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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of Europe in Review, in which we bring you detailed reporting and news briefs about politics, foreign relations, regional governance and security across the continent.

This month, we examine the impact that surging immigration and the worst outbreak of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades are having on the European Union's political landscape.

Populist parties are gaining more support as the European public pushes back against immigration and the costs associated with housing and supporting arrivals – at a time when the continent's economy is forecast to grow more slowly this year than previously expected.

In the Netherlands, domestic politics took a sharp turn to the right with a huge win in parliamentary elections by anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom. The result sent shockwaves through Europe, which will now have to face the prospect of dealing with Wilders, who is an EU and climate change sceptic.

The Spanish presidency of the European Union is aiming to conclude discussions on a migration reform package before the end of the year, while Italy and Austria are seeking separate migrant relocation agreements with third party countries outside the bloc.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had to reshuffle his cabinet after acrimonious differences emerged with his Home Secretary about how London police should handle pro-Palestinian rallies and more broadly immigration. Meanwhile, anti-immigrant riots broke out in Dublin after the stabbing of three young children and a care worker outside a school by a naturalised Irish citizen of Algerian origin.

Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk's strong performance in a recent parliamentary election prompted Politico to name him as Europe's most influential person this year, and to praise him as a sliver of hope for centrists who have watched populist forces around the continent moving from the fringes and into government.

Adding to the political changes, European lawmakers have narrowly voted in favour of abolishing the power of veto for member states in key EU policy areas as part of a sweeping reform of the bloc's treaties – a plan which is fiercely opposed by some countries.

European political upheavals and the conflict in the Middle East have started to draw attention away from the war in Ukraine – a fact that worries Kyiv – as the conflict enters its third winter with no end in sight.

A large-scale Russian assault around the town of Avdiivka in the country's east has forced Kyiv to stall its southern counteroffensive, which has failed to deliver any strategic gains. As Russia prepares to blitz Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, Kyiv's backers in the West are faltering, with political divisions halting vital aid.

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Netherlands shifts to the right with huge win for anti-Islam populist Wilders

Domestic politics in the Netherlands took a sharp turn to the right with the huge win in parliamentary elections by the anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) on November 22.

Wilders' PVV secured 37 out of 150 seats in parliament, more than doubling the party's seats in the Dutch parliament and allowed them to take the initiative in forming a ruling coalition. The result sent shockwaves through Europe, where extremist nationalist ideology is putting pressure on democracies that now face the possibility of having to deal with the first far-right prime minister of the Netherlands. [MSN][NOS]

A victory for Wilders could potentially steer the Netherlands on towards a dramatic change in direction, following four consecutive governments led by the centrist Mark Rutte from the VVD over the past 13 years. While Wilders ran on a broad range of issues, the Dutch Donald Trump, as he is known, promised to stem the tide of Muslim immigration.

His victory appeared based on his campaign to curtail migration — the issue that caused the last governing coalition to quit in July — and to tackle problems including the Netherlands' cost-of-living crisis and housing shortages. Wilders got a standing ovation, cake and sparkling wine when he met his lawmakers at the parliament building after the elections. [MSN]

“The Dutch will be No. 1 again,” Wilders said. “The people must get their nation back.” [MSN]

‘Asylum tsunami’

Wilders advocates the “de-Islamization” of the Netherlands and working towards curbing the “asylum tsunami.” He has said that he wants no mosques or Islamic schools in the country, although he was milder about Islam during this election campaign than in the past. [Politico]

Wilders also plans to ban Qurans and mosques as well as a ban on wearing Islamic scarves in government buildings. He’s also pledged to move the Dutch Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. [WashingtonTimes] [NOS]

The PVV has called for a “freeze on asylum” and “a generally more restrictive immigration policy,” restoring Dutch border controls. Refugees with residence permits will lose these if they go on holiday to their country of origin, and Syrians with temporary asylum permits will be sent back to Syria as “parts of Syria are now safe.”

Often described as a populist far-right politician, Wilders views himself as a right-wing liberal. Wilders has made a name for himself due to his hard criticism of Islam, his scepticism about the European Union, and his stance against policies intended to tackle climate change. [France24]

Additionally, the PVV wants an opt-out from EU asylum and migration rules. EU nationals would require a work permit to work in The Netherlands, and the number of foreign students will be reduced. [France24]

Anti-European sentiment

Aside from advocating strict immigration policies, Wilders and the PVV are staunchly Eurosceptic. During the campaign, Wilders openly advocated for organising a binding ‘Nexit’ referendum to exit the EU, despite recognizing that there is currently no national mood for such action. [BBC]

Wilders said he opposes any form of political union, such as the EUm, "an institution that is pulling more and more power to itself, hoovers up taxpayers money, and imposed diktats on us." [France24]

The PVV has called for a sovereign Netherlands, a Netherlands that is in charge of its currency, its borders and its policies. Wilders opposes the European climate targets and corresponding rules. PVV wishes to leave the Paris agreement on climate change and also wants to abolish the Dutch climate law.

Instead, the PVV wants to extract more oil and gas and seize the building of wind turbines and solar farms. "We will stop the hysterical reduction of CO2, with which we, as a small country, mistakenly think we can save the climate" says the PVV manifesto. [The Guardian]

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was quick to congratulate Wilders, as both share a stance against aiding Ukraine in its defence against Russia. [Reuters]

Coalition problems

But to become prime minister of a country known for compromise politics, the politician must persuade other party leaders to work with him in a coalition government. [MSN]

That will be tough since mainstream parties have long been reluctant to join forces with him and his party, but the size of his victory strengthens his hand in any negotiations. The official in charge of investigating possible coalitions has announced a delay in his report due to hesitance from potential partners to join forces with Wilders' party.

Ronald Plasterk, a former government minister from the centre-left Labor Party, was set to present his findings on potential coalitions a few weeks after the election. The delay in the investigation comes as two significant parties have distanced themselves from considering a coalition with Wilders. [MSN]

Wilders has called on other parties to constructively engage in coalition talks.

Pieter Omtzigt, a former centrist Christian Democrat who built his own New Social Contract party in three months to take 20 seats, has also expressed his reluctance to discuss forming a coalition with Wilders. On election night Omtzigt changed his tone, saying: "We are available to govern. This is a difficult outcome. We will discuss on Thursday in what way we could best contribute." [The Guardian] [NOS] [MSN]

Omtzigt has criticized Wilders' anti-Islam statements in the past, deeming them unconstitutional. In response, Wilders has appealed to Omtzigt, VVD leader Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius, and the agrarian Farmer Citizen Movement to engage in coalition talks.

The new leader of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), led by outgoing prime minister Mark Rutte, has stated that she will not form a coalition with Wilders; however, her party will offer support to Wilders' party in parliament. [MSN]

Elections Results

Frans Timmermans and his Labour-Green alliance, made up by the left Party for the Labourer (PvdA) and the GreenLeft (GL) party, came in second place in the elections. After gaining 8 seats, compared to the 2021 elections – when there was no alliance between the two parties yet – GL-PvdA now secured 25 seats. [NOS]

GreenLeft's Jesse Klaver, faction leader in the Dutch parliament said he was "shocked" by the result, after witnessing the PVV's victory.

"We always defended the rule of law and this will be more needed than ever in the future." Ex-Eurocommissioner Timmersmans congratulated Wilders on his win, but immediately after vowed he will "never enter into a coalition with a party that excludes Dutchmen." He admitted to be disappointed by both the outcome and his alliance' own result. "Now is the time we are going to defend democracy," he added. [Politico]

The Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), responsible for delivering Mark Rutte as Dutch PM for the last 13 years, lost 10 seats compared to the last election, now totalling at 24 seats. Party-leader Dilan Yesilgoz, admitted the results had not been what they expected. [NOS]

"I think there are big lessons for politicians in this. People were not listened to enough, and not enough workable solutions were offered. The lead is not with us now," she said. [Politico]

(jb/gc)

EU gears up for migration reform, as member states take matters into their own hands

The Spanish presidency of the European Union is aiming to conclude discussions on a migration reform package before the end of the year, while Italy and Austria are seeking separate migrant relocation agreements with third party countries outside the bloc.

The EU package, which has been proposed amid a surge in migrants travelling illegally to the continent in search of a better life, is being negotiated by the bloc's institutions.

Over 233,000 "irregular" migrants have arrived in the EU this year, up from some 180,000 in 2022, but still a far cry from the 1.04 million during a crisis in 2015, according to border agency Frontex and the Spanish interior ministry.

