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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.

This month, we examine how the European Union has struggled to maintain unity amid the worst outbreak of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades.

The new war in the Middle East has prompted concern among some of Kyiv's allies that attention will be diverted away from Ukraine, whose battle against Russian invaders would be compromised by any decrease in Western backing.

Kyiv has deployed freshly acquired long-range US missiles to devastating effect against Russian aviation. But Ukraine is worried about its stockpiles, which have shrunk after Moscow launched an ambitious – though seemingly disastrous – assault against the eastern Donbas town of Avdiivka.

Meanwhile, nationalist-populist movements across the EU have lost a key ally after voters decided to eject

Poland's right-wing government, ending what the opposition says were eight dark years of authoritarian-minded rule that saw democracy dismantled.

However, some observers say the main trend in Europe is still towards demagogic populism. The comeback of Slovak populist leader Robert Fico has caused alarm that he could gang up with Hungary's nationalist premier Viktor Orban to further strain Western allies' unity on helping Kyiv resist Russia's invasion.

We also report on how a proposed sweeping revision of the European Union's founding treaties has sparked fears of a "superstate" that would erode the powers of individual members of the bloc.

At the same time, despite fierce opposition from some nations, EU leaders have approved new measures to tackle a mounting migrant crisis that is polarizing the continent.

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Europe divided over response to Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The European Union has struggled to demonstrate political unity around the worst outbreak of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades. [TheNewArab] [The Guardian]

In the wake of Hamas' horrific attack on October 7, which killed more than 1,400 Israelis, and Israel's response, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, announced the suspension of all aid to Palestinians, saying there could be "no business as usual." Varhelyi was nominated for his post by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a staunch ally of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. [Reuters]

Multiple governments quickly warned against cutting off aid to the detriment of Palestinian civilians and questioned whether the Commission had the authority to take such a decision. Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg and Ireland publicly voiced alarm while other countries did so behind the scenes, Reuters cited diplomats as saying. Israel has killed more than 8,000 Palestinians in its bombardment of the Gaza Strip in recent weeks, according to the territory's health ministry. [Reuters] [TheNewArab] [TheEconomist]

"Our understanding is that there is no legal basis for a unilateral decision of this kind by an individual Commissioner, and we do not support a suspension of aid," a spokesperson for Ireland's foreign ministry said, referring to Varhelyi's announcement.

Ireland has announced it will give EUR 13 million in funding for Palestinian humanitarian assistance. [The Independent] [Reuters]

The European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said he backed on October 23 a call by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for a "humanitarian pause"

and added that it would give leaders more time to negotiate the release of the more than 200 hostages held captive by Hamas.

The EU's stance is at odds with the UK and the US, which have both ruled out calling for a ceasefire until all the hostages taken by Hamas are released. Among the EU's political heavyweights, France has backed a pause while Germany has so far not done so. [DailyMail] [Reuters]

No aid suspension

Just hours after Varhelyi's comment, Borrell said aid would not be suspended, as "punishing the Palestinian people" would damage the EU's interests. The EU later tripled its humanitarian funding to Gaza.

The European Commission later said Varhelyi had acted unilaterally without the approval of commission head Ursula von der Leyen. Over 70 members of the EU parliament called for his immediate removal from his post. [TheNewArab]

The EU's disarray reflects longstanding divisions within the 27-strong bloc over the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Germany and Austria said they were suspending their development aid to Palestinians, while others, such as Italy, said suspending their aid was not up for discussion. [Reuters]

Europe is one of the primary sources of aid to the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, where the United Nations estimates that around 2.1 million people need humanitarian assistance, among them 1 million children. [Reuters]

European countries were also split over Jordanian and Arab states' United Nations proposal for a "humanitarian ceasefire." The United Kingdom, Germany and some other Western states abstained on the basis that they did not name Hamas nor condemn the October 7 attacks. France supported the motion. Following proceedings, French Ambassador Nicolas de Rivière said this was because "nothing justifies the killing of civilians." [UN]

Von der Leyen criticised

European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen was criticised for her comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Von der Leyen said that "Israel could count on the EU" and the following day expressed support for "Israel's right to defend itself against the Hamas terrorists, in full respect of international humanitarian law." [TheNewArab]

After meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, von der Leyen had expressed sympathy for the Israeli government "without emphasising the need to respect international law and exercise restraint," according to Irish President Michael D. Higgins. [BBC News] [Euronews] [Euronews] [Euronews] [Financial Times]

Higgins criticised von der Leyen's comments as "thoughtless and even reckless." Speaking at a United Nations conference in Rome, Higgins said her one-sided support for Israel was unhelpful and that "she wasn't speaking for Ireland." [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

Israel's ambassador to Ireland, Dana Erlich, accused Higgins of spreading misinformation about the conflict. [BBC News] [BBC News]

Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar told EU leaders that Israel must not confuse innocent Palestinian people for Hamas. He also said that von der Leyen's comments on the conflict "lacked balance." [The Irish Times] [Breakingnews.ie]

Pro-Palestinian protests

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets around the world on October 13 in support of the Palestinians.

On October 28 in London, police clashed with protesters as around half a million took to the streets to demand a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war. Demonstrators gathered with banners and posters and let off fireworks and red and green flares. Crowds started to gather near the Golden Jubilee Bridge, holding signs saying "Gaza, stop the massacre" and "Free Palestine, end the Israeli occupation." [MSN]

Demonstrations occurred throughout the country, including Glasgow and Manchester, where thousands gathered. There have been similar rallies across many European cities. [MSN]

Germany and France, meanwhile, banned pro-Palestinian protests. The two countries - home to the European Union's most prominent Jewish and Muslim communities - have cracked down on pro-Palestinian groups to stop public disorder and prevent antisemitism. [Reuters]

(cqk-gdb-md-mrd/gc)

Ukraine deploys long-range missiles as Russia intensifies attacks in the east

Fighting intensified along the front as the Russian invasion of Ukraine passed the 600-day mark in October.

Russia launched an ambitious assault against the eastern Donbas town of Avdiivka, with seemingly disastrous results. Though Ukraine was forced to halt operations in the south to deal with the new attack, evidence is mounting that Kyiv is intensifying activity on the south-western Kherson front.

Meanwhile, Ukraine has deployed freshly acquired long-range missiles to devastating effect against Russian aviation. At the same time, both sides are increasingly worried about their stockpiles.

Russians launch costly offensive against Avdiivka

In scenes now characteristic of the war, Russian forces have launched a mass assault against another fortified town in Ukraine's east.

Avdiivka has been a frontline settlement since Russia's first incursion into Ukraine in 2014. The town was the site of intense fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in 2014, 2015 and 2017, on account of its strategically important position. It lies only 10 kilometres from the city of Donetsk, which served as the capital of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, a Russian-controlled breakaway state formed in the eastern Donbas region.

At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's forces were able to advance to the north and south of Avdiivka, with the aim of encircling and capturing it. But Russian attacks on the town itself have failed to produce meaningful results. As *Europe in Review* previously reported, the last large-scale assault on the town in July ended in failure. [BBC] [Europe Monthly August 2023] [Guardian] [Washington Post]

However, last month's assault on Avdiivka was far larger in scope.

On October 11, massive columns of Russian armoured vehicles attempted to assault Ukrainian positions around the town. The offensive is Russia's largest combined-arms operation since its failed attack on the nearby city of Vuhledar in February and March 2023.

Reports indicate that Russia has deployed eight brigades to take the increasingly ruined settlement,

while Ukraine has been forced to divert some armoured units from its southern counteroffensive to replenish Avdiivka's defenders. The assault was at its most intense between October 11 and October 20, with Russian armoured vehicles and aviation working in tandem to cut the town off.

Avdiivka is a difficult arena for both sides. The northern approach to the city is dominated by a slag pile known as "the Terikon", and Ukrainian positions have been well fortified since 2014. The Terikon complicated Russian movement around northern Avdiivka, while receiving orders to hold it is almost equivalent to a death sentence amid drone attacks and artillery strikes conducted by both sides.

The wide-open fields that surround Avdiivka make a Ukrainian counteroffensive similarly risky, as Russia continues to hold an advantage in artillery. The Russian assault succeeded in driving Ukrainian forces away from the pile, forcing them to move to more defensible positions at the nearby Avdiivka Coke Plant. Russian forces also advanced in the south, taking several fields. Further advances have, for the moment, been halted by the defenders. Avdiivka is now the hottest zone on the frontline and the battle continues into November.

In an event symbolic of the battle as a whole, a Russian flag planted on the Terikon was destroyed by a Ukrainian drone just hours later. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Business Insider] [CNN] [Euronews] [Reuters] [Times] [Washington Post]

Thus far, the casualties in the battle have been quite one-sided.

Enormous quantities of Russian vehicles have been destroyed. The first day of fighting on October 11 left over 50 such machines demolished. The count of visually confirmed Russian losses in tanks and armoured transports has since crossed the 150 mark, numbers which have not been seen since 2022. Videos have widely circulated that show Russian columns being devastated by artillery and landmines, with disabled vehicles picked off by drones. According to Britain's defence ministry, these losses are the worst suffered by Russia in a single engagement this year. Meanwhile, the number of visually confirmed Ukrainian losses remains in the low dozens.

According to the Royal United Services Institute, a UK-based think-tank, the battle of Avdiivka favours the Ukrainians, as long as these casualty proportions don't change. However, preventing Russia from advancing has come at the cost of a slowdown on the southern front, where Ukraine has been undertaking a grinding

counteroffensive against well-fortified Russian positions. The sight of Western-made Leopard 2 tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles near Avdiivka is further evidence that Ukraine has been forced to relocate its forces to cope with the enormous Russian assault.

While Moscow has been unsuccessful in its goal to date and has suffered horrific losses, the experience of similar urban battles in the eastern cities of Bakhmut and Lysychansk shows that Ukraine faces a tenacious enemy that will not be deterred by the destruction of entire armoured columns.

Similarly, the Russians will remember that Ukraine kept its forces in Bakhmut despite a worsening tactical situation, drawing the battle out for months even while threatened with encirclement. The battle of Avdiivka is almost certain to continue, though the question is whether Russia will maintain the same intensity – and whether the casualty rate will remain in Ukraine's favour. [Associated Press] [Atlantic Council] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Reuters] [RUSI]

Ukraine deploys ATACMS missiles, hitting Russian air force

After over a year of asking, Ukraine has finally received a key capability from its allies – and immediately used it to punish Russian forces.

Ukraine's counteroffensives in Kherson in the south and Kharkiv in the east were successful in part due to strikes on Russian supply depots, using the Western-supplied HIMARS rocket artillery system. Since then, Russian forces have moved their supply hubs out of the range of Ukrainian weapons.

While cruise missiles like the Storm Shadow gave Ukraine a limited long-range strike ability, these needed to be launched from the air, meaning they could be detected by Russian air defences. This left Ukrainian forces crying out for a long-range ballistic missile. Russia, for its part, uses the Iskander in this role to great effect, a platform which had no counterpart in the Ukrainian arsenal.

Ukraine's wishes were finally granted last month as it received the ATACMS missile system from the US. These projectiles have a maximum range of 165 kilometres and, being high-speed ballistic missiles, are extremely difficult to intercept. While Ukraine has received a small number of these, they have already inflicted a severe blow to the Russian air force.

Russia has been using the southern Ukrainian city of Berdyansk as a base for its helicopters. This was

known to Kyiv for some time, but an attack on the airfield was beyond Ukraine's capabilities. On October 17, ATACMS were used against Berdyansk airfield and an airfield near the occupied eastern city of Luhansk. Russian air defences were unable to intercept the missiles, which destroyed 15 helicopters and damaged several more using cluster munitions. The attack is the largest single-day loss inflicted on Russia's helicopter fleet during the conflict. These helicopters inflicted considerable damage on Ukrainian forces during the start of their southern counteroffensive in June.

Moscow has claimed the missiles will have no effect on the course of the war and has already claimed interceptions, but has provided no proof. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Business Insider] [Drive] [Euractiv] [Euronews] [Forbes] [Politico Europe] [Washington Post]

Elsewhere on the front, Kyiv's troops have stepped up operations in the southern Kherson region.

Russian and Ukrainian forces have been in a standoff across the Dnieper river ever since Ukraine recaptured the city of Kherson in November 2022. Ukraine has been conducting raids across the river for months now, achieving control over several islands in the Dnieper delta. Russia, in response, frequently shells civilian and military targets in and around Kherson city. While details are contested, it does appear that the scale and number of these Ukrainian raids have increased in the last month.

While Russia has claimed to have repelled the landings, Ukraine forces clearly have a foothold on the other side of the Dnieper and have been harassing Russian forces in the villages of Pischanivka, Pidstepne, Krynky and Kozachi Laheri. Though the logistical difficulty of a large-scale river crossing makes a Ukrainian offensive in this region highly unlikely, the raids serve as a reminder that no part of the front can be described as quiet. [BBC News] [New York Times] [Newsweek] [Reuters]

Both sides brace for long war

As the war seems destined to grind on into 2024, neither side appears to have the capacity to achieve its strategic goals. Ukraine has been unable to dislodge Russian forces from the country's occupied south, while the Russians have failed to achieve control over Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. Both sides are now left to prepare for a long war.

The Russian military, despite its flaws, remains tenacious and adaptive. Though outright victory is

unlikely, the Kremlin has more than enough in the tank for a long fight. While production of military equipment is still outstripped by the rate of attrition, the country's vast inheritance of Soviet armoured vehicles ensures that Russia will continue to field large numbers.

Nevertheless, the attrition is visible – Russia continues to deploy older systems pulled from storage and is still recruiting large numbers of convicts to fill the ranks. Gaps in ammunition production are being filled by supplies from allies such as North Korea and Iran, even as the Russian economy struggles to support the war effort.

The Russian air force dwarfs its Ukrainian counterpart but faces an increasingly complex Ukrainian air defence network, limiting Moscow's effectiveness. While Russia has been unable to advance much further in the Donbas, it has proven more than capable of holding the territories it occupied in 2022.

Ukraine, for its part, faces a more complicated situation. Its domestic defence industry remains too small and too vulnerable to equip its military for a long-term fight with a far larger opponent. At the same time, Russian production facilities and vehicle stockpiles are far out of reach for any weapon in Ukraine's arsenal.

With Russia certain to retain the advantage in numbers, artillery and aviation, Ukraine will have to rely on the support of Western nations to keep its guns firing and to provide the systems needed to even the odds.

Russia has been stockpiling missiles for an anticipated all-out assault on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure this winter, which Kyiv cannot hope to repel without Western-supplied air defence systems. With elections looming in the United States, and the eruption of a war between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East, maintaining this support will be a challenge.

While it would not end Ukraine's will to resist occupation, an end to, or a decrease of, Western backing would dramatically compromise Ukraine's position. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Euractiv] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Politico EUROPE] [Reuters]

(wb/pk)

Proposed changes to EU treaties spark fears of 'superstate'

A European Parliament committee on October 25 approved a report that proposes a revision of the EU's founding treaties, calling for the end of unanimity decisions among member states and making the euro a mandatory currency across the bloc.

The proposals, backed by the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs, drew the ire of Polish government spokesperson Piotr Muller, who said in a televised interview that the plans would cause "the abolition of nation states" and the "creation of an EU superstate". [Polish Radio] [TVP]

Muller declared that the right-wing populist Law and Justice grouping, recently dethroned in Polish parliamentary elections but still the largest single political party in the country, would oppose any ratification of the proposals in the parliament in Warsaw, should they win approval from European institutions.

Sweeping reforms

The report suggests 267 treaty changes, arguing that these would strengthen the bloc's institutions. The proposals, backed by five out of seven political groupings in the European Parliament, include replacing the obligation of unanimous consent for decisions in the European Council in a range of areas including defence, taxation and foreign policy.

Instead, there would be a new type of qualified majority vote, requiring two-thirds of member states representing at least 50% of the EU's population.

Existing qualified majority votes in the Council require 55% of member states representing 65% of the population.

Other proposals in the report include the introduction of mechanisms enabling EU-wide referendums, renaming the European Commission as the "European Executive", and making the euro a mandatory currency across the bloc. Seven EU members currently do not use the currency. [TVP World]

Presenting the plans in September, Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt, a co-rapporteur on the proposals to amend the EU's treaties, said the measures would be crucial for the future enlargement of the bloc from 27 to over 30 members.

End of 'blackmail' urged

German Green MEP and co-rapporteur Daniel Freund defended the argument for removing the requirement

of unanimity, saying that after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 “we have seen painfully how a single member state, time and time again, can blackmail the rest of the Union”.

Kremlin-friendly Hungarian leader Viktor Orban has repeatedly opposed the bloc’s sanctions against Moscow, and has recently been joined in that stance by freshly reappointed Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly August 2022]

The European Parliament is scheduled to vote on the report at the end of November. Should MEPs adopt the proposals, they will ask the European Council to call a convention gathering European institutions, member state leaders and representatives of national parliaments.

If the convention approves the treaty changes, national parliaments in each member state would need to ratify the proposals for them to enter into force.

One EU diplomat approached by Politico after a draft of the report leaked out in the summer said the proposed reforms were unlikely to see the light of day. The diplomat labelled the plans a “provocation” that would not win support from European capitals.

(qv/pk)

EU approves new rules to tackle migrant crisis

EU leaders have approved new measures to tackle a mounting migrant crisis as rising tensions over a spate of arrivals polarize the continent. [BBC] [Al Jazeera]

The package includes support for countries such as Italy, which is the arrival point of many refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean. [Euronews] [BBC] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

The fresh measures were agreed by European leaders on October 4 after prolonged negotiations and an influx of migrants that overwhelmed the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Under the new rules, EU states can detain asylum seekers at borders for up to 20 weeks. Countries overwhelmed by a migrant surge can request “solidarity support” from fellow members of the bloc, potentially involving relocation of asylum seekers, assistance in processing applications or financial aid. [BBC] [Al Jazeera] [Euronews]

According to UN figures, southern Europe has seen the arrival of about 215,000 migrants so far this year, with an estimated 2,500 losing their lives while making dangerous journeys in search of a better life in richer countries.

The migrant numbers are the highest since 2016. However, they are still a far cry from the 1.3 million who sought asylum in Europe in 2015 – the most since World War II.

Unlike the 2015 migration crisis, which primarily involved migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, this year has seen a large influx of economic migrants from Africa. [The Telegraph]

Migration dominates Granada summit

Migration dominated discussions at an informal summit of European heads of state and governments held in the Spanish city of Granada on October 6. During the gathering, which followed the EU agreement on immigration, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak emphasised the need for united European action against the escalating irregular migrant crisis, deeming the situation "immoral and unsustainable." [BBC]

The summit, however, witnessed opposition from the nationalist premiers of Poland and Hungary, who refused to endorse a final statement on irregular immigration, despite it being approved by a majority of states present. [Reuters]

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Hungary's leader, Victor Orban, criticised potential EU laws which could financially penalise countries that refuse to take in relocated migrants from the Middle East and Africa. [Reuters] [Politico]

Border controls increase across EU

Several EU countries are bolstering border controls to combat illegal migration and counteract potential security threats. [The Guardian]

The Czech Republic and Austria in October introduced checks on their borders with Slovakia. The moves target people trafficking and follow similar measures by Poland. Germany and France have also brought in intermittent checks at their shared border. [Financial Times] [AP]

A third of the countries in Europe's Schengen zone, which was intended to be a free-movement area, have now enacted border controls. [Financial Times]

EU seeks collaboration with African nations

Amid growing concerns over the Israel-Hamas conflict and potential refugee surges, the EU is fast-tracking an economic agreement with Egypt. [Politico] [Financial Times]

Egypt, which manages the only non-Israeli crossing into Gaza, cooperates with Brussels on migration issues but it is grappling with debt and currency problems. [Financial Times]

The EU deal with Cairo aims not just to curb migration but to fortify Egypt's struggling economy. The move is part of the European Union's broader strategy to manage migration, and follows agreements struck with nations like Tunisia and Turkey. [Politico] [Financial Times]

In July, the EU reached a deal with Tunisia under which the African country can receive financial support in return for helping to improve border security and prevent trafficking. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

However, Tunisia's President Kais Saied recently rejected a EUR 127 million aid package from the European Union, citing inconsistencies with the July agreement that pledged EUR 1 billion. [Reuters]

During an EU summit in Brussels on October 26 and 27, European leaders stressed the need to promptly address irregular immigration and condemned terrorist attacks in France and Belgium on October 13 and 15 respectively. [European Council] [European Council]

In the northern French city of Arras, a teacher was fatally stabbed by a former pupil known for extremist views. Meanwhile, in Brussels, a Tunisian gunman killed two Swedish football fans before being shot by police. [The Guardian] [European Council] [European Council]

(rs/pk)

NATO bolsters forces in Kosovo after deadly clashes

The United Kingdom, Romania and Germany have announced plans to bolster their troop presence in Kosovo after clashes erupted between police and heavily armed ethnic Serbs.

The UK sent military forces to Kosovo to reinforce KFOR. On October 6, 200 soldiers from the 1st Battalion of the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment joined the 400 soldiers of the British contingent already present in Kosovo. The UK deployed troops on a request by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe. [UK GOV]

In May 2023, the UK Minister for Armed Forces James Heappey announced that the UK would continue to contribute to the NATO mission until at least 2026. [UK GOV][UKG OV]

The British troop deployment comes amid growing concerns regarding security in northern Kosovo in the wake of a deadly gun battle on September 24 between Kosovo's forces and armed ethnic Serbs, which resulted in four fatalities. The clashes raised fears of an escalation in the ethnic Serbian-majority region, 15 years after Kosovo declared independence. [Europe in Review October 2023] [Deutsche Welle] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesspiegel] [Reuters]

The ethnic Serbian fighters barricaded themselves into the Serbian Orthodox monastery in Banjka village near the Serbia border. More than 30 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) peacekeepers were injured, while three attackers and a Kosovo Albanian police officer died during the clashes in September, according to Kosovar police. [Europe in Review September Monthly]

The United Kingdom is working closely with international partners to urge Kosovo and Serbia to de-escalate tensions and return to dialogue. The Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke on October 5 to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani at the European Political Community meeting in Granada, encouraging de-escalation.

Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said: "We need NATO because the border with Serbia is very long and the Serbian army has been recently strengthening its capacities and they have a lot of military equipment from both the Russian Federation and China." [APNews]

Romania's NATO Ambassador announced on October 3 that the country would also be sending about 100 soldiers to Kosovo to boost the country's peacekeeping forces.

150 Germans

Approximately 150 German soldiers are set to be deployed to Kosovo in April 2024, according to a spokesperson for the German Defence Ministry. This

decision, made on October 6, serves as part of Germany's contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-led international peacekeeping mission known as Kosovo Force (KFOR), aimed at maintaining stability in the region. [Reuters] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesspiegel]

The German Defence Ministry, however, has underscored that the deployment is not a direct response to these recent developments. Instead, the additional soldiers will compensate for the withdrawal of Austrian troops from the KFOR mission. Currently, around 3,400 KFOR forces are stationed in Kosovo, 71 of which are from the German Bundeswehr. [Deutschlandfunk] [Reuters]

During a recent visit to Tirana, Albania, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock conveyed the European Union (EU)'s deep concerns about the potential for escalation following the Kosovo shootout.

Ahead of the Berlin Process summit on October 16, a Germany-France initiative encouraging Western Balkan countries to progress towards European Union (EU) membership, Baerbock emphasised, "Russia's attack on Ukraine makes EU enlargement to include the Western Balkans a geopolitical necessity." [Associated Press] [Deutsche Welle]

Economic plans for West Balkans

The EU has introduced an ambitious growth plan for the Western Balkans, encompassing Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The proposal, unveiled during the annual Berlin Process summit in Albania, outlines the opening of select sections of the EU single market to these nations, contingent upon their successful implementation of reforms. [AP]

The event underscored the importance of integrating the Western Balkans into the EU, with the ongoing Ukraine conflict stemming from Russia's actions catapulting this integration to the forefront of the EU's agenda. The EU is determined to breathe new life into the enlargement process, which stalled after Croatia's accession in 2013.

EU leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, met at the Berlin Process summit. [AP]

This development comes after the Bilateral Defence Consultations between Spencer Boyer, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO

Policy, and Gelardina Prodani, the Secretary General of the Albanian Ministry of Defense, on September 21. Their talks addressed regional security challenges, including Russia's actions in Ukraine, focusing on enhancing Albania's military capabilities and strengthening strategic cooperation. The event culminated in the signing of a guiding framework, underscoring the enduring US-Albania strategic partnership. [US Department of Defence]

(lf-sl-sw-kg/gc)

Putin disregards ICC arrest warrant with Xi meeting in Beijing

President Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing on October 17 to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the Belt and Road Initiative forum, one of two of the Russian leader's trips abroad that were in defiance of the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant issued in March 2023

Before travelling to Beijing, which is not is not a member state of the ICC Rome statute, he travelled to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, on October 12, to attend a ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Kant military airbase near Bishkek. [Reuters]

At the forum in Beijing, the Russian president said the Belt and Road Initiative was "in tune with Russian ideas" and praised "our Chinese friends" for their achievements. In his address, Xi Jinping called the initiative "a symbol of progress and the right direction of development." He also condemned "geopolitical rivalries" and unilateral sanctions. [BBC]

In addition, the leaders had an "in-depth exchange of views on the Israeli-Palestinian situation." [Reuters]

Overall, China has maintained a neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian war, although it has largely echoed Russia's narrative on the war. There are some indications that China is concerned about the ongoing conflict. During his trip to Moscow in March 2023, Xi Jinping personally warned Putin against a nuclear strike on Ukraine. [The Diplomat]

Putin, Orban meet in Beijing

Putin also met in Beijing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who became the first head of a European Union (EU) country to meet the Russian leader since he was indicted for war crimes by an international court.

