demand

European electricity prices fell below zero during multiple weeks in July as production from solar farms boost supply above demand in power grids early in the afternoon.[Bloomberg] [Bloomberg]

It's an increasingly common phenomenon as Europe races to build cheaper solar farms to cut demand for fossil fuels. Intraday prices in Germany, the region's biggest power market, turned negative from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on July 3, according to data from Epex Spot SE. In Germany and the Netherlands prices fell to negative EUR 500 per megawatt hour on the Epex Spot SE electricity exchange and were in negative territory repeatedly throughout the month. [Bloomberg] [Bloomberg]

While consumers don't pay negative prices, negative prices for traders in the electricity market do affect investment decisions by private investors. Such prices may reduce the attractiveness of renewable energy for private investors as the European Union (EU) attempts

to attract private capital under the Repower EU program. However, EU policy is driving spending forward. [EU]

Large wind and solar installations have provided a greater energy supply than demand during periods of intense sunlight during the summer months. Previous wind installations produced marginally negative rates on occasional windy days.

Now, the use of more solar panels on utility scale solar farms and distributed on residential and commercial rooftops has led to significant over capacity during peak sunlight periods. Prices fell below zero in a dozen countries in Europe on July 15, including France, Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. [BI]

Power prices do not remain negative throughout the day, and baseload power from nuclear and fossil fuel sources in areas without hydropower remain critical to provide electricity when the sun is not shining and wind not blowing. This is because battery storage technology is not presently sufficient to save power generated from renewable sources beyond a few short hours.

Europe will install 60 gigawatts of new solar capacity in 2023, approximately a third more than the 41 gigawatts added in 2022 – which was almost double that of 2021 – according to HSBC Holdings Plc. research quoted by Bloomberg, as well as the The Statistical Review of World Energy. [Bloomberg] [EI] [BP]

(rw/gc)

European Space Agency's Ariane 5 rocket completes final mission

The European Space Agency's Ariane 5 rocket completed its final and 117th mission on July 6, bringing two satellites, one German and one French, into orbit. [DW]

The Ariane 5 has been the workhorse of the European Space Agency (ESA) for the past twenty years. The Ariane carried the Rosetta space probe, the first Earth probe to successfully land on a comet, and launched the two most advanced observation platforms in orbit today, the James Webb Space and Euclid Space Telescopes. [ESA] [Space.com]

The Ariane 5 will be replaced by the upcoming and more capable Ariane 6.

The ESA published photos on July 13 of the Earth and Moon taken in June on the 20th anniversary of the first European planetary mission on June 2, 2003. The Mars Express, now in orbit around the Red Planet, sent back its first photos of Earth while still enroute to Mars on July 3, 2003.

The Mars orbiter sent back photos of Earth and the Moon, demonstrating ESA's continued contributions to exploring the Solar System. [ESA]

(rw/gc)

Baltic states set to decouple from Russian energy grid in 2025

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas announced that the Baltic states are set to decouple from the Russian energy grid by early 2025. [Reuters]

Lithuania has been lobbying for Estonia and Latvia to leave the Russian energy grid earlier than 2025, ideally in the summer of 2024. Estonia's grid operator Elering has said that it considers leaving the Russian grid sooner than 2025 as too risky. [ERR]

"We see what happens in Ukraine, where people are being killed and bombs continue to fall – I don't think it's the right choice to keep cooperating with the aggressor just because this saves a few cents," Rokas Masiulis, the chief of the Lithuanian power grid operator Litgrid, said. [Reuters] [ERR]

Litgrid said it will follow Estonia's timetable because all three Baltic states must decouple together. [Reuters]

(aog/gc)

Belarus applies to join BRICS group

Belarus applied to join the BRICS group in May, Belarusian news agency BelTa reported on July 25. [Reuters]

"This decision has become an absolutely logical step in the context of the implementation of Belarusian approaches to expanding cooperation in multilateral formats with traditional partners and friendly states,"

the Belarusian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. [BelTa]

The BRICS countries Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are due to hold a summit in South Africa in August, where Belarusian officials “are expected to present their recommendations to the BRICS Heads of State.” South Africa nearly pulled out of hosting the conference due to pressure by the West to arrest Putin during his visit. [BelTa] [Reuters][Guardian]

(aog/gc)

Central European countries call for extension of EU ban on Ukrainian grain imports

A central European bloc, consisting of Romania, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria, called for an extension of a European Union (EU) ban on Ukrainian grain imports until the end of the year at a meeting in Warsaw on July 19. [EuroNews]

Under the bans, wheat, maize, rapeseed and sunflower seed coming from Ukraine can transit through the five Eastern European countries but not stay inside their markets for domestic consumption or storage purposes. [EuroNews]

At the meeting, representatives from the five central European states signed a joint declaration on the need to prolong EU preventive measures on imports of wheat, maize, rapeseed and sunflower seeds originating in Ukraine. [RomaniaInsider]

"In the event that the preventive measure is not extended, this will have a profound impact in the frontline member states on the prices and the storage capacity, which is essential for the grain to be harvested," the countries wrote in a common document.

(sw/gc)

Germany, partners report subsea explosives on yacht in Nord Stream investigation

The German government, in collaboration with Sweden and Denmark, provided an update to the United Nations (UN) Security Council on the suspicious

explosions that occurred on the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022.

The joint letter submitted by the three nations suggested that subsea explosives were discovered in samples obtained from a suspicious sailing yacht, raising concerns over the potential sabotage of the pipelines. [Reuters] [Die Zeit]

The Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines were essential energy conduits connecting Russia and Germany beneath the Baltic Sea. Since its establishment in 2011, Nord Stream 1 has been instrumental in supplying a significant share of Europe's gas imports from Russia. [Reuters] [Die Zeit]

Germany, Sweden and Denmark, which initiated separate investigations into the unexplained attacks, committed to providing updates ahead of the UN Security Council meeting on July 11. Their joint letter to the international organ, dated July 10, stated that the investigations have presented unprecedented complexity, making it difficult to determine when they will be concluded. [Reuters]

The joint letter indicated that "the boat in question may have been used to transport the explosives that exploded at the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 pipelines [Reuters]." Experts cited in the letter suggested that skilled divers may have attached these explosives to specific points on the pipelines, located on the seabed at depths of approximately 70 to 80 metres. German authorities have not yet pinpointed the precise route taken by the yacht. [Die Zeit]

At present, the three nations have had difficulties identifying the perpetrators and their motivations. The yacht had reportedly been rented by a company based in Poland to "hide the identity of the real character." The company was allegedly owned by two Ukrainians, which has denied any involvement in the explosion. [Die Zeit][Reuters]

(if/gc)

Irish MEPs crucial in passing EU Nature Restoration Law

Ireland’s members of the European Parliament (MEPs) played a “critical” role in passing the European Union’s (EU) Nature Restoration Law on July 12, according to the country’s Environment Minister, Eamon Ryan. EU lawmakers passed a version of the law by 336-300

vote, with 13 abstentions. [Evening Standard] [Reuters] [The Irish Times]

The Nature Restoration law had faced considerable backlash from right-wing parties including Ireland's centre-right Fine Gael party. However, all five Fine Gael MEPs voted in favour of the law, rebelling against the party, with MEP Sean Kelly highlighting the "biodiversity crisis" Ireland is currently facing. [The Irish Times]

The law contributes to the EU's Green Deal by setting 2030 targets to tackle biodiversity loss and ecosystem damage, with 81 percent of Europe's natural habitats considered to be in "poor health." Irish MEPs and farmers hope the law will provide Ireland with greater food security, flood resilience and healthier bogs. [EU Observer] [Reuters] [Irish Independent] [Irish Farmers' Association]

(ew/gc)

Leaders meet in Italy to discuss help for developing nations

Italy has unveiled a series of initiatives and partnerships dubbed the "Rome Process", aimed at strengthening cooperation between Mediterranean countries with the mid-term goal of reducing illegal migration to Europe. [Deutsche Welle]

The plan was presented at an international conference on migration and development convened by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Held on July 23 in Rome, the meeting was attended by leaders of European bodies, international financial institutions and several heads of state from Mediterranean countries, the Gulf, Africa and the Middle East.