Some of the bloc's individual member states disagree with European lawmakers over new human rights proposals to help migrants, including the European Parliament's plan to provide all unaccompanied minors with a representative. [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, amid the war between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East, the EU's executive has accelerated an economic agreement with Egypt in a larger plan to curb migration to Europe, following deals struck with Tunisia and Turkey. [Statewatch]

Fears of terrorism

Tensions have been rising across the EU as far-right voices have stoked fears that mass immigration will increase the risk of terror attacks, such as those in France and Belgium in October. On November 23, a knife attack in Dublin, allegedly by a naturalised Irish citizen of Algerian origin, sparked riots in the Irish capital. [Euractiv] [Washington Post]

Amid the rise in immigration, 11 of the 26 countries that form Europe's Schengen zone – which is supposed to enable free movement – have imposed border controls. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Italy inks agreement with Albania

Seeking its own solution, Rome inked an agreement with Tirana on November 6 for Albania to temporarily host some of the thousands of migrants rescued at sea by Italian authorities while their asylum requests are being processed. [Euronews]

Under the terms of the deal, Italy will administrate and fund the construction of two reception and detention centres in the Albanian coastal town of Shengjin. The facilities are to be designed to hold up to 3,000 people

at a time. Albania will be in charge of deporting asylum seekers whose bids are rejected by the Italian authorities.

Italy's hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said that if such asylum requests were processed quickly, the two camps could host up to 36,000 people a year. So far in 2023, some 145,000 people have landed on Italy's shores, up from 88,000 in 2022.

The project is planned for launch in the spring, but must still be put into legal acts and ratified by the Albanian parliament.

Amid concerns, European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson said in a preliminary assessment that the deal was not in breach of the bloc's rules. [Euronews]

Johansson added that EU legislation did not apply outside the bloc. She also said the rules that will apply in the Albania facilities would reflect those of the EU.

However, Euronews reported it was not clear if potential violations inside the centres could trigger legal action by the European Commission, as the EU's executive appeared to have distanced itself from the implementation of the deal.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz appeared open to studying Italy's arrangement with Tirana, telling reporters: "Albania will quite soon, in our view, be a member of the EU, implying that we are talking about the question of how can we jointly solve challenges and problems within the European family." [Reuters]

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani told his country's lawmakers the deal with Albania was not the same as an arrangement between the United Kingdom and Rwanda.

Controversial UK-Rwanda deal

An agreement between London and the African nation would see migrants who have arrived without documents in Britain since 2022 be sent to Rwanda, where their asylum claims would be assessed.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promised to pass an emergency law declaring Rwanda a safe destination for migrants in an attempt to circumvent a ruling from the British Supreme Court. Judges upheld an earlier appeal court decision that potential human rights abuses in Rwanda or in refugees' home countries – which Rwanda could deport them to – would put the UK in breach of several conventions it had signed, including

the European Convention on Human Rights. [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera]

Tajani said that contrary to the UK-Rwanda plan, Italy would not be outsourcing the management of asylum applications to a third country and would not be derogating from internationally protected rights. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Austria interested too

Meanwhile, other EU members have shown interest in emulating the UK-Rwanda deal.

The Austrian and British interior ministers signed a joint statement on November 2 pledging to work more closely together on security and migration issues, as Vienna explores a third-country relocation scheme like the UK's arrangement with Rwanda. [The Guardian]

The major difference between the British and Austrian plans is that under a scheme envisioned by Vienna, successful asylum seekers would be allowed to return to Austria, while the British plan would see people deported on a one-way ticket to Rwanda to claim asylum. [The Telegraph] [The Guardian]

(qv/pk)

Despite divisions, European Parliament approves sweeping reform of EU

European lawmakers on November 22 narrowly voted in favour of abolishing the power of veto for member states in key EU policy areas as part of a sweeping reform of the bloc's treaties – a plan which is fiercely opposed by some countries.

A total of 291 MEPs assembled in Strasbourg voted to approve the plan, 274 voted against it, and 44 abstained. [Euractiv]

Lawmakers backed a report by the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs that suggested 267 treaty changes. The proposed amendments strengthen the powers of EU institutions. One key change would abolish the need for unanimous decisions by member states in the European Council in 63 areas including defence, taxation and foreign policy.

New form of vote urged

Instead, the report proposes a new form 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 European Council require 55% of member states representing 65% of the population. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

However, such reforms will ultimately require approval by every EU member state's national parliament to enter into force, and they are strongly opposed by several governments, notably that in Warsaw.

Poland's two largest parties – the centre-right Civic Platform (PO) and the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) – both oppose the proposed changes.

Civic Platform leader Donald Tusk, a former European Council president who is poised to become Poland's new prime minister, said the measures did not represent "the spirit of the times and the real needs of the EU".

He added that they embodied a "naive euro-enthusiasm" which threatened to change the nature of the EU. [Notes from Poland]

'Anti-democratic power grab'

Meanwhile, senior PiS MEP Jacek Saryusz-Wolski said the proposals would bring about the EU's "self-destruction", adding that they were an "anti-democratic power grab behind citizens' backs".

The outgoing nationalist government in Warsaw adopted a resolution opposing the changes, saying they "fundamentally reduce Poland's sovereignty" and "violate the Polish constitution." The resolution said the changes would "serve the interests" of the EU's two biggest member states. That was a reference to France and Germany, which back the measures. [Polish Radio] [Euronews]

Opposition to the reforms is not limited to Poland. Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna told reporters: "We must never give up the principle of unanimity." He added: "We are against amending the Treaty". [ERR]

MEPs' approval of the proposed reforms triggered a call for the formation of a special convention of European institutions, member state leaders and representatives of national parliaments to enable the changes.

The bloc's leaders set to gather at a European Council summit on December 15 are expected to vote on whether to call a convention.

Should a majority of them approve the move – equivalent to 14 leaders out of 27 – a convention will be held, although this is not expected to happen before the EU Parliament elections in June 2024.

If the convention backs the treaty changes, the national parliaments of all EU member states would still need to ratify the proposals for them to come into effect.

(qv/pk)

WAR IN EUROPE: Ukraine braces for harsh winter as Russia benefits from flagging Western support

With snow now covering most of the frontline, the war in Ukraine has well and truly entered its third winter.

A large-scale Russian assault around the town of Avdiivka in the country's east has forced Kyiv to stall its southern counteroffensive, which has failed to deliver any strategic gains. As Russia prepares to blitz Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, Kyiv's backers in the West are faltering, with political divisions halting vital aid.

Russians creep forward

The town of Avdiivka in Ukraine's ruined east has remained the centre of gravity on the frontline for the second consecutive month, as Russia continued to pour resources into its capture.

Last month, Moscow launched an enormous offensive against Ukrainian positions around the town. Despite suffering intense losses in equipment and manpower for minimal gains, Russia remains undeterred. According to the Ukrainians, Russia has attacked in three waves since early October. These assaults have put increasing pressure on Avdiivka's defenders, who faced these offensives on three of the city's sides.

Russia's strategy is to cut the town off from its rear supply roads, but taking the strategic villages behind the city has proven difficult. Ukrainian forces retain control of Stepove and Sieverne, but face intense infantry and artillery assaults. Avdiivka lies close to Donetsk city, which Moscow-backed separatists captured in 2014 and which has functioned as an important logistical hub for Russian forces since the war began.

Pro-Russian commentators believe that the capture of Avdiivka would lower Ukraine's ability to strike Donetsk and demoralise Kyiv's Western backers – justifying what has thus far been a very costly move. [Al Jazeera] [Deutsche Welle] [Forbes] [France 24] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal]

Outside of Avdiivka, activity on the frontline has been modest.

Fighting in Ukraine's southern Zaporizhzhia region has stalled – along with Ukraine's counteroffensive in the area. A combination of Russian assaults in the country's eastern Donbas region, and increasingly poor weather, have slowed Ukraine's efforts.

However, as *Europe in Review* previously reported, a gap was found in the southern Kherson region, across the Dnieper river. Ukrainian troops were able to expand their bridgehead in November, as engagements continued around the riverside village of Krynky. While the operation is larger than a raid, it remains to be seen if Ukraine can develop its foothold into a new threat to Russia's occupation of the country's south-west. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [Euronews]

Internal discord

Ukraine's commander in chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, has been vocal about the lack of movement. In an interview with *The Economist* in early November, Zaluzhnyi said: "Just like in the first world war, we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate".