The meeting occurred during a forum on October 17 in China. Their previous in-person meeting took place on February 1 the previous year in Moscow. [Reuters] [The Washington Post] [The Moscow Times]

Orban emphasised that "Hungary has never wanted to confront Russia. On the contrary, Hungary's goal has always been to establish and mutually expand the best contacts. And we have succeeded." Putin also stated that relations between the two countries were based on "all the positive things we have inherited from the past."[Reuters] [The Washington Post] [The Moscow Times] [Reuters] [The Washington Post] [The Moscow Times]

"Despite the fact that in today's geopolitical conditions, the opportunities for maintaining contacts and developing relations are very limited, nevertheless, it can only cause satisfaction that our relations with many European countries are maintained and developed. One of these countries is Hungary," Putin said. [Reuters] [The Washington Post] [The Moscow Times]

Orban and Putin also talked about gas and oil supplies and nuclear energy. Under a 2014 contract, the Russian company Rosatom is currently building a nuclear power plant in Hungary.

Hungary secures Russian gas

The Hungarian government has secured additional gas supplies from Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom. Meanwhile, it has criticised a new transit levy imposed by Bulgaria on Russian gas. [Reuters] [TASS]

In response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, the Bulgarian government passed a law on October 13 imposing a transit fee of EUR 10.27 per megawatt-hour on Russian gas passing through its territory.

Hungarian State Secretary Zoltan Kovacs described the Bulgarian move as a "clear breach" of EU regulations that also "endangers" Hungary's energy security. He added that Budapest has asked the European Commission to investigate. [spglobal]

While the majority of EU states have made an effort to reduce their energy dependence on Russia, Budapest has continued to pursue energy deals with Moscow. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Hungary has been receiving an annual supply of 4.5 billion cubic metres of gas from Russia since September 2021 under a long term deal with Gazprom

via the Turkstream pipeline, which passes through Bulgaria and Serbia.

Speaking on a Russian state-owned TV channel on October 22, Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller said that additional gas supplies from Russia to Hungary this year totalled 1.3 billion cubic metres. He added: “We have an agreement that we will supply additional volumes on an ongoing basis in the coming winter.” **[Reuters]** **[TASS]** [Upstreamonline] [spglobal]

While Hungary is a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), it has often opposed EU initiatives to militarily support Ukraine and has developed close ties with Russia. This recent meeting with Putin has caused concern among North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and EU officials.

US Ambassador to Hungary David Pressman wrote on X: "While Russia strikes Ukrainian civilians, Hungary pleads for business deals." [Reuters] [The Washington Post] [The Moscow Times]

Putin in Bishkek

During Putin’s Bishkek trip, the Russian president met with Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov. Putin said that Russia is the leading supplier of oil products to Kyrgyzstan, noting that the countries will continue to expand cooperation. "We very highly value the Kyrgyz-Russian strategic partnership and our relationship as allies," Japarov said. [Reuters]

Putin held a meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Heads of State Council in Bishkek, where he answered questions from journalists. Putin replied to a question about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by saying that Russia did not take sides.

When asked about Armenia, which did not attend the summit despite being a member of the CIS, Putin noted that the country remained in the Commonwealth. Russia did not support a peace accord between Armenia and Azerbaijan during the Azerbaijani offensive which overran the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh in September, while Russia had accused Armenia of soliciting closer relations with the European Union at Russian expense during its war in Ukraine. [Reuters]

Journalists also asked about the damage to the Baltic connector pipeline on October 8. The pipeline is located in the

Baltic Sea, between Estonia and Finland. Putin said that Russia had nothing to do with it and that the pipeline is not as safe as the Nord Stream pipeline, ultimately saying that anything could have happened. [Meduza]

(ad-ao/gc-pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium: Justice Minister resigns after terror attack

Four days after the Brussels shootings perpetrated by a radicalised Tunisian illegally residing in Belgium, Justice Minister Vincent Van Quickenborne announced his resignation from the government.

Two Swedes visiting Brussels were killed in the shooting committed by 45-year-old Abdesalem Lassoued just two hours before the Euro-2024 qualifying match between Belgium and Sweden. [TF1]

At a press conference on October 20, Quickenborne stated that he had been made aware after the shooting that Tunisia had requested Lassoued's extradition on August 15, 2022 – a request ultimately not processed by the Brussels prosecutor's office.

Lassoued had reportedly escaped Tunisian prison in 2011 where he was serving a 26-year sentence for attempted murder and other crimes. He had been expelled from Sweden before seeking asylum in Belgium. His petition was rejected but he was not

deported. Lassoued initially attempted a mass shooting by firing at passersby in central Brussels with an assault rifle before perpetrating his alleged hate crime.

Quickenborne said: "It is an individual, monumental error, an unacceptable error, with dramatic consequences," adding that he assumed "responsibility" by resigning. [LaTribune] [BBC]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Prime Minister calls for stricter expulsion policies after Brussels shootings

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said on October 17 that it was time for stricter expulsion policies after it emerged that a gunman suspected of killing two Swedes and injuring a third on October 16 was a failed asylum seeker who had been living illegally in Belgium since 2020. [VRTNews][Politico]

The attacker had been on the authorities' radar since 2016 because of his alleged jihadist links. Law enforcement had been alerted multiple times that this man was potentially dangerous. [Politico]

"People who have to return to their country of origin should either literally accompany them onto the plane, or we should put them in closed centres until they can be expelled", De Croo said. In De Croo's view, Europe should present a united front to the countries of origin, offering money or other resources only if those countries are cooperative. [VRTNews]

(gt/gc)

Belgium: Public transport workers strike nationwide

Belgian unionised public transport workers went on strike nationwide and gathered in Brussels on October 5 to protest a proposed law that would restrict the right to protest.

Protestors gathered outside the office of the ministry of justice in the morning to march to the headquarters of the left-wing, francophone Socialist Party and the left-wing, Flemish Vooruit Party. [Crisis24]

It is estimated that only 58% of buses and trams were operational in northern Belgium during the protest,

and that roughly 10,000 people participated in the protests. [PeoplesDispatch]

The controversial bill was first introduced by then-Justice Minister Vincent van Quickenborne and has already received the support of the country's House Committee. The proposed law would give judges the right to prohibit protests during specified times.

While aimed at reducing rioting, those that oppose the bill fear it would be prone to abuse, also used to restrict peaceful protests. [L'Avenir]

The human rights group La Ligue des Droits Humains, for example, argues that rioters that damage public property can already be arrested and punished under existing legislation in the country's penal code, making the bill redundant and overly restrictive. [rtl]

This comes just three months after rioting starting in Paris spread to Brussels, causing extensive damage to buildings and cars across the capital city. [CPG No.8]

(sw/gc)

Belgium: Prosecutor's office opens corruption case against Libya's ambassador to Brussels

The Belgian prosecutor's office has opened a corruption case against Libya's ambassador to Brussels.

Libya's prosecutor general ordered the detention of the country's ambassador to Brussels, Amel Jerary, on October 3 after she was accused of transferring hundreds of thousands of euros of Libyan public money to her son's company.

The Belgian prosecutor's office froze suspected company accounts, only recovering EUR 118,000. [BrusselsTimes]

Jerary has since been dismissed by the United Nations-recognised government in Tripoli. [Guardian]

Jerary and her son's lawyer issued a statement following the dismissal "strongly reject[ing] any allegations of wrongdoing, including the suggestion of misappropriation of Libyan public funds." [LibyaUpdate]

(sw/gc)

Belgium set to violate EU budget rules next year

Belgium is on course to breach European Union (EU) budget rules next year, despite the federal government's announcement on October 9 of highly controversial reforms to the country's labour market and healthcare sector. [BrusselsTimes]

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo insisted that the federal budget would remain below 3%, but he said that the government "Step by step, we are moving towards the Maastricht standards." [BrusselsTimes]

The new budget, which aims to reduce Belgium's budget deficit by up to EUR 1.2 billion in 2024, includes spending cuts of more than EUR 100 million from the country's healthcare system and the extension of the government's 'flexi-job' scheme to 12 different sectors of the economy.

Flexi-jobs are zero-hours contracts in which employers pay only 25 per cent of the standard contributions without removing workers' social security altogether. [BrusselsTimes][BrusselsTimes]

Under the EU's Maastricht Treaty, member states must keep budget deficits below 3% of annual GDP. This limit was temporarily suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the suspension was later extended until 2024 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The new budget was quickly – and often vehemently – denounced by many Belgian opposition parties outside of the ruling "Vivaldi" coalition government.

Catherine Fonck, a practising doctor and federal minister for the centrist French-speaking party Les Engagés, claimed it was "striking" that Vivaldi decided to impose additional costs in the healthcare sector "despite crucial needs still not [being] met."

(gt/gc)

France: Government increases security measures to combat antisemitism

France has mobilised police, public security officials and members of Operation Sentinelle – a special unit tasked with maintaining security on the streets – to combat a rise in antisemitism following an October 7

surprise attack on southern Israel by the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas. [The Guardian] [Euronews]

“At a time when terrorist attacks from Gaza are hitting Israel, I ask you to immediately step-up vigilance, security and protection of Jewish community sites in France,” French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said. [The Guardian]

France’s Jewish population numbers over half a million – the third largest in the world after Israel and the United States. Despite accounting for less than 1% of France’s total population, the Jewish community is the target of more than 60% of the total anti-religious acts across the nation.

According to the Jewish Community Protection Service and France’s Ministry of the Interior, 436 anti-semitic acts were carried out against the Jewish community of France in the year 2022 alone, 53% of which resulted in harm to individuals and 10% of which were classified as “violent physical attacks.” [Le Figaro]

New Anti-Semetism

French authorities and members of the Jewish community are concerned that the attack on Israel and the conflict that has since ensued could stoke a new wave of anti-Jewish and pro-Hamas acts of violence across France. Groups such as the Palestine Vaincra collective – whose dissolution was halted by France’s Council of State – have already celebrated the attacks on Israeli civilians that left 1,400 dead.

“This surprise attack caused a wave of pride and solidarity throughout occupied Palestine, but also throughout the world,” the group said. [Le Figaro] [Conseil d’État]

There is often "a correlation between a flare-up of violence in the Middle East and anti-Semitic acts in France," the President of the Council of Jewish Institutions, Yonathan Arfi, said.

“In London, Berlin and Canada, we are already seeing anti-Israeli or pro-Hamas demonstrations,” co-director of the North Africa & Middle East Observatory of the Jean Jaurès Foundation, David Khalfa, said. “There is a fear within the organised Jewish community and beyond of anti-Semitic attacks, either with assassinations or in the form of increased verbal and physical attacks.” [Euronews] [Le Figaro]

Macron’s position

President Emmanuel Macron expressed his “solidarity” with Israel after the Hamas attack. On the Eiffel Tower the Israeli flag was displayed. “The blackmail by Hamas after its terrorist acts is odious and unacceptable,” Macron said.

Macron also addressed domestic tensions that erupted after the Hamas attacks, saying that the current war was one between “terrorists and a country with democratic values.” He called on all those in France not to import the conflict, saying “Let us not add national divisions to international divisions.” [The Guardian]

Although Macron announced that France “stands shoulder to shoulder with Israel,” public opinion is divided. [Le Monde] [Politico] [Aljazeera] [AlJazeera]

France has the largest Muslim population in Europe with almost six million of the 64 million population identifying as Muslim. [Statista] Palestine Action Committee, a pro-Palestinian organisation based in France, filed an appeal to the French Council of State following Darmanin’s call for pro-Palestinian protests to be banned across France for security reasons. [Politico] [Reuters] [Le Monde]

In response, the Council of State rejected the appeal, stating that bans on pro-Palestinian protests should be made on a case-by-case basis, depending on the potential for local threat. About 15,000 reportedly participated in a pro-Palestinian protest at the Place de la Republique on October 22. [Conseil d’État] [Politico [Reuters]

Macron’s Outreach

The Elysee Palace also confirmed that President Macron contacted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and Lebanon’s Najib Mikati.

"The President expressed his concerns over the situation and reminded each of them of the importance of unequivocally condemning the terrorist attacks against Israel, its soldiers and its people," it said. Macron visited Israel on October 24 to convey French solidarity. [Reuters]

In later statements on October 12, the French president reiterated his support for Israel’s right to respond but advised that the "only response to terrorism is one that is...strong but fair." [Le Monde]

France is among 23 nations whose citizens were either killed or kidnapped by Hamas terrorists. Thirty French

citizens were killed in the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7 in southern Israel. [MSN]

Hungarian proposal

Macron was not in favour of a proposal by Hungarian European Union commissioner Olivér Varhelyi to halt aid payments to Palestine – a proposal which has since been at least "partially reversed." [The Guardian]

Macron explained during a press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that "one must not confuse the fight against terrorism with the most essential humanitarian rights to support the civilian population." [The Guardian]

(cqk-rdm-vt/gc)

France willing to break European human rights law on deportations

France is ready to break European human rights law to deport individuals deemed "dangerous" in line with President Emmanuel Macron's commitment to its strictest immigration crackdown in three decades.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin announced that France would proceed with deportations without awaiting the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) to rule on their appeals. Should the ECHR subsequently declare these deportations violating the European Convention on Human Rights, France would accept the associated fine but not allow the individuals back into the country. [The Times]

This move is part of a proposed bill that aims to attract centre-right and hard-right voters, who traditionally support the Republican party or Marine Le Pen's National Rally. The legislation not only facilitates deportations but also extends the detention period for individuals without charges. The immigration bill is scheduled to be discussed in parliament on November 9. [LeMonde]

Under this bill, foreigners who have received deportation notices could be held for up to 18 months, especially if they have a criminal record or are on an intelligence watchlist. Presently, individuals can only be detained for 90 days, often leading to their release before the deportation process concludes. The legislation also targets asylum claimants who fail to gain refugee status, making it easier to deport them, and it proposes denying residency permits to applicants who lack French language skills or express

radical views. While these measures align with Darmanin's vision for addressing security concerns, they also challenge the pro-European values associated with President Macron's leadership.

Le Pen stated that she would not be voting in favour of the law since it is already possible to expel radicals who have been living in France for many years. Le Pen adds that the new law will only incentivise illicit immigrants and further equalise illegal workers. [LeFigaro]

(fs-vt/gc)

France: Muslim immigrant kills French literature teacher

A Russian immigrant killed a French literature teacher in the north French city of Arras on October 13 in what senior French officials described as a terrorist attack.

Mohammed Moguchkov, a Russian 20-year-old man from the North Caucasus republic of Ingushetia, stabbed 57-year-old Dominique Bernard to death and injured three others at the Gambetta High School after it was evacuated due to a bomb threat. He reportedly screamed, “Allahu akbar!” (God is great) during this attack. [BBCNews] [LeMonde]

Moguchkov, who arrived in France at the age of 5, was registered as a potential security threat in France and was under surveillance by the country’s national intelligence. His father was deported for security issues in 2018.

French President Emmanuel Macron said the government would “embody a ruthless state towards all those who harbour hate and terrorist ideologies.” [TheGuardian]

(vt/gc)

France: Bomb scares cause evacuations of 14 airports

Since the Hamas attack on Israel and expressions of support for Israel by the French government, France has been on high alert for potential terrorist attacks. [Le Monde] [BBC News]

At more than fourteen airports across the country, fake bomb alerts caused the cancellation of hundreds

of flights and the evacuation of entire airports. Also targeted by false alerts were the Louvre Museum and the Palace of Versailles. [AP News] [Le Monde]

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin expressed his frustration with the false alarms, stating that an alert like this "disorganises our security services and obviously stops society from functioning." [Le Monde]

Nobody was injured during the evacuations. Fines of up to EUR 45,000 and a prison sentence of up to three years can be expected for those who carry out prank calls of this magnitude, according to the Interior Ministry. [Le Monde]

Calls of this nature were made over three consecutive days to airports, landmarks and a nuclear research institute. A 16-year-old student at a school in Paris emailed a fake bomb threat to his school that same week. [The National News] [France 24]

(rdm/gc)

Germany responds to rising anti-semitism by banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations

Germany's response to a growing wave of anti-semitism in October has taken a controversial turn as it bans pro-Palestinian demonstrations, igniting a heated debate between authorities and demonstrators.

With one of the largest Palestinian diaspora communities outside the Middle East residing in Berlin, tensions have escalated, prompting increased security measures for Jewish institutions across the country. Meanwhile, activists view the recently implemented regulations as an infringement on their political right to protest. [Reuters] [BBC]

Both German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier have unequivocally condemned the recent surge in anti-semitic acts. Their response follows several violent incidents in Berlin, including an attack on a local synagogue on October 18, when assailants hurled Molotov cocktails at the building.

While the synagogue remains undamaged, the Central Council of Jews in Germany has characterised the incident as an act of terrorism, prompting its president to call for the apprehension of the perpetrators.

[Associated Press] [Der Spiegel] [Guardian] [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle] [BBC]

Chancellor Scholz, in line with Germany's enduring "never again" slogan, has pledged a zero-tolerance approach to violence targeting the country's Jewish population. In a parliamentary address, he emphasised that "anti-semitism has no place in Germany," acknowledging the nation's historical responsibility for the Holocaust.

On October 22, President Steinmeier addressed thousands of protestors at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin during a demonstration in support of Israel, stating that "[e]very single attack on Jews, on Jewish institutions is a disgrace for Germany [Associated Press]." [Der Spiegel] [Tagesschau]

The recent wave of violence in the Middle East coincided with Germany's ongoing struggle with anti-semitism in recent years. An arsonist attempted to firebomb a synagogue in Berlin the week after the Hamas attack in Israel and on October 18, clashes between several hundred demonstrators and police resulted in injuries to 60 officers and the arrests of 174 protesters, with 65 of them under criminal investigation. [Euronews] [Tagesschau] [NYP] [Guardian]

Pro-Palestinian demonstrations banned

German authorities have imposed bans on most rallies expressing solidarity with Palestine. The public display of certain symbols and clothing items, such as the chequered scarf known as the keffiyeh, has also been banned. [Guardian] [BBC] [RBB24]

On October 12, the pro-Palestinian network Samidoun was officially outlawed for allegedly celebrating terrorism openly. On the day following Hamas' attack on Israel, the network posted photos on Instagram of its members distributing candy in the Berlin neighbourhood of Neukölln, which has a substantial Muslim and Arab population. The group is now under surveillance by Berlin's domestic intelligence agency. [Der Spiegel] [Reuters] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [RBB24]

German media, especially state-sponsored sources, have frequently referred to these protests as anti-Israel and pro-Hamas. However, this characterisation has been challenged by numerous activists and social media influencers. In mid-October, a video went viral purportedly showing police in Neukölln stomping on candles that were lit in memory of the victims of the hospital explosion in Gaza, where between 100 and 300 people lost their lives.

Another widely shared video depicted the forceful apprehension of a man for displaying a Palestinian flag on the street.

Human rights campaigners have also criticised Germany's restrictions on pro-Palestinian protest actions. A spokesperson for Human Rights Watch's office in Berlin declared on X that the ban was a "restriction of freedom of expression." One demonstrator at an unauthorised protest told the news agency Reuters that they were afraid of being labelled pro-Hamas. "I feel that in Germany we're not allowed to speak our mind," he told the reporter.

Despite the ban, spontaneous pro-Palestine protests continue to take place in Berlin and the rest of Germany. Some of these have escalated into violent confrontations with the police.

On October 18, clashes between several hundred demonstrators and police resulted in injuries to 60 officers and the arrests of 174 protesters, with 65 of them under criminal investigation. [Euronews] [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Germany: Interior ministry unveils plans to streamline deportation process

The German government is gearing up to simplify and expedite the deportation process for migrants, with a particular focus on asylum-seekers and refugees.

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser introduced on October 11 a draft bill aimed at enhancing the state's capacity to deport migrants lacking a legal right to stay. The initiative comes in response to mounting concerns and political challenges associated with the recent surge of immigration to Germany, including over one million Ukrainian refugees, which has stretched resources and shelter capacities across the country. [Reuters] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Associated Press] [Die Zeit]

During the first seven months of 2023, there was a 78% increase in first-time asylum requests, prompting local and state officials to seek additional federal funding. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz acknowledged the challenge, stating in an interview with public news programme Tagesschau that "the numbers of those coming as refugees today are too high." [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Die Zeit] [Tagesschau]

Faeser's proposed legislation seeks to extend pre-deportation custody from 10 to 28 days and streamline the deportation process for individuals sentenced to a year or more in prison. Moreover, the bill aims to empower authorities to search residences for documentation that could verify an individual's identity. [Associated Press] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

These efforts reflect other government initiatives introduced in recent months. Parties from across the political spectrum have made repeated efforts to expand the list of countries of origin classified as "safe" for repatriation, most recently Moldova and Georgia. In September, the interior ministry also implemented border checks with its eastern neighbours Poland and Czech Republic to combat human smuggling. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

While the bill aims to tighten repatriation rules, it simultaneously seeks to ease other restrictions. Notably, it relaxes the stringent work bans for asylum seekers, making it easier for refugees to find employment soon after their arrival in Germany. Faeser emphasised that "there is no one single measure that will help us at the moment to reduce illegal migration, but a package of measures." [Tagesschau] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Associated Press]

Germany, once known for its open-door policy from 2015, has witnessed a shift in public sentiment. Increasing support for far-right and anti-immigration parties, seen clearly in the election results in Bavaria and Hesse in early October, has prompted the centre-left ruling coalition to explore ways to be more assertive in addressing irregular migration. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

A high-level meeting between the chancellor, state representatives and opposition leader Friedrich Merz took place on October 13 to discuss the proposed measures. The bill is expected to be passed by the German parliament soon after. [Die Zeit] [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Germany: Police arrest members of far-right group planning political coup

In a sweeping operation across six states, German law enforcement arrested several members of the far-right extremist group "Vereinte Patrioten" (United Patriots) for their alleged involvement in a conspiracy to execute a political coup and kidnap German Health Minister

Karl Lauterbach last year. [MDR] [Reuters] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesschau]

The operation on October 10 was part of a broader investigation into the Reichsburger movement closely associated with the Vereinte Patrioten. The Reichsburger group is known for its rejection of modern Germany as a legitimate state and comprises various factions with differing beliefs, including monarchist revivalists and neo-Nazis. [Reuters]

In 2022, the Vereinte Patrioten were found to have organised to overthrow the German government through violence and establish a new regime based on the 1871 German Reich constitution. Evidence revealed plans to carry out targeted explosive attacks designed to trigger a nationwide power blackout, cutting off the population from media and triggering civil-war-like conditions in the country.

Additionally, the group had planned to kidnap the federal health minister, possibly due to their opposition on Covid-19 vaccine mandates. [Reuters] [MDR] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesschau]

Among the individuals apprehended, one suspect was found to have offered his garage as a storage space for weapons, while another had allegedly scouted high-voltage power lines in preparation for the planned blackout. Another was discovered to have operated group chats aimed at recruiting more supporters and disseminating instructions for making explosives. [MDR] [Reuters]

(if/gc)

Germany: Member of parliament launches new political party

Sahra Wagenknecht, a prominent figure in Germany's hard-left political arena, has resigned as a Bundestag representative for the Left Party. She is now poised to launch a new political party named Bundnis Sahra Wagenknecht (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance).

This move is seen as a significant development in German politics, as it addresses the growing dissatisfaction among a segment of the electorate that is disillusioned with mainstream political options. [Politico] [Reuters] [Guardian] [Deutsche Welle] [ZDF]

A passionate call for a fresh political start accompanied Wagenknecht's departure from the Left Party. On October 23, she declared on X: "The people of this

country deserve better politics. Let us found a new party together that stands up for social justice, economic sensibility, peace and diplomacy, and an open culture of discussion."

The Left Party, with its roots tracing back to East Germany's Communist Party, has been experiencing a gradual decline in recent years. Earlier this month, it failed to meet the 5% voter threshold required to enter state parliaments in Bavaria and Hesse. In eastern Germany, where the Left Party has maintained representation, its status as the People's Party has eroded. [Deutsche Welle] [Politico]

Wagenknecht accuses the Left Party of straying from its original mission. She is particularly critical of what she sees as unchecked migration and misguided environmental policies, which she believes raise costs without effectively addressing climate issues. She argues that mainstream politics has neglected rural regions and ordinary workers in favour of urban cosmopolitan milieus. Her detractors, meanwhile, label her as a populist. [Deutsche Welle] [Guardian] [ZDF]

"We live in a time of global political crises, and in this of all times, Germany probably has the worst government in its history," she declared in Berlin. "Many no longer know who to vote for, or they vote out of anger and despair [Politico]." [ZDF] [Deutsche Welle]

A recent poll has already suggested that Wagenknecht's new party could garner up to 20% national support, with the potential for even higher numbers in the formerly communist east. Consequently, it can potentially divide the voter base of Germany's far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), as they share several core policies.

Like the AfD, Wagenknecht criticises the government for being elitist, neglecting rural concerns, rushing the green energy transition, and implementing an open-door migration policy. She has also taken positions against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), attributing Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the West opposing arming Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia. While some AfD members support her positions, Wagenknecht has firmly rejected cooperation with the far-right party. [Guardian] [Politico] [Reuters]

Looking ahead, the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht plans to participate in next year's European elections and German state elections in Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony – all considered strongholds for the AfD. This move is expected to weaken the Left Party further,

potentially jeopardising its representation in the German parliament soon. [Politico] [ZDF] [Guardian]

(if/gc)

Germany launches 'job turbo' initiative to facilitate employment for Ukrainian refugees

The German Ministry of Labor is gearing up to launch an initiative aimed at helping Ukrainian refugees integrate into the German job market, capitalising on their recently acquired German language skills. This move is part of a broader effort to address a shortage of skilled labour and mounting concerns about irregular migration to the country. [Associated Press] [Tagesspiegel] [Tagesschau]

Since the start of Ukraine's war with Russia in February 2022, Germany has welcomed over one million Ukrainian refugees, granting them immediate residency status. The Labour Ministry estimates that 19% of those who fled the Russian invasion have already found employment. Still, Labor Minister Hubertus Heil stressed that there is still much work to be done, noting that the current employment rate is "far from sufficient [Associated Press]." [Tagesspiegel] [Tagesschau]

The initiative, colloquially known as the "job turbo," will see job centres nationwide provide enhanced support to refugees in their job-seeking efforts. Officials will meet with refugees every six weeks to assist them in finding suitable job employment opportunities and overcoming any associated challenges.