Meloni's initiative is part of Italy's wider "Plan for Africa", which aims to address the root causes of illegal migration by creating economic opportunities, while at the same time fostering the generation of renewable energy in developing countries.

The plan also aims to take advantage of Italy's strategic position in the Mediterranean to build undersea infrastructure to carry energy to Europe. [Europe Monthly May 2023] [Europe Monthly July 2023]

The talks in Rome will be followed by a donor's conference at which states will be able to finance infrastructure projects as part of the "Rome Process", Meloni said. [Decode39]

The United Arab Emirates pledged USD 100 million to support initiatives under the process.

(ps/pk)

Italy, Slovenia and Croatia vow joint effort to tackle illegal migration

The foreign ministers of Italy, Slovenia and Croatia have signed a declaration pledging to work together more closely in tackling illegal migration from the Middle East and Africa to Europe via the so-called Balkan route.

The ministers held a trilateral meeting in the Italian city of Ancona on July 10. [Slovenia Times] [Rtvslo] [AA]

Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon said at a joint press conference after the talks that the three countries had committed to jointly carry out a search-and-rescue operation at sea in the autumn. She added that this would help prevent human tragedies at sea while tackling the problem of migration in a humane way.

"We need to secure the Schengen border. Our proposal is to include Frontex [the EU's border agency] in this process, in addition to joint police patrols. This could eliminate unnecessary and unjustified... controls on our border with Austria," Fajon said.

Austria in April extended controls at its frontier with Slovenia by another six months, saying the measure was needed to prevent illegal immigration. Slovenia complained that the decision was "disproportionate and unjustified". [Slovenian government]

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.

Spike in 'irregular' crossings

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

One of the main migratory paths into Europe is through Western Balkans countries.

Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, who was a guest at the trilateral meeting in Italy, stressed

"the importance of solidarity within the EU towards the states mainly affected by the migration problem."

Schallenberg said that in 2022, Austria had the largest number of asylum applications per capita in Europe, adding that his country was at the "spearhead of the EU when it comes to regional cooperation". [Euractiv]

The foreign ministers meeting in Italy on July 10 also discussed the war in Ukraine and the integration of Western Balkans countries into the EU.

European Union interior ministers in June 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. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(mr/pk)

NATO extends Stoltenberg's term as secretary general

NATO on July 4 extended the contract of its secretary general Jens Stoltenberg rather than appointing a successor, banking on experience and continuity amid Russia's war against Ukraine. [Reuters]

Stoltenberg will stay in his post until October 2024. He previously had his contract extended by NATO in March 2022, following the outbreak of war on the military alliance's doorstep. [Euronews I]

Stoltenberg, a former prime minister of Norway, has won respect among both European and North American members of NATO for his cool-headed leadership in times of crisis, Euronews reported.

US President Joe Biden said in a statement: "With his steady leadership, experience, and judgment, Secretary General Stoltenberg has brought our Alliance through the most significant challenges in European security since World War II."

Speculation has been rife about who could replace Stoltenberg, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen being tipped as one potential successor.

However, in a comment cited by Euronews, Bruno Lété, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, said that some NATO members had voiced strong

opposition to Von der Leyen due to her previous performance as German defence minister.

(hj/pk)

Sweden poised to join NATO after Turkey lifts veto

Fourteen months after applying to join NATO, Sweden is on the verge of entering the military alliance after Turkey lifted its opposition to the Nordic country's membership, which requires approval by all members.

The breakthrough came on the eve of a NATO summit held in Vilnius on July 11 and 12 after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson in the Lithuanian capital. [BBC]

NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg announced Ankara's about-turn after the Erdogan-Kristersson meeting on July 10, saying the decision was a "historic step" but that an exact date for Sweden's accession could not be given, as that matter now depended on Turkey's parliament. [BBC]

Turkey had been stalling on approval for Sweden's NATO membership, accusing Stockholm of harbouring exiled activists of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is labelled as a terrorist organisation by Ankara, Brussels, Washington and many Western countries.

In May, Swedish lawmakers voted to tighten their country's terrorism laws in an attempt to convince Turkey that Stockholm would crack down on exiled PKK members. Sweden has also increased prosecutions of activists related to Kurdish separatist movements, and resumed weapon exports to Turkey. [The Guardian]

Meanwhile, Quran-burning protests in the Nordic country exacerbated tensions with Ankara, and Erdogan said earlier that if Sweden disrespected Turkey or Muslims, he would not support its NATO bid. [Politico]

Hungary promises to stop delaying

Out of the 31 NATO allies, Turkey and Hungary are the only two members that have not yet ratified Sweden's accession to the military alliance. Earlier in July, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said his country would no longer delay the process if Turkey lifted its veto. [Reuters]

Budapest says a law ratifying Stockholm's entry is now in the hands of the Hungarian parliament. A timeframe on the law's adoption has not been given, although a lawmaker from the ruling right-wing Fidesz party told Reuters the move would not occur before the parliament returns from its summer recess in the autumn. [Daily News Hungary] [444]

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan indicated his country's parliament would debate Sweden's ratification when the chamber reconvenes in October. [Arab News]

Turkey resumes talk of joining EU

NATO chief Stoltenberg's announcement that Ankara had lifted its opposition to Stockholm's bid to join the military alliance was unexpected – Erdogan had claimed shortly before that he would only back Sweden's candidacy if frozen talks over Turkey's accession to the EU were resumed.

Turkey first applied to join the bloc in 1987, and its membership has since been a fraught issue among member countries. The European Parliament voted in non-binding resolutions to suspend talks on Ankara's accession to the EU in 2016 and 2019 in response to Erdogan's crackdown on domestic opposition after he was threatened by a failed coup attempt. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Although Erdogan's demand was swiftly dismissed by European Union officials, a NATO statement said that Sweden would "actively support efforts to reinvigorate Turkey's EU accession process", including the "modernisation of the EU-Turkey customs union and visa liberalisation".

US President Joe Biden said he looked forward to working with Ankara on "enhancing defence and deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area."

"I look forward to welcoming Prime Minister Kristersson and Sweden as our 32nd NATO ally," Biden added in a statement.

(qv/pk)

Switzerland to join European Sky Shield defence project

The Swiss defence ministry announced on July 4 that Switzerland would be joining the German-led Sky Shield defence project. [LeFigaro]

Defence Minister Viola Amherd signed a declaration of intent to join the defence project on July 7, as did Austria – also a neutral country. [BFMTV] [RTS] [SwissInfo]

Germany first established the project in 2022 to boost the continent's air defences in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February that year. The project aims to cut defence costs for European states by coordinating air and missile defence systems procurement, training, maintenance, as well as logistics.

So far, 17 countries have signed up to the Sky Shield project.

Critics – such as the lobby group Pro Schweiz – argue that the decision contravenes Switzerland's centuries long policy of neutrality. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Turkey: President Erdogan seeks investment from Gulf countries

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accompanied by 200 businesspeople, travelled to Saudi Arabia on July 17 to start a three-day long Gulf tour to attract investment to boost the Turkish economy. Business forums were arranged in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates during the trip. [Al-Jazeera]

"We are hoping to improve our relations and cooperation in many fields. We will focus on joint investment and commercial initiatives to be realised in the upcoming period," he told reporters in Istanbul. After his three-day trip Erdogan said that all aspects of bilateral relations were discussed during his meetings and added "We will see the effects of this visit on our economy in a short time." [AP News]

Erdogan met in Jeddah with King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Despite encountering previous tension, the leaders signed several economic agreements. The kingdom agreed to purchase Turkish-made Bayraktar drones, Saudi Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman announced on Twitter.

(lc/gc)

EU summit with Latin American leaders soured by Europe's colonial past

Leaders from the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) held a two-day summit in Brussels on July 17-18 – the first such gathering in eight years – which was haunted by the ghosts of colonial history.

While designed to relaunch both political and economic relations, European leaders struggled to persuade their CELAC counterparts to strongly condemn Russia's war in Ukraine in the summit's closing communique.

Summit host Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, opened the first session by urging delegates to condemn Russia's "illegal war". But he received immediate pushback from CELAC President Ralph Gonsalves, the prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, who insisted the summit was not the place to discuss the conflict in Ukraine.