He believes that such a situation will favour Russia, allowing it to "rebuild its military power, eventually threatening Ukraine's armed forces and the state itself". Zaluzhnyi argued that in order to break the stalemate, the Ukrainian military will need to upgrade its equipment and gain a technological edge over an opponent with three times as many soldiers.

He pointed to Ukraine's insufficient number of air defence systems, mine breachers and electronic warfare systems as particular points of weakness. Ukraine's Western backers have provided these, but in limited numbers.

Zaluzhnyi's frank assessment was met with resistance from Kyiv. A representative of Ukraine's Office of the President, Ihor Zhovkva, said that Zaluzhnyi's comments "ease[d] the work of the aggressor," and that "panic" had been raised among Ukraine's Western backers.

In a rare note of discord in the Ukrainian state's public messaging, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the war "was not a stalemate". Zelensky also sacked the head of Ukraine's special forces, General Viktor Khorenko, for reasons not made public. [CNN] [Economist] [Financial Times] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Reuters] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe]

Western support for Kyiv falters

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion in 2022, European and American allies rushed to provide Ukraine with essential aid, giving the country the necessary ammunition to fight effectively. Nearly two years on, however, Kyiv is picking up worrying signals about the solidity of its Western backing. Adding to its concerns is the resistance of some EU member states to Ukraine being allowed into the bloc.

The European Commission recommended the opening of membership talks with Kyiv last month – nearly ten years after Ukrainians took the streets of their capital and toppled a pro-Russian government. But the country's prospects of entering the Western club remain up in the air.

Budapest is the biggest obstacle for Ukraine, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has committed to voting against starting the accession procedure, which requires unanimity among EU member states.

Orban, a long-time ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has disrupted European efforts to supply and support Ukraine. He has held up billions of euros in military and financial aid to Kyiv, often attempting to extract concessions from the EU, in particular seeking relief from European Commission sanctions imposed as a result of the deterioration in the rule of law in his country.

Meanwhile, Poland – once Ukraine's most vocal and important backer in the EU – has quarrelled with Kyiv in recent months over economic matters. In November, a blockade of Ukrainian lorries at the Polish border, organised by Polish truckers in response to what they perceive as unfair competition by Ukrainian hauliers, held up imports.

After a recent parliamentary election in Poland, the government in Warsaw has been unable to respond effectively to the crisis, adding to Ukraine's woes. The blockade has also spread to Slovakia, for the same reasons. [Associated Press] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [POLITICO Europe]

The process of entering the EU is a laboured one. States such as Turkey and Serbia have been in Europe's "waiting room" for decades as they must first copy the entire body of EU law into their domestic codes, reaching milestones set by the EU Commission. Ukraine's path won't be easy either. All eyes are now on the upcoming EU summit in Brussels, scheduled for December 14 and 15. [Associated Press] [Atlantic Council] [Economist] [ECFR] [Euractiv] [Euronews]

Shrinking shipments from US

Across the Atlantic, Ukraine's primary military supplier has slowed down deliveries amid political turmoil.

The Republican party, which controls the lower house of the US legislature, has sought to put support for Israel in its war against Hamas, and funds for increased security at America's border with Mexico, ahead of aid to Ukraine. At the same time, polling has shown a significant dip in support for Ukraine aid among American voters.

This has led to the shrinking of US shipments to Ukraine. A recent example is the supply of ATACMS missiles, which were deployed to devastating effect against Russian aviation. Ukraine has not used the missile since October.

The likelihood of Europe filling the United States' shoes as Ukraine's most important supplier of military hardware remains low – despite a commitment from Germany to dramatically increase support for Kyiv. In November, the EU announced it would not meet a target of producing one million shells per year to meet Ukraine's appetite for ammunition. European stockpiles of materiel are significantly smaller than those of the United States. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Economist] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Hill] [Wall Street Journal]

Western support has been essential to Ukraine's resistance and allowed the nation to pull off significant upsets against a much larger opponent, but the oft-repeated pledge that Ukraine would be supported "for as long as it takes" may now be ringing hollow. Russia, which has been able to mitigate Western sanctions against its industrial sector, expand conscription, and obtain large ammunition shipments from Iran and North Korea, stands to greatly benefit from the West's faltering backing for Kyiv.

Russia hoards missiles and drones

Although Ukraine has hardened its infrastructure and defences since Russia's last onslaught in winter 2022,

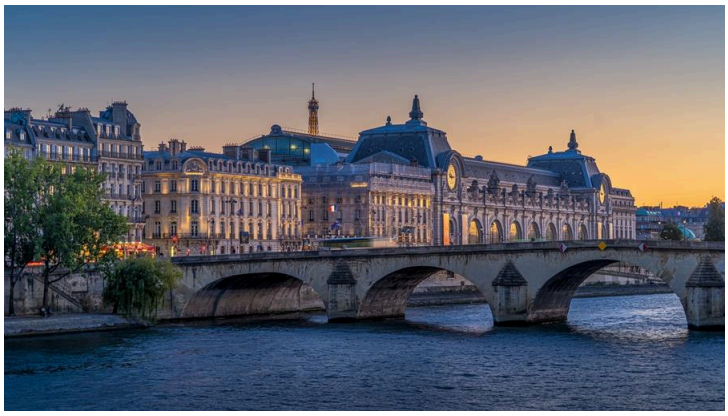
Moscow has likely stockpiled an enormous number of missiles and drones – and Ukrainian civilians are in the crosshairs.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance believes that Russia "has amassed a large missile stockpile" in advance of a new wave of attacks. With the air defence systems Ukraine requires unlikely to arrive in the numbers it needs, a difficult winter campaign looms.

The first hint of another winter onslaught came on November 3, as drones and cruise missiles were launched at several Ukrainian regions. Kyiv claimed interceptions of a large number of drones, though several buildings were reportedly damaged to an unknown extent. While Ukraine has strengthened its defences with Western-supplied Patriot and IRIS-T systems, these are in short supply – and the evidence is that Russian missiles and drones are not. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [Le Monde] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

(wb/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe



Belgium rail workers strike

Unionised rail workers in Belgium went on strike nationwide from November 7 to 9, calling for increased consultation with the government in industry reforms. The state-owned National Railway Company of Belgium organised the strike.

Labour unions CGSP Cheminots, CSC Transcom, and SLFP Cheminots participated in the strikes, which led to the cancellation of half of all long-distance inter-city trains. Nearly all rush-hour services were unavailable. [WSWS]

Workers are particularly opposed to halving the guards' preparation times between trains (from 20 minutes to 10 minutes), as well as increasingly long hours, stating overtime has become a structural norm. While a 2022 recruitment campaign saw an additional 2,400 new hires, 750 left before the end of their training period. [RTBF]

These latest strikes follow a joint statement by transport workers' unions released on October 31 calling on workers to refuse to handle military equipment being sent to Israel, stating "a genocide is underway in Palestine." [Reuters]

Further strikes by rail workers are planned from December 5 to 7. [Crisis24]

(sw/gc)

Belgian investigation nets suspected far-right group

Raids on November 9 resulting from a Belgian probe into alleged members of an extreme right group led to arrests domestically and in Germany, Italy, Croatia, and Lithuania.

Five suspects were arrested in total, and seven more suspects were interrogated. Two of the five arrested were detained in Diepenbeek and Ostend in the northern Flemish regions of Belgium. [BBC]

Europol first launched the investigation in July this year. Anti-terrorism investigators announced on November 10 that one of the alleged members being held was suspected of preparing bomb attacks and inciting violence.

"During one of the house searches in Diepenbeek, large numbers of Nazi memorabilia, including Nazi flags and swastikas, were found," prosecutors said that same day.

"It also turned out that some members of the online groups had written a manifesto, and there are indications that they had weapons at their disposal," the federal prosecutor's office said. [VOA]

The group is suspected of using an online platform for terrorist-related activities, including the dissemination of violent extremist propaganda, the active recruitment of new members, and the sharing of manuals of 3D-printed weapons. [Europol]

(sw/gc)

French Senate passes immigration bill

The French Senate passed a new immigration bill in a 210-115 vote on November 14. The new bill is a variation of one initially proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party. [France24]

The bill aims at limiting the reasons for which undocumented migrants can be present in France, as well as welfare benefits for migrants, and the ability to bring family members into the country. It also enables the immediate expulsion of non-citizens who commit criminal acts, a significant departure from typical European immigration norms. [CNN] [LeMonde]

The Senate's conservative majority amended the resulting legislation, an effort that "restored the bill's consistency by toughening it up," according to Bruno Retailleau, leader of Les Républicains branch of the Sénat. [Le Monde]

Retailleau warned that relaxing immigration laws would be a "sign of weakness." The conservative leader argued: "We [France] can't have a bill that wants both to expel more people and regularise more people." [Le Monde]

The bill, also referred to as the *Projet de loi d'immigration*, aimed to address various challenges linked to immigration and assimilation in France. It would make granting residency permits contingent upon the applicant's agreement to "respect the values of the republic."