The government also emphasises the importance of language skills. A senior official at the Federal Labor Agency, Daniel Terzenbach, has been appointed as a "special envoy" to oversee the integration process. [Tagesspiegel] [Tagesschau] [Associated Press]

In return, the government will expect active participation from refugees. Jobless benefits may be reduced for individuals who decline suitable job opportunities. Additionally, the government will expedite the recognition of foreign job qualifications to streamline the process. [Associated Press] [Tagesschau]

While the initiative has garnered broad support, it has not been without some critics. Some members of the liberal Free Democratic Party, part of the ruling coalition, argue that the initiative should prioritise job

placement over language acquisition, highlighting that employment is crucial for practical integration. Meanwhile, Kai Whittaker, a social policy expert for the main opposition faction, has expressed concern about recent funding cuts affecting job centres throughout Germany. [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Germany: Van overcrowded with migrants crashes in southern Germany, claiming seven lives

A van carrying more than 20 undocumented migrants overturned on October 12 on the A94 highway in southern Germany near the Austrian border. The crash resulted in the loss of seven lives, including a six-year-old child, and left 16 individuals injured. Most of the passengers were of Syrian and Turkish nationality. [ZDF] [Associated Press] [Euronews]

According to authorities, the crash occurred as the van accelerated in an attempt to evade a police checkpoint along the highway. The driver, identified as a 24-year-old stateless man residing in Austria, also sustained injuries and is currently detained for investigation on charges of homicide and smuggling with fatal consequences. [ZDF] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Associated Press] [Euronews]

The A94 highway is a notorious smuggling route for migrants seeking entry into Germany via Austria. In recent months, authorities have been on high alert, with border and federal police intensively patrolling all inter-regional roads near the border in a concerted effort to combat human smuggling operations. [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [ZDF]

Bavaria's interior minister, Joachim Herrmann, decried the "inhuman behaviour of the smuggler [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]" and stressed the urgent need to reinforce border controls, aligning with his party's position within the country's conservative opposition bloc. Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser expressed shock at the incident, calling for a resolute effort to "eradicate the cruel business of smuggling gangs that make maximum profit from the plight of people [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]." [ZDF] [Associated Press] [Euronews]

(if)

Germany: Wolf resurgence throughout the country sparks controversy over their protected status

Wolves, once on the brink of extinction in Europe, have staged a slow but remarkable recovery throughout the continent, thanks to strict protection measures.

In Germany, the resurgence of the wolf population has become a political issue, as debates intensify over whether to alter their protected status to manage their increasing numbers. [Deutsche Welle] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Tagesschau]

Official figures indicate that there are currently 184 wolf packs nationwide, most of which are concentrated in the north and east of the country. While this revival is celebrated by many, concerns have arisen in regions where wolves pose a threat to livestock and the livelihoods of farmers. [Deutsche Welle] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Tagesschau]

Germany currently enforces strict laws against the deliberate shooting of wolves, punishable by fines or imprisonment of up to five years. However, influential farming lobbies as well as political parties spanning the ideological spectrum have been calling for a reevaluation of the wolf's protected status.

In the southern state of Bavaria, the wolf debate even became an election issue over the summer when the conservative government permitted the shooting of any wolf that had killed a farm animal, a move which was met with criticism from Bavaria's Green Party. [Deutschlandfunk] [Deutsche Welle]

Traditionally, the leftist Green Party has been steadfast in its support of wolf protection. However, as the debate has intensified, some members have made concessions. On October 12, Germany's green environment minister, Steffi Lemke, proposed legislation to facilitate killing "problematic" wolves in specific regions where they pose a threat to grazing animals. Agriculture Minister Cem Özdemir has also suggested streamlining procedures for removing wolf packs that attack livestock. [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesschau]

In response to these proposed measures, conservationists and experts have voiced scepticism, arguing that reducing the wolf population may not result in fewer livestock losses. Instead, they emphasise the importance of implementing effective herd protection measures, such as the use of electric fences. [Deutsche Welle] [Tagesschau] [Deutschlandfunk]

State environment ministers are scheduled to discuss Lemke's proposal at the end of November. If approved, the new practices will come into effect by the start of the next grazing season in 2024. [Deutschlandfunk]

(if.gc)

Ireland announces 2024 budget

Ireland will make tax cuts, provide a one-off cost of living support and increase social welfare payments and minimum wage as part of its fiscal budget next year. [Examiner] [Gov.ie]

A sizable portion of the 2024 budget will go to education. A free school book initiative will be implemented for students in their first three years of school, with college students' tuition fees being cut in half for households earning under a EUR 100,000 income threshold. [Examiner]

The current rate of the Carbon Tax will increase as well as fuel prices. The new Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund was also announced alongside the Future Ireland Fund. [RTE News]

The former was created to ensure "no reduction in capital investment when the economy goes into a downturn." In contrast, the purpose of the latter is to ensure that there is a financial reserve for future spending on pensions and healthcare. [RTE News] [Independent]

The minimum wage on the island will increase to EUR 12.70 an hour, social welfare payments will increase by EUR 12, the reduced value added tax rate for gas and electricity will be extended by another 12 months, and energy credits will be given to households over the winter. [RTE News]

There will be increased funding for the justice sector, with funds allocated towards recruiting gardaí. The defence sector will receive EUR 1.23 billion in funding next year. [RTE News]

With the country's cost-of-living crisis, the budget could have done more for prospective homeowners and renters, according to the Irish Times. [Irish Times]

Rent Tax Credit will increase for renters, whilst tax relief for landlords will increase. The decision has caused controversy, as it has been viewed as a move that primarily benefits landlords, not tenants. [Examiner] [Irish Times] [Labour][Breakingnews.ie]

Finally, EUR 22.5 billion will be invested in the public health system. The Irish Medical Organisation still views this as a "missed opportunity" as it prepares to enter 2024 with the same issues it has faced this year relating to hospital capacities and waiting lists. [RTE News]

(rdm/gc)

Pro-Palestinian rallies held in Northern Ireland

Some 3,000 people took part in a protest in the Northern Irish capital of Belfast, expressing their condolences for the Palestinian people and their anger with the European Union and the US's pro-Israeli response to the violence. [Newsletter] [Newsletter] [Newsletter]

The leader of Sinn Fein, the biggest political party in local government in Northern Ireland, Mary Lou McDonald, expressed sympathy for the Palestinians affected by the conflict without mentioning the Hamas attack. Since her first comments, McDonald has condemned the Hamas attack on Israel but has criticised other countries for ignoring the decades-long plight of the Palestinians. [Irish Independent] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

Ireland has supported Palestinian liberation since the 1980, when it became the first EU country to call for the recognition of a Palestinian state. Sinn Fein is widely regarded as the legalised political wing of the former Irish Republican Army. [Britannica] [AA]

Irish people and Palestinians have similarities in terms of their histories of domination by England and Israel, respectively, which has led to a strong "allegiance between Irish nationalism and the Palestinian cause, as both fit comfortably into the anti-imperialist/ colonial model", while pro-British unionists take the opposite view, according to John Manley, a political correspondent for the Irish News. [The Irish News] [Arab Center Washington] [Foreign Policy] [The Journal.ie]

(rdm/gc)

Switzerland: Right-wing party makes gains over the greens in federal elections

An exit poll – conducted by the Swiss public broadcaster SSR – of the federal, legislative elections on October 22 showed that the country's right-wing, populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) saw an increase in support, with the Greens losing more than four percentage points.

The right-wing party won 29% of the 200 seats in Switzerland's lower house, the National Council, becoming the country's leading political party. The final tally revealed the left-wing Social Democratic Party came second with 18% of votes, with the Centre receiving 15%, the Liberal-Radicals 14.4%, the Greens receiving 9.4%, and the Liberal-Greens receiving 7.2%. [Franceinfo][CNBC]

This month's election results vary significantly from four years ago, which saw the Greens making historic gains over the SVP, winning 13.2%. The Greens, however, lost five seats, the Liberal-Greens lost six, and the SVP gained nine this month. [Guardian]

Three main issues dominated voters' decisions: fees for mandatory and free-market-based health insurance, climate change and subsequent rapid glacier erosion, and immigration, according to pre-election polls.

In an interview with ABC News on October 23, political analyst Pascal Sciarini of the University of Geneva suggested that many voters felt they had already taken a big step towards protecting the climate by approving a bill in June that aims to curb the country's greenhouse emissions, shifting the focus of voters to rising insurance fees and immigration concerns, the backbone of the SVP's election campaign. [ABC] [USNews]

The proportion of female candidates elected dropped from 42% in 2019 to 38.5%, ending a steady upward trend in women's representation over the past few decades since women were first allowed to be political candidates in 1971. [SwissInfo]

These latest election results are part of a more significant trend in Europe, with Greece, Sweden and Italy all seeing electoral gains by conservative parties over the past year. That said, Swiss foreign and domestic policy is expected to stay the same, with citizens voting in referendums on all significant bills.

While the National Council will shape the composition of the country's seven-member executive branch, known as the Federal Council, this month's legislative elections are unlikely to alter the composition of the Federal Council – where the SVP, Social Democratic

Party and Liberal-Radicals all already hold two seats each, with the Centre party having one. [AP]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Authorities launch investigation into potential funding of Hamas

Switzerland's Attorney General, Stefan Blattler, announced on October 21 on public radio station SRF that the country was launching an investigation into the potential domestic financing of Hamas.

Blattler further stated that the investigation had been opened several weeks before the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, however, giving no further details. The Federal Public Prosecutor's Office later only clarified that the investigation was launched "on suspicion of financing Hamas from Switzerland." [cnews] [i24news]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland: Thousands protest in Bern for climate change action

An estimated 60,000 people gathered outside of the Swiss parliamentary buildings in Bern to protest against the government's climate change action two weeks ahead of the country's federal elections on October 22. [wio]

The protestors demanded tougher policies for environmental protections and stricter compliance with the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Posters included messages such as "if the climate were a bank, we would have saved it long ago" and "the forest is burning, the Arctic is melting, politics is sleeping." [LaCroix]

Protestors denounced the government's proposed revision of a CO2 law that would, if implemented, stipulate that around two thirds of reductions in greenhouse gas emissions be implemented domestically and the remaining amount abroad. The organisers of the protest, Climate Alliance, called it "a new opportunity for Switzerland to shirk its own efforts." [GlobeEcho]

According to a GLAMOS report released on September 28, Switzerland's glaciers have experienced the second-highest rate of melting this year, following record losses in 2022. Over the past two years, the country's glaciers have experienced a 10% reduction in their total volume. [DailySabah]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland to create Middle East taskforce

Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis announced on October 9 that the country will set up a Middle East task force to enable the government to respond quickly and in a coordinated way after the Hamas attack on Israel.

The task force will be headed by the Foreign Ministry's head of the Middle East and North Africa division, Maya Tissafi. Following the attack, special evacuation flights were arranged to expatriate Swiss citizens from Tel Aviv to Zurich on October 10. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland is home to one-fifth of Russian spies in Europe, newspaper reports

The daily Swiss-German newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) reported on October 7 that one out of five Russian spies in Europe are stationed in Switzerland, totaling around 80 Russian intelligence operatives in the country.

While most European countries have begun actively countering the Russian intelligence network and expelling employees of Russian embassies after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Bern did not resort to such extreme measures. [Ukrainska Pravda]

(sw/gc)

United Kingdom: Opposition Labour Party wins major parliamentary seat in Scotland

The United Kingdom's opposition Labour Party has won a seat in a special election for a Scottish district, seen as an indicator of the party's rebounding popularity ahead of a national election next year.

The centre-left Labour Party beat the ruling nationalist Scottish National Party (SNP) in Rutherglen and Hamilton West, near Glasgow, earning them a parliamentary seat and doubling Labour's total of Scottish seats from one to two. [AP]

Labour candidate Michael Shanks won 17,845 votes, more than twice the number taken by SNP runner-up Katy Loudon. Labour Party leader Keir Starmer called it "a seismic result," adding that the election results signalled that "it is time for change" and "this changed Labour Party can deliver it." [Reuters]

The by-election occurred after former SNP MP Margaret Ferrier was ousted by her constituents for breaking Covid-19 rules.

The turnout for the vote was 37%, a dramatic fall from the 66.5% recorded at the last general election. Stephen Flynn, SNP leader at Westminster, said that the party needed to learn how to inspire constituents who "stayed at home and didn't vote SNP." [BBC]

University of Strathclyde polling expert John Curtice said the 20% swing to Labour – if replicated at a general election – could allow the party to recapture dozens of seats north of the border. [AlJazeera]

(sl/gc)

British companies in GBP 4B contracts for nuclear-powered attack submarines

British businesses will be behind the design and manufacture of the world's most advanced submarines following the awarding of GBP 4 billion contracts on October 1.

The signing of the Detailed Design and Long Leads (D2L2) Phase with BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock represents a significant milestone for both the UK and the trilateral AUKUS programme as a whole in the lead-up to building the future class of nuclear-powered attack submarines, known as SSN-AUKUS. [UK gov]

The new submarines are part of the AUKUS pact – a strategic defence alliance between Australia, the US and the UK that was announced in September 2021.

The pact includes an agreement to jointly build nuclear-propelled submarines and is the first time the US has shared nuclear propulsion technology with an ally other than the UK.

The pact also includes an agreement to work together in the Indo-Pacific on regional security concerns. The pact is viewed as being a counterweight to Chinese Pacific naval power – China has since condemned the agreement as “extremely irresponsible.” [BBC].

(ar/gc)

United Kingdom: Inquiry opens over alleged unlawful killings in Afghanistan

An independent inquiry has been opened to investigate claims that the British special armed forces unlawfully killed 33 people in Afghanistan. The British Special Air Service (SAS) has claimed that they acted in self-defence.

The hearings occurred in the Royal Courts of Justice in London on October 9. The British SAS are accused of unlawful killings during night raids between 2010 and 2013. Authorities were accused of covering up or failing to investigate illegal actions fairly. [Guardian] [AP]

The investigation will hear submissions on behalf of the families, including eight children, who were allegedly killed by special forces. The special forces allegedly killed nine people in their beds during a night raid. [BBC]

Tessa Gregory, the lawyer representing the families, said: "Our clients hope that the opening of this inquiry marks the end of the wall of silence and obstruction that has confronted them over the last decade." [PBS]

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence said: "It is not appropriate for us to comment on allegations which may be within the scope of the statutory inquiry, and it is up to the statutory inquiry team, led by Lord Justice Haddon-Cave, to determine which allegations are investigated." [BBC]

(sl/gc)

United Kingdom: Government to close migrant hotels

The United Kingdom announced that 50 hotels will stop housing asylum seekers by January 2024. British Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick confirmed on October 24 that of the 400 hotels providing housing for migrants, 50 will no longer be required to do so.

In a statement, Jenrick said the British taxpayers were paying an "eye-watering bill" for individuals making the "illegal, dangerous and wholly unnecessary small boat crossings." [UK GOV]

In September, the Home Office reported that migrant hotels cost EUR 8 million a day. [BBC]

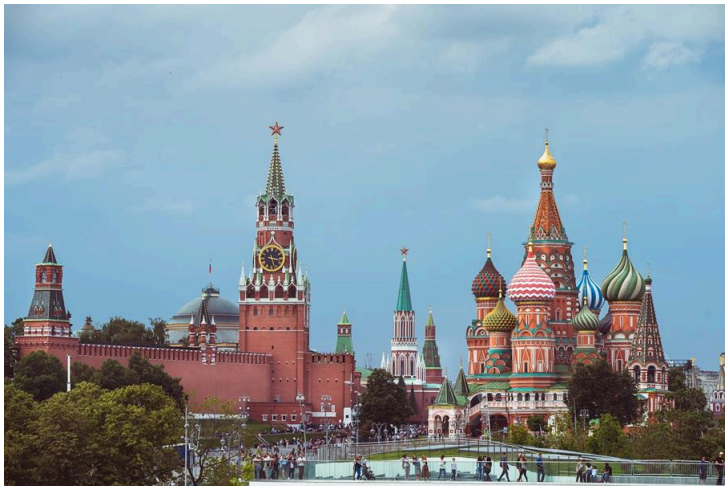
According to the immigration ministry, the 20% drop in small boat crossings from last year served as a contributing factor to the plan. The UK attributes this drop in migration to a partnership with the Governments of Albania, France, Turkey and Italy as part of the UK's wider plans to reduce migration. [UK GOV] [BBC]

Jenrick added that the UK will implement the Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda partnership to "dismantle smuggling gangs' business models and stop the boats entirely." [UK GOV]

Further, the UK plans to utilise the former military base at Wethersfield and the Bibby Stockholm barge as effective alternative accommodation sites "by optimising room sharing." [UK GOV]

(sl/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



Belarus: Government introduces new law to restrict religious freedoms

Belarus has introduced a new draft law that could reduce freedom of religion by banning all unregistered faith groups and requiring all institutions to re-register or face potential closure for those that do not. The country's House of Representatives in Minsk has introduced the draft law. [Belsat]

The draft law expands grounds for close to include activities against Belarus' sovereignty, social harmony and constitutional order. Furthermore, it empowers authorities to issue liquidation notices without prior warnings in cases of specified violations, potentially mirroring the crackdown on political parties in Belarus.

As a result, religious communities outside the Russian Orthodox Church, predominant in Belarus, may likely face prosecution.

(md/gc)

Georgia: Parliament fails to impeach president

The Georgian Parliament failed to impeach President Salome Zurabishvili over visits to European capitals despite foreign visits being deemed “unconstitutional” by the country’s Constitutional Court.

On October 18, the Parliament voted to impeach the president. With 100 votes required, only 90 members of Parliament registered. Eighty-six voted in favour, and one voted against. [GeorgiaToday]

The vote came after a ruling by the Constitutional Court of Georgia on October 16, stating that the president had violated the constitution. According to the Court, Zurabishvili had made visits abroad and exercised her powers of representation in foreign relations without obtaining the consent of the Government of Georgia, violating the constitution. [CivilGeorgia]

Zurabishvili met with multiple foreign leaders to garner support for Georgia’s integration into the European Union, in contravention of the ruling Georgian Dream party platform. [Guardian]

(sl/gc)

Georgia: Government revokes citizenship of former prosecutor general

Georgia revoked the citizenship of former Prosecutor General Otar Parskhaladze after the United States accused him of "channelling malign Russian influence" in the country.

The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Partskhaladze on September 14 for enabling Russia's interest in the war against Ukraine. He received a Russian passport in 2021. He was also accused of purchasing "moveable and immovable property of considerable amount and value" in Russia. [TransparencyInternationalGeorgia] [CivilGeorgia]

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili revoked his citizenship on October 17. This decision came after the ruling party, Georgian Dream, called for him to be tried in a Georgian Court first.

Furthermore, Irakli Kobakhidze, speaker of the Parliament, warned the National Bank of Georgia against freezing Partskhaladze's assets, claiming that such a move would violate Georgia's constitution. National banks changed their rules so that international sanctions only apply to a Georgian citizen once a court issues a guilty verdict against them. [Eurasia.Net]

Partskhaladze is close to the former Prime minister and Chairman of the Georgian Dream Party, Bidzina Ivanishvili. [CivilGeorgia]

(sl/gc)

Russia: Three of Alexei Navalny's lawyers detained

Russian authorities detained on October 14 three lawyers who provided legal support to the opposition figure Alexey Navalny for alleged involvement with an "extremist group." [Reuters]

Navalny's aides said lawyers Vadim Kobzev, Igor Sergunin and Alexei Liptser were being investigated on suspicion of belonging to an "extremist group." A Moscow court remanded all three in investigative custody until December 13, according to a statement posted by the court on Telegram.

The video published by the court showed Kobzev and Sergunin in courtroom cages, listening to the ruling.

These detentions are seen by western observers as an attempt to isolate Navalny, who has spent over a thousand days in prison, and hinder his access to legal counsel. This incident reflects a broader trend of legal professionals facing prosecution in Russia, particularly those connected to opposition figures or dissenting movements.

(md)

Ukraine tries to seize Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant three times

Ukrainian forces made three separate attempts to retake Enerhodar and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant after Russia occupied the area in March 2022, the head of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (HUR), Kyrylo Budanov, said in an interview.

According to Budanov, the first attempt was made in August 2022. The goal had been to create a bridgehead, but the mission was ultimately unsuccessful. Ukrainian intelligence units tried two more times without success.

The third operation involved soldiers of the International Legion, a foreign military unit of soldiers from 60 different countries, the Kyiv Post reported.

"As the HUR gained experience from landing to landing, the Russians in the area became more and more prepared," Budanov said. [Kyiv Post] [Deutsche Welle]

(ad/gc)

Ukraine: Government opens investigation into alleged abuse of soldiers in Ternopil

One of Ukraine's chief investigative bodies has opened an investigation into the abuse of military conscripts, filmed in the western city of Ternopil in early October. The State Bureau of Investigations (SBI) said they will pursue criminal charges pertaining to "abuse of authority by military officials." [Ukrainska Pravda]

One video, initially posted on social media, shows a man being punched and bundled into a car. Another shows a number of men being beaten while lying in

bed. In both cases, the SBI says the acts were carried out by personnel from and on the site of the Ternopil City recruitment office. [SBI Telegram]

The new investigation into abuse follows others undertaken by the SBI in recent months. In September, several videos were released of similar brutal mistreatment inside recruitment barracks in the city of Sambir, near Lviv in western Ukraine. Not including the most recent events, there have been 112 reported cases of abuse by enlistment officers since the beginning of Russia's invasion. [Kyiv Independent]

(md/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Republika Srpska moves to restrict NGOs from engaging in politics

The government of Bosnia's Republika Srpska or Serb Republic started public consultations that aim to restrict non-profit organisations from engaging in politics. [Balkan Insight]

The president of the Serb Republic, Milorad Dodik, put forward a plan branding civil groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as "foreign entities." The European Union and the US criticised the move. [AP]

Ahead of a series of public consultations on the draft law, a group of civil society representatives held a protest in Banja Luka, the administrative capital of the Serb Republic. Protesters argue that the law could limit freedom of association and expression. Regional media outlets have expressed concerns over censorship. [Radio Free Europe]

Dodik came to its defence, claiming it is similar to a US law that identifies NGOs funded by outside sources as "foreign agents" on US soil.

(em/gc)

Belgrade-backed Kosovo-Serb party chooses its new leader

A Serbian-backed party in Kosovo chose a new leader at a conference in North Mitrovica on October 24.

Zlatan Elek, who previously worked as a specialist paediatrician, was voted unanimously as the president of Srpska Lista.He later declared on social media that he would continue to follow Belgrade's stance on Kosovo. He succeeds Goran Rakic, who has led the party since 2017. [Balkan Insight]

"All important political decisions will always be made in coordination with the Belgrade authorities and in the interest of the entire Serbian people," read the statement on the party's Facebook page.

Elek's election comes amid significant turbulence for the Srpska Lista. In late September, a party official admitted to partaking in an armed attack in North Kosovo in which one policeman and three gunmen were killed. [Barrons]

(em/gc)

Greek minister allegedly receives gifts from Huawei, NY Times Reports

The New York Times has published a report alleging that a Greek minister and other government officials received gifts from China's Huawei between 2020 and 2021, purportedly to advance the company's interests in Greece.

The report, "Gifts, Gadgets and Greece: Inside a Huawei Lobbying Campaign," reveals leaked internal messages discussing Huawei's efforts to engage Greek

officials and counter US-led opposition to its technology. [NYT]

In the messages, Greek government advisers are mentioned as providing Huawei with a document detailing government contracts and priority projects. The report also suggests discussions about gifting gadgets, including smartphones and smartwatches.

Furthermore, Huawei employees discussed providing devices to a senior Greek government minister and his son, and to police and immigration officials, as well as assisting Greek regulators during a 2021 industry conference in the United Arab Emirates.

While Greece has traditionally supported Beijing's interests, recent developments have seen the country reorienting itself towards the West. The allegations raise questions about the relationship between Greek officials and Huawei. However, Minister Adonis Georgiadis, the report's subject, denied the claims and emphasised no special relationship with the company. [GreekReporter]

Greek government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis asserted that Huawei's presence in the country's new telecom networks was limited and had not influenced government policy decisions or contracts.

(kg/gc)

ECHR rules North Macedonia discriminated against Roma citizens

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has found North Macedonia guilty of discrimination against four of its Roma citizens, violating their right to freedom of movement. In a judgement issued on October 3, the ECHR ruled that these citizens were discriminated against in 2014 when border authorities prevented them from leaving the country. [Balkan Insight]

The ECHR judgement found that these citizens' rights to freedom of movement, choice of residence within the country, and the freedom to leave any country, including their own, were all violated. The court also determined that North Macedonia violated the European Convention on Human Rights prohibition of discrimination based on various grounds, including race.

The case highlights the discrimination faced by the Roma population in North Macedonia, which has faced

difficulties when trying to travel or leave the country. The easing of the visa regime for Western Balkan countries in 2009 led to increased asylum requests from the region.

Many Roma individuals took advantage of this situation to travel and seek asylum in more developed European countries. To prevent these individuals from reaching their borders, North Macedonia imposed increased checks on departing passengers. However, these measures often led to the discrimination against its citizens and have been criticised by human rights groups.