Instead, leaders of the 33-nation CELAC bloc came to Brussels with a clear message: defining relations today means addressing and rectifying past injustices – especially as the EU looks once again to the resource-rich region, this time to power its green transition.

Some CELAC delegates pushed for the implementation of the 2019 EU-Mercosur trade deal, which has stalled amid European concerns about deforestation and agricultural competition. [Associated Press] [Euronews] [France24] [Politico]

While the EU is Latin America and the Caribbean's biggest investor, the region's largest trading partner is China. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on the summit's first day promised to pump over EUR 45 billion into the region under the EU's Global Gateway programme. The money is intended for infrastructure projects that, at least in part, will also benefit the EU's private sector.

(jmw/pk)

Germany, Sweden to buy air-to-air missiles from US for USD 3.5bn

Germany and Sweden are to buy American medium-range AIM-120C-8 air-to-air missiles under deals together worth around USD 3.5 billion that have been approved by the US State Department. [UK Defence Journal]

The deal with Germany, announced on July 19, is worth USD 2.9 billion. The Swedish purchase, announced on July 7, will total USD 605 million.

Germany requested up to 969 of the advanced missiles, while Sweden is seeking to acquire 250.

The purchases come amid Sweden's application to join NATO, while the German government has pledged to increase military spending amid Russia's war in Ukraine. [BBC] [DefenceNews]

(hj/pk)

United Kingdom agrees to join major Indo-Pacific trade group

The United Kingdom has signed a deal to join the major Indo-Pacific trade group Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), marking its biggest trade agreement since Brexit.

The agreement was signed by Business and Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch on July 16 after two years of negotiations, and is set to come into force during the second half of 2024.

The deal will make 99 percent of British exports to the CPTPP eligible for tariff-free trade, lowering prices for consumers and incentivizing higher trade volume. [Gov.UK] [Sky News] [UK Parliament]

The CPTPP consists of Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam. The UK will be its first European member, and first new member since the group formed in 2018.

With the UK's membership, the CPTPP's combined gross domestic product (GDP) will be GBP 12 trillion, accounting for 15 percent of global GDP. [The Guardian] [Sky News] [Gov.UK]

Joining the CPTPP could boost the British economy by GBP 1.8 billion each year after 10 years. While the UK has strengthened relations with the Indo-Pacific region since Brexit, critics have described this deal as "mainly cosmetic" and "underwhelming". [The Guardian] [The Independent] [Loughborough University]

Meanwhile, Badenoch said there was a "very low" chance of a UK-US trade agreement. This was echoed by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak ahead of a meeting with President Biden in June, describing how a trade

agreement has “not been a priority” for either nation. [The Guardian][Politico]

(ew/gc)

Austria’s Raiffeisen Bank stalls on departure from Russia: report

Austria’s Raiffeisen Bank International, the largest Western bank in Russia, is postponing plans to leave that country in the hope that the conflict in Ukraine will end soon, Reuters reported on July 6, citing what it said were three sources familiar with the situation. [Reuters/MSN] [The New Voice of Ukraine/Yahoo]

The bank, under pressure from the European Central Bank, had planned to spin off its Russian unit in the wake of Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Raiffeisen Bank plays a significant role in Russia’s financial system and is recognized as “systemically important” by the Russian central bank.

(mr/pk)

Croatian parliament declares 1930s famine was ‘genocide’ against Ukrainians

The Croatian parliament has voted to declare the deaths of millions of Ukrainians in a Soviet-era man-made famine as genocide.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Twitter: “I am grateful to the Republic of Croatia for this historic vote.” [Al Jazeera] He added: “The world will never put up with the crimes of the Kremlin – neither past nor present.”

The Great Famine, also known as the Holodomor, took place in 1932 and 1933 after Soviet leader Josef Stalin ordered police to seize grain and animals from Ukrainian farms, including the seed needed to plant the next crop. [Reuters]

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Twitter on June 28: “World recognition of the Holodomor genocide continues to grow rapidly.”

The legislatures of many countries have declared the Great Famine to be an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people. The Slovak parliament did so on June

20, the British parliament on May 25, the National Assembly of France on March 8, and the Senate of the Czech Republic on December 14. [Ukranews] [Euromaidan press]

(mr/pk)

France will send long-range missiles to Ukraine, Macron says

French President Emmanuel Macron said on July 11 that he will join Britain in supplying Ukraine with long-range cruise missiles such as the SCALP/Storm Shadow.

"I have decided to increase deliveries of weapons and equipment to enable the Ukrainians to have the capacity to strike deeply," Macron said at the summit of the 31-member NATO alliance in Lithuania. [Reuters]

The SCALP/Storm Shadow is an Anglo-French weapon with a range of 250 kilometres, the longest of any Western weapon supplied to Ukraine so far.

"From our point of view, this decision is a mistake with consequences for the Ukrainian side, because this will, of course, force us to take countermeasures," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in response.

Russia has long warned that Western countries risk being dragged directly into the conflict by providing arms to Kyiv. Some Western allies were concerned that Kyiv might conduct strikes into Russia itself, particularly after the provision of long-term armaments.

Macron said that Ukraine has pledged not to use SCALP against such targets. [LeMonde]

(ava/gc)

Germany unveils EUR 686 million military aid package for Ukraine at NATO summit

During the two-day summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Vilnius, Lithuania, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Defense Minister Boris Pistorius revealed a new military aid package for Ukraine, worth approximately EUR 686 million. The aid package, aimed at bolstering Ukraine's defence capabilities, was announced by Pistorius during a press briefing at the summit. [Deutsche Welle] [Politico]

The military assistance plan will mainly focus on enhancing air defence, tanks and artillery capabilities, as stated by Pistorius. Among the key components of the aid package are 40 Marder armoured vehicles, 25 Leopard 1 battle tanks, five Bergepanzer 2 tank recovery vehicles and two launch units for the Patriot air defence system. [Politico] [Deutsche Welle]

Germany will also supply Ukraine with crucial ammunition, including 20,000 rounds of artillery shells. Anti-drone and anti-mine systems will be provided to bolster Ukraine's defence capabilities. [Politico]

(if/gc)

Georgian, Croatian PMs discuss EU, joint projects

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili discussed his country's EU aspirations and economic collaboration in talks with his Croatian counterpart Andrej Plenkovic on July 24. [civil] [Agenda] [Agenda]

During a visit by Garibashvili to Croatia, the two leaders broached topics including Georgia's chances of gaining the green light by the end of the year to join the European Union.

Garibashvili said he was grateful for Croatia's support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The two prime ministers also discussed economic collaboration and cooperation in sectors including tourism, defence and justice, and the promotion of Croatian investment in Georgia.

(mr/pk)

Hungarian PM accuses EU of leading pro-LGBTQ+ 'offensive'

Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has unleashed the latest in a series of broadsides against the European Union, accusing it of carrying out a pro-LGBTQ+ "offensive".

Orban said on July 22 that he was committed to safeguarding Hungary's Christian heritage.

A controversial education law passed in 2021 that prohibits Hungarian schools from using materials

portraying homosexuality and gender change has been deemed by Brussels to be anti-LGBTQ+. [Reuters]

Orban's government has clashed with the EU on various fronts in recent years, including over contested reforms of Hungary's media and judiciary. [Euractiv]

Budapest is entangled in a dispute with Brussels over claims that Orban has eroded the rule of law, leading to some EU funds for Hungary being suspended.

(ss/pk)

Italy has confiscated EUR 2bn in Russian oligarchs' assets since 2022

Authorities in Italy have confiscated assets worth some EUR 2 billion from Russian oligarchs since the start of the war in Ukraine, the Italian Central Bank's Financial Intelligence Unit (UIF) said in a report released on July 4.

The assets, including luxury yachts, cars as well as financial products, were frozen as part of sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia and Belarus after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

According to UIF Director Enzo Serata, 170 financial holdings valued at EUR 330 million registered to 80 individuals had been frozen in Italy as of June. [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Before Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Italy had been a popular destination for Russian oligarchs who bought properties in the country's most prestigious locations such as the island of Sardinia, Lake Como, and the Tuscan countryside.