France has the largest Muslim population in Europe. Ten percent of the French population was born outside the country, according to the national statistics agency INSEE.

New requirements

The bill would also require migrants to reside in France for 24 months before bringing other family members into the country to live with them, and it proposes new reductions to the amount of appeals migrants are

allowed if their application for refugee status is denied. [The Local fr]

Additionally, the residency of undocumented individuals allowed to remain in France to work in sectors with labour shortages would be determined on a case-to-case basis. The new legislation would also limit the healthcare provided by the French state for undocumented individuals to emergency medical services only. It would require migrants to reside in France for five years to access most welfare benefits. [The Local fr] [Le Monde]

One of the most relevant aspects of the revised bill is its push to remove previous protections that shield migrants who enter France at age 13 or younger from deportation in adulthood, should they be convicted of a crime. The amended legislation would allow for the removal of such individuals who appear on a terror watch list and those found to have "committed a grave and deliberate violation of the principles of the French Republic." [The Local fr]

This is of particular concern given the recent October 13 assault and murder of a teacher in Arras, France, allegedly perpetrated by Mohammed Mogouchkov, a radicalised man of Chechen origin who arrived in France under 13 years old and whose extremism had put him under surveillance by French authorities. This is someone who, according to France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, could have been deported before the killing if such measures were in place. [AP] [Le Monde]

Struggle against antisemitism

Minister Darmanin also highlighted France's current struggle against a surge in anti-Semetic acts across the nation, telling France 2 TV that the number of such acts "has exploded." The interior minister added that of the 486 individuals that have been arrested in connection with the more than one thousand anti-Semitic acts occurring since the October 7 terror attack on Israel, over 100 of the alleged perpetrators are foreigners. [The Guardian]

The bill must receive support in the National Assembly before becoming law. According to a report by Le Monde, this is not likely to happen, since right-wing French lawmakers want to toughen the bill even more, whilst left-wing lawmakers are “dead set against it”. [Le Monde]

These developments came just before Macron’s government announced that the proposed referendum on immigration, which was heavily

supported by France's right and far-right parties, will not go ahead due to lack of support for the bill and Constitutional issues. [Le Monde]

Bill denounced

French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne advocated for the bill in its original form, commenting to France Inter radio that the initial draft attempts "to remove those who shouldn't be here more quickly and at the same time to better integrate those who should remain."

But Borne has questioned the conservatives' claim that the bill will better the condition of migrants already living in France. [France 24]

The leader of the Parti Socialiste in the Assemblée Nationale has already denounced the revised bill as "disgraceful." However, Retailleau's counterpart in the Assemblée, Olivier Marleix- whose support on either side will be needed to pass any resolution- has vowed to "keep toughening the text."

Several non-governmental organisations and human rights organisations have spoken out against the bill, claiming that it poses a threat to migrants' rights. [Human Rights Watch]

(cqk-rdm/gc)

French court clears minister of abuse of power charges

French Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti was acquitted on November 29 of abuse of power charges by the Court of Justice of the Republic (CJR) [New York Times]

The charges involved two incidents, dating from soon after he was appointed justice minister in July 2020. [New York Times]

The justice minister had launched an investigation on three magistrates who had instructed the police to examine his phone records in 2014 while he was a lawyer. Then Dupond-Moretti began administrative proceedings against a judge, Edouard Levrault, who had investigated one of his former clients. [New York Times]

For both incidents, the Judiciary cleared the four judges of any wrongdoings.[New York Times]

The court ruled that while Dupond-Moretti had a conflict of interest as justice minister, he had not intended to abuse his power. [New York Times]

The minister had not expressed "animosity, contempt or a desire for revenge" toward the four magistrates, and he had not been "warned" of the conflict of interest by his staff, the president of the court, Dominique Pauthe, said. [New York Times]

The CJR is a special court often criticised for being soft on government members. [RFI]

Dupond-Moretti has been criticising and attacking the Magistrates Unions, and in turn, they and an anti-corruption association, Anti-Cor, have brought this case against him. [France Info]

Eric Alt, a magistrate and Anti-Cor administrator, said that friction between the justice minister and the magistrates may 'strengthen the culture of independence' of the Judiciary. [France Info]

(gdb/gc)

French labour minister trial starts

French Labour Minister Olivier Dussopt's trial at the Paris criminal court started on November 27 after being accused of favouritism when awarding a public contract when he was the mayor of a small town in 2009.

Dussopt was accused of passing information regarding a EUR 5.6 million contract in 2009 to the Saur water company in Annonay. Dussopt allegedly modified the evaluation criteria to favour the company's bid. [Rti]

The former socialist MP, who joined Macron's government as labour minister in 2022, denied the accusations. [FinancialTimes]

Dussopt influenced the decision to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 plan. His proposal caused protests among the French population.. If the labour minister is found guilty, he will face two years in prison. [LeMonde]

(vt/gc)

French lawmakers push to end free healthcare for undocumented migrants

Right-wing lawmakers in France are trying to scrap free medical aid for undocumented migrants. The amendment comes when French immigration law is undergoing severe pressure to curb the inflow of undocumented or irregular migrants into the country. [RFI] [RFI] [Le Monde]

French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist government has not supported the amendment, undermining the already-existing State Medical Aid (AME) scheme.

Medical practitioners around the country have made their position on the government-sponsored bill clear, with thousands signing an open letter in which signatories have promised to disobey the bill if it passes. [Libération]

The bill emanates from France's right and far-right political parties, who have argued in the past that the AME scheme incites more illegal immigration. However, a report published by France's National Centre for Scientific Research in 2022 debunked this assumption. [De Facto Migrations]

According to the Deputy head of the French Infectious Diseases Society (SPILF), Professor Pierre Tattevin: Scrapping AME "would cost us a lot dearer than any savings it might generate." He also claimed in the interview that the bill is guided by “ideology rather than medical concern". [France 24]

(rdm/gc)

Macron skips rally against antisemitism

French President Emmanuel Macron was missing from the rally against antisemitism in Paris, which 100,000 people attended. However, his French conservative challenger in the upcoming election, Marine LePen, from the National Rally (formerly the National Front), as well as the current party president, Jordan Bardella did attend. [BBC]

The appearance of LePen appeared to reverse typical stereotypes in France where the National Front has previously been accused of anti-semitism. [Le Monde] [Reuters] [France 24]

The marches were organised to show solidarity with Jewish communities in Israel that were affected by the Hamas attack on October 7th of this year. [ABC News]

More than 70 demonstrations against antisemitism took place around France on the same day, with support for the Jewish community being shown by both right and left-wing politicians, French celebrities, and former presidents François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, who took part in the larger Paris solidarity march co-organized by French Senate Speaker Gérard Larcher. [The Guardian]

The amalgamation of France's right and left caused tension on the day, with some left-wing Jewish groups trying to stop far-right party leaders from joining. Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front party, also received criticism for attending the rally since her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was a convicted Holocaust denier. [AP News] [Reuters] [BBC News]

Macron's absence from the rally was "regrettable", according to Yonathan Arfi, president of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France (CRIF). Although he was not in attendance, Macron showed his support for French Jewish communities in an open letter to the French in which he condemned the rise in antisemitism around the world. [Éylsée]

The fact that MEPs from France's radical left parties were not at the protest in Paris sparked controversy, too.