(ps/gc)

IMF calls on Romania to reduce high fiscal deficit, tax evasion

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) urged Romania to further reduce its high fiscal deficit during the country's annual meeting with IMF experts from September 25 to October 5. [Euractiv]

While Romania's 2023 budget deficit target was estimated at 4.4% of gross domestic product (GDP), the deficit had already risen to 2.65% in the first eight months of the year, with IMF experts predicting that the deficit will reach 6% of GDP by the end of the year.

"Fiscal deficits will need to fall below 3% of GDP, as agreed with the European Commission, to stabilise public debt in the medium term, to help secure the necessary financing in the market at lower interest rates and to support the continued payment of EU funds," said IMF mission leader Jan Kees Martijn.

The IMF also criticised the country's 1% turnover tax on large companies, recommending a tougher fiscal regime. [CentralEuropeanTimes]

(sw/gc)

ECHR faults Turkey for pretrial detention of 45 individuals linked to Gulen Movement

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has criticised Turkey for the arrest and pretrial detention of 45 individuals following the 2016 coup attempt due to their alleged affiliation with FETÖ, a term used by the

Turkish government to refer to the Gülen movement as a terrorist organisation. [Turkish Minute]

The ECHR's recent ruling, issued as a single judgement for the 45 applicants whose cases were filed between 2016 and 2019, focuses on their arrest and detention based on suspicions of Gülen movement membership.

All of them were identified as users of the ByLock app – which has been considered a secret tool of communication among supporters of the Gülen movement since the 2016 coup bid – and some were also suspected of financing the movement through accounts at the now-defunct Bank Asya, associated with the Gülen movement, as well as the possession of pro-movement publications.

The Strasbourg court ruled that the Turkish government failed to provide sufficient indications that the applicants were reasonably suspected of committing the alleged offence at the time of their initial detention, leading to a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Consequently, the court granted EUR 5,000 in non-pecuniary damages, costs, and expenses to each applicant, except one, while dismissing the rest of their claims for just satisfaction.

The decision follows a previous landmark ruling in September in which the ECHR found Turkey in violation of several European Convention on Human Rights articles in a related case, emphasising that affiliations such as using the ByLock app or having an account at a Gülen-linked bank cannot serve as criminal evidence against Gülen movement members.

(fs/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Cyprus: Deal on contested road welcomed amid bid to heal ethnic divide

After intense talks, a breakthrough was announced on October 9 as Greek and Turkish Cypriots reached an "understanding" over a contentious road within a UN-controlled buffer zone on the ethnically divided island. The construction of the road by Turkish Cypriots had sparked tensions not seen in years. [AP News]

Cyprus government representatives said that the agreement fulfils Turkish Cypriot demands. The route will link the northern village of Arsos with the ethnically mixed village of Pyla, which is located inside the buffer zone and shares a border with internationally recognized Greek Cypriot territory in the south of the island.

As part of the deal, Turkish military guard posts within the buffer zone will be dismantled and any Turkish or Turkish Cypriot military or police presence in the area will be prohibited.

The UN will establish a checkpoint along the newly constructed road, ensuring that only Turkish Cypriots and European Union nationals can access the south. Greek Cypriots, however, will not have access to the north through this checkpoint. [AP News]

The UN special representative for Cyprus, Colin Stewart, on October 16 hailed the deal, acknowledging the "positive and constructive attitude" of both Cyprus and Turkey. The agreement is seen as a promising first step towards resuming the peace process on the island. [CyprusMail]

In August, the European Commission, France, the UK and the United States condemned an attack by Turkish Cypriots on United Nations peacekeepers who were preventing the construction of the road. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

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 proved unsuccessful, most recently in 2017.

(kg/pk)

Cyprus: Growing tensions amid Israel-Hamas conflict

Four Syrians have been arrested in Cyprus on suspicion of detonating a pipe bomb near the Israeli embassy in the capital, Nicosia, on October 21.

The suspects, aged 17 to 21, face charges related to attempted destruction of property using explosives, and possession and use of explosives. [TimesofIsrael]

A day after the pipe bomb blast, an Israeli man was assaulted in the town of Larnaca while putting up posters of children kidnapped by Palestinian militant group Hamas. Four individuals approached him, with one pushing the Israeli man and another stealing his bag containing the flyers. [CyprusMail]

Meanwhile, nearly a thousand people of various ages and nationalities gathered in Nicosia on October 20 to call for an end to the conflict in Gaza. Protesters waved Palestinian flags and held placards denouncing war and imperialism. [CyprusMail].

Security around the Israeli embassy and other locations has been increased in Cyprus, which has a substantial Jewish community. [TimesofIsrael]

(kg/pk)

Italy: Debate on judicial impartiality after 10 Tunisian migrants released

A judge's decision to release ten Tunisian migrants from a centre holding people who are about to be repatriated has caused controversy and a national debate on judicial impartiality. [Il Post] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

The ruling on the Tunisians, who had filed a request for international protection in Italy, means no migrants can be held at the centre until a judge has examined their situation.

Judge Iolanda Apostolico said that tougher rules on immigration recently introduced by the government are inconsistent with EU law and the Italian constitution.

The Italian government, led by the hard-right Brothers of Italy, pursues an anti-immigration policy.

Judges are required to give preference to EU law and Italian constitutional law in cases where these clash with regular domestic law. [Repubblica]

Apostolico was criticised for her decision by members of Italy's ruling parties, including Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing populist Lega, and by Justice Minister Carlo Nordio. [Il Post]

On social media platform X, Salvini posted a 2018 video that showed Apostolico taking part in a demonstration in solidarity with immigrants who were waiting at sea to get permission to enter Italian ports. The post implied that her October decision on the ten Tunisian migrants was influenced by her political views on immigration.

The case sparked a debate in the first two weeks of October about the extent to which a judge can allow his or her political views to be known. [Repubblica]

Meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights on October 19 ordered Italy to pay EUR 9,000 compensation to three Tunisian migrants, saying that they were treated inhumanely while they were held at a detention centre on the island of Lampedusa.

The court also found that the three were kept in the centre illegally because no specific circumstances could justify their detention. [Ansa]

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen pledged EU action to help Italy deal with a crisis that saw thousands of migrants arriving by boat on its southern island of Lampedusa in September. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(nc/pk)

Italy: Ex-mayor of 'model' migrant-friendly town cleared of string of crimes

The former mayor of a small Italian town which was seen as a model of integration between migrants and locals has been cleared of a number of crimes including criminal conspiracy and fraud. [Ansa] [Il Post]

Mimmo Lucano, ex-mayor of the southern town of Riace, had his 13-year jail sentence reduced by an appeal court, whose judgement was published on October 12.

His prison term has been cut to one year, for minor crimes.

Lucano became known for the inclusive community that sprung up in his town. [Sole 24Ore] [Repubblica] Before his arrest in 2018, Riace had around 2,400 inhabitants, of whom 500 were migrants. [Il Post]

Tougher measures on immigration were introduced across the country last September after the hard-right Brothers of Italy party came to power. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(nc/pk)

Italy: Two men arrested in Milan amid fears of terrorist attacks

Two men were arrested in Milan on October 18 after the Italian authorities uncovered a number of chats in which the pair declared themselves members of jihadist group Islamic State. [Ansa]

The chats contained threats to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, but did not indicate that any terrorist operation was being planned. [Rai News]

Meloni has announced stepped-up security measures amid fear of possible terrorist attacks following the outbreak of war between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. [il Sole 24 Ore]

(nc/pk)

Italy: Critics slam PM's stance on morality as she breaks up with partner

The opposition has accused Italy's hard-right government of hypocrisy in insisting on traditional values after Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni broke up with her partner.

Meloni announced that her relationship with journalist Andrea Giambruno, the father of her daughter, had come to an end after Italian media released a video of him making inappropriate sexual comments to a female colleague. [Ansa]

Giambruno's remarks were the latest of several controversial statements he has made over recent months on topics including rape, climate change and migrants. [Politico] [Euronews]

Meloni, who became a mother despite not being married, leads the governing hard-right Brothers of Italy party, which holds traditional conservative views on the family and gender. [NewYorkTimes] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

(nc/pk)

Italy: General strike against rise in cost of living

Italian workers in the transport and education sectors held a general strike on October 20, demanding higher pay amid rising prices. [Il Post]

The strikers protested against increases in the cost of living and a rise in government spending on defence. [La Repubblica] [Greenpeace]

While prices in Italy have risen, the "Citizens' Income" – a state subsidy introduced by the populist Five Star Movement in 2019 to combat poverty – will be abolished next year, following a decision by the governing, hard-right Brothers of Italy party.

Italy is one of five countries in the EU that do not have a minimum pay level. [Wired]

The opposition leftist Democratic Party has pressed for a minimum wage in recent months, but the government has not made any such move. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(nc/pk)

Italy: European court says residents' rights violated over Naples garbage crisis

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has declared that Italy violated the rights of residents in and around Naples due to the country's failure to address a 15-year garbage and pollution crisis. [ECHR]

The court's preliminary verdict states that Italy inadequately managed waste collection, treatment and disposal in the Campania region, leading to an adverse

impact on residents' well-being. [The Spec/AP] [JURIST - News]

Government-commissioned studies presented to the court indicated a higher risk of mortality associated with various cancers and heart malformations in the provinces of Naples and Caserta, compared to other areas.

The region has been dubbed the "Land of Fires" because of the burning of trash and toxic waste. [Courthouse News Service]

Authorities claim that at least some of the pollution was caused by the local Camorra mob's illegal multi-billion dollar waste disposal business. [AP News]

In response to the crisis, land was seized and partially transferred to a social cooperative. Since then, the situation in the region has improved. [Euronews]

The ECHR ruling is not final. Parties in the case have three months to request a review by the court's grand chamber. Should the court issue a final ruling, Italy would be obliged to present an action plan outlining how it intends to address the findings. As a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, Italy is legally obliged to implement the court's rulings.

(fs/pk)

Italy: Earthquakes hit Naples area

The southern Italian region of Naples was shaken by a magnitude 4 earthquake on October 2.

It followed a magnitude 4.2 earthquake on September 27. The two were among the strongest the country has seen in the past 40 years, but no one was injured and only limited damage was reported. [The Guardian] [Ansa]

Checks and controls in the area will be carried out to test the resistance of buildings to tremors. [Reuters]

The region hit by the earthquake has 24 volcanoes more than 39,000 years old and stretches for about 200 square kilometres in the Neapolitan Bay area. [CNN]

(nc/pk)

Italy: 50% stake in rail firm Italo to be sold to shipping group MSC

Shipping giant MSC has announced it has entered a deal to buy a 50% stake in Italian high-speed train company Italo, which is owned by US fund Global Infrastructure Partners. [Il Post]

Italo is the second biggest company operating in Italy's rail sector and serves 20 million passengers a year.

Switzerland-based MSC – the Mediterranean Shipping Company – is the world's largest container line in terms of fleet capacity. It has recently made a string of acquisitions in the logistics sector. [Reuters] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

(nc/pk)

Malta: State-owned Air Malta to shut and reopen amid financial woes

Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela has announced that financially troubled state-owned airline Air Malta will shut and reopen in a new format on March 31 next year.

The new company will keep the same name and will use the same aircraft as now. No interruptions are expected in flights.

Before coming up with such a solution, Malta had negotiated with Brussels, without success, on giving state aid to the carrier, which was facing bankruptcy. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

Malta's finance minister, Clyde Caruana, said on October 2 that the government intended to sell part of its shares in the firm while keeping a majority stake. [Times of Malta]

Shutting down the old Air Malta and starting the new one will cost the country EUR 350 million. [Ansa] [Corriere]

(nc/pk)

Malta: Driving licences racket involving gov't minister exposed, says newspaper

A newspaper says it has exposed a racket involving government minister Ian Borg that aimed to help favoured candidates obtain a driving licence more easily in Malta.

The Times of Malta reported that in his previous post as transport minister, Borg – now the country's top diplomat – had flagged to officials the names of individuals who he wanted to receive a helping hand when they took a driving test.

The newspaper said it had uncovered the scheme after obtaining a number of WhatsApp messages. Some of these showed that such favours were accorded to candidates keen on supporting the governing Labour Party, the Times of Malta added.

Prime Minister Robert Abela denied that Borg had acted illegally, as did Borg himself.

The ruling Labour Party is already facing a scandal over a suspected fraud racket involving payouts of state disability benefits. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

(nc/pk)

Malta: European rights court awards damages to teen migrant

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has awarded EUR 25,000 in damages to an Ivorian teenager who spent 225 days in detention in Malta. [Infomigrants]

The teenager, who arrived in the Mediterranean nation in 2021, was kept in poor conditions and provided with no explanation for his detention, the court said. It added that he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, underwent inadequate medical treatment, and suffered from mental health problems.

The ECHR ruled that Malta's practice of detaining migrants for "health reasons" was illegal and did not meet the teenager's needs as a vulnerable minor.

Human rights organisations have accused Malta of treating migrants inhumanely. The ECHR's decision puts pressure on the country to reform what the court said was a "dysfunctional national [detention] system."

(fs/pk)

Portugal: Climate activists fill golf course holes with cement

Climate activist group Climáximo on October 11 filled in holes at a golf course with cement in protest against big businesses' lack of action in addressing climate change.

Climáximo, which is the Portuguese equivalent of Extinction Rebellion, said on social media it had targeted the Paço de Lumiar course just outside Lisbon because it is a "luxury of the rich, at the cost of an absurd quantity of water**".**

The Portuguese Golf Federation condemned the incident as vandalism and an "invasion" of property. [Portugal Resident] [Publico] [A Bola]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Socialists sign coalition deal in bid to form new gov't

Incumbent Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has taken the first formal step towards forming a new coalition government, signing a deal with left-wing alliance Sumar on October 24.

A June general election saw the centre-right People's Party (PP) winning the most votes. However, the grouping failed to secure a parliamentary majority. Sanchez, who garnered the second largest number of votes, was then given the chance to build a coalition that can rule the country.

Sanchez hailed the deal with Sumar as "an agreement for a new, progressive coalition government." [The Guardian]

The pact contains over 200 promises, including pledges to boost the minimum wage, reinforce the healthcare system and increase public housing. [El Mundo]

Sumar leader Yolanda Diaz, the current labour minister, vowed to "make a better Spain and improve people's lives." [AA]

However, the alliance with Sumar is only one small step towards forming a government, as Sanchez still faces the much harder task of gaining the support of two Catalan separatist parties that he needs for a majority.

One of them, the Junts grouping, is demanding an amnesty for all those involved in a failed bid for Catalan independence in 2017.

After signing the alliance with Sumar, Sanchez made no direct comment on his attempts to gain the support of Catalan parties, saying only that "the path of progress and coexistence is definitively strengthened in our country".

Sanchez and his allies have until November 27 to form a new government. If they fail, parliament will be dissolved and Spaniards will return to the polls in January for the sixth time in the last nine years. [The Guardian]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Tens of thousands march against amnesty for separatists

Tens of thousands marched in Barcelona on October 8 against incumbent Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's plans to offer an amnesty to Catalan separatists, whose support he needs to form a new government.

Sanchez, a Socialist, has proposed a pardon for all Catalan nationalists who were involved in the region's 2017 failed bid for independence. The deal could cover up to 1,400 people.

The Barcelona march was called by anti-independence organisation Societat Civil Catalana and was attended by top politicians from the People's Party – Spain's main conservative grouping – and the far-right Vox party. [The Local]

Speaking at the protest, which followed a similar demonstration in Madrid on September 24, People's Party leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo described Sanchez's proposed deal with Catalan separatists as a "backwards step". [The Guardian]

He added: "We stand with democracy, and anything that amounts to a reactionary decision needs to be condemned by all democrats."

Santiago Abascal, the leader of the far-right Vox, was also present at the march. He called Sanchez's proposal "an assault on the constitution". [The Guardian]

Vox supported the People's Party's failed attempt in late September to form a government. [Europe

Monthly October 2023]

The proposed amnesty would include former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont, who lives in self-imposed exile in Belgium. [Reuters]

Feijoo's People's Party won the most seats in a general election in July but fell well short of a parliamentary majority, leaving incumbent premier Sanchez with a chance to remain in power.

(jw/pk)

Spain: Court throws out case by ex-lover against former Spanish king

A high-profile lawsuit against former Spanish King Juan Carlos brought by an ex-lover has been thrown out by London's High Court.

The EUR 145 million case was brought by Danish entrepreneur Corinna Zu Sayn-Wittgenstein – a British citizen – who accused the ex-monarch and the Spanish secret service of harassment and putting her under illegal surveillance since 2012. [Reuters]

A judge on October 6 ruled that the High Court of England and Wales did not have the jurisdiction to hear the claims and that it was not clear whether the alleged harassment had occurred in England. [BBC]

Following the announcement, Juan Carlos' spokesperson appeared to hint that the former king may return to public life soon, saying that the London court's decision "re-establishes the conditions necessary for further public appearances." [FT]

The spokesperson added: "While His Majesty Juan Carlos regrets the outlay of energy and resources involved in the proceedings, he nonetheless welcomes the decision of the High Court of London, which unsurprisingly confirms his innocence." [FT]

The former monarch abdicated in favour of his son, Felipe IV, in 2014 and moved to Abu Dhabi in 2020 under a cloud of financial scandals which damaged the Spanish royal family. [Reuters]

Juan Carlos has made only three trips back to Spain since going into exile.

(jw/pk)

Spain: Canary Islands struggle to cope with migrant surge

Over 1,000 migrants arrived in the Canary Islands from Africa during a single day in October, leaving local officials struggling to cope.

Arrivals to the Spanish-owned archipelago, located 400 kilometres north-west of Africa, have been increasing in recent months, culminating in a surge on October 21. [Reuters]

The regional leader of the Canary Islands, Fernando Clavijo, called for greater help from the central Spanish government in Madrid. [InfoMigrants]

Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska said on a recent visit to the archipelago that the spike in numbers resulted from political "destabilisation in the Sahel." [France24]

(jw/pk)

Spain: Successful rocket launch boosts European space ambitions

Spanish private company PLD Space has successfully launched a rocket in a boost to European space ambitions.

Raul Torres, the firm's CEO, hailed the success of the operation in Spain, saying all systems worked "perfectly." [The Guardian]

Torres added that the mission, which was Europe's first fully private rocket launch, was "only the beginning" for his company's activities.

The reusable Miura 1 rocket was launched from Huelva, a city in south-western Spain, on October 7. It carried equipment to collect data, but this was not designed to be used during the suborbital test flight. [El Mundo]

Spain's acting prime minister, Pedro Sanchez, said on social media: "The launch of the Miura 1, the first rocket with 100% Spanish technology, has been a success."

Sanchez added that the operation was a "milestone that positions Spain's research and development at the forefront of space transportation." [The Guardian]

The mission took place under the shadow of recent problems in the European space industry. Virgin Orbit failed to launch an orbital rocket from Britain in January.

In July, the last launch of Europe's largest rocket – the Ariane 5 – took place at the European space port in Kourou, French Guiana. [Reuters]

(jw/pk)

Vatican City: Pope appoints 21 new cardinals, cementing progressive legacy

Pope Francis has appointed 21 new cardinals, among them religious leaders in geopolitical hotspots such as Jerusalem and Hong Kong, in a move that cements his vision of a more progressive Catholic Church. [AP] [Reuters]

With the appointments, nearly three-quarters of the cardinals who will one day elect the next pontiff have been handpicked by Francis, securing continuity for his theological and politically progressive vision. [France 24]

The new "princes of the church" will help Francis enact reforms. Several will be voting participants in this autumn's synod, a world-wide summit of bishops called by the pope to discuss the future of the Church. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Comparing the church to an orchestra, Francis told the new cardinals: "Diversity is necessary; it is indispensable. However, each sound must contribute to the common design."

(nc/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria: Ex-chancellor Kurz goes on trial for alleged perjury

Austria's former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has gone on trial for allegedly giving false testimony to a corruption probe.

Kurz, the former leader of the still-ruling conservative Austrian People's Party (OVP), is accused of misleading a parliamentary committee set up to investigate alleged graft in his previous government.

His trial began on October 18. If convicted, he could face up to three years in prison. [Reuters]

Kurz denies wrongdoing. In a statement to reporters in a Vienna courthouse, he said: "I hope for a fair process, and that in the end the accusations will be proven wrong." [The Guardian]

Kurz was once hailed the "wunderkind" of European conservatives. In 2017, when he was just 31, became the world's youngest democratically elected head of government. [The Guardian]

Amid suspicions of corruption, bribery and manipulating opinion polls, he was forced to resign in 2021 following pressure from opposition parties. [BBC] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(sl/pk)

Croatia: PM blocks no-confidence vote against foreign minister

Croatia's premier, Andrej Plenkovic, on October 6 blocked an opposition bid to hold a parliamentary vote of no confidence against the country's foreign and

European affairs minister after the latter failed to list his assets. [HRT]

Foreign Minister Gordan Grlic Radman, like Plenkovic, belongs to the conservative ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

Thirty-seven members of the opposition filed a no-confidence motion against Radman for failing to declare his assets, though he had been instructed to do so by the Commission for the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest. [Index.hr]

Radman is the co-owner of Agroproteinka, a company that has received contracts from the agriculture ministry for disposing of the carcasses of pigs culled after a bout of African Swine Fever. [HRT] [Jutarnji.hr] [Index Investigations]

Radman said he had "made a mistake" and "didn't have time" to declare his assets. He added he would "correct all deficiencies." [Index.hr]

Referring to Agroproteinka being awarded contracts by the agriculture ministry, Radman said accusations made against him were rooted in the "absurd thesis that one ministry made a decision on the culling of pigs in order to financially favour another minister." [Index.hr]

(sl/pk)

Croatia: Former head of PM's office starts jail term for graft

A former head of the Croatian prime minister's office has begun a prison sentence for corruption.

Tomislav Saucha arrived at a Zagreb prison on October 24 to start his jail term for illegally acquiring state funds.

Saucha claimed travel expenses for international trips by various advisors. These trips were never taken and the funds were not allocated to those allegedly travelling. Saucha and his former secretary, Sandra Zeljko, were also convicted of falsifying travel documents. [Jutranji]

In 2020, Saucha was sentenced to three years in jail and Zeljko to four-and-a-half years. They were also banned from performing any official duties. [Telegram.hr] [TotalCroatiaNews]

In March this year, Croatia's Supreme Court confirmed a first-instance verdict and rejected Saucha and Zeljko's appeals. [N1Info]

Saucha served as the head of office for then-Prime Minister Zoran Milanović from 2013 to 2016. [Vecerenji] [TotalCroatiaNews]

(sl/pk)

Czech Republic: Pro-Western gov't survives no-confidence vote called by ex-PM

The pro-Western Czech administration has withstood an opposition attempt to topple it in a parliamentary vote of no confidence over claims of government incompetence in handling a growing deficit and a migration crisis.

The vote on October 19 was tabled by the centrist opposition ANO movement, together with the far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigrant SPD party.

In the 200-seat lower house of parliament, 85 opposition lawmakers voted to oust Prime Minister Petr Fiala's five-party ruling coalition, while 96 lawmakers expressed confidence in the government, with 19 absent. [Radio Prague International]

The outcome was widely expected as Fiala's centre-right government has a majority in the lower chamber.

The main opposition ANO brought the no-confidence motion after criticizing Fiala's refusal to fire Interior Minister Vit Rakusan for using an eavesdrop-proof phone.

ANO leader Andrej Babis, a populist former prime minister, claimed – without offering evidence – that Rakusan had the phone to communicate with organized crime. [abc news/AP] [Brno]

Babis's ANO movement also accused Fiala's administration of failing to deal with the country's soaring inflation, driven by high energy prices, and a new wave of immigration. [AP News].

Inflation has been on the decline in recent months, dropping from a three-decade high of 17.5% in January to 6.9% in September.

Babis also accused the pro-Western government of caring more about Ukrainians than Czech citizens. [abc

news] [The Hindu/AP]

(yl/pk)

Hungary: Budapest erupts in protests at PM's anti-EU stance

Thousands of anti-government protesters demonstrated in Budapest on October 23 against Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist leadership and his criticism of the EU.

Some demonstrators voiced concerns that Hungary could exit the European Union under Orban's rule, though the right-wing leader has denied he intends to undertake such a move. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

Speaking at an event in the city of Veszprem, south-west of Budapest, Orban accused the EU of attempting to promote liberal values in Hungary. He argued that these are not supported by the Hungarian people. [euronews]

He also criticised the EU's financial penalties against Hungary and described Brussels as a "bad contemporary parody". [Reuters] [The Guardian]

In December 2022, the EU suspended some EUR 22 billion in funds earmarked for Hungary due to concerns about democratic backsliding by Orban's government.

However, the European Commission is reviewing that decision in a bid to prevent Budapest from vetoing EU aid for Ukraine. Hungary has continued to maintain friendly ties with the Kremlin, despite criticism from other EU member states.

Thousands of students, teachers and civil organisation members took part in the October 23 protest on the streets of Budapest, calling for improved wages and greater educational freedom in Hungary. [Budapestttimes]

Demonstrators waved national, European Union and Ukrainian flags as a symbol of their opposition to Orban's pro-Russian and anti-EU rhetoric. They paused their march outside a high school where five teachers were forced to resign in September 2022 due to their involvement in widespread rallies against Orban's government. [Budapesttimes] [xpatloop]

The Hungarian PDSZ teachers' union has been organising mass protests for better wages and working

conditions for educators since 2022. The union has recently criticised Orban's administration for passing a bill this summer that increased teachers' workloads, which many viewed as an act of retaliation by the government for months of demonstrations. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

(ao/pk)

Hungary: New military cyberspace centre aims to combat digital threats

The opening of a new military centre in Budapest specialising in cybersecurity will help protect Hungary from growing digital threats, the country's defence minister has said.