In June, European Union leaders pushed the bloc's bodies to find legal ways to funnel frozen Russian assets as aid for Ukraine.

(ps/pk)

Latvia: President makes first visit to Estonia

Newly elected Latvian president Edgars Rinkevics made his first official state visit to Estonia on July 10. Rinkevics told Latvian Television he would carry the tradition of going to Estonia for his first state visit shortly after his election on May 31. [ERR] [Diena]

“I think that both of our countries are leaders and champions when it comes to military assistance to Ukraine. We have passed the [2] percent of GDP mark quite a long time ago already, but think it is very important that we continue urging other members of NATO, the European Union, and like-minded nations to do more.” Rinkevics said at a press conference. [ERR]

Estonian President Alar Karis added: “In these extremely turbulent times, defence cooperation between Estonia and Latvia is more effective than ever. We have learned to coordinate better, to organise joint procurements, to help each other.” [Baltic Times]

Rinkevics was sworn in as the new president of Latvia on July 8. [DW]

(aog/gc)

Kosovo’s foreign minister seeks more from EU-backed meetings

Kosovo’s Foreign Minister Donika Gervalla has called for more concrete results from European Union (EU) facilitated dialogue meetings between Kosovo and Serbia. [Euractiv].

“I think there was a greater chance, with a better and concrete strategy and plan, for the dialogue to yield better results. Often, the dialogue has been merely for handshakes and photo opportunities, so we are not interested in pseudo-dialogue.”

Gervalla also said that Kosovo is interested in normalising relations with neighbouring Serbia and that recognition by Serbia of Kosovo as an independent country was the only path to ensure long term peace in the region. [Euractiv]

(jn/gc)

Norway to supply Ukraine with 1,000 mini-drones and air defence gear

Norway said on July 12 it would supply Ukraine with ultra-light drones and components for air defence missile systems as part of a new military aid package.

The pledge aligns with Norway’s establishment of a 75-billion-kroner (EUR 6.69 billion) fund dedicated to providing civilian and military aid to Ukraine from 2023 to 2027.

Norwegian Defence Minister Bjorn Arild Gram said that the new package includes 1,000 Black Hornet "nanodrones" for reconnaissance tasks and components for NASAMS surface-to-air missile systems. All the pledged equipment is made in Norway. [Ahram] [The Local]

(pp/pk)

Romania calls for permanent presence of German troops

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu appealed to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at a joint press conference in Berlin on July 4, calling for German troops to be sent to boost North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces along Romania's border with Russia-invaded Ukraine – both "soon" and "permanently." [Politico]

Scholz did not respond to Ciolacu's comments at the press conference, focusing rather on the NATO Vilnius summit held in Lithuania between July 11 and 12. The chancellor clarified that a decision on Ukraine's NATO membership would be unlikely. [Bloomberg]

Ciolacu's appeal came a week after Germany announced that it would be permanently sending 4,000 troops to Lithuania.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, eight NATO battle groups have been established in Romania – sharing an approximately 600 kilometre long border with the occupied nation. The troops come from Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Romania itself. [NATO]

Later, on July 5, the German Defense Ministry clarified that it had no intention of sending permanent troops to Romania's border with Ukraine. Later, on July 11, Spain announced that it would be reinforcing its military presence in Romania's NATO battlegroups. [RomaniaInsider][AA]

This follows the call by US and Romanian experts for a permanent stationing of US troops and a NATO Black Sea policy focused on Romania in June at the Yorktown Institute in Washington, DC weeks prior to the Russian attack on the Ukrainian port of Odessa.

Seth Cropsey, former Deputy Undersecretary of the US Navy and Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, noted in a Europe in Review interview on June 13 that the

Russia Navy maintains a capability to disrupt shipping in the Black Sea. NATO member Romania has an extensive coastline and multiple ports, which are alternate transshipment points for Ukrainian grain as well as economically vital offshore oil and gas reserves being developed to offset dependence on Russian energy.

Cropsey, together with the ambassador of Romania to the US, Andrei Muraru, called for a strong permanent American Army and Navy presence and the development of a NATO Black Sea strategy to secure the Western alliance's Black Sea interests in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine during a June 21 presentation in Washington DC. These interests may now well include not only safeguarding Black Sea energy for Europe, but also critical food supplies for Africa and global markets. [Yorktown]

(sw-rw/gc)

Romania to train Ukrainian pilots to operate F-16 fighter jets

Romania announced on July 6 the establishment of a regional training centre for F-16 fighter pilots, to be accessible to both North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members and Ukraine.

The announcement came from the country's Supreme Council for National Defence (CSAT) in the days leading up to the NATO summit held in Vilnius, Lithuania, between July 11 and 12. [NewVoiceofUkraine]

The training programme is part of an international coalition – jointly led by the Netherlands and Denmark – tasked with providing F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine in its war against invading Russian forces. [AeroTime]

(sw/gc)

Slovenian PM says border dispute with Croatia should be taken 'off political agenda'

Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob said during his first official visit to Zagreb on July 14 that a "poisonous" border dispute between his country and Croatia should be taken "off the day-to-day political agenda." [Sloveniatimes] [Slovenia Government]

After becoming independent countries following the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia and Croatia became locked in a decades-long dispute over several parts of their border, both on land and at sea, including in the Gulf of Piran area. [Total Slovenia News]

“I believe that by looking to the future, by looking for projects that can help people on both sides of the border, we will also defuse issues that were unsolvable in the past,” Golob said.

While meeting in Zagreb, Golob and Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic signed an agreement on cross-border cooperation in providing emergency medical assistance and hospital treatment.

(mr/pk)

Switzerland increases funds for migrants in Croatia

A senior Swiss migration official has pledged CHF 860,000 (EUR 890,000) to support a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) project to help migrants in Croatia.

Christine Schraner Burgener, State Secretary of the Swiss migration office, made the pledge during a two-day visit to the Croatian capital, Zagreb, on July 13 and 14.

Burgener met with Terezija Gras, State Secretary for European and International Affairs at the Croatian interior ministry. After holding talks, Burgener visited the National Coordination Centre for Border Control and the Hotel Porin reception centre in Zagreb.

The second part of her trip included talks with UNICEF’s local mission. Burgener also visited an accommodation centre for children with special needs from Ukraine which is financially supported by the Swiss migration office. [Slovenia Times] [Slovenia Government]

(mr/pk)

Turkish parliament Speaker insists on two-state solution for Cyprus but calls for dialogue

The Speaker of the Turkish parliament said during a visit to northern Cyprus on July 11 that having two states, one Greek and one Turkish, on the island is the only viable solution to its near 50-year ethnic division. [Cyprus Mail] [News in Cyprus]

The sovereignty of northern Cyprus, controlled by Turkish Cypriots, is recognized only by Turkey.

At the same time, the Turkish parliamentary Speaker, Numan Kurtulmus, told reporters that "it would be beneficial for both sides [in Cyprus] to have a dialogue between the two equal communities, to develop joint projects and to act together, responsibly sharing their common island." [Cyprus Mail]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rejects a United Nations-sanctioned framework envisioning a federated island nation. [Euronews] [AA.com] [AP]

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded the island after a brief Greek-inspired coup. Greek Cypriots control two-thirds of the territory, while Turkish Cypriots control the northern part. Despite numerous attempts, reunification negotiations have been unsuccessful, most recently in 2017. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(nc/pk)

Turkey, North Cyprus sign deal on undersea power link

Ankara and the Turkish Cypriot-controlled north of Cyprus on July 18 signed a deal to build an undersea electricity cable. [Cyprus Mail] [LGC]

The planned USD 400 million link will have a capacity of 800 megawatts and will make it possible for Turkey to supply energy to north Cyprus and vice-versa. The cable is to be built by 2028, the Cyprus Mail reported.

(nc/pk)

Turkey and Greece vow to repair ties after years of tension

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met on July 12 with his Greek counterpart Kyriakos Mitsotakis on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, where they agreed to resume talks and take confidence-

building measures to create a positive environment between the two countries. [Reuters]

Public statements made by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Greek counterpart Giorgos Geapetritis indicated that the normalisation talks will take place in September. The ministers emphasised the determination of both countries to build a constructive environment. [E-Kathimerini]

The talks will be held during a high-level strategic meeting in Thessaloniki, Greece, the spokesperson of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), Ahmet Celik said. The militarisation of the Aegean islands and the Turkish minority in Thrace should be discussed, he said.