However, the position of those not in attendance was summed up by one MEP from La France Insoumise, who said: "I want to march against antisemitism [but] I'm not going to march with those who have helped to develop antisemitism". [Euractiv] [Le Monde]

Since the march, Macron has hosted religious leaders from around France to generate discussions about combating antisemitism. [France 24]

Surge in antisemitism

French Jews have experienced an increase in antisemitic acts, with the number of reported cases in the thousands since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas conflict on October 7. [France 24][Le Monde]

According to the French interior minister, since the beginning of the conflict, 2,500 reports of anti-semitic acts have been registered.. So far, antisemitic incidents have reported to be three times higher compared to the entire 2022. These anti-Semitic acts have ranged from cases of offensive graffiti and verbal abuse to cases of violent physical assaults. [Le Monde] [Le Monde] [AlJazeera]

Many of France's Jewish communities are now living in fear, with some considering moving out of the country to lead more peaceful lives and others "withdrawing into their communities," according to anonymous Jewish sources interviewed by a reporter at France 24. [France 24] [The European Conservative]

In solidarity with French Jews, the leader of the Socialist Party, Olivier Faure, proposed that marches against antisemitism take place across the country. However, this suggestion was quickly undermined by Jean Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise, who refused to walk alongside representatives of France's far-right who, themselves, have a history of antisemitism. [The Algemeiner] [The Guardian]

(rdm-vt/gc)

Macron opposes gender-inclusive language

A proposed bill banning gender-inclusive language in France has received a majority vote in the French Senate amidst the growing European debate about how newly created gender neutral terminology endangers languages. [Euronews] [Le Monde] [Senat.fr] [The Guardian]

French President Emmanual Macron has expressed his doubts regarding the advisability of relenting to political pressure to utilize "gender-inclusive" terminology in common speech while at an inaugural ceremony for the Cité Internationale de la Langue Française. This centre showcases the history of the French language. [Campus France]

In his speech, Macron warned against "giving into fashionable trends" such as establishing a less-gendered French language. [France 24]

Calls from public interest groups and academia to make the French language "less sexist" have been rebuked by "the guardians of the French language" of the Académie Française since the 1980s. [Academie Française] [The Guardian] [France 24]

This debate has historically involved "right-leaning language purists, the Left and feminists," according to Katie Dartford at Euronews. [Euronews]

On the Right, the argument is centred on protecting the foundations of the French language and traditional pronoun usage. On the Left, the view is that there is a

gender bias ingrained in the language that needs to be resolved by gender inclusivity. [France 24] [RFI]

The Lower House of the National Assembly must approve the bill to become law.

(rdm/gc)

France looks to ban small ultra-right groups

French Interior Minister Grrald Darmanin said he is going to propose a ban on small ultra-right groups, in response to a series of violent protests over the murder of a schoolboy at a village dance.

The 16-year-old, called Thomas, was fatally stabbed when fighting broke out at a dance in Crepol on 18 November. Prosecutors say nine suspects have been placed under formal investigation. Extreme-right activists ``have seized on the boy's death,'' BBC News reported. [Le Monde] [BBC News]

Hundreds of extreme-right activists travelled to a town near Crepol after the incident in search of those responsible for the boy's murder. They appeared as hooded militants, with some carrying weapons like baseball bats. [Le Monde]

Far-right media outlets encouraged revenge attacks on the suspects. Far-right politicians have also used the incident as an opportunity to connect immigrants to the crime, despite details of the attack being yet unclear. [Le Monde]

Nine suspects are being questioned about the boy's murder, about which the circumstances are unclear. The senior prosecutor on the case, Laurent de Caigny, has warned people against coming to any hasty conclusions about the murder.

De Caigny told reporters that the murder appears to have taken place for "petty reasons" and that differences in "race, ethnicity, nationality or religion" do not imply a premeditated intent to commit murder. [Le Monde]

Palestinian conference disrupted

A group of extremists were reported to be attacking a Palestine themed conference in Lyon in the early morning on November 11. The conference was hosted by Palestine 69 Community and attended by approximately 100 people and attacked by a group of

40 to 60 individuals. The attackers wore masks and raided the conference with fireworks and sticks. [AA] [LeMonde]

People in Lyon gathered together on the same day during the afternoon of the attack, November 11, to manifest against fascism. Around 3,000 Lyonnais took part in the protest. Protesters were asking to shut down the places where the extremist groups gather together, to prevent new attacks and the spread of their movement. [LeFigaro]

(rdm-vt/gc)

Police officer who killed French teen freed

After the killing of Nanterre teen Nahel Merzouk in June this year, the police officer charged with his murder has since been released. He will remain under judicial supervision until the trial. [Le Monde]

The 17-year-old was stopped at a traffic stop by two police officers, one of whom shot at the teen as he tried to pull away from the officers.

The killing of Nahel sparked violent protests around France. [The Guardian] [The Intercept]

According to a report by Le Monde: "the killing of Nahel revived long standing grievances about policing and racial profiling in France's low-income and multi-ethnic suburbs." [Le Monde] [Harvard Politics]

Upon his conditional release, the officer in question is prohibited from carrying a weapon, going near the crime scene, and speaking with witnesses or plaintiffs. [France 24]

Since the news of the officer's release, Nahel's mother has called for a fresh wave of protests to shed light on the "injustice" of the justice system in France. [France 24]

(rdm/gc)

Six students go on trial for 2020 murder

A group of teenagers have begun their trial at the closed-doors juvenile court for their part in the murder of school teacher Samuel Paty in 2020. [Le Monde]

Paty was stabbed and beheaded in his classroom on October 16, 2020, after showing his pupils pictures of the Islamic prophet Mohammed from the popular French magazine Charlie Hebdo. The images were shown during a class on freedom of expression.

The youngest pupil involved in the murder was 13 years old at the time. The student in question made a false accusation against Paty just before his murder, wherein she claimed that Paty asked all Muslim students to leave the classroom before showing the image of Muhammed when in fact she had skipped the class in question. [Reuters]

Her father posted the claim on social media, together with a description of Paty showing students cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohamed that had been shown by French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo in 2015, during his class on freedom of expression. The posting is believed to have prompted 18-year-old Abdoullakh Anzorov from Chechnya to travel 80 km from Normandy to Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a town near Paris, to murder Paty, in echoes of the 2015 break in and murder at Charlie Hebdo offices in 2015. [BBC News]

Police shot Anzorov dead at the scene of the crime. The other teenagers on trial have been convicted for helping Anzorov identify Paty in exchange for money before Anzorov committed his murder. [New York Times]

All of the defendants have expressed deep guilt regarding their role in the murder and claimed not to have known the true intentions of Anzorov. The second trial for eight adults who are alleged to have played a role in the murder will take place next year. [The Guardian]

(rdm/gc)

French senator charged for allegedly drugging MP

French Senator Joel Guerriau of the Horizons party has been charged preliminary for drugging fellow member of parliament Sandrine Josso to commit rape or sexual assault. [France 24] [The Guardian] [Politico]

The 66-year-old senator has been placed under judicial supervision and has, since his arrest, been suspended from his party. Les Indépdenents, Guerriau's Senate group, has also issued a suspension. [Le Monde]

Horizons, the centre-right party, is allied to Macron's Renaissance party.

Depending on the outcome of the investigation, Guerriau could be facing a five-year prison sentence and a fine of up to EUR 75,000.

Josso, a member of the lower-house National Assembly, was at Guerriau's residence in Paris when the incident occurred. It was after ecstasy was detected in her blood that Josso filed the criminal complaint. [The Guardian]

Guerriau's lawyer told the press that the Senator was charged with possession of drugs and "administering without Sandrine Josso's knowledge a substance likely to alter her judgment or self-control, to commit a rape or sexual assault". [Le Monde]

(rdm/gc)

French court rules to deport Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine member

France's top administrative court ruled in favour of an appeal by the country's interior ministry to deport activist and member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) Mariam Abu Daqqa, reversing a lower court's decision. [Fox News]

The Conseil d'État held that Abu Daqqa, who has been in France on a speaking tour since September and was placed under house arrest after Hamas's October 7 terror attack, is "likely to seriously disturb public order" due to her ties to the PFLP. [Reuters]

The Conseil d'État cited the 72-year-old's "leadership" role in the PFLP as part of its decision. Abu Daqqa has been cited as "a member of the PFLP Political Bureau" as recently as July of last year. She has functioned as a spokeswoman/advocate for the PFLP in its push for the creation of a united Palestinian coalition with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

This claim was disputed by Pierre Stambul of the Union of French Jews for Peace, who advocated against Abu Daqqa's deportation, saying that she had not held a leadership role for around 20 years. [Reuters] [Al-Monitor]

Abu Daqqa claims 30 family members have been killed since the beginning of the war and expressed her emotional pain at having to watch from a distance.

"Death is much easier than staying here while my heart aches for them. Or having to receive news every day of one of them dying," she said. [Fox News]

PLO wing

The PFLP, an internationally recognised terror organisation, is the second largest wing of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). It includes an armed branch connected to multiple terror attacks in recent decades.