At an inauguration ceremony on October 2, Defence Minister Kristof Szalay-Bobrovniczky said the centre had been in development since before Russia invaded Ukraine last year, and called the facility an "important national treasure." [Hungarytoday] [abouthungary]

The Hungarian government has in recent years prioritised national security with efforts to develop its military and boost defence spending.

Szalay-Bobrovniczky said that amid the increasing use of cyberspace in military operations, the new centre would help Hungarian forces adapt to changes in technology in the 21st century. [Hungarytoday]

(ao/pk)

Hungary: Grants aim to boost use of solar panels

The Hungarian government has announced plans to offer grants worth EUR 193.5 million in total to support households in installing solar panels and batteries. [abouthungary] [budapesttimes]

Speaking at a conference on October 5, Hungary's energy minister, Csaba Lantos, said that from January the grants would cover 65% of the installation costs of solar panels and batteries.

He also announced that from early 2024, the government would lift a ban which prevents households with solar panels from sharing their excess energy with Hungary's national grid.

Lantos added that households with solar panels that are installed before January 2026 will receive reduced electricity bills for a period of 10 years. [abouthungary] [budapesttimes] [dailynewshungary] [xpatloop]

Hungary in September announced an ambitious plan to cut its greenhouse gas emissions, while signalling that it intended to diversify its energy sources. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

(ao/pk)

Poland: Voters eject nationalists accused of choking democracy

Poland's ruling nationalists have been ousted in a parliamentary election, ending what the opposition says were eight dark years of authoritarian-minded rule that saw democracy dismantled and human rights eroded.

The right-wing, populist and EU-hostile Law and Justice (PiS) party won more votes than any other single grouping in the October 15 ballot, but failed to secure a majority in parliament.

The election, with a record turnout of over 74%, has opened the way for three opposition parties to form a new governing coalition. These will together have a clear majority. They have pledged to repair fraught relations with Brussels, which has repeatedly accused Warsaw of breaching rule-of-law principles, and to bring Poland back into the European mainstream.

Seconds after exit poll results were released, jubilant opposition leader Donald Tusk told cheering supporters: "This is one of the most beautiful days for Polish democracy."

He also promised to try to heal bitter divisions between liberal and conservative Poles that have grown deeper in recent years.

Observers have said that young people voting for the first time played a key role in the election result, giving the thumbs-down to a formula that proved successful for the PiS party in the past: a mix of traditionalist Catholicism, pugnacious nationalism and populist policies such as handing parents state payouts.

Tusk, who is eyeing the post of prime minister – a post he has held before – will need to negotiate compromises between his coalition partners, who include centre-right politicians and left-wingers. One

tricky question will be how far to ease a near-total ban on abortion introduced under PiS, a move which sparked mass street protests.

Court overhaul on the cards

A priority task a new government is likely to set itself is unravelling sweeping changes to Poland's judicial system introduced by Law and Justice. The party parachuted its own nominees into key positions, triggering concerns that many judges could no longer be trusted to deliver a fair trial. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Tusk, a former European Council president, on October 25 headed to Brussels for talks with top officials including European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola.

It was the start of Tusk's promised effort to unfreeze billions in EU funds that were earmarked for Poland but suspended over accusations that the nationalists in Warsaw have flouted the rule of law.

At stake is access to EUR 76.5 billion in EU cohesion funds, designed to help the bloc's poorer regions, and EUR 35.4 billion in grants and loans from Covid recovery funds. [Reuters] The opposition says the money is vital to help Poland catch up with the richer West.

Welcoming Tusk in the Belgian capital, von der Leyen wrote on X, formerly Twitter: "The record turnout in the elections showed again how strongly attached Poles are to democracy."

Swift end to state propaganda?

Another urgent task for the opposition when it takes power in Warsaw will be dismantling the state propaganda machine built up by Law and Justice during its two terms in office. The party has turned public media, in particular state broadcaster TVP, into a vehicle for demonising its political opponents, liberals, migrants and the LGBT community.

The television station also propagates theories that the EU, under Germany's sway, is scheming to turn Poland into a vassal state – one whose economic weakness benefits Berlin.

Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found that Law and Justice "enjoyed a clear advantage" in the Polish elections

"through its undue influence over the use of state resources and the public media". [OSCE]

Law and Justice, allied with two smaller groupings in a United Right coalition, won 194 parliamentary seats with 35.4% of the vote.

However, the three opposition groupings which have pledged to form a coalition government jointly have 248 seats in the 460-seat lower chamber.

The largest opposition bloc, the Civic Coalition – headed by Tusk's centrist Civic Platform party – won 157 seats after gaining 30.7% of the vote.

The centre-right Third Way alliance came third with 65 seats and 14.4% of the vote, while the New Left came fourth with 26 seats and 8.6%. [Polish Radio]

The freshly-elected parliament is set to meet for the first time on November 13. PiS-friendly President Andrzej Duda has been accused of stalling in designating a new prime minister. Critics have said that a delay will allow Law and Justice to destroy documents that could prove incriminating during expected probes into alleged cronyism during the party's years in power.

(pk)

Poland: Call for commission to probe alleged spying on opposition

Poland may set up a commission to investigate claims that the government used spyware against its political opponents, two opposition lawmakers have said. [Reuters] [Notes From Poland]

Opposition politician Jacek Karnowski, who was elected to parliament in October's hotly contested parliamentary elections, said he expects an investigative commission to be formed "at the turn of the year." [Reuters]

Opposition MP Piotr Zgorzelski, meanwhile, has vowed to set up such a commission. [Notes From Poland]

Three opposition groupings are expected to form a governing coalition after Poland's ruling nationalist populist Law and Justice (PiS) party failed to attain a parliamentary majority.

In a special committee report in May, the European Parliament found that Law and Justice had used Israeli-

developed surveillance software called Pegasus against opposition figures, government critics and journalists – allegations which the ruling party denies. [The Guardian] [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

Karnowski – who was serving as mayor of the Polish coastal city Sopot at the time – was one of the victims of the phone hacking scandal, according to media reports in March. [Reuters]

The newly elected MP said that the planned investigative commission should call outgoing Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and the head of Law and Justice, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, to stand before it. [Reuters]

Pawel Wojtunik, who was head of Poland's Central Anticorruption Bureau from 2009 to 2015, suggested that the government ordered "mass" surveillance of opposition members in the leadup to last month's parliamentary elections. [Notes From Poland] [Wyborcza.pl]

However, Wojtunik said that he was "unable to assess the credibility" of information he had received to that effect. He was accused of lying by Deputy Interior Minister Maciej Wasik. [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Poland: European court says changes to judges' retirement age violates law

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled that legislation in Poland which reduced the retirement age for judges infringes on their rights and amounts to unlawful interference in judicial independence.

The decision comes at a time of sweeping political change in Poland following a general election which saw pro-EU opposition parties gaining a parliamentary majority that will likely allow them to form the next government.

The ECHR's ruling challenges controversial judicial reforms that were introduced by the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party, which has governed Poland for eight years and faced criticism from Brussels on various issues, including judicial independence and LGBT rights. [ThePrint/Reuters] [The First News]

Under changes that were brought in by PiS, authorization for judges to continue working beyond the retirement age – 60 for female judges and 65 for male judges – depended on the approval of the justice

minister and the powerful National Council of the Judiciary.

The ECHR found this practice to be “arbitrary and unlawful interference in the sphere of judicial independence.” [ECHR]. The European court emphasised the need for judges to be shielded from arbitrary decisions by legislative and executive bodies, and suggested that oversight by an independent judicial body was crucial to ensuring such protection.

The ECHR also noted that the legislation’s differentiation between the retirement ages of female and male judges contravened European rules on equal treatment.

As a result of the ruling, Poland has been ordered to pay damages ranging from EUR 20,000 to 26,000 to each of the four applicants in the case.

Poland is facing several dozen pending cases at the Strasbourg-based ECHR related to the appointment of judges. The nationalist PiS government has previously dismissed numerous rulings by European institutions on judicial matters, claiming that these constituted illegal and politically motivated interference in national affairs.

(fs/pk)

Poland: Venice Commission calls for ‘Russian influence’ law to be scrapped

Legal experts from the Venice Commission rights watchdog on October 10 called on Poland to “repeal in its entirety” a law that introduced a state-backed panel to investigate alleged Russian influence on people in political and administrative functions.

The panel was set up by Poland’s ruling nationalists and given the power to prohibit a person from holding a public function and the power to annual administrative decisions when it detected Russian influence.

The Venice Commission – an advisory body to the Council of Europe, a European rights watchdog – said that the Polish commission resembled a political body with little oversight, and had the potential for political misuse.

The Venice Commission said that a later amendment that limited the scope of the Polish law was insufficient

and recommended the repeal of the original law. [Council of Europe]

Poland's ruling nationalists were ousted in October parliamentary elections after eight years in power. A new coalition government set to be formed by opposition parties is expected to undo a swathe of legal changes that saw the outgoing administration in Warsaw accused of democratic backsliding.

(psh/pk)

Slovakia: Pro-Russia ex-PM's return to power threatens EU unity on Ukraine

Slovak populist leader Robert Fico, who has vowed to withdraw his country's military support for Ukraine, was sworn in as prime minister on October 25 after an election win, prompting worries in the EU about Bratislava's possible transition from a stalwart Kyiv ally to a Moscow sympathiser.

Fico, who has denied being pro-Russian but echoed the Kremlin's propaganda by blaming "Ukrainian Nazis and fascists" for initiating the war, won early parliamentary elections on September 30 after campaigning heavily on vows to boost social spending and to "not send a single round" of ammunition to Kyiv. [BBC] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Fico's comeback has rung alarm bells in the EU that he could gang up with Hungary's populist, nationalist leader Viktor Orban to further strain Western allies' fragile unity on helping Kyiv resist Russia's invasion. [AP News] [Guardian] [France 24] [BBC]

The 59-year-old Slovak leader, who has been premier three times before, joins Orban in seeking to disrupt liberal European conventions. The two men have spoken out against the EU's continued financial and military aid for Kyiv, much of which relies on the unanimous backing of the bloc's 27 member states. [FT] [Reuters]

"An immediate halt to military operations is the best solution we have for Ukraine. The EU should change from an arms supplier to a peacemaker," Fico said on October 26. [France 24]

He added that Bratislava would not endorse EU sanctions against Moscow without a full assessment of how they would impact Slovakia. [France 24] [Reuters]

Slovakia first

Fico, who attacked Brussels and Washington on his campaign trail, has pledged to formulate foreign policy independent of EU partners and the US.

The nation-first populist has insisted he wants to uphold his country's NATO and EU membership but with "full respect" for Slovakia's sovereignty and national interests. [France 24] [AP News] [Reuters]

Fico, who has echoed Russian President Vladimir Putin's claim that the government in Kyiv runs a "Nazi" state, said he intended to block Ukraine from joining the US-led NATO.

He added that striving for peace talks is the only way to stop Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a stance dismissed by Kyiv and its Western allies, who have said halting military aid would encourage Moscow's aggression. [CNBC] [Guardian] [Reuters]

Fico is a veteran politician well acquainted with the intricacies of Brussels politics. Diplomats and analysts say he was pragmatic when he headed Slovak governments from 2006 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2018. [Reuters] [Guardian]

Some observers have suggested that he will shrink away from alienating the EU mainstream and tread carefully on issues like the bloc's support for Kyiv, given Slovakia's heavy reliance on European Union development funds. [Bloomberg] [FT] [The Economist]

"He (Fico) said crazy things about Ukraine in the campaign, but I think we will see a domestically focused government, with Fico much weaker at home than Viktor Orban in Hungary and without the same level of international ambition," said Slovak analyst Milan Nič, a senior research fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations. [FT]

The top priority of the Fico-led coalition government will be to rein in the country's ballooning deficit and combat surging illegal migration. [Bloomberg] [France 24] [AP news] [Guardian] [Reuters]

Slovakia is facing the highest budget deficit in the eurozone this year – at 6.85% of gross domestic product – due to high pre-election spending and slower economic growth. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

Coalition deal with far-right party

Following Fico's election victory, his leftist Smer party signed an agreement on October 16 with the centre-left Hlas (Voice) and the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) to forge a coalition that will control 79 seats in a

150-seat parliament. [Politico] [FT] [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [BBC] [AP News] [The Economist]

Fico's Smer is responsible for the justice, defence, foreign and finance ministries as part of the coalition deal. [Reuters] [AP News] [France 24] [Guardian]

The nationalist SNS, a party with neo-Nazi origins, takes over the culture and environment portfolios. SNS leader Andrej Danko, known for sharing Fico's pro-Kremlin leanings, said in July that some Russian-occupied territories were not "historically Ukrainian". [BBC] [Europe Monthly August 2023] [The Economist]

Meanwhile, the centre-left Hlas, which split from Fico's populist Smer on a more pro-Western platform, gets to name the parliamentary speaker. Analysts have suggested that Hlas could tame any radical policy turns by the new government. [Guardian] [Reuters]

Hlas chief Peter Pellegrini has said his party will leave Fico's coalition if the country's foreign policy does not align with Slovakia's membership of NATO and the EU. [BBC] [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

Pellegrini turned down an offer to be prime minister in a potential coalition government led by the centrist, pro-Western Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, which came second in the election after pledging to supply Ukraine with military aid. [Reuters] [AP News] [Bne] [Politico]

Progressive Slovakia will end up in opposition with 32 seats in parliament.

President Zuzana Caputova postponed the appointment of Fico's cabinet because she refused to accept SNS's original nominee, Rudolf Huliak, as the new environment minister. Huliak, a climate change denier who has verbally attacked environmental campaigners, was later replaced by Tomas Taraba, a far-right politician known for his past as a member of the neo-Nazi LSNS party. [Guardian] [AP News] [abc news] [Reuters]

President stops aid package for Ukraine

Earlier in October, President Caputova turned down a package proposed by Slovakia's pro-Western caretaker government to provide more military deliveries to Ukraine.

Caputova's office said in a statement on October 5 that the interim administration of technocrats had only limited power after it failed to secure a mandatory vote

of confidence in parliament in June. [Europe Monthly July 2023] [AP News] [Politico] [Bloomberg]

The presidential office said Caputova had not changed her stance on the importance of military supplies for Ukraine, but that approving such a package by a government on its way out would "create a risky precedent for the change of power" after future Slovak elections.

The stopgap government, formed to stabilise the country ahead of September's early parliamentary elections, had planned to deliver more ammunition to Kyiv and help train Ukrainian soldiers in demining.

Though Fico has vowed to halt military aid to Kyiv, his new coalition government is expected to maintain support for humanitarian assistance and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine.

(yl/pk)

Slovenia: Cost of devastating summer floods estimated at EUR 9.9bn

The total cost of damage caused by devastating floods that hit Slovenia in August is EUR 9.9 billion, the government has said.

The assessment, released on October 4, includes the impact on individuals, businesses and the environment. The floods affected an area estimated at over 17,000 square kilometres, or 85% of the country. [STA]

During a visit to Slovenia, Ursula von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, said the EU was ready to provide financial assistance and backing for the country's reconstruction efforts. [BNN news]

Flash floods swept away houses and destroyed bridges and roads in Slovenia on August 3, in what Prime Minister Robert Golob described as the country's worst ever natural disaster. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(ss/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern

Europe

Denmark: Non-Western immigrants will have to work to keep welfare payouts

Non-Western immigrants receiving welfare payouts in Denmark will have to work for 37 hours a week if they want to keep the benefits.

The plans, confirmed at a government briefing on October 13, were drawn up by the coalition government led by the centre-left Social Democrats along with two right-wing opposition groupings, the Danish Democrats and the Danish People's Party. [Politiken]

Non-Danish recipients of government cash assistance programmes will be subject to the work obligation if they have not lived in Denmark for nine of the last 10 years and have not been employed full-time for two-and-a-half years.

Such people will have to undertake jobs for 37 hours a week, with the type of work to be decided by municipal authorities.

Employment Minister Ane Halsboe-Jorgensen said: "We want to send a very clear signal that when you come to Denmark, we expect something from you, and then you must work if you can in any way." [The Local]

Under the plan, people working in utility jobs assigned to them may not replace existing municipal employees. Lessons in the Danish language and time spent searching for a job can be included in the 37-hour requirement.

Nick Zimmermann, of the Danish People's Party, said: "It is basically about the unfairness towards us Danes,

that we get up every... morning, while far too many people sit and do absolutely nothing, paid for by Danish taxpayers."[Danish Broadcasting Corporation]

(km/pk)

Denmark: Deputy PM quits politics amid poor poll ratings for coalition partner

Danish Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister Jakob Ellemann-Jensen resigned on October 23, announcing that he was retiring from politics. The Liberal party that he has led for four years will remain in the country's three-way governing coalition. [Reuters]

Ellemann-Jensen, who had been on sick leave from February to August due to stress, has been under pressure amid poor ratings for his party in opinion polls.

Support for the Liberals fell from 24.6% when he became party leader in September 2019 to 8.7% on October 3, according to one survey. [Toronto Star]

Critics said Ellemann-Jensen appeared weak compared to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, the leader of the Social Democrats, and Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen, the head of the Moderate Party. [Toronto Star]

Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen replaces Elleman-Jensen as economy minister and deputy premier, and is favourite to be elected as the next Liberal party chief. [Toronto Star]

"There is greater confidence that he [Lund Poulsen] can stabilize the party and this stability will likely extend into the government," political commentator Jarl Cordua told Reuters.

(gdb/pk)

Greenland women seek damages from Denmark for involuntary contraceptives

A group of 67 women from Greenland have requested financial compensation from the Danish government after being given contraceptives without consent in the 1960s and 1970s.

Until 1953, Greenland was a Danish colony but is now a semi-sovereign territory of Denmark.

The contraceptive scandal emerged in 2022 after a Danish broadcaster reported that between 1966 and 1970, 4,500 intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUD) were given to young Inuit women without their knowledge.

The initiative, organised by the Danish government, aimed to limit the birth rate in Greenland. [Politiken]

In May, the Danish and Greenlandic governments launched an investigation into the scandal but its conclusions are not due until May 2025. [Danish Broadcasting Corporation] [Reuters]

Sixty-seven women submitted a request to Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on October 2 for DKK 300,000 (EUR 40,230) each as compensation. [The New York Times]

Naja Lyberth, who initiated the compensation claim, said: "It's already 100% clear that the [Danish] government has broken the law by violating our human rights and causing us serious harm." [France 24]

In 2009, Greenland passed a self-governing act reducing Denmark's authority in the territory but a Danish grant still makes up a quarter of Greenland's GDP and over half of its public budget.

(km/pk)

Denmark: Defence ministry to restart ammo production after 55 years

Denmark will restart ammunition production after a 55-year gap, the country's defence ministry announced on October 7, amid a spike in demand caused by the war in Ukraine.

The defence ministry said it had entered into an agreement to buy an arms factory in north-western Denmark which was the country's only ammunition supplier from its establishment in 1676 until 1968.

The ministry announced it had agreed to pay DKE 19.6 million (EUR 2.6 million) to buy the factory from the Krudten Erhvervspark consortium. [Danish Broadcasting Corporation]

Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said: "Ammunition production in Europe is under severe pressure, and we should also try to find solutions in Denmark to contribute where we can, based on Danish needs." [Reuters]

The defence ministry did not specify the type of ammunition that will be produced.

(km/pk)

Finland: Ruling party reclaims lead in opinion poll after scandals

Finland's right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP), the main grouping in the country's ruling coalition, has restored its lead in an opinion poll after a string of racism scandals earlier this year. [Yle] [Europe Monthly September 2023]

The monthly survey, carried out for Finnish public broadcaster Yle, found that the NCP would secure 21.5% of the vote in a parliamentary election, marking a 0.3 percentage point rise from the last study. [Yle]

In July, the NCP and one of its coalition partners, the right-wing populist Finns Party, were overtaken by the centre-left opposition Social Democratic Party in the poll following racism scandals involving government ministers. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

In the latest study, the Social Democratic Party's popularity dropped by 0.6 points to 20.8%. [Helsinki Times]

The Finns Party, meanwhile, experienced a decline in support of one percentage point to 17.5%, marking the fourth consecutive month of diminishing popularity. [Yle]

"The Finns Party is on a not-especially-steep but nevertheless downward trajectory," said Tuomo Turja of market research company Taloustutkimus, which conducted the survey for Yle.

The remaining members of the ruling coalition, the centrist Swedish People's Party and the centre-right Christian Democrats, have also experienced a drop in support. [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

Finland: Ex-President and Nobel peace laureate Martti Ahtisaari dies at 86

Former Finnish President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Martti Ahtisaari has died at the age of 86. [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera]

The news was confirmed by the Finnish presidential office on October 16.

A prominent member of the centre-left Social Democrat party, Ahtisaari served as Finland's president from 1994 to 2000. He was also a United Nations diplomat known for his peace-making efforts. He retired in September 2021, struggling with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. [Yle] [The Guardian]

Finnish President Sauli Niinisto paid tribute to his predecessor, describing Ahtisaari as having "lived a remarkable life." [Al Jazeera]

Ahtisaari played a pivotal role in brokering peace across various continents, including agreements that led to Namibia's independence in 1990, and the granting of autonomy to Aceh province in Indonesia in 2005.

He also drafted a peace plan and a constitution for the former Yugoslav province of Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008. [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera] [Yle]

He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008, with the Nobel Committee praising his "important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflicts." [The Guardian] [Yle]

In 1994, during his first year as president, Ahtisaari oversaw Finland's historic referendum on joining the European Union. He was also an early supporter of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. [The Guardian]

Finland eventually became a member of the Western military alliance earlier this year. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

(rs/pk)

Finland: New Sami parliament chosen

Finland's indigenous Sami people have chosen a new parliament to represent their interests and rights on both the national and international stage. [Euronews] [Yle] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

The Sami, who are Finland's only officially recognized indigenous community, voted in September to elect 21 members to their assembly for a term running from 2024 to 2027.

The results of the election were announced on October 4, with three women emerging as the main winners. The new parliament will focus on matters including the right to self-determination and land-use issues. [Yle]

The Finnish government does not have a minister for indigenous affairs and the Sami people have limited representation in the national parliament in Helsinki. One candidate for the election to the Sami assembly described the Finnish government as "indifferent" to Sami issues. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Finland has faced criticism from the United Nations for its treatment of the Sami people. The country was found in 2022 to have breached an international convention on racial discrimination concerning the political rights of the community. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly January 2023] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

In February, the government led by then-Prime Minister Sanna Marin failed to pass a reform bill supporting Sami rights. The matter has remained a point of contention, straining relations between Helsinki and the Sami. [Yle] [Euronews] [Europe Monthly January 2023] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

The largest number of votes in the Sami parliament election was secured by Anu Avaskari, who has been a long-time member of the Sami assembly. Anni Koivisto, currently the first vice-chairman of the assembly, won the second-highest number of votes. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finland launches EUR 50m biodiversity drive amid green record

Finland is set to launch its largest biodiversity project, aiming to restore and preserve natural areas. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Government]

The project named, Priodiversity LIFE, is backed by a EUR 50 million budget, including EUR 30 million provided by the EU's LIFE programme, which provides funds for pro-environment initiatives.

The Finnish project is scheduled to start in early 2024 and will span eight years. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish

Government] [Carbon Pulse]

Beyond conservation, Priodiversity LIFE plans to create 461 "person-years" of employment, promoting skill development for people involved in protecting nature. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Government]

In another boost to the country's green efforts, recent data by the Finnish Energy Industry Association (Energiateollisuus ry) has revealed that in September, 98% of the country's electricity production was emission-free, marking a record. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Energy]

Since the beginning of the year, the clean energy ratio has been at 93.5%, owing to a limited reliance on fossil fuels and peat. Nuclear power contributes two-fifths of the total output, closely followed by wind and hydropower. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Energy]

"The energy crisis has ironically accelerated our efforts to tackle the larger crisis, which is the climate crisis," said Jukka Leskela, CEO of the energy industry group.

"Clean electricity is readily available and can be further increased as demand grows. Electricity serves as a solution to reduce emissions in other sectors, including transportation and industry." [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Energy]

In 2022, Finland's electricity use dropped by 6% with the help of energy-saving measures initiated during last winter's high prices. The country is now a net electricity exporter, and its self-sufficiency has risen due to increased nuclear capacity and wind power investments. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Energy]

(rs/pk)

Iceland: Women, including PM, strike for 24 hours over inequality

Tens of thousands of women in Iceland including Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir went on strike on October 24 to protest at a gender pay gap in the country and at sexual and gender-based violence. [The Guardian]

Dozens of organizations including Iceland's largest association of public worker unions joined the walkout. [ABC news] [BBC]

Organizers said that in certain professions Icelandic women earn 21% less than men. Meanwhile, over 40%

of women report having experienced gender-based or sexual violence in their lifetime. [The Guardian]

The October protest was the first of its kind since 1975, when 90% of women in Iceland went on strike, leading to key changes including the election of the world's first female president. [ABC news].