"We are continuously discussing the protection of the rights and interest of the Turkish minority in Western Thrace and the importance of respecting their laws," Celik said. [TRT World]

Political tension between the two countries increased last year when Erdogan halted bilateral talks in a dispute over airspace violations and accused Mitsotakis of pressuring the US to block the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey. Bilateral relations improved when Greece became one of the first countries to send help and rescue operations to Turkey after the February 7 earthquake.

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan backs Ukraine's bid for NATO membership

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan voiced his government's support for Ukraine's admission into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) during a July 7 meeting in Istanbul with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

"Without a doubt, Ukraine deserves to be in NATO," Erdodan said. Zelensky said he was "happy to hear" that Turkey supports Ukraine's bid to join during a joint press conference. [CNN]

Since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Erdogan has emerged as a key powerbroker, playing a balancing act between the two sides. He helped broker the Black Sea grain deal that unlocked millions of tons of wheat caught up in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, averting a global hunger crisis. [CNN]

NATO has an open-door policy, meaning that any country can be invited to join if it expresses an interest, as long as it is able and willing to uphold the principles of the alliance's founding treaty. However, under the accession rules, any member state can veto a new country from joining.

Moscow has taken notice of the shift in Ankara's policy. The Chairman of Russia's upper house of parliament Viktor Bondarev said: "Turkey is gradually and steadily continuing to turn from a neutral country into an unfriendly one." [Washington Post]

Erdogan's decision to break with Moscow may partly be driven by economic considerations. Though Turkish exports to Russia have increased from USD 2.6 to USD 4.9 billion since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, Turkey's overall exports have declined about 10.5 percent over the past year. [Washington Post]

Erdogan has made several "dizzying" moves to return Turkey into the Western fold, Duke University economist, professor of political science, Timur Kuran, said. "If it brings more Western investment, he and his team may find partnering with the West too seductive. [Washington Post]"

Russian President Vladimir Putin still plans to visit Istanbul in August for a face-to-face meeting with the Turkish president. [CNN]

(cqk/gc)

UK and Poland enhance defence cooperation with new agreement

The United Kingdom and Poland signed a 2030 Strategic Partnership agreement that aims to enhance foreign policy, security and defence cooperation between the two countries. The signing took place following discussions at Lancaster House on July 5. [Euractiv]

The partnership focuses on shared priorities such as defence capabilities, operations and addressing matters related to Belarus and China, according to a press release from the UK's Defence Ministry. It builds upon the foundation set by the 2017 UK-Poland Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation.

Under the partnership, collaborative efforts will be made to develop advanced capabilities for the armed forces, enhance joint training exercises, reinforce NATO's deterrence and defence readiness and

maintain a unified stance on matters concerning the Indo-Pacific region. [GOV UK]

(pp/gc)

United Kingdom, Turkey to start talks on new free trade deal

The United Kingdom and Turkey announced on July 18 that the two countries will begin talks on a new free trade agreement (FTA) to replace the existing one. [Reuters]

Britain already has a FTA with Turkey, which rolled over when Britain left the European Union. "I look forward to using the deal to deepen the UK-Turkey trading relationship, drive economic growth and support businesses up and down the country," British Business and Trade Secretary Kemi Badenoch said. [Government of UK]

The announcement came after a call between Kemi Badenoch and her Turkish counterpart Omer Bolat, where they committed to negotiating a new deal and deepening the trade relationship between the two countries.

(lc/gc)

Belgium summons UAE ambassador over disinformation accusations

Belgium summoned the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) ambassador to Brussels on July 7 after a data leak showed that Emirati intelligence had paid EUR 5.7 million to Swiss lobby group Alp Services in exchange for creating files on over 1,000 people in Europe – 160 individuals and 80 organisations in Belgium alone.

The data was obtained by French online newspaper Mediapart, who then forwarded the approximately 780,000 confidential documents to the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC). The EIC then published a report on July 7, stating that the UAE had targeted individuals in Europe as part of its anti-Qatar smear campaign between 2017 and 2020. [RTBF]

The documents included infographics attempting to falsely link hundreds of individuals to extremism.

Among those Belgian nationals targeted is the country's Federal Minister for Environment and

Sustainability, Zakia Khattabi, who was linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in the leaked documents. In an interview with daily newspaper LeSoir, Khattabi said that “everything is false.” Khattabi’s political party, Ecolo, has backed her fully, stating that the UAE’s behaviour is “antidemocratic.” [LeSoir]

Khattabi is due to attend the COP28 climate change conference at the end of the year in Dubai. [RTBF 2] [RTLBF]

Alp Services has released a statement claiming that the “stolen data” was “partly falsified” before it was shared with the EIC. [MiddleEastEye]

(sw/gc)

European Union signs migration deal with Tunisia

The European Union (EU) and Tunisia reached an agreement on July 16 to improve border security and tackle trafficking in return for EU investment in the country's economic development. [BrusselsTimes] [politico.eu][Belga]

The deal will now be presented to EU countries despite criticism about Tunisia's human rights record and treatment of migrants. Belgium State Secretary for Asylum and Migration Nicole de Moor told Radio 1 that Belgium intends to ratify the agreement. [BrusselsTimes][politico.eu][Belga]

The EU statement did not give precise financial details of the agreement, but the EU is ready to give Tunisia more than EUR 1 billion in areas such as trade, investment and energy cooperation, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in June. [BrusselsTimes][politico.eu][Belga]

(gt/gc)

Spanish court halts probe into hacking of PM’s phone, blaming Israel

Spain’s High Court has been forced to halt an investigation into the hacking of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s phone because of a lack of cooperation from Israel, a judge has announced.

Judge Jose Luis Calama said on July 10 that he had received no response to his request for evidence from

Israel, where the NSO Group – which developed the Pegasus software used to hack Sanchez's phone – is based. [Politico]

Calama said he had sent a letter to Israel four times asking for the NSO Group's CEO to testify as a witness in the case, but that there had been no reply. [La Vanguardia]

Calama added in a judicial document: "This silence clearly shows an absolute lack of legal cooperation on the part of the government of Israel. This leads us to presume that the judicial request in question, which has been sent four times, will never be executed." [Reuters]

An investigation was launched in May 2022 after the Spanish government said that Pegasus spyware, which can infiltrate mobile phones to access data or activate the microphone and camera of their owners, was used against some of Spain's leading politicians. [The Guardian]

The most high-profile figures targeted were Sanchez and Defence Minister Margarita Robles. Sanchez had nearly three gigabytes of data stolen from his phone. [Politico]

Judge Calama said that only a diplomatic push by the Spanish government would have any chance of gaining the evidence from Israel needed to continue the case. [Reuters] [La Vanguardia]

Sanchez is the first head of a NATO and European country confirmed to have been hacked by Pegasus spyware. [Politico]

(jw/pk)

Swedish embassy overrun after Quran burning, Iraq expels ambassador

A violent protest in Baghdad on the night of July 20 resulted in the second occupation and vandalisation of the Swedish embassy in Iraq's capital in less than a month.

The protest was in response to a planned burning of the Quran in Sweden, following an earlier burning and desecration of the holy text outside the Stockholm Central Mosque on June 28, an incident that sparked anger in the Muslim world. [Aljazeera Timeline]

The Iraqi government expelled the Swedish ambassador on July 20, citing Stockholm's failure to address plans for setting a copy of the Quran alight. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the Taliban administration in Afghanistan on July 11 forbade all Swedish-administered aid activities in the country. In a statement posted on Twitter, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid called for an apology to Muslims "for this heinous act". [Reuters]

At the multilateral level, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a motion on July 12 to denounce Quran burning as an act of religious hatred. The vote was far from unanimous, with 28 states in favour, 12 against, and seven abstaining. The motion is not legally binding and does not require action from Sweden. [UN]

Sweden hits out at 'misinformation campaign'

The Swedish foreign ministry released a statement condemning the burning of the holy book in Stockholm as Islamophobic. The ministry insisted that the "act in no way reflects the opinions of the Swedish government."