They were responsible for the bombing of Israeli civilians (2019), hijacking an Air France flight (1976), killing 24 innocents at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport (1972), assassinating an Israeli cabinet minister (2001), and attacking a Synagogue in Jerusalem (2014),according to the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). [NGO Monitor] [NCTC]

The PFLP is "blacklisted" by the EU due to its terror connections and attacks on Israel.

The organisation's founding declaration advocates for the use of "revolutionary violence" as "the only weapon left to the masses [Palestinians]." It calls for members to "turn our land into a burning hell for the invaders [Israel]" while asserting that "the fate of collaborators and traitors and enemies," such as France and its fellow Western and EU nations, will be that of Israel- "crushed in full." [Reuters] [PFLP Founding Statement]

NGO Monitor has raised concern in recent years over several NGOs allegedly diverting EU funds for Palestinian humanitarian aid to the PFLP, citing 2021 reports "that these NGOs provided a funding 'lifeline' for the PFLP, employed PFLP terrorists, and that PFLP terror operatives used NGO offices for meetings." Revelations that Abu Daqqa previously dismissed as "silly claims." [NGO Monitor] [Reuters]

(cqk/gc)

France tests new submarine ballistic missile

France tested a new submarine-launched ballistic missile on November 18. It was the first test for the new M51.3 long-range missile, which was launched by the French Defence Procurement Agency (DGA).

The test took place in a facility in southwestern France. The M51.3 missile is expected to become operational in 2025. [Reuters]

The upgraded M51.3 has been reported to have higher rate of survivability and increased operational range, encompassing 8,000 to 10,000 km with a speed of Mach 25. [NavalNews]

French Minister of Armed Forces Sebastien Lecornu expressed satisfaction with the successful test. With the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the test marks a pivotal moment for France's credibility on the missile's improvement and France overall nuclear capability. [MinistèreDesArmées]

The General Directorate of Armaments (DGA) was monitoring the M51.3 throughout its entire flight phase. The fallout location of the missile was hundreds of kilometres from any coast, in the North Atlantic area. [DefenceAerospace]

(vt/gc)

German constitutional court upholds double jeopardy principle in landmark ruling

In a pivotal decision on October 31, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court declared that individuals acquitted of murder and war crimes cannot be retried, even in the presence of new evidence. The ruling, passed by a majority of six judges in favour and two against, overrules a 2021 reform to ease double jeopardy rules. [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [MDR] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

The case that prompted this ruling was brought by a man in his 60s who had been acquitted in 1981 for the rape and murder of a 17-year-old girl in Lower Saxony due to insufficient evidence. Despite the initial acquittal, new DNA evidence emerged, leading to his re-arrest and a second trial in 2022. [MDR] [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

In December 2021, the government officially amended the law to allow retrials, particularly in cases utilising modern DNA analysis from crimes committed long ago. The amendment applied only to the most severe offences, such as murder, genocide, and war crimes. [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [MDR] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

The recent ruling by the constitutional court declares the 2021 reform unconstitutional, reinstating the principle that individuals cannot be retried for the same crime, even with new evidence.

Presiding Judge Doris König underscored that the German constitution prohibits multiple punishments and prosecutions, emphasising the "absolute" nature of the right not to be retried. König pointed out that the law leaves "no room for manoeuvre even if it turns out in retrospect that the verdict was incorrect [Deutsche Welle]." [Reuters]

This decision aligns with international conventions, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights, on double jeopardy. [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

(if/gc)

Germany faces unprecedented cyber threats

A recent status report presented by the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) in Germany has sounded alarm bells, declaring the current cyber threat level to be "higher than ever before" during the reporting period from June 2022 to June 2023.

The report from November 2 emphasised the urgent need for increased investment in cybersecurity, particularly for small businesses and local governments, which are especially vulnerable to organised hackers. [Euractiv] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Reuters]

Ransomware attacks involve hackers encrypting an organisation's systems and demanding ransom payments for unlocking them. The threat extends to the theft of sensitive data, often leading to extortion or online data leaks if payments are not made. [Reuters]

The BSI documented 27 ransomware attacks on local authorities and businesses and 23 on educational and research institutions, averaging two such attacks per month in the past year. About 65 victims from Germany had their names and data published on leak sites, representing a 24% increase compared to the previous reporting period. [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

Local authorities and small to medium-sized enterprises constitute around 80 % of the German corporate landscape and are particularly vulnerable to cyber threats. Many of these companies view security measures as operational obstacles, posing a significant challenge in balancing security and day-to-day operations. The BSI, however, underscores the need

for additional measures, as German firms suffered a total loss of 203 billion EUR from cyber attacks in the previous year. [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

"The threat situation in cyberspace is worrying," commented Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser after the report was published. [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

In response to the growing threat, the BSI aims to establish a nationwide central office for cybersecurity to coordinate the fight against cyber attacks on critical infrastructures.

BSI President Claudia Plattner emphasised the importance of Germany embracing itself as a cybernation. "In this context, the creation of a central office for cybersecurity is essential for the BSI," she said, "if only to be able to create a uniform national picture of the situation." [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Euractiv]

(if/gc)

Racism is widespread in Germany, government-commissioned monitor says

A recently released national monitor commissioned by the German government has shed light on the pervasive issue of racism in the country, disproportionately impacting black and Muslim individuals.

Published on November 7 by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research, the report surveyed over 21,000 participants. [Tagesschau] [Guardian] [Deutschlandfunk] [Der Spiegel]

Key findings reveal that over half (54%) of surveyed black individuals reported experiencing racism in public, with nearly 20% facing repeated threats or harassment. About 13% of Muslim and 12% Asian respondents reported frequent acts of harassment. [Tagesschau] [Tagesspiegel] [Guardian] [Der Spiegel] [Deutschlandfunk]

The national monitor identified both overt and subtle forms of discrimination, which, for many minorities, lace regular encounters with fear. Incidents of discrimination were particularly prevalent with law enforcement, where 41% of black men and 39% of Muslim men reported incidents of discrimination by

the police, compared to a significantly lower 9% for white men.

Public offices and authorities also emerged as significant sources of racism, with every second Muslim person and 40% of Asians reporting discriminatory experiences. [Tagesschau] [Der Spiegel] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesspiegel] [Guardian]

Healthcare settings were also heavily impacted by racism, as racial labelling led to fewer appointments and less attention to complaints. Women, mainly Muslim (68%) and black women (67%), reported adverse experiences in healthcare.

Over a third of female respondents experienced discrimination regularly, and approximately 13% delayed or avoided treatment due to concerns about discrimination. The unequal treatment of patients was further linked to anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms in survey participants. [Tagesschau] [Guardian] [Der Spiegel] [Tagesspiegel]

This revelation follows a recent survey by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, where Germany ranked the poorest in terms of racism against black people in European Union countries. According to that survey, 76% of respondents in Germany claimed they had been discriminated against because of their skin colour, origin, or religion. [Deutschlandfunk]

Germany's Center for Integration and Migration Research plans to conduct this survey annually, covering different sectors like housing and labour. [Guardian] [Tagesschau] [Tagesspiegel]

(if/gc)

German far-right AfD member arrested for Nazi symbolism

Daniel Halemba, a 22-year-old newly elected member of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, was apprehended on October 30 on charges related to the display of Nazi symbolism.

Halemba, who made history as the youngest politician ever elected to Bavaria's state legislative body in early October, faced arrest just hours before his swearing-in ceremony. [Der Spiegel] [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [BBC]

A member of the Teutonia Prag student fraternity, Halemba had already come under scrutiny from

authorities in September when the organisation was raided by the police on suspicions of employing Nazi symbolism and salutes.

In Germany, fraternities dating back to the 19th century are often associated with perpetuating conservative and nationalistic philosophies. [Reuters] [Der Spiegel] [Deutsche Welle] [BBC]

In a video released by his legal team, Halemba denounced the arrest warrant as "arbitrary" and dismissed the accusations as baseless. The public prosecutor's office is also investigating four other members of the fraternity on charges including incitement to hatred. [Der Spiegel] [Deutsche Welle]

The arrest occurred less than a month after the AfD, known for its neo-Nazi sympathies, experienced considerable electoral successes in several states across the country. The party achieved its best-ever election result in Bavaria in early October, securing 32 seats and becoming the largest opposition party in the state. The AfD and its youth wing are under observation in several states, reflecting concerns over the party's ideological leanings. [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle]

(if/gc)

Germany marks 85th anniversary of Kristallnacht

Germany solemnly commemorated the 85th anniversary of Kristallnacht, also known as the "Night of Broken Glass," on November 9.