Iceland has been the most gender-equal country in the world for 14 years in a row, according to the World Economic Forum. [WEF]

With the global reputation that it has, Iceland has a responsibility to "make sure we live up to those expectations," said Freyja Steingrímsdóttir, one of the strike organisers. [The Guardian]

(gdb/pk)

Norway: Foreign minister replaced after conflict-of-interest concerns

Norway's Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt lost her job on October 16 in a government reshuffle after it emerged that her husband traded shares in publicly listed companies that could have been affected by her decisions in office. [POLITICO]

One of these companies was weapons manufacturer Kongsberg Gruppen, in which the Norwegian state is a majority shareholder. [POLITICO]

Huitfeldt, from the ruling Labour Party, said in late August that she was unaware of her husband's involvement in the company. She added she believed that she had not breached conflict-of-interest rules. [The Barents Observer]

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store initially said Huitfeldt had made mistakes, but added that he believed her account of events and wanted to keep her in her post. [The Barents Observer]

That changed after municipal and regional elections in September saw the Labour Party finishing behind the conservative opposition. The result marked the first time that Labour, which heads a minority centre-left coalition government, failed to come first in any nationwide vote since 1924. [Reuters]

Huitfeldt is being investigated by parliament in an ethics probe. [Reuters]

Erna Solberg, the head of the Conservative Party – Labour's main rival – is subject to a similar parliamentary inquiry after it was recently revealed that her husband traded shares during her time as premier from 2013 to 2021. [Reuters]

Political commentators pointed out that it was challenging for Store to criticise Solberg for her husband's stock trading while one of his own ministers faced similar issues. [The Barents Observer]

(jb/pk)

Norway: Indigenous activists protest against controversial wind farms

Hundreds of campaigners took to the streets of Oslo on October 11 to demand the removal of two windfarms that the indigenous Sami people say pose a threat to their culture. [Guardian]

The demonstration by indigenous and environmental activists was the latest after a landmark ruling in 2021 by Norway's supreme court, which found that 151 wind turbines in the western Fosen region of Norway infringed on the rights of Sami reindeer herders by encroaching on their grazing lands. [Guardian] [Independent]

While the court invalidated the turbines' expropriation and operating permits, the fate of the wind turbine infrastructure was left unspecified. As a result, the windfarms continue to operate. [Guardian]

Sami activists say that the government's reluctance to remove the turbines could threaten the Sami culture, which revolves around reindeer rearing and the land.

"It really scares a lot of young people because, for us, our culture is everything. It really feels like we are nothing without our lands or our reindeer," said Ella Marie Haetta Isaksen, a Sami protester and activist. [Guardian] [Independent]

The Sami are an indigenous people who live in Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia. Their total population is estimated to be around 80,000, of whom roughly half live in Norway. Around 2,600 Sami individuals in Norway earn their livelihood through reindeer herding. [Northern Norway]

The protests have drawn the support of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who was detained during a previous demonstration in Oslo in February.

Thunberg said: “A climate transition that violates human rights is not a climate transition worthy of the name.” [Guardian] [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Politico]

The Norwegian government has deemed the turbines a “violation of human rights” but has so far resisted calls for their dismantling. Instead, it supports mediation between the wind farm owners and the Sami people. [Independent] [Guardian]

(rs/pk)

Norwegian author Jon Fosse wins Nobel Prize for literature

Norwegian author, poet and playwright Jon Fosse was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature on October 5. [BBC] [Financial Times]

According to the Swedish Academy, which awards the prize, Fosse was chosen for his “innovative plays and prose which gives voice to the unsayable”. [BBC] [Financial Times]

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said on social media site [X], formerly Twitter: “All of Norway congratulates [you] and is proud today!”

Fosse’s works, primarily written in the Nynorsk variant of the Norwegian language, include the *Septology* series and novels such as *Aliss at the Fire* and *Melancholy*. [BBC]

(rs/pk)

Sweden: Non-European immigrants face social benefit cuts

The right-wing Swedish government plans to make it harder for non-Europeans to receive social benefits in an effort to dissuade immigration. [Barrons]

The country’s ruling coalition is also set to introduce rules that will require immigrants from outside Europe to learn Swedish and compete for jobs in the country’s highly-skilled labour market. [Infomigrants]

While details of the plan are being worked out, the leaders of the three-party governing coalition and the far-right Sweden Democrats have said that the Nordic nation has “significant problems” with foreign-born

people who are unemployed and live on benefits. [Barrons]

“Together with an integration policy that has made almost no demands [on immigrants] and provided no incentive to integrate into society, extensive immigration has created a divided Sweden,” the leaders said in an opinion piece for the Dagens Nyheter newspaper. [The Local]

The article did not illustrate its claims with any official data, nor did it provide information on the number of Swedish citizens living on social benefits. [The Local]

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson’s minority government, which came to power a year ago with backing from the far-right Sweden Democrats, has vowed to crack down on immigration and crime.

(jb/pk)

Sweden: Record bomb attacks amid surge in gang violence

Sweden witnessed 139 attacks involving bombs this year as of October 23, six more than the previous record year in 2019. [The Local] Police have kept a tally of bomb attacks since 2018.

Sweden has the highest crime rate in Northern Europe, particularly experiencing problems with gang violence and other gang-related crimes such as fraud, arms trafficking and drug trafficking.

A report by the NGO Global Initiative (GI) gave Sweden a 4.7 out of 10 rating on its Organised Crime Index – the highest of eight Northern European countries. [European Conservative]

Local police have linked the surge in violence to a gang leader known as the Kurdish Fox, real name Rawa Majid, along with his rivals. Majid has acquired Turkish citizenship, and the government in Ankara has been reluctant to extradite him to Sweden. [European Conservative]

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has assured the public that gangs will be pursued and put on trial. “If they are Swedish citizens they will be locked up for a long time in prison, and if they are foreign citizens they will… be expelled,” he said. [The New European]

Following a bomb explosion in late September that killed a young woman and destroyed five houses,

Kristersson said in a television appearance that the cause of the violence was “unsuccessful integration”. [DW]

(jb/pk)

Sweden: In European first, Stockholm to ban petrol and diesel cars from city centre

In a first for a European capital, Stockholm will ban petrol and diesel-powered cars from certain parts of the city beginning in 2025, officials have announced.

The initiative will affect a 20-block zone with the aim to improve air quality and reduce traffic noise. [Euronews] [Reuters]

The Swedish capital’s deputy mayor for transport, Lars Stromgren, said: “Nowadays, the air in Stockholm causes babies to have lung conditions and the elderly to die prematurely.”

Stromgren, who is a member of the Greens, part of Stockholm City Council’s ruling left-wing coalition, added: “We need to eliminate the harmful exhaust gases from petrol and diesel cars. That’s why we are introducing the most ambitious low-emission zone to date.” [The Guardian]

The move has been criticised by the opposition centre-right Christian Democrat party, which has said that the plan could hurt businesses. [AP News]

Exceptions to the ban will apply to ambulances, police cars, and vehicles transporting someone with a documented disability. [New York Times]

(km/pk)

Sweden: Gov’t does not plan to remain long-term owner of SAS airline

The Swedish government does not plan to remain a long-term owner of financially troubled Scandinavian Airlines (SAS), Finance Minister Elisabeth Svantesson has said.

The government has already invested over SEK 8 billion (EUR 691 million) and has rejected the carrier’s request for more funds.

On October 3, SAS unveiled a restructuring plan including a EUR 1.1 billion deal with Air France-KLM and other investors. [Svenska Dagbladet] [Reuters]

The deal effectively wiped out its existing shareholders, including the Swedish state with a 21.8% stake, Bloomberg reported.

Last year, SAS filed for US bankruptcy protection amid debt problems, strikes by pilots and a struggle to reduce costs. [Reuters] [Göteborgs-Posten]

Svantesson said: "The Swedish state shall be a responsible, but not long-term, owner in SAS." She added that the government would monitor the restructuring of the airline, which has struggled to compete with low-cost rivals. [Bloomberg]

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU launches formal inquiry into X under Digital Services Act

The European Commission has formally submitted a request for information from X – formerly known as Twitter – under the Digital Services Act (DSA), citing concerns over the company's handling of the surge of false content surrounding the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas. [Reuters] [Politico] [Al Jazeera] [European Commission]

The request, submitted on October 12, marks the first time the European Union's (EU) executive has taken

such steps in response to potential DSA violations. The DSA, in effect since October of last year, is a pivotal element of the EU's digital strategy. It mandates very large online platforms and search engines to combat deemed misinformation, illegal content, address public security risks and protect against manipulative techniques. [Reuters] [European Commission]

In a letter to X, Thierry Breton, the European Commissioner for Internal Market, outlined the Commission's request for detailed information on how the platform manages problematic content. Similar requests have been issued to TikTok and Meta for their alleged inaction against disinformation during the same period. [Politico] [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

Responding to Breton's concerns, X CEO Linda Yaccarino stated that the company is "actively working to address the operational needs of this fast-moving and evolving conflict [X]." Elon Musk, who acquired X last year and currently serves as CTO, challenged the lack of specific examples of disinformation provided by the European Union. [Politico] [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

Recent changes in X's policy, including Musk's decision to limit free academic access to a data tool that had enabled researchers to track keywords and hashtags, have made tracing disinformation on the platform more difficult. Additionally, Musk's drastic staff cuts have reportedly impacted the performance of X's content moderation team, hindering its ability to effectively filter out disinformation. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

The request by the EU Commission has also received some backlash from conservative factions in the United States.

On X, author and political commentator Michael Shellenberger wrote that the incident reminded him of an episode of the dystopian Netflix series *Black Mirror,* with "a petty group of European bureaucrats[...] deciding what the whole world should be able to say and hear on social media platforms."

Previously, politicians in the US Senate's Committee of Finance had spoken out against the DSA for being discriminatory in its targeting of US tech companies, arguing in a letter to President Joe Biden that policies targeting disinformation of social media "must apply equally to firms based in Europe, China, the United States, and other countries.

Following the request for information, X must provide the required details regarding its crisis response to online terrorist propaganda by October 18 and

address other compliance issues by October 31. The Commission will then decide whether to initiate formal proceedings against the company. If found in violation of the DSA, X faces potential fines of up to 6% of its global revenue. [Politico] [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

(if/gc)

European nationalists lose ally as Polish opposition triumphs in election

Nationalist-populist movements across the EU have lost a key ally after voters decided to oust Poland's right-wing government. [Time] [BBC News] [The Washington Post]

Polish parliamentary elections on October 15 signalled an end to eight years of nationalist rule in the EU's fifth-largest country and heralded hopes among many for a more cooperative chapter in fraught and often vitriolic Warsaw-Brussels relations. [BBC News]

Over the course of its two terms in power, the Law and Justice (PiS) party faced accusations from the EU of democratic backsliding over the government's tight grip on state media, controversial judicial reforms, erosion of women's and LGBTQ rights, and highly-criticised migration policies.

Law and Justice received the highest share of votes of any one party in last month's closely contested ballot but failed to secure a majority, paving the way for the opposition — which includes parties ranging from the centre-right to the left — to form a coalition government. [The Washington Post]

The results strike a blow to Eurosceptic populist groups across the bloc, including Viktor Orban's right-wing government in Hungary and the recently elected Moscow-friendly Smer party in Slovakia. [BBC News] [CNN]

Hungary and Poland have long supported each other in the EU, together defying Brussels on policies ranging from migration and climate change to rule-of-law matters. [BBC News]

Referring to the Polish election results, leading German news site Der Spiegel wrote: "It appears possible that a major bastion of right-wing populism has fallen." [Der Spiegel]

Warsaw's new centrist-liberal government is expected to rapidly begin reversing changes enacted by Law and

Justice to Poland's legal system — which the EU says undermine the political independence of the judiciary. [Europe Monthly July 2023] [Time]

The changes have been the cause of a long-running dispute with Brussels over rule-of-law concerns, with the EU continuing to block EUR 35.4 billion in Covid recovery funds for Poland. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Former European Council president Donald Tusk – head of the Polish centrist Civic Platform (PO) party, which would be the largest member of a new governing coalition – will hope to make good on his campaign promise to unblock the EU funds and improve relations with the bloc. [Politico]

'Autocratic populism can be defeated'

"Take note: the victory of the Polish opposition proves that autocratic populism can be defeated, even after an unfair election," wrote author and journalist Anne Applebaum for The Atlantic, adding: "Nothing is inevitable about the rise of autocracy or the decline of democracy." [The Washington Post] [The Atlantic]

Observers have said that the support of the public media and state-controlled companies for Poland's nationalists meant the opposition did not have a level playing field.

Rosa Balfour, director of Brussels think tank Carnegie Europe, said the result of the Polish election would bring a "major shift" for Europe. [The Washington Post]

"If we get a government without Law and Justice, the relationship between Warsaw and Brussels, which has deteriorated steadily, would change," Balfour said. "It also shows that Polish society can make independent decisions even if the media is government controlled." [The Washington Post]

British historian and author Timothy Garton Ash, a specialist on Central and Eastern Europe, told Polish private broadcaster TVN that the triumph of the opposition was "especially significant for Europe because, in a certain sense, Poland is now going against the current."

He added: "The main trend in Europe is still in the direction of populism. Look at Slovakia, with Robert Fico, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, and now Germany with the electoral successes of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)."

One EU diplomat said the bloc would function better following the Polish election results, adding: "The

rejection of far-right policies should serve as an example to other people, and this should hopefully lead to the EU becoming stronger in the face of geopolitical threats." [The Washington Post]

(ek/pk)

EU mulls releasing funds to Hungary in bid to stop veto on aid for Ukraine

In a move to stop Budapest from vetoing an EU aid package for Ukraine, the European Commission is planning to release frozen funds to Hungary before December, Politico and The Financial Times have reported.

Budapest, which is Moscow's closest ally in the EU, has been opposing the bloc's aid to Kyiv, citing what it says is the harsh treatment of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Ukraine.

The EU froze around EUR 22 billion in funds to Hungary in December 2022 amid concerns about its right-wing government's democratic backsliding. [Politico]

However, EU officials have said that judicial reforms by Budapest in May have moved Hungary closer to unlocking EUR 13 billion in funds designated for the country's economic development. [Reuters]

European Union leaders plan to vote on a EUR 50 billion funding package for Kyiv in December, requiring unanimous support from all member states. Current EU financial support for Ukraine runs out the same month. [Politico]

(ao/pk)

EU Parliament calls for more trust with Switzerland

The European Union Parliament in Strasbourg, France approved a report on October 4 calling for "more trust between the EU and Switzerland based on greater transparency." The Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) approved the report by 538 votes to 42, with 43 abstentions.

The report "regretted" Switzerland's decision not to decide on a negotiating mandate until the end of 2023,

especially given that the European parliament will hold elections in mid-2024.

The report went on to state that while there is no agreement on the deal package, numerous bilateral agreements between the EU and Switzerland are "at risk of being undermined." [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania focus on green energy, connectivity

The prime ministers of Greece, Bulgaria and Romania met on October 9 in Varna, where they signed a joint declaration to enhance trilateral transport, digital connectivity and regional relations.

Acknowledging the importance of strengthening ties in southeastern Europe, the leaders reaffirmed their commitment to deepening bilateral cooperation in the broader region. [EUReporter]

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis emphasised the pivotal role of Greece in regional energy interconnectivity and green energy. He highlighted the expansion of natural gas exports and the development of green energy sources, aiming to establish Greece as a hub for the distribution of green energy. [GreekReporter]

The leaders recognised the need to develop strategic transport, energy interconnections and digital networks along the north-south axis to boost economic growth and cohesion in the region and across Europe. This includes identifying and establishing new rail and motorway infrastructure connecting the three countries.[EUReporter]

Additionally, they agreed to establish a trilateral working group led by relevant ministers to prepare and sign a memorandum of understanding for a multimodal transport corridor. Furthermore, the leaders renewed their call for Bulgaria's and Romania's accession to the Schengen area by the end of this year.

They pledged to strengthen cooperation in addressing illegal migration and targeting human smuggling networks and supply chains.

(kg/gc)

Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria work together against Black Sea mines

The Turkish Defence Ministry announced on October 11 that Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria will work together to tackle the problem of floating mines in the Black Sea as a result of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

The ministry said that the three states had discussed the plan at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's defence ministers meeting in Brussels earlier that week. [Reuters]

The same day, Romanian Defence Minister Angel Tilvar announced the results of an investigation into debris found near the country's border with Ukraine, concluding that it came from Russian drones shot down by Ukrainian air defences. [NewVoiceofUkraine]

The Romanian defence ministry announced the discovery of a drone crater near the Ukrainian-Romanian border following Russia's attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure along the Danube river the evening prior. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Russia withdraws from Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

Russia's parliament completed the process of withdrawing its ratification of the global treaty banning nuclear weapons tests on October 26, evidence of its chilly relations with the United States as Moscow pursues its war in Ukraine. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Russia was not prepared to resume discussing nuclear issues with the US unless Washington dropped its "hostile" policy. [Reuters]

On October 9, Russian lawmakers had been given 10 days to consider how best to withdraw Moscow's ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The topic of a nuclear test ban had become prevalent after Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested on October 5 that Moscow might reconsider its commitment to the treaty. [Meduza] [Reuters]

Russia's representative to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO) announced the possibility of revoking the ratification on October 6.

Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's representative to CTBTO, wrote: "The aim is to be on equal footing with the #US

who signed the Treaty but didn't ratify it. Revocation doesn't mean the intention to resume nuclear tests."

Chairman of the State Duma, the lower house of parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin discussed the issue with parliamentary leaders on October 9 and said he and other parliamentary leaders had given lawmakers of the International Affairs Committee until October 18 to study the option of de ratification.

In response to Moscow's statements, the head of the CTBTO, Robert Floyd, said, "Banning nuclear testing remains essential to preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and to safeguarding current and future generations from the harmful effects of explosive nuclear testing." [Reuters]

(ad/gc)

Switzerland takes part in NATO air exercise

The Swiss Army sent 45 soldiers to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Tiger Meet in Gioia del Colle in southern Italy to participate in air exercises between October 2 and 13.

The exercises aimed to strengthen defence capacity and international cooperation. Thirteen countries participated in total, with over 70 combat aircrafts, 15 helicopters and 1,500 soldiers.

Switzerland, while not a member of NATO, has been a member of the NATO Tigers Association since 1981 and has participated in the Tiger Meet since 2004. [SwissInfo] [20minutes]

(sw/gc)

Erdogan sends bill approving Sweden's NATO membership to parliament

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan submitted a bill approving Sweden's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership to parliament for ratification.

The bill's passage through parliament should be a formality, but Erdogan has a track record of holding out on Sweden's application to extract concessions from the US, including the sale of F-16s to Ankara, the Guardian newspaper reported. Erdogan signed on

October 23 the protocol on Sweden's NATO then sent it to Turkey's grand national assembly, the president posted on Twitter. [TheGuardian]

Sweden moved to join NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Turkey had initially opposed Sweden's membership, demanding that the Scandinavian country tighten up on the extradition of Kurdish asylum seekers living in Sweden. Turkish officials have insisted the steps Sweden had taken to clamp down on the outlawed Kurdistan Workers party militia were insufficient. [TheEconomist][Reuters]

Turkish officials have repeatedly said Stockholm needed to take more concrete steps to clamp down on the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militia before Ankara could ratify its membership bid. The PKK is deemed a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the European Union and the United States. [Reuters]

Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson welcomed the move. "Now it remains for the parliament to deal with the question," Kristersson said on X. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he was looking forward to a "speedy vote" in the Turkish parliament and to welcoming Sweden as an ally "very soon." [Reuters]

Turkey and Hungary are the only NATO members whose legislatures have yet to sign off on Sweden's accession. [TheGuardian]

(vt/gc)

Ukraine pauses WTO complaint against Poland, Slovakia and Hungary

Ukraine has paused its World Trade Organisation (WTO) lawsuit against Poland, Slovakia and Hungary after filing a complaint in September following the neighbouring states' embargo on the country's food exports. Ukraine's Deputy Economic Minister Taras Kachka said that a compromise can be found. [Reuters]

Ukraine paused its WTO complaint to allow for practical solutions to be found, Kachka said. Ukraine did not seek disputes with its neighbours but sought a wider European Union solution to the food embargo, he added. [Ukrainska Pravda]

Poland described Ukraine's decision as a "good but insufficient step." Polish government spokesperson Piotr Muller demanded a total withdrawal of the WTO claim and ruled out pausing Poland's grain embargo. [Yahoo News]

(md/gc)

UK, allies provide additional military support for Ukraine

The United Kingdom will provide GBP 100 million in military aid to Ukraine to help Kyiv remove minefields at river crossings and trenches and to protect critical infrastructure. [GOV UK].

The International Fund for Ukraine (IFU), a funding mechanism administered by the UK with contributions from Norway, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Lithuania, will procure and fund the equipment. The IFU was created in April 2022 to coordinate the purchase and transport of military equipment to Ukraine.

The member nations have contributed GBP 785 million to the IFU, including GBP 500 million from the UK. This is the IFU's third procurement round, known as the "Urgent Bidding Round." [IFU].

After the United States, which has provided USD 43.9 billion since February 2022, the UK is the second largest provider of military assistance to Ukraine, at GBP 4.6 billion.

In January, when the UK became the first ally to give main battle tanks to Ukraine, the British Chief of the General Staff, General Patrick Sanders, warned that its military support to Kyiv weakens the British army "temporarily." [BBC] [House of Commons]

(ar/gc)

United Kingdom plans to deploy 20,000 troops to Northern Europe

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that the United Kingdom will increase its military presence in Northern Europe by deploying more than 20,000 soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen. It will send eight Royal Navy ships, 25 military jets and an aviation task force of Apache, Chinook and Wildcat helicopters. [UK GOV]

Sunak announced the deployment at a meeting with Northern European leaders in Sweden on October 13 and after the discovery on October 8 of damage to a gas pipeline and telecom cable connecting Finland and Estonia in what appears to be an act of sabotage.

The Finnish foreign ministry has contacted both China and Russia in its investigation. [Reuters]

The British deployment is part of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a UK-led coalition of ten northern European nations. It includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Unlike NATO, the JEF does not require consensus, enabling it to respond quickly, particularly against hybrid threats under NATO's Article 5. [CSIS]

(ar/gc)

Czech defence minister calls for UN exit over resolution on Gaza

Czech Defence Minister Jana Cernochova has urged her country to withdraw from the UN after the body's General Assembly passed a resolution demanding a humanitarian truce in Gaza without explicitly condemning Palestinian militant organisation Hamas for its attack on Israel.

"I'm ashamed of the UN," Cernochova said on October 28 on X, formerly known as Twitter. "In my opinion, the Czech Republic has no place in an organisation that cheers on terrorists and does not respect the fundamental right to self-defence. Let's get out." [Radio Prague] [Radio Prague] [bnn] [BRNO]

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, who visited Israel on October 25 to show support for the Jewish state's right to defend itself, said Prague was committed to remaining a member of the UN. [Embassy of the Czech Republic] [expats.cz]

Fiala told Slovak news website Dennik N on October 29 that he understood Cernochova's frustration with the resolution's failure to "condemn the terrorism of Hamas in Israel".

The United Nations General Assembly – which brings together representatives from all 193 UN member states – voted on October 27 to call for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, along with unhindered access to humanitarian aid for the besieged Gaza Strip. [BBC] [Aljazeera] [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

EU to boost wind power sector to counter Chinese turbines

The European Commission on October 24 tabled a European Wind Power Action Plan that seeks to strengthen the wind power sector in the EU.

In a bid to ensure that the sector operates in a fair and competitive international environment, the commission plans to employ procurement instruments, trade defence tools and free trade agreements to encourage a level playing field for European products both at home and abroad. [European Commission]

The move comes in tandem with an investigation into China's activities in subsidizing its own wind power sector. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the European Commission on September 13 launched a probe into whether to impose tariffs on imported Chinese electric vehicles amid claims of an unfair competitive advantage for Chinese products because of state subsidies from Beijing.

Amid fears of a trade war erupting, a fissure has emerged between officials in France and Germany, an automotive powerhouse that is fearful of a possible tit-for-tat escalation with Beijing. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Wind power is seen as crucial to replacing fossil fuels and boosting domestic energy production, but the EU is falling behind on installation if it wants to meet its 2030 climate and energy goals.

(ic/pk)

Russia and Arab League aim to work to resolve Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Russia and the Arab League will work together to "stop the bloodshed" in Israel and Gaza.

The Russian Foreign Minister said this during a meeting in Moscow with the group's chief Ahmed Aboul Gheit, who arrived in Moscow on October 9 after the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas attacked Israel.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that it was important to "urgently stop the clashes, solve the problem with the civilian population...and establish the

reason why there is no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Abul Gheitsaid: "We demand the creation of political prospects and a fair resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict." [The Moscow Times]

(ad/gc)

Turkey can act as mediator in Israeli-Hamas conflict, Erodogan says

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said his government is ready to act as a mediator in order to bring an end to the current war between Israel and Hamas, a result of the latter's October 7 terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians and military personnel.

On the same day of the attacks, President Erdogan said peace in the Middle East "is only possible through a final settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict" and called the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, composed by the region's pre-1967 borders including East Jerusalem, "a necessity that can no longer be delayed." [Al-Monitor]

In an October 11 statement, Erdogan called upon countries "to take up a position between the parties that is fair, just, and based on humanitarian balances," saying that "everyone should refrain from acts that will wholly punish the Palestinian people, like blocking humanitarian aid." [Reuters]

While the Turkish president remained comparatively muted in his condemnation of Hamas's role, Erdogan cited Israel's response to the terrorist assault as "disproportionate" and "devoid of any ethical foundation." He described on October 13 Israel's attack on Gaza and decision to cut electricity and water as a "massacre."

Erdogan called on Israel to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza to provide food, energy and basic needs to the Palestinian population through Egypt's Rafah crossing, which is now closed. Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Fidan called during a joint press conference with his Lebanese counterpart Abdallah Bouhabib for the international community to work toward a two state solution. [Politico][Reuters]

Anti-Israeli protests erupted in Ankara on October 17 after an Israeli strike killed large numbers of Palestinians in a Gaza hospital. Protesters marched with Palestinian flags, chanting anti-Israel slogans.

Police used pepper spray and water cannons to disperse the protesters who tried to enter Israel's consulate in Ankara. [Reuters][L'OrientToday]

Ulterior motives?

The Turkish leader also questioned the Biden administration's mobilisation of its USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean on October 10.