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on Instagram on July 26 that his country had been the victim of state-sponsored misinformation, claiming that actors were seeking to damage the Nordic nation's interests and reputation by implying government support for Quran burnings.

Other Swedish officials, such as Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin, blamed Russia for misinformation campaigns. [The Guardian]

The burning provoked fierce debate about the freedom of speech and about the right to blaspheme in Sweden, which the country has permitted since the 1970s. [BBC]

Iraqi security failure

After the attack on his country's embassy in Baghdad, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom said in a statement that Iraqi security forces had neglected their obligations to protect the diplomatic post. The United States and United Kingdom released similar statements.

The office of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani condemned the attack, acknowledging the incident as a security breach. [Reuters]

The protection of embassy grounds by a host state is enshrined in Article 22 of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, a key piece of international law.

(hj/pk)

Pope urges dialogue amid escalation in Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Pope Francis on July 9 called for resumed dialogue amid an escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [Rai News] [AA]

"With sorrow, I learned again that blood has been poured out in the Holy Land," the pontiff said during a Sunday address to a crowd in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican.

"I hope that the Israeli and Palestinian leaders can resume direct dialogue to bring an end to the spiral of violence and open paths of reconciliation and peace," he added.

A wave of violence has swept the West Bank for more than a year, prompting international concern. [Reuters]

Francis in 2021 hosted a meeting at the Vatican with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, during which the pope called for dialogue in order to achieve a two-state solution. [Vatican News] [The Times of Israel] [BBC]

(nc/pk)

Turkey upgrades relations with Egypt to ambassador level

Turkey and Egypt agreed to appoint ambassadors after almost a decade of diplomatic tensions that were sparked by the Arab Spring.

The decision was in accordance with an agreement signed by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Turkish foreign ministry said on July 4. [Reuters]

Turkey nominated Salih Mutlu Sen as its ambassador to Cairo, while Egypt nominated Amr Elhamamy as its ambassador to Ankara. [BBC Turkish]

The relations between Turkey and Egypt broke down in 2013, when al-Sisi took the power from Mohammed Mursi

an Erdogan ally, in a military coup. The normalisation process started in 2022 when Erdogan shook hands with al-Sisi in Doha during the World Cup, followed by the respective foreign ministers meeting to discuss the normalisation process.

“From now on, our relations will continue to improve rapidly in political, economic and all other fields. This is the will of our president and government,” Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said in a press conference.

The bilateral meeting between the countries’ leaders scheduled to take place on July 27 in Ankara was postponed by al-Sisi’s attendance of the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. [Gazete Duvar]

(lc/gc)

Turkey: Erdogan says he is open to meeting Syria's Assad

Turkey has never “shut the door” to discussions with the Syrian government, the country’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told reporters during a press conference before starting his three-day visit to Gulf countries on July 17. [Reuters]

It was “unacceptable” for Turkish armed forces to withdraw from northern Syria, a condition that Damascus has set for talks, Erdogan said. Turkey would not accept Syria ’s demand “as long as terrorists” are near the Turkish border, he said. [Daily Sabah]

In early 2023, Erdogan said he would consider meeting Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad to start the peacebuilding process. Assad said there was no point in meeting Erdogan until Turkey’s “illegal occupation” ended. [Al-Jazeera]

(lc/gc)

United Kingdom imposes new sanctions against Iran

The British government has imposed new sanctions targeting Iranian security officials in response to Tehran’s threats to the United Kingdom and its

partners, including a new sanctions regime which will give the UK greater powers to target Iran's key decision makers.

Iran has increased its efforts to kill or kidnap individuals perceived to be enemies of the regime outside of Iran, including in the UK, the Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said in a July 6 statement. Since the start of 2022, the UK has responded to more than 15 credible threats to kill or kidnap British or UK-based individuals by the Iranian regime. [Gov.Uk]

The new sanction regime will significantly expand the UK's sanctions powers by creating new criteria under which individuals and entities can be sanctioned, including: the Iranian regime's activities undermining peace, stability and security in the Middle East and internationally; the use and spread of weapons or weapons technologies from Iran; the Iranian regime's undermining of democracy, respect for the rule of law and good governance

other hostile activities towards the UK and its partners emanating from the Iranian regime. [Gov.Uk]

"The Iranian regime is oppressing its own people, exporting bloodshed in Ukraine and the Middle East, and threatening to kill and kidnap on UK soil," Cleverly said. "Today the UK has sent a clear message to the regime – we will not tolerate this malign behaviour and we will hold you to account."

Thirteen individuals and organizations, including prison governors overseeing torture, entities collecting private information of regime opponents, and individuals enforcing Iran's compulsory hijab laws, have been subjected to asset freezes and travel bans. These measures are part of the broader sanctions regime. [Gov.Uk]

The UK's sanctions framework has been enhanced to include new criteria for imposing sanctions on individuals and entities. These criteria encompass actions that undermine peace, stability and security in the Middle East and globally, the proliferation of weapons and technologies, efforts to undermine democracy and good governance, as well as other hostile activities targeting the UK and its partners. [GOV UK]

The British government has also introduced additional sanctions under the Iran Human Rights sanctions regime, targeting individuals and entities responsible for significant human rights abuses in Iran.

The new sanctions will take the form of travel bans and asset freezes. These measures prohibit sanctioned individuals and entities from conducting business with UK entities and freeze their assets in the country. Those currently subject to these restrictions include Heidar Pasandideh (Governor of Sanandaj prison), IRGC Cyber Defence Command (CDC), and The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR). [GOV UK] [Reuters]

(pp/gc)

Canada embassy opens in Lithuania

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has announced the opening of the Canadian embassy in Vilnius on July 10. [LRT]

"Strong relationships we share as allies and like-minded democracies are more important than ever," Trudeau said at a press conference with Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte. [LRT]

(aog/gc)

Cypriot, Argentinian presidents discuss opening of new embassy

The President of Cyprus, Nikos Christodoulides, and his Argentinian counterpart Alberto Fernandez, on July 19 discussed the upcoming opening of a Cypriot embassy in Buenos Aires. [CBN] [CNA]

The two leaders held talks during a summit of the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in Brussels on July 17 and 18.

The opening of the new Cypriot embassy, scheduled for September, comes amid strengthening diplomatic relations between the Mediterranean island nation and Argentina. [News in Cyprus]

(nc/pk)

US State Department greenlights F-35 warplanes for Czech Republic

The US State Department has approved the sale of 24 F-35 fighter jets to the Czech Republic, as Prague seeks

to upgrade its weapons to NATO standards in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The potential deal, worth up to USD 5.62 billion, requires congressional approval and could take several years to finalise. [Bloomberg]

The new jets would improve Prague's defence capabilities and support NATO operations by "guarding against modern threats and maintaining a constant presence in the region", the State Department said in a press release.

Czech Defence Minister Jana Cernochova, whose country is a NATO member and a US ally, said in a statement that "only the most advanced fifth-generation fighters will be able to meet mission requirements in future battlefields."

In addition to 24 warplanes, the package approved by the State Department includes advanced medium-range air-to-air missiles, various bombs, communications gear, and technical support. [Reuters] [Defense News]

US-Czech defence treaty ratified

Meanwhile, the parliament in Prague on July 19 ratified a defence treaty signed with the US to make it easier for the American army to deploy troops on Czech soil.

Defence minister Cernochova said the treaty was important at a time when "brutal Russian military aggression" is taking place just "a few hundred kilometres from our borders to the east". [Reuters]

The document was backed by the five-party centre-right ruling coalition and by populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis's ANO party. It was opposed by the far-right Direct Democracy Party, which claimed that the pact would compromise the sovereignty of the Czech Republic. [Independent]

(yl/pk)

Italy's Meloni discusses China, Ukraine, Africa with Biden in US

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and US President Joe Biden met on July 27 in Washington to discuss Rome's relations with Beijing, support for developing countries and political and military backing for war-torn Ukraine.

Meloni is one of the few far-right leaders to have been invited to the White House during Biden's presidency. The Washington Post described the visit as "the latest endorsement of her international credibility".