A dark chapter in Nazi history, the evening in 1938 witnessed widespread attacks on Jewish temples, shops, and social places by the Nazis. More than 90 lives were lost, 7,500 Jewish businesses vandalised, and 1,400 synagogues destroyed.

Approximately 30,000 Jewish men were arrested, many of whom were sent to concentration camps. [Tagesschau] [Euronews] [Associated Press] [New York Times]

This year's anniversary has occurred against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, which erupted on October 7.

The Antonio Amadeu Foundation's antisemitism monitor reported an increase in attacks on Jewish people and institutions in Germany since the conflict

began, with about 70 verified incidents of antisemitism occurring since early October. [New York Times] [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Tagesschau]

Recent events, including the attempted firebombing of a synagogue, have heightened fears within the German-Jewish community, causing some individuals to hide their identity due to rising antisemitism.

The spike in such attacks is part of a longer-standing trend over the past years, attributed in large part by press reports to the second largest Muslim population in Europe and to left wing parties, sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and against the Israeli military response to the Hamas terrorist attack of Octobery 7, with antisemitic attitudes having tripled, especially among young people. [Reuters] [BBC] [Associated Press]

At a commemoration ceremony at a synagogue in Berlin, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed shame and outrage at recent attacks on the Jewish community in Germany.

Meanwhile, Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, also pointed to recent pro-Palestinian demonstrations as the source of the recent violence, criticizing demonstrators for openly calling for the destruction of Israel. He claimed that antisemitism among Arab-origin and leftist groups has been on the rise. [Tagesschau] [Associated Press] [Euronews] [BBC] [Politico] [New York Times]

In a video upload on November 2, Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck stated that while criticism of Israel is allowed, "Israel's right to exist must not be relativized. Israel's security is our obligation." This reflects Germany's historic and steadfast support for Israel despite the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, declared by former Chancellor Angela Merkel as its *Staatsräson*, or reason of state. [BBC]

However, Germany's stance on Israel faces challenges from various public quarters. At a recent protest for Palestinian rights, a placard reading "Your *Staatsräson* sucks!" underscored dissenting voices. Muslim and Arab communities feel their right to protest has been unfairly restricted, as many pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the country have been banned. [BBC] [New York Times]

As Germany remembered the horrors of Kristallnacht, the nation continued to grapple with the complex dynamics of historical remembrance, the persistent spectre of antisemitism as well as Islamophobia, and

contemporary geopolitics between Israel and Palestine.

(if/gc)

German journalist faces scrutiny over links to Russian oligarch

Hubert Sepiel, a prominent German journalist known for his coverage of Russian President Vladimir Putin, is under investigation following revelations that he received at least EUR 600,000 in undisclosed offshore payments from companies connected to a Russian oligarch.

These findings, made public on November 14 as part of the Cyprus Confidential project led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, have raised concerns about potential influences on Seipel's journalistic work. [Die Zeit] [Guardian] [ZDF] [Tagesspiegel]

In 2018, Seipel reportedly signed a sponsorship contract for his second book, “Putin's Power: Why Europe Needs Russia.” Documents indicate that oligarch Alexei Mordashov, sanctioned by the European Union in 2022 for close ties to the Kremlin, provided financial support.

Payments to Seipel appear to have been intricately routed through offshore structures managed by Mordashov's associates. [Die Zeit] [ZDF] [Guardian] [Tagesspiegel]

A leaked handwritten note further suggests a similar agreement dating back to 2013 for a Putin biography, indicating a more extended history of financial ties between Seipel and Mordashov. [Die Zeit] [ZDF] [Tagesspiegel]

The German broadcaster NDR, responsible for airing several interviews between Seipel and Putin, expressed grave concern about the allegations. In response, it has blocked access to Seipel's interviews and films, emphasising that he should have disclosed any potential conflicts of interest. [Guardian] [Die Zeit]

Both Seipel's publisher, Hoffmann und Campe, and NDR claim to have been unaware of the payments and have announced plans to conduct internal investigations. [Tagesspiegel] [ZDF] [Die Zeit]

In response to the allegations, Seipel acknowledged receiving money from Mordashov for his book projects

but asserted that the oligarch did not influence the content of his books or his other journalistic work. He pointed to a clause in the leaked contract claiming that he had no obligations to the sponsor concerning the book's composition. Russian parties, including Mordashov and Putin, have declined to comment on the payments but asserted that Seipel's success was through fair business practices. [ZDF] [Guardian] [Tagesspiegel] [Die Zeit]

The revelation could have broader implications, raising concerns about attempts by pro-Putin actors to influence positive coverage in international media. In Germany, the disclosure adds to the ongoing debate about the role of business elites in supporting Putin, particularly considering Germany's long-standing reliance on Russian oil and gas. [Guardian] [ZDF]

(if/gc)

Germany's cabinet approves 2023 supplementary budget

Germany's cabinet greenlit a supplementary budget on November 27, navigating financial constraints triggered by a recent court ruling that curtailed government spending.

The move came in response to the Federal Constitutional Court's blockage of nearly 60 million EUR, earmarked for repurposing unused pandemic funds into green projects and industry subsidies, putting Chancellor Olaf Scholz's administration in a fiscal bind. [Reuters] [Tagesspiegel] [Deutsche Welle] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Euronews]

Germany's constitutionally enshrined debt brake was introduced after the 2008 global financial crisis to curb the country's borrowing capacity. It has been suspended in cases of extreme circumstance, most recently in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, the government wishes to justify continuing the debt break suspension by pointing to the spillover effects from the 2022 energy crisis, a fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Economy Minister Robert Habeck has vocally criticised the debt brake, emphasising the need for clarity to support industries and prevent the relocation of new jobs. [Reuters] [Euronews]

The recent legal setback resulted in a substantial reduction of funds in the federal budget, affecting cross-departmental expenditures such as Germany's

Climate and Transformation fund and defence measures against energy price increases.

Consequently, the Finance Ministry froze the nation's budget for 2023, raising uncertainties about the government's ability to balance the 2024 budget and manage financial planning in the coming years. The economic crunch is particularly impactful for the Greens, the leftmost member of the ruling coalition, renowned for its emphasis on climate protection. [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Deutsche Welle] [Tagesspiegel] [Reuters]

While the freeze's immediate financial effect on citizens is limited, companies and self-employed individuals engaged in government-funded projects may face changes, delays, or cancellations. [Reuters] [Euronews]

Efforts are underway to present a 2024 budget by the end of the year, to be then approved by parliament. The cabinet intends to cite the 2022 energy crisis as justification for renewing the suspension of the country's debt brake. [Reuters]

(if/gc)

German industry gets new energy subsidies

German Finance Minister Christian Lindner announced EUR 83.3 billion will be spent to offset gas and district heating in 2024, as well as offset the economic rescue of German utility Uniper SE, the country's largest natural gas importer. [Bloomberg]

German Economy Minister Robert Habeck announced EUR 28 billion in electricity tax breaks for German industry to offset natural gas price increases through 2027, from Euro 15.37 per kilowatt hour (kWh) to Euro Cent 50 per kWh, sending industrial stocks soaring. [Bloomberg]

The German government further announced EUR 7.5 billion in loan guarantees for Siemens Energy to primarily offset losses stemming from its takeover of Spanish wind energy leader Gamesa. [Reuters]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni signed a joint agreement on November 23 to repurpose existing natural gas pipelines, transforming them into a hydrogen pipeline system across the Alps and Mediterranean connecting Germany, Switzerland, and Italy to Tunisia. [Euractiv]

Tunisia plans to produce over eight million tons of hydrogen per year, mainly for export to Europe, by 2050 and to produce 4 million tons annually by 2030.

(rw/gc)

US pharmaceutical giant plans EUR 2.3 billion investment in German plant

Eli Lilly, a US pharmaceutical giant, plans to invest EUR 2.3 billion in a production plant for injectable drugs in the Western German town of Alzey.

The decision aligns with an emerging industry trend favouring localised production, driven by concerns about global supply chains made vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. [ZDF] [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Süddeutsche Zeitung]

The investment announcement follows the success of Eli Lilly's diabetes drug, Mounjaro, which has also shown promise in treating obesity. Mounjaro's versatility has translated into a 37% surge in the company's third-quarter revenues for 2023.