General Michael Kurilla, commander of the U.S. Central Command said that the arrival of "these highly capable forces" to the region was "a strong signal of deterrence should any actor hostile to Israel consider trying to take advantage of this situation." [U.S. Central Command]

During a joint press conference with Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer in Ankara, Erdogan asked: "What will the aircraft carrier of the US do near Israel, why do they come? What will boats and aircraft on it do? They will hit Gaza and around, and take steps for serious massacres there." [Reuters]

A 'fatuous' notion

Regarding Ankara's offers of mediation, some experts believe it is unlikely Israel would consent to Turkey as a moderator.

Israel has, for years, accused Erdogan of harbouring Hamas leaders and providing cover for the terror organisation, claims which others in the region including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) support. [Al-Monitor]

According to Alan Makovsky, a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress and Turkey analyst, "The idea that Turkey could mediate this crisis, or that Israel would accept its mediation, is fatuous."

Makovsky noted that "even in the wake of this ugly operation, he [Erdogan] has been unable clearly and unequivocally to label Hamas or its assault on and kidnapping of civilians as 'terrorist.' Nor has he even called on Hamas to release its hostages, even civilian ones." [Al-Monitor]

(cqk-vt/gc)

United Kingdom deploys forces to eastern Mediterranean

The United Kingdom announced the deployment of military assets to the Eastern Mediterranean on October 13 in support of Israel's right to self-defence.

The military deployment included P8 aircraft, surveillance assets, two Royal Navy ships, three Merlin helicopters and a company of Royal Marines "who will be on standby to deliver practical support to Israel and partners in the region and offer deterrence and assurance." [UK GOV]

In a visit to Israel on October 19, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reiterated British support of Israel's right to defend itself and stressed, along with Israeli President Issac Herzog, the need to avoid further escalation of violence. The two leaders agreed to continue working for the release of British nationals held hostage by Hamas.

The UK government has said at least nine British nationals died in the October 7 Hamas attack, and seven are missing. [Reuters][BBC]

The British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly travelled to the Middle East on October 18 for a three-day trip to the region. He met with leaders in Egypt, Turkey and Qatar to discuss regional stability and the urgent need for humanitarian aid access for Gaza via the Rafah crossing in Egypt. The UK has also pledged an additional GPB 10 million in humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians. [UK GOV]

(ar/gc)

Vatican criticized by both Palestinians and Israel over response to conflict

The Vatican's response to the Israeli-Hamas war has been criticised by both sides in the conflict.

Pope Francis has appealed for peace and voiced concern at the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the possibility of the conflict expanding. [Vatican News]

He has also called for the release of over 200 hostages taken by Palestinian Islamist group Hamas when it carried out a raid on October 7 from the Gaza Strip on southern Israel, killing about 1,400 people. In response, Israel unleashed air strikes on Gaza that have killed thousands.

The Palestinian ambassador to Denmark, Manuel Sarkis Hassassian, has urged the Vatican – and Pope

Francis especially – to take a stronger stance against the killings of Palestinians.

In an October 18 interview, the ambassador said that "a strong statement from the Vatican… should move America and Europe to expedite the process of stopping this carnage." [NCR]

At the same time, Israel has criticised the Vatican for what it sees as a lack of clear condemnation of Hamas.

In a statement following a meeting with Vatican officials, Israel's foreign minister, Eli Cohen, said it was "inconceivable" that the Holy See would voice concern for the suffering in Gaza without acknowledging the Israelis killed by Hamas on October 7. [MSN]

The Vatican has clearly stated its "absolute and unequivocal condemnation" of Hamas' attack, and defended Israel's right to self-defence. However, it has also stressed the need for "proportionality" in Israel's response. [NCR]

The Holy See indicated that it was ready to act as a mediator in the conflict but acknowledged that "there are no great spaces at the moment" for the Vatican to play a role.

In comments to the press on October 27, the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, reiterated the Holy See's call for a "two-state solution" to the Middle East conflict, its appeal for the release of hostages and for attention to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

This message was discussed in a phone call between Pope Francis and US President Joe Biden on October 22, and was delivered to the UN Security Council by the Holy See's permanent observer to that body. [Vatican News] [Reuters]

(ar/pk)

Finland-Estonia gas pipeline damaged, Chinese ship suspected

Investigators are probing whether a Chinese ship deliberately caused a leakage that led to the undersea Balticonnector gas pipeline between Estonia and Finland being shut down on October 8.

NATO has stepped up patrols in the Baltic Sea in the wake of the incident. The military alliance, which Finland joined in April, has promised a "determined"

response if the damage to the pipeline is found to be deliberate. [AP News] [NATO] [Guardian]

Finnish investigators said they had recovered an anchor from the seabed in the vicinity of the leak and were verifying whether it belonged to a Chinese container ship called the NewNew Polar Bear, which was in the area at the time. [Reuters][Al Jazeera]

The Balticonnector is a bi-directional pipeline in the Baltic Sea that carries liquefied natural gas (LNG) between Finland and Estonia. It is still unclear whether the damage to it was intended or accidental. [Reuters]

“The next questions are about whether it was intentional, negligence, poor seamanship, and that’s where we get into whether there could be a motive for what’s going on,” Finland’s National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) chief Robin Lardot told reporters.

“But it’s too early to answer that at this stage,” he added. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

The NBI said the NewNew Polar Bear ship had sailed over the pipeline during the time the damage was caused. The bureau added that the ship was missing one of its front anchors but investigators could not establish contact with the vessel to verify if this was the same anchor that was retrieved from the seabed. [Sky News] [Reuters]

China denied any involvement and called for an “objective, fair and professional” investigation of the incident. [Politico][Al Jazeera]

While gas supplies to Finland were interrupted, the country expects to be able to compensate with deliveries of LNG by ship. According to Gasgrid Finland, the Finnish gas operator, repairing the pipeline could take at least several months.

In September 2022, the Nord Stream pipelines under the Baltic Sea connecting Russia and Germany were damaged by explosions, causing four gas leaks. Authorities have deemed the incidents an act of sabotage, but the perpetrators remain unidentified. [Reuters] [AP News]

(rs/pk)

Italy, France discuss defence with India

Officials in Italy and France have held talks with India on defence as New Delhi seeks to boost cooperation

and strengthen partnerships with key European allies in the sector.

On a visit to Rome from October 9 to 12, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh met with his Italian counterpart Guido Crosetto. They signed an agreement aimed at enhancing cooperation in areas such as security and defence policy, research and development, industrial co-development, co-production, and the establishment of joint ventures. [The Hindu] [The Indian Express]

The two ministers also discussed military cooperation, including training, information sharing, maritime exercises and maritime security.

On the last day of his visit, Singh met with executives from 24 Italian defence companies, urging them to establish robust supply chain links with Indian manufacturers.

On October 12, Singh joined French Armed Forces Minister Sebastien Lecornu in Paris for the 5th annual defence dialogue.

The two ministers explored ways to deepen collaboration between their defence industries, particularly in areas like space, cyberspace and artificial intelligence. [The New Indian Express]

(hp/lm)

Armenia, EC condemn Azerbaijan's military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen issued a joint statement in Granada on October 6 condemning Azerbaijan's military operation against the Armenian population in Nagorno Karabakh.

The meeting focused on how to address the humanitarian needs of 120,000 Karabakh Armenians that fled to Armenia. President Ursula von der Leyen announced that the Commission will provide more than EUR 15 million to address the humanitarian needs of the Karabakh Armenians. [European Commission]

"We are committed to further strengthen EU-Armenia relations" Von der Leyen said in the joint statement. [European Commission]

(yn/gc)

Azerbaijan says that any new conflict in Armenia would be France's fault

Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliev criticised the European Union (EU) and France on October 8 for being on the side of Armenia during a call with European Council President Charles Michel.[Daily Sabakh]

President Ilham Aliev criticised the EU and France after France agreed on future contracts to supply Armenia with military equipment in order to strengthen Armenian defences. Aliev said that the provision of military equipment to Armenia as an approach that is "intended to inflate a new conflict" and "France would be responsible for causing it." [Reuters]

Future military equipment provision by France to Armenia has been agreed upon but the details of the contract remain unclear.

(yn/gc)

Azerbaijan, Georgia presidents meet

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met with the Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili on October 8 to discuss trade, economic ties and regional and global security issues.

Garibashvili said at a press conference that the two countries have a "strong and historic bond" marked by "centuries-old neighbourly brotherhood and friendship." Aliyev mentioned the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh and expressed hope that Georgia and Azerbaijan would be able to cooperate with Armenia. [Civil Georgia]

After the meeting, Garibashvili tweeted: "Great meeting with President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. Georgia and Azerbaijan are focused on strengthening ties and fostering economic growth. We're exploring joint opportunities in trade, energy, sustainable and infrastructure development to benefit our people. Reiterated Georgia's support to lasting peace and stability in the region." [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

(ad/gc)

Bosnia's defence minister slams choice of Hungarian general to lead EU mission

Bosnia's defence minister has criticised the appointment of a Hungarian general as the new commander of the EU's military mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Hungary's defence minister, Kristof Szalay-Bobrovniczky, announced on October 3 that his countryman Major General Laszlo Sticz will be taking over as head of the EU mission – formally called Operation ALTHEA – in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a year starting from January 2024. [abouthungary] [SarajevoTimes]

Bosnia's defence minister, Zukan Helez, has opposed the appointment, disapproving of the close ties between Hungarian nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Bosnian Serb nationalist leader Milorad Dodik, both of whom have friendly relations with Russia. [abouthungary] [SarajevoTimes]

Dodik has over the past two years moved to separate the Serb-dominated region within Bosnia and Herzegovina from the rest of the country. [Reuters]

Orban has increasingly voiced support for the Western Balkans, advocating for the EU accession of Balkan countries and increased funding for the region. However, experts have suggested that his support for Balkan states' EU membership is a strategy to find new, similar-minded allies within the European Council, given Hungary's isolation due to its pro-Russian stance. [LeMonde]

The EU launched its ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004 to maintain stability and peace following a war there from 1992 to 1995. The country was part of Yugoslavia before declaring its independence in 1992. [euforbih]

Szalay-Bobrovniczky said that starting in 2024, the Hungarian military would support the EU mission by providing helicopter transport, air evacuation, a bomb disposal crew, medical aid, a military police unit, and dogs trained to sniff out explosives.

(ao/pk)

Croatia takes in more wounded Ukrainians for treatment

Croatia has taken in a second round of Ukrainians injured in the war with Russia for medical treatment and rehabilitation.

Seventeen wounded soldiers and four of their family members arrived in Croatia on October 19. The veterans were taken for medical assistance, while their family members were provided with accommodation near hospitals. They have received the status of people under temporary protection. [N1Info]

Referring to the 1991-95 Croatian war of independence, Tomo Medved, Minister for Croatian Veterans, said: "We are the only EU member state that, unfortunately, had a Homeland War, that had experience with the seriously wounded, and our medical staff have experience with war wounds." [BalkanInsight]

Ukrainian ambassador Vasyl Kyrylych estimates that there are currently 27,000 Ukrainians in Croatia in total. "Croatia accepted Ukrainians in the best possible way, and the Ukrainians feel at home here," he said. [BalkanInsight]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic in March announced that Croatia would be providing medical treatment to soldiers injured during the war in Ukraine. [Euractiv]

In April, the first round of wounded soldiers requiring medical assistance arrived in Croatia. Of those 19 veterans, 12 have returned to Ukraine after successful treatment, while another seven are in the final stages of treatment and rehabilitation. [N1Info]

(sl/pk)

Czech president says Europe must not shirk defence responsibilities

NATO's role in safeguarding Europe's security should not serve as an excuse for European nations to shirk their defence responsibilities, Czech President Petr Pavel has said.

Pavel, a pro-Western retired NATO general, on October 3 urged Europe to reduce its security dependence on the US while focusing on developing strategies to contribute to the transatlantic military alliance.

He added: "Reducing the reliance on the US and developing European strategic enablers is to be seen as our contribution to our transatlantic partnership." [Politico] [Prague Morning] [Bnn]

Pavel, who chaired the NATO military committee from 2015 to 2018, said that European countries needed to allocate more than the NATO-agreed goal of 2% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence spending.

In 2014, NATO members agreed to meet the 2% financing commitment by 2024.

While European countries have accelerated their military expenditures in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, only a third of 31 members have met or are close to meeting NATO's target. [Politico] [Prague Morning]

The US, which contributes the bulk of NATO forces, has complained that several of its European allies do not contribute enough. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

The Czech Republic's 2023 budget committed the country to spending 1.52% of its GDP on defence. In April, the lower house of the Czech parliament passed a bill under which every state budget from next year will have to allocate at least 2% of GDP to defence. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

(yl/pk)

France to deliver military aid to Armenia

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna announced on October 3 during her visit to Armenia that Paris will deliver military equipment to Yerevan.

"France has given its agreement to the conclusion of future contracts with Armenia, which will allow the delivery of military equipment to Armenia so that it can ensure its defence," Colonna said.

Colonna's visit came after Azerbaijan forced Armenian separatists to surrender in its breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Since then, more than 100,000 refugees have fled from the region to Armenia and hundreds have been killed in related violence. [France24]

The move is part of a broader strategy to distance Paris from Russia, also at increasing odds with its former ally Armenia, diplomatically. [Politico]

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has since stated that any subsequent conflict with Armenia would be France's fault. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Macron and Scholz hold talks

French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz met in Hamburg to improve bilateral relationships and strengthen collaborations within the European Union (EU).

The relationship between the two leaders has been troubled by disagreements over defence strategies, energy policies and EU budget rules. They found common ground for reforms regarding EU electricity in meetings held between October 9 and 10. [BNN Breaking]

The two leaders prioritised strengthening the EU market, making it more competitive with the US and China.

The two leaders confronted each other on AI, with Macron expressing his concerns about the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act. He said that it would limit a European ChatGPT. [Politico]

(vt/gc)

Georgia condemns Russia's plans to build a naval base breakaway region

Georgia has condemned Russia's plans to open a permanent naval base in Abkhazia, a breakaway region in Georgia that Tbilisi recognises as occupied territory. [BBC]

Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili called Russia's plans to build a permanent naval base on the Black Sea coast a "result of occupation." The Wall Street Journal reported that following the attacks by Ukrainian forces on Russia's Navy in the Crimean Peninsula, its Black Sea fleet has been positioned eastward. [WallStreetJournal [CivilGeorgia]

On October 5, Aslan Bzhania, the de facto leader of Abkhazia, said: "In the near future there will be a permanent base of the Russian Navy in the Ochamchira district." [Reuters]

The European Union (EU) has expressed "strong concern" about Russia's plans, claiming it "violates Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the principles of international law and international

commitments taken by Russia. Pawel Herczynski, EU Ambassador to Georgia, called Russia's actions a "clear violation by Russia of the 6-point agreement from 2008." [CivilGeorgia]

(sl/gc)

Greek and Estonian PMs prioritise cooperation

Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis and Estonian Prime Minister Kallas met to underscore their cooperation and shared values.

Mitsotakis discussed the advances in trade and digital technology in Estonia, which has become a model for digitisation. Both leaders expressed staunch support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion. [AMNA]

Kallas emphasised the common European values between Greece and Estonia, pointing to shared defence, investments and sea borders. Kallas expressed gratitude for Greece's support in the Ukraine conflict and proposed collaboration in digitisation.

They discussed how the climate crisis affects Greece and urged unified responses. Both leaders stressed the need for increased defence budgets and EU-wide cooperation. [GreekCityTimes]

(kg/gc)

Hungary, Slovenia pledge to build gas pipeline

Slovenia and Hungary have committed to building a gas pipeline to connect the two countries. [Slovenia Times]

Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob said such a link would enable Hungary “to get rid of dependence on Russian gas in the mid-term and find an independent source that would be supplied through Italy.” [Slovenia Times]

The new pipeline is to be designed for two-way transportation, with a planned capacity of 50,000 cubic metres of gas an hour, equivalent to 440 million cubic metres a year. [GOV.SI] [Slovenia Times]

An agreement pledging collaboration on natural gas supplies was signed on October 4 in Budapest by Bojan Kumer, the Slovenian minister of the environment, climate and energy, and Peter Szijjarto, Hungary's foreign minister. [Slovenia Times]

The two countries are working to conclude a detailed gas supply deal. [GOV.SI]

(ss/pk)

Kosovo and Serbian leaders fail in talks to normalise relations

The leaders of Kosovo and Serbia failed to reach an agreement at a summit on October 26 in Brussels in an attempt by the European Union (EU) to help ease tensions.

Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbia President Aleksander Vucic could not agree to an EU proposal to improve their bitter relations that continue to endanger their prospects of joining the bloc [AP].

The EU hoped the parties could have shown their commitment to the normalisation process and past agreements.

The meeting has come in the wake of the deaths of three Serb gunmen and one Kosovar policeman killed in late September when a gang of 30 armed Serbs set up barricades and launched an hour-long gun battle. [Euronews]

Since declaring its independence from Serbia in 2008, Kosovo has received recognition from 102 states. The increasing tensions between the two have caused fear of a renewed conflict in the future.

(em/gc)

Norwegian, Russian generals discuss border cooperation

Two generals and their staff from Russia and Norway held a meeting in the Arctic on October 5 to talk about border cooperation and to prevent "accidents and misunderstandings". [Reuters] [The Local]

The talks were the first known such meeting since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year. [The Local]

Lieutenant General Yngve Odlo, head of Norway's joint headquarters, and Lieutenant General Stanislav Vladimirovich Maslov, in charge of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Border Directorate for the Western Arctic Region, met aboard a Norwegian coastguard vessel, the Norwegian military said. [Norwegian Military] [Reuters]

Russia and Norway share a border spanning 198 km in the Arctic. [Reuters]

The two sides discussed topics including challenges in border cooperation, rescue operations and management of fisheries. [Norwegian Military]

Both delegations agreed that any issues related to their sea and land borders should be resolved through transparent communication and continued adherence to agreements between Oslo and Moscow, according to the Norwegian military.

"It is important to conduct these meetings," Odlo said in a statement, adding that such talks can prevent "accidents and misunderstandings" between the two countries. [Norwegian Military] [Reuters]

Norwegian-Russian border cooperation stems from a bilateral agreement of 1949. The two countries have cooperated on fisheries since the 1970s. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Portugal's president says his nation and Belgium share same vision

Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa said during a three-day state visit to Belgium that the two countries are in "full agreement on the vision of the world". [Publico]

The itinerary of the Portuguese president's trip, which began on October 17, had to be altered at the last minute after Brussels was plunged into a lockdown following the death of two Swedes in a terrorist attack the day before. [BNN] [Portugal Resident]

The trip included a meeting with Phillippe and Mathilde, the king and queen of Belgium. Rebelo de Sousa described his talks with the royal couple as "very fruitful, politically and economically". [Publico]

(jw/pk)

Romania closes border with Ukraine after Russian drone attacks

Romania closed its border crossing to Ukraine in Isaccea, positioned along the Danube river in the southeast of the country, on October 6 due to the destruction caused by Russian drone attacks the night prior.

The border point was a strategic target for Russian forces given Ukrainian refugees typically cross into Romania and grain is often transported between the two countries at this crossing.

According to the mayor of Isaccea, Anastase Moraru,"traffic through the Isaccea border crossing point is completely closed due to the attacks on the Ukrainian side at Orlovka." [BalkanInsight]

While no casualties were reported due to the drone attack, a Ukrainian grain storage facility was damaged and nine trucks burnt. Wreckage from the Russian drones was also identified on the Romanian side of the border. [NewVoiceofUkraine]

The attacks came just a day after Romanian President Klaus Iohannis announced that North Atlantic Treaty Organisation members would be helping the country boost its defence capabilities along the country's border with Ukraine, especially along the Danube River. [Bloomberg]

(sw/gc)

Romanian prime minister travels to Ukraine, signs MoU

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu travelled to Kyiv to meet with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky on October 18, a day after having travelled to Israel to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, where he expressed "solidarity" with the Israeli people. [RomaniaInsider]

During the visit to Kyiv, the Government of Romania and the Government of Ukraine held their first-ever joint meeting, during which they signed seven agreements to establish bilateral cooperation in various fields, including border-crossing infrastructure, exports, illegal migration, healthcare and pharmaceuticals. [Ukrinform 1] [Ukrinform 2] [Euractiv]

Also part of the Romanian delegation, Minister of Economy, Entrepreneurship, and Tourism Stefan-Radu

Oprea signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with his Ukrainian counterpart, Oleksandr Kamyshin, regarding the expansion of mutual military-technical cooperation between the two countries. [Ukrinform 3]

The European Commission has since announced its backing of the increased bilateral cooperation between Kyiv and Bucharest, stating that it "welcomes" the Solidarity Lanes MoU, which aims to facilitate cross-border links and transport operations, in particular. [European Commission]

Two days later, Romania's Transport Ministry announced it had approved an MoU with Hungary to open a new border checkpoint between Timis, western Romania and Kubekhaza, southeastern Hungary. [SeeNews]

(sw/gc)

Slovakia accuses Russia of interference in election

The foreign ministry in Bratislava has accused Russia of "unacceptable interference" in Slovakia's elections amid a diplomatic spat.

The foreign ministry summoned a Russian embassy official on October 2 in response to remarks by a Russian spy chief about US "interference" in Slovakia ahead of its parliamentary ballot.

The foreign ministry in Bratislava complained that the comments came on the eve of a September 30 election, when a pre-vote moratorium on information was in place in a bid to ensure no major announcements would influence the outcome of the Slovak ballot. [Reuters] [Aljazeera] [Bnn]

"We consider such deliberate spread of disinformation to be unacceptable interference by the Russian Federation in the election process," the Slovak foreign ministry said. [Aljazeera] [Le Monde] [Barron's][The Times of India][Euractiv]

The Russian embassy in Bratislava rejected the accusations.

"Unlike some of Slovakia's current allies, we do not interfere with internal affairs of other countries, we do not take part in regime changes," the embassy said, as quoted by Russian news outlets. [Le Monde] [Barron's] [The Times of India]

The diplomatic spat broke out when Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), claimed in a statement published on September 28 that Washington had instructed its allies to work with businesses and political circles to boost the election chances of the centrist pro-Western Progressive Slovakia (PS) party. [Euractiv]

Naryshkin's statement also referred to the PS as "US proxies". [Le Monde] [Barron's] [The Times of India]

Danger of deepfakes

The elections in Slovakia also demonstrated the danger of deepfakes being employed in politics.

Pro-Kremlin populist and former Prime Minister Robert Fico, whose leftist Smer party vowed to halt military aid for Ukraine, won Slovakia's tight parliamentary election following the circulation of recordings apparently exposing plans by his progressive rival to rig the vote. [Bloomberg]

In the run-up to the election, investigative journalist Monika Todova received a recording of herself discussing with Michal Simecka, the leader of the pro-EU and liberal PS party, ways to manipulate voting. [The Times] [Bloomberg]

In the two-minute recording, their voices were flat, and they spoke in a stilted manner. It sounded off because the "conversation" had never taken place.

AFP fact-checkers found that the audio clip was a hoax fabricated using deepfake AI technology trained on speakers' voice samples.

"My friends and our readers realise it's a deepfake, but people who voted for Smer-SD or Republic [a far-right party] think it's real," said Todova, who has been a target of Fico's Smer party for covering corruption scandals. [The Times]

While Simecka dismissed the fakes as "colossal, obvious stupidity" in a social media post on September 28, the extent to which the fabricated clips influenced the election's outcome is still unclear.

(yl/pk)

Swedish PM urges EU to boost security as gunman kills two in Brussels

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has urged the European Union to step up security after the fatal shooting of two Swedes in Brussels on October 16.

The suspected gunman was shot by police shortly after the attack and later died, according to Belgian authorities. He had identified himself as a member of the Islamic State and claimed responsibility for the killings in a video posted online. [AP News]

The perpetrator declared in the video that the Koran, Islam's holy book, was "a red line" for which he was ready to sacrifice himself.

Kristersson said: "All indications are that this is a terror attack aimed at Sweden and Swedish citizens only due to them being Swedish." He added: "This is a time for more security, we can't be naive." [Reuters]

In August, Sweden raised its terror alert to the second-highest level following controversial public burnings of the Koran by anti-Islamic demonstrators in the country. This caused outrage among Muslims both in Sweden and internationally. [Europe Monthly, September 2023]

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said that the EU's new migration pact would allow for quicker deportations of foreigners deemed a security threat.

The pact is awaiting final approval but has already been tentatively agreed on by most EU countries. Officials hope that a deal will be reached by the end of the year. [Euractiv]

(km/pk)

Ukraine's negotiations with EU for accession are 'realistic,' foreign minister says

Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said in an interview with Forbes Ukraine that negotiations on the country's European Union (EU) accession were "realistic" unless there were "force majeure events."

Kuleba noted "For this parliament, this is a test of patriotism. It must pass this test. There is a majority."

He further added that if "no new requirements or recommendations or sub-recommendations are put forward," negotiations could begin by the end of 2023.

The European Commission is expected to provide a recommendation to initiate negotiations on Ukraine's membership in the EU in October. The start of these negotiations must be unanimously approved by the EU member states. [Forbes] [Ukrainska Pravda]

(ad/gc)

Zelenksy and Azerbaijani president commit to principles of territorial sovereignty

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev recently engaged in a phone call during which they reaffirmed their commitment to the "principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states." [AZ News] [Barrons]

Later posting on the messenger app Telegram, Zelenksy expressed his gratitude to Azerbaijan for its "significant humanitarian assistance," particularly its role in supporting Ukraine's energy infrastructure. The statement comes in the wake of Azerbaijan's reoccupation of the pro-Armenian separatist region within its borders, Nagorno-Karabakh. [Radio Free Europe]

Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan has been supplying energy equipment such as transformers and generators to Kyiv to alleviate damage to the national grid. [Caspian News]

(md/gc)

Ukrainian president travels to Brussels

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenksy met with his Belgian counterpart, Alexander de Croo, on October 11 during his visit to Belgium.