In Italy, journalists speculated that Meloni was willing to withdraw her country from China's Belt and Road global infrastructure project in exchange for the US supporting the Italian premier's foreign policy on Africa. [La Repubblica]

In 2019, Italy became the first G7 country to join the Belt and Road initiative but, after Meloni became prime minister in October 2022, there has been talk that Rome could back out of the project. [Politico]

At a press conference following her meeting with Biden, Meloni denied there was pressure from the US regarding Italy's relations with China. [Corriere della Sera]

Two days before Meloni's visit to the US, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry said Italy's role in the Belt and Road initiative had brought "mutually advantageous results" for both countries. [People.cn]

On the Ukraine war, Biden praised Italy for standing with Kyiv against "Russian atrocities". Meloni said that those who believe in peace should "support the Ukrainian cause." [Palazzo Chigi]

(ps/pk)

US missile defence base in Poland to be completed this year, says PM

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has said that a planned US missile defence base in Poland will be completed by the end of 2023 and will be fully operational next year. [TVN24] [Polsat News] [Polskie Radio] [TVP World]

The base is part of a planned wider US missile shield designed to protect Europe, a system which has been in the works since 2009 but which has been given renewed importance in light of Russia's war in Ukraine. [Polskie Radio] [TVP World]

"It is as vital to defend Polish skies as it is to defend Polish land," said Morawiecki in the northern Polish village of Redzikowo, where the base is being constructed. [Polskie Radio]

Speaking alongside the US ambassador to Warsaw, Mark Brzezinski, the prime minister added: “The modernisation of the Polish army and its integration within the entire NATO defence system is unprecedented. It makes Poland safer today than ever before.” [Polskie Radio]

Brzezinski stressed the significance of Polish-American cooperation within the military alliance, saying: “This state-of-the-art facility meshes Poland into an interdependent system. This facility wraps Poland into a missile defence system that protects my country.”

The new base at Redzikowo is part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), a US-led missile defence plan laid out in 2009 to protect Europe from ballistic missile threats. [Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO]

The EPAA project has seen the deployment of US Navy ballistic missile defence ships to Spain, a land-based missile site in Romania, a command centre at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, and a radar installation in Turkey. [NATO] [Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO]

The completion of the missile site at Redzikowo is the final phase of the EPAA plan. [Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO] [TVP World]

(ek/pk)

Spain: Court orders extradition of Venezuela’s ex-spymaster to US

Spain’s High Court has ruled that global police agency Interpol should extradite a former head of Venezuelan military intelligence from Spain, where he is being held, to the United States.

Former spymaster Hugo Carvajal has been charged by the US with drug trafficking offences. Carvajal is one of a dozen high ranking Venezuelan officials first accused by the US in 2020. [Reuters]

The Spanish High Court’s ruling on July 18 came a week after the European Court of Human Rights put the brakes on Carvajal's attempt to avoid extradition to the US. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

In a statement, the Spanish tribunal said: “Since the precautionary measure granted by the European Court of Human Rights has been lifted... [Spain's High Court] urges Interpol to hand over the defendant to the US.” [BNN]

Carvajal was removed from office by Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in 2019. Carvajal fled to Spain, where he was arrested by the authorities in 2021. [Al Jazeera]

(jw/pk)

Turkey will receive US F-16 fighter jets, Biden official says

The Biden administration will move ahead with the transfer of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey after consultation with the US Congress, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on July 11. The decision came a day after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave the green light for Sweden's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. [Reuters]

Turkey first requested to buy USD 20 billion of Lockheed Martin Corp F-16 fighters and nearly 80 modernisation kits for the existing warplanes in October 2021. The Biden administration gave the green light for the sale, but it was blocked by US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez.

President Biden has "been clear and unequivocal for months that he's supported the transfer of F16s," and has "placed no caveats or conditions on that in his public and private comments over the past few months," Sullivan said on July 11. The president "intends to move forward with that transfer in consultation with Congress." [Daily Sabah]

(lc/gc)

UK and US pledge USD 2B to support developing nations tackling climate change

Over USD 2 billion has been pledged to help developing nations reduce carbon emissions and increase climate resilience, according to British Energy Security and Net Zero Secretary Grant Shapps and the US's Special Presidential Envoy on Climate John Kerry. They announced their pledge at the Climate Finance Mobilisation Forum in Windsor on July 10. [Reuters] [Climate Action]

Top financiers and philanthropists attended the forum. Shapps said that their expertise will not only benefit

British and American economies, but "those that will be most affected by climate change impacts." [Open Access Government] [Gov.UK]

Despite bearing less historic responsibility for climate change, emerging markets and developing countries currently contribute two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions. These countries are also generally more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change – many are geographically prone to natural disasters and adverse weather, while lacking the funds and infrastructure to cope with them. [Gov.UK] [Climate Change News]

The funding will help support a "global transition" to renewable energy and sustainable growth. Projects include LeapFrog Investments' USD 500 million for companies tackling climate change in Asia and Africa, emphasising the role of private investment in transitioning to a low-carbon economy. [Climate Action] [Reuters]

(ew/gc)

Vatican's Ukraine peace envoy talks with Biden about deported children

Pope Francis's Ukraine peace envoy met US President Joe Biden in Washington on July 18 to discuss the Vatican's efforts to bring deported children back to Ukraine from Russia. [il Sole 24 Ore] [Vatican News] [AP]

Cardinal Matteo Zuppi's talks with Biden came after the papal envoy's visits in June to Moscow and to Kyiv, where he met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Zuppi was appointed in May as the head of a Vatican peace mission which aims to try to end the war in Ukraine.

According to the authorities in Kyiv, Russia has deported about 16,000 children from Ukrainian territory it has occupied. [The Guardian]

Biden, meanwhile, "shared his wishes for Pope Francis's continued ministry and global leadership," the White House said in a statement. [ANSA]

(nc/pk)

Austria, Vietnam vow to step up cooperation

Austria and Vietnam have pledged to strengthen economic, educational and cultural cooperation. A memorandum of understanding to that effect was signed during a visit by Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong and a high-ranking delegation to Vienna between July 23 and 25. [The investor] [Tuoitrenews]

Vietnam and Austria last year marked the 50th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations.

A welcome ceremony for the Vietnamese delegation was hosted by Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen in Vienna on July 24.

(mr/pk)

Croatia, China launch joint police patrols to protect tourists

Eight police officers from China on July 14 joined Croatian police for a month of joint patrols, aiming to ensure the safety of Chinese tourists in Croatia, a popular summer holiday destination.

The Chinese officers also aim to combat telecom and internet fraud and share their experience with Croatian law enforcement authorities.

These are the first joint patrols by Chinese police abroad since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020.

Beijing has had a mechanism in place for carrying out joint police patrols with law enforcement officials in Croatia, Italy and Serbia since 2016. [China.org.cn] [Global China Daily] [hrt.hr]

(mr/pk)

Macron promotes French interests on trip to South Pacific

French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to the South Pacific in late July as he tried to promote his country's interests in a region increasingly being defined by the geopolitical competition between China and the United States. His visit included stops in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia, as well as Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. His trip coincided

with a large-scale US-Australian-led military exercise,Talisman Sabre, which French troops took part in.. [AP News]

Pro-independence movement in New Caledonia

Macron's regional started in New Caledonia, the nickel-rich territory of nearly 300,000 people, where pro-independence groups are pushing back against a disputed country-wide 2021 vote to remain part of France.

Macron stressed the "immense responsibility" that both sides bear in finding a consensus on the future constitutional status of the archipelago. While he clarified that he was not engaged in formal negotiations, he sought a "profound, sincere political exchange" with all stakeholders.