While this is the second time that Zelenksy has met with De Croo since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it is the Ukrainian president's first time travelling specifically to meet with the Belgian leader. [Ukrinform]

At a joint press conference after the meeting, De Croo confirmed that Brussels would continue to provide Kyiv with military aid and materials, including F-16 fighter aircrafts to be made available from 2025. De Croo also confirmed that EUR 1.7 billion in frozen Russian assets would be made available to Ukraine to

aid with reconstruction. After collecting taxes on these frozen funds, this figure is expected to rise to EUR 2.3 billion. [Reuters]

That same day, Belgian Defense Minister Ludivine Dedonder held a telephone meeting with her Ukrainian counterpart Rustem Umierov in which they discussed the logistics of Brussels supplying Kyiv with F-16 aircrafts, as well as "synchronised" their positions ahead of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-Ukraine Council meeting between the defence ministers of the organisation's member states that took place during Zelensky's visit. [Ukrainska Pravda]

This was the first time that Zelensky was invited to join a NATO meeting at the organisation's headquarters in Brussels. [rtbf]

(sw/gc)

Ukrainian president goes to Romania for security, grain talks

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky travelled to Bucharest on October 10 to meet with his Romanian counterpart, Klaus Iohannis. This visit marks Zelensky's first trip to Bucharest since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Guardian]

Upon arrival in Bucharest, Zelensky stated on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) that "Romania is a friend who came to our help on our darkest day and whose support gets stronger with time. I am certain this visit will be beneficial for both of our nations." [Romania Insider]

The two discussed military aid for Ukraine, a new F-16 training centre for Ukrainian pilots on Romanian soil and increased cooperation in air defence in the Black Sea region. This was in response to repeated Russian drone attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, ports and grain exports along the Romanian-Ukrainian border on the banks of the Danube River. Additionally, they agreed to double the transit capacity for Ukrainian grain through Romanian ports to four million tons.

Following their talks, Iohannis confirmed that Bucharest would be backing Ukraine and Moldova's opening membership negotiations with the European Union by the end of the year. [Radio Free Europe]

Iohannis's announcement came one day after Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu said that if Austria continued to veto Bucharest's accession to the

Schengen zone, he “reserve[d] the right to challenge the decision at the European Court of Justice." Austria first blocked both Romania’s and Bulgaria’s accession to the zone in December 2022. [Digi24]

(sw/gc)

Sunak, Meloni call for joint action to stop illegal immigration

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and his Italian counterpart Giorgia Meloni published an op-ed outlining efforts to tackle illegal immigration. "Our perspectives and our goals are the same," they said in the op-ed published in The Times. "We are working together to stop the boats, and we are calling on others to act with the same sense of urgency." [TheTimes] [Reuters]

The leaders chaired a meeting on October 4 in Granada, Spain, which was attended by the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, France, Albania and the European Commission, to discuss migration and organised immigration crime. [UK GOV]

In their joint statement, Sunak and Meloni said that participants of the meeting in Spain agreed to an eight-point plan to address growing levels of illegal migration. [UK GOV]

(sl/gc)

United Kingdom deploys fighter jets to Poland for joint exercises

The United Kingdom has deployed four Royal Air Force Typhoon fighter jets to Poland for joint training exercises.

The fighter jets were deployed ahead of the Warsaw Security Forum, a security conference focused on the security of Central and Eastern Europe.

The deployment allowed RAF pilots to practise alongside aircraft from Poland, Spain and Italy. UK Defence Minister James Heappey attended the Forum in Poland and stressed the need to support Ukraine in its war against Russia.

He also urged allied nations in Europe to increase defence budgets. Said Heappey: "If it's not the time –

when there is a war in Europe – to spend 2% on defence, then when is?" [BBC]

The UK is the Partner Nation of this year's Warsaw Security Forum. In July 2023, the UK and Poland signed a strategic Partnership calling for security and defence cooperation to strengthen NATO's defence posture. [UK GOV]

Additionally, the UK has permanently deployed troops in Poland as part of the NATO commitment under Operation CABRIT. [UK GOV]

(sl/gc)

EU watches for turmoil within Israel government

As the Israeli offensive in Gaza starts, the European Union is watching to see how the attack by Hamas impacts the country's internal political landscape and by extension the political dynamics of the Middle East, a strategic region for the leaders of Europe.

Rifts among Israel's top officials erupted into the open after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to blame the military and security establishment for the failures that led to the surprise Hamas assault on October 7. [NYTimes]

"At no time and no stage was a warning given to Prime Minister Netanyahu regarding war intentions of Hamas," Netanyahu wrote in the now-deleted post on X, formerly Twitter. "On the contrary, all security officials, including the head of army intelligence and the head of the Shin Bet, estimated that Hamas was deterred and interested in an arrangement." [MSN]

Netanyahu's comments on X, formerly Twitter, prompted a furious response, including from within his war cabinet. The post was deleted, and the Israeli leader later apologised in a new post, saying: "I was wrong." The political fallout from the surprise Hamas attack, which killed more than 1,400, has been contained as the Israeli government unifies around the tragedy and its military response.

The massive surprise terrorist attack has predictably incited a search for accountability. The government is blaming the security establishment, which they claim was rife with political opponents focused on protesting government policies instead of intelligence work and failed to recognize, prepare for, or communicate signs of an impending Hamas attack.

Political opponents and critics intend to hold the Parliamentary majority accountable for the security failure. Following the attack Prime Minister Netanyahu declared a government of national unity and invited the candidates he defeated in the previous election to join his government to bring the country together in a time of national crisis. The invitation was accepted by opposition National Unity Party leader, retired general, and former Defense Minister Benny Gantz. [JNS]

Netanyahu's opponents are not yet calling for him to step down. "I'm not dealing now with who is to blame or why we were surprised," said former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, now leader of the opposition. "It's not the time, it's not the place." [Yahoo]

Israel's internal political turmoil also comes as some member states within the European Union (EU) have pushed for a ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas to deliver more humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians in the besieged Gaza Strip. A political fallout in Israel may create further obstacles for the European Union and the United States as they try to end the fighting or create humanitarian corridors for the besieged population in Gaza.

Israel history

It would be surprising if Bibi's prime ministership survived this war, according to Amit Segal, chief political commentator for Israel's Channel 12. "It would set a national precedent," he told CNN. "Israeli history has taught us that each and every surprise and crisis led to the collapse of the government. [Yahoo]

History is against him. Golda Meier resigned after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Menahem Begin stepped down following the First Lebanon War in 1983, and Ehud Olmert left office after the Second Lebanon War, giving way to Israel's current leader, Netanyahu. [Yahoo]

Netanyahu has tried to rally Israeli troops. “All the people of Israel are behind you and we deal the harshest blow to our enemies in order to achieve victory. To victory! Are you ready?!,” he said during a visit with the Golani Brigade on the border.

In an October 26 address to the nation, Netanyahu made it clear that the Israelis “are in the midst of a campaign for our existence.” The Israeli leader also said that there must be an investigation into the failure of Israeli intelligence to catch the attack on October 7 before it could be carried out saying: "The fault will be examined and everyone will have to give answers, including me." [Wall Street Journal] [Al-Monitor]

Netanyahu's polls

Unsurprisingly, recent polls reveal that Netaniyahu's popularity has fallen sharply. According to a poll, a significant majority of Israeli respondents, including 86% overall and 79% of coalition supporters, hold the government and the PM responsible for the infiltration of Hamas terrorists into Israel. [jpost.com]

The poll showed that 56% (with 28% of coalition voters) believe Netanyahu should resign at the end of Operation Swords of Iron, and 52% expect Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to leave. Another poll suggests growing support for Benny Gantz's National Unity party. [Times of Israel]

Former NATO chief Javier Solana said that he believes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the "worst politician" in Israeli history. "I don't think anything good will come of this," he told Spanish broadcaster Cadena Ser, referring to this month's events in Israel and Palestine. [AA]

"But it could make Netanyahu disappear from Israeli politics," said Solana, who was the EU's chief diplomat from 1999 to 2009. [AA]

Great survivor

Netanyahu is the great survivor of Israeli politics: after serving as Prime Minister for three years in the nineties and then a dozen more starting in 2009, he returned—despite myriad legal troubles—in December as the head of the most right-wing government in the nation's history. [TheNewYorker]

Netanyahu's policies concerning Gaza have fluctuated, from discussing potential occupation in 2019 to efforts to expand economic lifeline and increase the workforce flow, with the number of Gazan workers commuting to Israel reaching 17,000. His approach aimed to maintain a fragile peace with Hamas while hoping the terrorist group would destabilise the Palestinian regime. Hamas played along, feigning interest in Gaza's development as well as Palestinian politics [Washington Institute]

Netanyahu has also faced ten months of protests against his controversial and divisive judicial overhaul, his corruption case – and a near-death experience – this is battered and beaten Bibi, not the vintage version.

If Netanyahu were to fall from power, it would likely mark the end of the highly contested judicial reform, a significant promise he made to voters in 2022. This

reform aimed to shift power by placing the judicial system under greater government control.

Israel has no formal constitution and Israeli courts were, uniquely among Western democracies, able to overturn laws passed by Parliament they deemed objectionable without any formal court challenge until the Netanyahu led reforms. [jpost.com]

(md-rw/gc)

Germany's Scholz meets with emir of Qatar to discuss Hamas

Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani met on October 12 in Berlin to address Israel's military action against the Palestinian organisation Hamas and the broader crisis in the Middle East.

Originally, the meeting had been scheduled to discuss the energy partnership established between the two nations in 2022. However, the main agenda shifted following Hamas' terror attack in Israel on October 7, which resulted in approximately 1,400 casualties and prompted a swift Israeli response in the Gaza strip. [Welt] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Der Spiegel] [United Nations]

Scholz reaffirmed Germany's steadfast support for Israel, emphasising its right to self-defence and urged Qatari support for the release of approximately 150 hostages, including at least five Germans, held captive by Hamas. [Die Zeit] [Tagesschau] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

Qatar has been host to the political office of Hamas since 2012 and has been an instrumental interlocutor between the terrorist group and the international community. [FT]

Qatar's support for Hamas has raised international concerns, with reports suggesting that the country has invested up to EUR 950 million in reconstruction and infrastructure in Gaza. Additionally, the Gulf nation provides shelter for Hamas leader Ismail Haniya, who currently lives in the capital Doha. [Welt] [Der Spiegel] [Tagesschau] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

Nonetheless, Scholz emphasised the importance of cooperation with Qatar, highlighting its mediating role in the Israel-Hamas conflict. According to Hamas, Qatar is currently involved in negotiations for the exchange of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners in Israeli

custody. Scholz has agreed to remain in close contact with Tamim on these humanitarian efforts. [Tagesschau] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Die Zeit]

The meeting has faced criticism both from Germany's opposition parties and from within Scholz's own ruling coalition. Members of the liberal Free Democratic Party, the conservative Christian Democratic Union, and the Leftist Party have joined in condemning Scholz for pursuing business relations with Qatar due to concerns about indirect terror financing and called for the immediate suspension of all cooperation on energy. [Tagesschau] [Die Zeit]

Despite the disapproval from other politicians, Scholz defended the meeting and also announced his intention to speak with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the matter.

"It would be irresponsible not to use every contact that could help in this dramatic situation," he urged in an interview, while assuring that the talks were being held "in close coordination with Israel [Welt]. [Tagesschau] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Die Zeit]

In further diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions, Scholz visited Israel, Jordan and Egypt, where he warned against Iranian and Hezbollah interference and advocated for the easing of the Gaza blockade to make way for humanitarian aid. In Jordan and Egypt, he sought support for Palestinian refugees fleeing Gaza in anticipation of a potential Israeli ground offensive. [Tagesschau] [Deutsche Welle] [Politico]

(if/gc)

Top Spanish diplomat slams ‘unfriendly’ comment by Israeli envoy amid Mid-East conflict

Spain’s top diplomat has criticised “unfriendly” comments by the Israeli ambassador to Madrid, who claimed that Spanish ministers were siding with Palestinian militant group Hamas.

The Israeli embassy released a statement on October 16 saying it was “deeply worrying” that “certain elements within the Spanish government have opted to align themselves with this terrorism.” [Reuters]

The embassy’s comments came in response to Spain’s social rights minister, Ioane Belarra, who suggested

that the government in Madrid should bring Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu before an international criminal court to face war crime charges. [The Guardian]

Referring to a demonstration in the Spanish capital, Belarra also said in a tweet that "dignity has filled the streets of Madrid today to urge the end of the genocide that Israel is planning against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. Freedom for Palestine."

Spain's Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said that he was "profoundly upset" by the comments of the Israeli ambassador in Madrid, calling them an "unfriendly gesture." [AA]

(jw/pk)

Armed Turkish drone shot down by US fighter jet

A US F-16 air fighter jet shot down an armed Turkish drone in Syria on October 5 that was flying over a "restricted operating zone" (ROZ) near Hasakah in Northern Syria, about a kilometre (less than a mile) from an American base. The drone was shot down because, according to the US Department of Defense, it represented "a potential threat."

Following the event, an emergency phone call was held between US Secretary of Defense Lloyd AustinI and Turkish Defense Minister Yasar Guler. They agreed that the incident was unfortunate and their focus must remain on defeating ISIS in Syria.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown also engaged in a discussion regarding the incident with his Turkish counterpart, Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, General Metin Gurak. They confirmed that the focus must remain on ISIS and following the deconfliction protocols. [BBC News]

(vt/gc)

UK coordinates with Qatar to free hostages taken by Hamas

The United Kingdom is coordinating with Qatar to free British hostages taken by Hamas. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, met on October 20 in Riyadh.

Sunak thanked Qatar for its efforts to secure the release of hostages taken by Hamas, including British nationals. [UK GOV]

Qatar's mediation was instrumental in the release of two US hostages held by Hamas. Hamas is holding an estimated 10 British citizens, according to UK Foreign Minister James Cleverly. [TheGuardian]

The UK Government said it would "use all the tools at our disposal to support these efforts and end the torment of the victims and their families." The leaders have agreed to stay in close contact throughout the process. [Telegraph]

According to Downing Street, both leaders agreed on avoiding any escalation in the violence across the region and welcomed humanitarian access in Gaza.

(sl/gc)

Czech Republic in talks to buy Embraer military cargo planes from Brazil

The Czech Republic has entered negotiations with Brazilian planemaker Embraer SA on the possible acquisition of two C-390 Millennium military transport aircraft, the defence ministry in Prague said on October 17.

The ministry added in a statement that the Czech armed forces lacked medium and long-range aircraft capable of 12-hour flights and landing on unpaved runways. [Defense News] [TVP World]

The announcement of the possible C-390 procurement comes as the Czech government ramps up military spending to meet its NATO-agreed goal of allocating at least 2% of national wealth on defence. [TVP World] [Reuters][Europe Monthly May 2023]

The defence ministry said it aimed to negotiate the shortest feasible delivery time for the aircraft, which can be used for evacuation from areas in crisis.

(yl/pk)

Georgian foreign minister meets new US ambassador

Georgian Foreign Minister Ilia Darchiashvili met with the new US Ambassador on October 13. Ambassador

Robin Dunnigan, confirmed in July 2023, said she looks forward to working with the people of Georgia and the Georgian government to further strengthen its strategic partnership. [Georgia Today]

Dunnigan also spoke about the importance of deepening economic and people-to-people ties. "I am very happy to be in Georgia, and thank you for the warm welcome," she said. [Georgia Today]

Darciashvili also mentioned that the two had discussed strategic partnership, economic cooperation and security challenges in the region.

"We talked about the fact that the strategic partnership between Georgia and the United States is a priority for both countries. We expressed our readiness to work actively with her in order to bring our bilateral relations even closer, to make our strategic partnership even more relevant," said the foreign minister. [Georgia Today]

(ad/gc)

Zelensky and Trudeau discuss Holodomor Museum, Gaza evacuation

President Volodymyr Zelensky and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau engaged in a phone conversation on October 16 to discuss the completion of the Holodomor Genocide Museum in Kyiv and the evacuation of Ukrainians from the Gaza Strip. [Ukrainska Pravda] [Government of Canada]

Zelensky and Trudeau both condemned Hamas's multi-front terrorist attacks against Israel on October 7 and explored potential avenues for cooperation to provide security for their respective citizens. [Ukrainska Pravda] [Government of Canada]

Ukraine's president thanked Trudeau for his readiness to help evacuate Ukrainians from Gaza in a post on X. "I also appreciate Canada's support for the Peace Formula and have invited the Canadian representative to attend the next meeting of national security advisors, which will be held soon."

They also discussed the continuation of defence cooperation, the development of Ukrainian hydroelectric generation and the completion of the Holodomor Museum. The Holodomor was a genocide committed by the Soviet authorities in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Both leaders confirmed their intention to maintain close and regular contact. [Ukrainska Pravda] [Government of Canada]

(ad/gc)

Zelensky meets in Kyiv with US official to discuss economic recovery plans

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky met on October 16 in Kyiv with the US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery, Penny Pritzker. They discussed efforts to support Ukraine's macro-financial stability in 2024 and the use of frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's economic recovery.

"The recovery of Ukraine despite the ongoing Russian aggression is a priority, as it allows us to provide the necessary conditions for the struggle and victory of our state," Zelensky said. He added that Ukraine is counting on the active involvement of American business in long-term projects in promising sectors of the Ukrainian economy, such as agriculture engineering and energy. [President Of Ukraine]

This is the second meeting between Zelensky and the US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery. Their first encounter took place in New York on September 20. [Ukrainska Pravda]

(ad/gc)

Croatia, South Korea bolster relations

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic has held a meeting in Zagreb with his South Korean counterpart Han Duck-soo to bolster a strategic partnership between their countries.

This marked the first high-level official South Korean visit to Croatia in the 30 years since the nations established diplomatic ties.

At their meeting, held during a European tour by Han, the two leaders agreed to elevate their relations to a “comprehensive future-oriented partnership,” emphasising shared values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

They plan to focus on economic issues, sustainable development, science and technology, cultural and educational exchanges, and security.

Han also sought Croatia's support for South Korea's bid to host the 2030 World Expo. Croatia, in turn, expressed hope for continued cooperation in multilateral organisations. [Korea Times]

(tms/pk)

Hungary strengthens links with China

The government in Budapest signed ten economic cooperation agreements with its counterpart in Beijing on October 16 following talks between Hungarian nationalist leader Viktor Orban and Chinese Premier Li Qiang. [Budapesttimes]

Hungarian Economic Development Minister Marton Nagy said the deals inked in the Chinese capital aimed to enhance Hungary's digital economy, energy, technology, medical equipment and environmental sectors. [Dailynewshungary]

'*China's trusted friend and partner*'

Meanwhile, during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on October 17 in Beijing at the third Belt and Road forum for global trade and infrastructure, Orban said that Hungary "will continue to be China's trusted friend and partner in the European Union". [CFR/FMPRC]

In recent years, Hungary has deepened its relations with China under Orban's "Eastern opening" diplomatic strategy. This emphasises cooperation with China as well as with other non-EU nations including Russia. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

Orban, a self-proclaimed proponent of "illiberal democracy" has been criticized for picking autocratic friends over fellow EU member states.

Tech team-up

The Hungarian economic development minister also signed an agreement with Gao Weijie, CEO of Huawei Technologies for Hungary and the Western Balkans region, on October 19 to strengthen their strategic cooperation, which began in 2013.

Under the new deal, the giant Chinese tech firm will collaborate with Hungarian companies of a similar type, while contributing to Hungary's efforts to expand its renewable energy sources and its electric vehicle charging station network. [BBJ/MTI]

The Hungarian government has initiated a EUR 165 million project to promote the use of electrical cars, starting in November. Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto announced the initiative on October 20 during a visit to the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen.

Szijjarto added that the Hungarian government had committed to invest EUR 78 million in the construction of 170 electrical charging stations in the country over the next two-and-a-half years. [hungarytoday] [budapesttimes]

Szijjarto recently said that China had helped boost Hungary's automotive industry production by 31% since 2022. This aligns with Hungary's goal of becoming Europe's battery manufacturing hub, supported by major Chinese investment. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

(ao/pk)

Polish, South Korean, business groups join forces on Ukraine reconstruction

Business organisations from Poland and South Korea have struck a preliminary agreement to collaborate on reconstruction initiatives in Ukraine, according to the Korea International Trade Association (KITA).

The agreement, signed in Warsaw, brings together Poland's Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers (ZPP) and KITA to facilitate information sharing and pursue cooperative projects related to reconstruction. [Yonhap]

(tms/pk)

Russian foreign minister praises ties with North Korea

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov thanked North Korea for its "unwavering" support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its official recognition of several Russian-backed separatist regions in eastern Ukraine during a week-long diplomatic mission to Pyongyang.

Lavrov also declared that the Russian and North Korean bilateral relationship had reached a "qualitatively new strategic level." [NBC] [Washington Times]

"We are fully aware that many countries worldwide share similar viewpoints and assessments, but only a select few, such as the DPRK, explicitly declare their solidarity with Russia and can express it openly," Lavrov said, using the initials of North Korea's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

North Korean munitions have become increasingly valuable for Russia, particularly due to the high demand on the Ukrainian front. The Russian army reportedly fires over 20,000 artillery shells per day in the conflict, a rate not seen in any global conflict since the Korean War. In October alone, North Korea shipped about 1,000 containers of munitions to Russia to support their invasion of Ukraine. [AP]

In addition to arms sales, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is reportedly engaged in strategic bartering, trading conventional munitions from plentiful stockpiles created to fight a war on the Korean Peninsula in exchange for missile technology from Russia.

Russia is also reportedly importing hundreds of Iranian Khoramshahr missiles and Shahid drones per month to launch at Ukrainian defences. [MSN]

Russian support

Russia also appears willing to help North Korea increase its range and capability for nuclear missiles. During a visit to the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Amur, close to the Chinese border, on September 13, Kim declared a joint "fight against imperialism." [Reuters]

Moreover, President Putin, who hosted the visit in person, promised to support North Korean efforts to launch a spy satellite following two earlier failed attempts this year, which could also have implications for missile technology advancement. Russia's collaboration with North Korea in these areas suggests the potential for enhanced intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capabilities with global reach. [NPR] [NK News]

Russia has already abandoned a diplomatic understanding with the West not to transfer advanced weapons technology to other states, possibly in response to Western support for Ukraine. North Korea test-fired the Hwasong 18 ICBM in July, which appears to be nearly identical to the Russian Topol-M missile. It is a solid-fuel missile, representing a technological leap only judged possible with Russian assistance by American experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. [CSIS]

Russia is also reportedly aiding Iran's missile program in exchange for sales of its missiles and drones. Iranian missile ranges have so far been allegedly restricted to 2000 KM by order of the Iranian government, concerned that a more extended range that would include European capitals might encourage an international response. [AP]

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced it was abdicating the Missile Technology Control Regime regarding missile technology exports to Iran on October 17. This follows Russian withdrawal on February 21 from the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that applied caps on the number of nuclear weapons the US and Russia could deploy through 2026 and from the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty on October 18. [CNN] [VOA] [Reuters]

Evidence of Russian, as well as Chinese or North Korean technical assistance, indicates that Iran may have or soon will significantly increase its missile range. Iran tested its solid-fuel rocket in a successful space launch on November 5, 2022. [Space]

(rw/gc)

Switzerland breaks with EU on China sanctions

Switzerland will not impose targeted European Union (EU) sanctions against Chinese individuals and companies implicated in human rights violations. The EU first started imposing thematic sanctions against Chinese entities in 2021.

The decision appears to have been influenced by concerns of potential retaliation, as China's Ambassador to Bern, Wang Shihting, warned that "anyone who really cares about the friendly relations between the two countries and who makes responsible polities will not agree to the sanctions." Consequently, the Swiss government quietly shelved proposals to impose EU sanctions.

Instead, according to reporting by local newspaper *NZZ am Sonntag*, the Swiss Economics Ministry "weighed up the interests based on various foreign policy and legal criteria" and decided to impose EU sanctions on a "case-by-case basis." [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

In Switzerland, exiled TIbetan families launch campaign against Chinese repression

A group of exiled Tibetan families launched a solidarity campaign in support of Tibetans undergoing political repression under the Chinese government. Protestors gathered outside the United Nations (UN) buildings in Geneva during the 54th Session of the ongoing UN Human Rights Council from October 11 to 13.

Protestors argued that the Chinese government aims to "eradicate" Tibetan culture and that state-sponsored mining is resulting in "catastrophic ecological degradation" of the alpine ecosystem.

A formal statement by the families reads as follows: “In honour of those who have committed self-immolation as an ultimate form of nonviolent civil disobedience, in memory of the 1.2 million Tibetans who have perished under the Chinese rule and the Tibetan people living inside Tibet undergoing the political repression, cultural assimilation, social discrimination, economic marginalisation and environmental destruction imposed by the Chinese Government, we, a collective of exiled Tibetan families from Switzerland, have launched a campaign on their behalf." [DevDiscourse]

(sw/gc)

France begins withdrawing troops from Niger

France started withdrawing its roughly 1,500 troops from Niger on October 5, following President Emmanuel Macron’s initial announcement on September 24 that France would not be “held hostage by putschists.” [Guardian]

The French military base in the Nigerien capital of Niahmey will also be decommissioned by the end of the year. [France24]

This end to military cooperation between France and Niger follows a coup in the West African country on July 26 that saw the democratically-elected government ousted and an increase in anti-French, anti-colonial sentiments throughout the country. [Europe in Review Monthly, September]

(sw/gc)

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