In the 2012 referendum, 97 percent of the voters supported keeping New Caledonia as part of France. The territory's indigenous Kanak community, which largely favours independence, widely boycotted the vote, leading to ethnic tensions. The Kanak community, being economically disadvantaged, tends to lean towards independence, while the wealthier white community remains loyal to France. [France 24] [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

Over the past five years, three referendums have taken place, all rejecting independence. But ballots in 2018 and 2020 were much closer, with anti-independence forces winning between 53 and 57 percent of the vote. [France 24] [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

Macron emphasised that any future status for New Caledonia must consider the results of the anti-independence referendums. On July 26, Macron delivered a combative speech to a crowd of 8,500 Caledonian loyalists in Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, addressing the future of French territory in the Pacific Ocean. He affirmed that New Caledonia remains French by choice, referring to the Matignon Agreements from 1988 and the Noumea Accord from 1998, which granted broad autonomy and recognized the ravages of colonisation. The next step, according to Macron, will be New Caledonia's place within the French Republic. [France 24] [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

The negotiations on a new constitutional system have been slow, particularly regarding the voting system and the path to self-determination. Four major pro-independence figures declined the president's invitation to unite the country's political forces, highlighting divisions within the Kanak and Socialist

National Liberation Front (FLNKS). [France 24] [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

Historic first visit to Vanuatu

During his trip to Vanuatu – the first visit by a sitting French leader to an independent Pacific state – Macron denounced "new imperialism" in the Indo-Pacific and in particular Oceania, emphasising that the power logic is threatening the sovereignty of several states, especially the smaller and most vulnerable one.

He stressed that France's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to defend the independence and sovereignty of all states in the region through partnerships with those willing to collaborate with France. [The Guardian]

Increasing strategic importance of Papua New Guinea

The most strategically important stop was in Papua New Guinea, where Chinese influence has been increasing. The nation signed a new security cooperation pact with the US in May and is also negotiating a security treaty with Australia. While Macron's office insists that the trip does not have an "anti-China policy" agenda, it aims to encourage regional powers to diversify their partnerships beyond Beijing and Washington. [AP News]

(cg/gc)

Norway's sovereign wealth fund blacklists Chinese state-owned builder

The Norwegian sovereign wealth fund announced on July 6 it would withdraw all investment in the state-owned Power Construction Group of China Limited (PowerChina).

The primary concern of the sovereign wealth fund is PowerChina's involvement in constructing a hydroelectric power project in a biologically protected area of North Sumatra, Indonesia. [Reuters]

The project has been decried by environmentalists, who say it threatens the habitat of an endangered species of orangutan, among other rare species. [MightyEarth]

The Norwegian fund's ethics council said in a statement that PowerChina's hydropower project would "pose a serious threat to the survival of this orangutan species as well as other critically endangered species".

According to Reuters, the Norwegian fund had a 0.03% stake in the Chinese multinational firm at the end of 2022, valued at USD 4.1 million.

(hj/pk)

Portuguese PM strikes pact with East Timor over illegal migration

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa made a pact with East Timor to combat illegal migration during a state visit to the Southeast Asian country. [Publico]

The deal follows a wave of illegal migration from East Timor, which was a Portuguese colony until 1975, to Portugal in recent years. [Portugal News]

A protocol was signed by Costa and Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta on July 26. The Portuguese premier said: "The only effective way to combat illegal immigration and human trafficking is to have legal migration channels. And that's what we're doing and building." [Portugal News]

Luis Montenegro, leader of Portugal's PSD opposition party, reacted to the visit by accusing Costa of "living on the moon" after the prime minister's lengthy absence from his home country because of recent foreign trips, which took him to New Zealand as well as East Timor. [Portugal Resident]

(jw/pk)

Switzerland signs climate change and disaster management MoU with Pakistan

Swiss Federal Council member and Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on July 8 in Bhurban with his Pakistani counterpart, Inam Haider Malik, to improve cooperation regarding prevention of and responses to climate change disasters.

Despite contributing minimally to global carbon emissions, Pakistan has been one of the hardest hit countries by climate change disasters. Over the past few years, the country has been increasingly ravaged by floods. In 2022, flash floods killed over 1,700 people, displaced millions and cost the country USD 30 billion in damages and economic losses. [BBC] [RTS] [KRDO]

After the signing, Cassis stressed the urgent need for international cooperation against climate change and subsequent natural disasters, and reaffirmed the Swiss government's commitment to pooling resources via bilateral agreements in the field of disaster management. [Dawn]

This is one of many bilateral agreements signed by Bern in the month of July, albeit with MoUs not being legally binding. The day prior, Swiss Environment and Energy Minister Albert Rosti signed a bilateral agreement with Italian ministers Matteo Salvini and Gilberto Pichetto Fratin regarding energy supply and cross-border rail transport. These agreements are intended to insulate Europe from energy supply shocks brought on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [SwissInfo]

The Swiss Federal Office of Civil Aviation and the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh finalised a first draft bilateral air service agreement on July 5 that would directly connect the two countries. [Rising]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland returns frozen USD 138 million to Taiwan after 32-year-old corruption case

Swiss authorities transferred USD 138.04 million – connected to a corruption case – back to Taipei on July 11, Taiwan's justice ministry announced on July 19. This follows Liechtenstein returning USD 11 million in February, linked to the same case.

The ministry referred to the move as a "historic breakthrough in judicial cooperation." [Barron's]

The funds – scattered across 20 odd bank accounts – were frozen after a 2001 French judicial probe into illicit kickbacks associated with a contract to sell six French frigates to Taiwan in 1991.

Initially USD 900 million was seized by Swiss authorities – of which USD 34 million was returned in 2007.

The Taipei ministry went on to say that, given Switzerland had assisted Taiwan with the case for more than 20 years, it had agreed to share the assets with Bern on a 50-50 basis. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

EU leaders sign deal on migration with Tunisia

After weeks of intensive negotiations, EU leaders on July 16 signed a wide-ranging partnership deal that the bloc agreed with Tunisia earlier this year in an effort to tackle illegal economic migration to Europe.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and outgoing Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, together with Tunisian President Kais Saied, attended a ceremony in Tunis at which a memorandum of understanding was inked.

EU leaders in June offered Tunisia aid of almost EUR 1 billion to save its precarious economy in exchange for tighter border controls.

However, the money will only be given if a number of conditions are met, Von der Leyen said. [Euronews] [DW] [European Commission]

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.

The deal between Tunisia and EU leaders, which is not binding, covers several areas including macro-economic stability, trade and investment, green energy transition, people-to-people contacts, and migration.

The agreement contains only vague figures, but some preliminary numbers are known. It includes EUR 150 million promised by the EU as direct budgetary aid for the Tunisian government. It also comprises EUR 105 million to help fight illegal migration and smuggling and to reinforce border management.

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.

(jmw/pk)

French embassy in Niger attacked as protesters wave Russian flags in march

Thousands of people backing the most recent coup in Niger marched on July 30 through the streets of the

capital, Niamey, denouncing France, waving Russian flags, and setting a door at the French Embassy ablaze before the army broke up the crowd, the Associated Press reported. [AP]

Demonstrators in Niger are openly resentful of France, the country's former colonial power. Russia is seen by some as a powerful alternative. The nature of Russia's involvement in the rallies, if any, isn't clear but some protesters have carried Russian flags, along with signs reading "Down with France" and supporting President Vladimir Putin of Russia. [AP]

(gc)

Maltese PM, Tunisian leaders discuss migration

Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela has said during talks with Tunisia's President Kais Saied and premier Najla Bouden that the North African country is a key partner in tackling the problem of increased migration across the Mediterranean. [Times of Malta] [Independent] [TVM News] [Malta Today].

The meetings, during which the leaders also discussed trade and cooperation on renewable energy, took place in the African nation's capital, Tunis, on July 10.

"We identified how important it is to fight against organised crime and the human trafficking which profits from human tragedy," Abela said.

"This cannot be done by Tunisia or Malta alone. It needs to be a collective effort. I made a vow to be the voice of Tunisia at EU fora, as I have been doing for a number of months," Abela added. [TVM news]

Tunisia is a key part of a perilous route used by people-traffickers to smuggle migrants seeking a better life across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

Abela's visit to Tunisia came after he held talks with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni on June 15. The two leaders said after meeting in Rome that cooperation between their countries – which are both on Europe's migration frontline – was needed to address "irregular" migration from Africa.

Abela praised a plan by Meloni to offer aid and investment to East Africa, a move aiming to counteract a spike in migrants heading to Europe.

European Union interior ministers in June 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. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(nc/pk)

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