Recently granted clearance in the US for off-label use as a weight-loss drug under the brand name Zepbound, Mounjaro is currently awaiting approval from the European Union (EU) for extended use. [ZDF] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

Eli Lilly expects the Alzey plant to generate approximately 1,900 construction jobs and over 1,000 permanent positions upon completion. Eli Lilly will fully finance the Alzey facility, a departure from recent foreign investments in Germany, such as Intel's chip factory, which relied on substantial government subsidies, drawing criticism from the public. [Europe in Review July 2023] [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

German Federal Health Minister Karl Lauterbach has emphasised the government's concerted effort "to make Germany more attractive as a pharmaceutical location." The move is posited as a triumph for Germany, showcasing its economic allure for foreign investment despite the challenges posed by escalating energy costs. [Süddeutsche Zeitung] [Reuters]

Eli Lilly's expansion into Europe signifies a departure from the pharmaceutical industry's opposition to EU plans to shorten market protection periods. Operating under the name "Lilly Deutschland" since 1960, Eli Lilly has maintained a longstanding presence in Germany,

but this new plant represents its first major productive complex.

The company already boasts other major production sites in Ireland, France, Spain, and Italy. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Construction of Hamburg's tallest skyscraper halts amid German property woes

The construction of Germany's much-anticipated Elbtower, a 65-story skyscraper set to become the tallest conventional building in the north-western city of Hamburg, abruptly stopped in early November, amid broader troubles in the country's real estate sector, once considered stable and secure.

Rising interest rates and building costs have contributed to developer insolvencies, frozen deals, and falling property prices, impacting the country's property market. The project, valued at just under EUR 1 billion, faced a setback as Austrian property giant Signa, owned by billionaire René Benko, failed to meet payment obligations to the builder, Lupp. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Hamburger Abendblatt] [NDR] [Europe in Review September 2023] [Reuters]

Signa, a significant player in the real estate market and the owner of New York's iconic Chrysler Building has seen its Elbtower investment plunge into uncertainty as construction costs reached a staggering EUR 25 million per month. [Tagesschau] [Hamburger Abendblatt] [Reuters]

Commerz Real, a subsidiary of Commerzbank and a 25% stakeholder in the Elbtower project, is currently discussing with Signa and Lupp to find a resolution.

Meanwhile, city officials of Hamburg's Department for Urban Development and Housing have warned Signa to adhere to contractual obligations or face consequences, including the possibility of dismantling and selling construction work to a third party.

Hamburg's First Mayor, Peter Tschentscher, has ruled out state financial aid for the Elbtower project, expecting private investors to find a solution amongst themselves. [Tagesschau] [Reuters] [Hamburger Abendblatt] [NDR]

If construction fails, Signa, having already invested at least EUR 200 million, faces a looming threat of collapse. [NDR]

(if/gc)

Violence erupts in Dublin after Irish children stabbed by immigrant

Ireland witnessed violent riots after the stabbing of three young children and a care worker outside a school in Dublin's city centre by a naturalised Irish citizen of Algerian origin. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Independent] [The Irish Times]

Although 34 people were arrested at the scene of the riots, many more were involved in vandalising and looting shops, burning buses and other forms of public transport, and injuring Gardai. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

On the same evening, rioters petrol-bombed one refugee and asylum seeker accommodation in North Dublin and seriously vandalised another. These emergency accommodation centres had been targeted by far-right protesters earlier this year. [The Irish Times]

Supporters of the Irish far-right movement were encouraged, via social media, to take to the streets following the stabbings. Considering the movement's recent history with the "Ireland is Full" protests, according to a report by Stephen McDermott at *The Guardian*, many were not surprised by this outbreak of violence. [The Guardian] [The Irish Independent]

Human Rights Commission

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission criticised what they described as the far right exploiting the connection between the stabbings and anti-immigration sentiment.

"The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is extremely concerned at reports that people espousing far-right ideology sought to exploit the tragic crime which occurred on Parnell Square East to foment anti-immigrant sentiment," the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission said.

"Collective action by the State, and civil society, is required over a sustained period to tackle racism and to prevent further polarisation of our society." [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission]

Since the riots, the president of Sinn Fein, Mary Lou McDonald, has called for the resignation of Justice Minister Helen McEntee and Garda Commissioner Drew Harris. McDonald told reporters: "They should resign, both of them.

To be explicit, when I say that I have no confidence and I do not make this remark lightly I am saying that we clearly now need a change." [The Irish Times]

Migration in Ireland

Ireland has traditionally been a country of large-scale emigration, with the number of people leaving the country consistently outdoing the number of people entering. This changed within the last 20 years, when Ireland's migration landscape underwent major change due to the expansion of the European Union and increasing numbers of arrivals from places like India, Brazil, and Nigeria. [IOM] [BBC News]

In April 2022, the migration landscape in Ireland changed with the onset of the war in Ukraine. Ireland welcomed just shy of 100,000 Ukrainian refugees into the country, making the 2022-2023 period the one with the highest immigration levels yet. [Breakingnews.ie] [The Irish Examiner] [The Irish Times]

With the significant increase in refugees and asylum seekers entering the country in early 2022, certain factions of the Irish population took to the streets bearing signs with slogans like "Ireland is full" and "Ireland for the Irish". [The Guardian] [BBC News]

Protests also began to rise from 2022 onwards due to the government's plan to develop various sites for temporary emergency accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers, about which certain portions of the public were not happy.

Whereas the Irish government has historically adopted a more positive tone when speaking about immigration, peripheral far-right parties like National Rally and The Irish Freedom Party, and their supporters, have approached the subject with negativity and anger, expressed in the form of protests and anti-immigrant attacks all over the country. [Breakingnews.ie] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Independent] [The Irish Times] [The Journal] [Irish Mirror]

Prime Minister weighs in

Following the violence, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar encouraged people not to link the incident of the

stabbings with immigration. However, this has proved difficult.

Ireland has absorbed record immigration in 2023 in accordance with EU directives, and recent polling shows 75% of Irish citizens oppose further immigration. [New Statesman] This has produced new political problems both for centre-right Fine Gael, the party of Prime Minister Varadkar, and his coalition partner, Sinn Fein, a party of the left that has been pro immigration.

To quell tensions, Varadkar reminded the public that the suspect had been living in Ireland for over 20 years and that not all migrants commit such crimes. He told reporters: "People who are migrants might commit crimes, just as people who don't commit crimes...there are people born and bred in Ireland who commit terrible crimes everyday, including murders." [BBC News]

A passerby who helped one of the children after being attacked was, too, an immigrant. Caio Benicio, who is of Brazilian origin, was passing by the scene of the attack when he stopped and helped one of the school girls who had already been stabbed. [BBC News] [The Irish Examiner]

The Irish public has hailed Benicio as a hero since being identified. [Sky News]

The victims of the stabbings were in serious but stable conditions. The suspect is, too, in hospital after sustaining head injuries but is not seriously injured. There have been no deaths at present.

A march for peace was staged in the days following the riots, bringing people to the streets to show the widespread support for migrants in the country. [Breakingnews.ie] [The Irish Times] [The Irish Examiner]

Conor McGregor

Irish authorities are investigating mixed martial arts star Conor McGregor for his social media posts before and during the violence that erupted in the Dublin riots, Rory Carroll reported for The Guardian.

Gardai are investigating social media posts from various accounts to determine if they incited the mayhem that left vehicles torched, shops looted, and dozens of officers injured. Police did not name the accounts, but it has been reported that one belongs to McGregor. [TheCrimeReport]

"There is grave danger among us in Ireland that should never be here in the first place," McGregor posted as fires burned on O'Connell Street and masked youths clashed with police. "Make change or make way. Ireland for the victory." [TheCrimeReport]

A separate post said: "You reap what you sow." The day after the riot, McGregor said he did not condone the riots, "any attacks on our first responders in their line of duty" or the looting and damaging of shops. But he said he understood people's "frustrations" and hinted at a possible tilt into activism or politics. Conor McGregor has accused Irish authorities of making him a "scapegoat." [TheCrimeReport]

(rdm/gc)

Ireland's Sinn Fein hosts annual party conference

Ireland Sinn Fein held its annual conference with more than 2,000 party members, where the topics of discussion related mainly to the country's housing crisis, healthcare and the war in the Gaza Strip. [The Irish Times] [The Irish Independent] [RTÉ News]

The subject of Ireland's unity was at the centre of party leader Mary Lou McDonald's Presidential Address. McDonald assured attendees that "momentum is building" for a united Ireland.[Breakingnews.ie] [Sinn Féin] [BBC News] [Limerick Post]

In 2025, Sinn Fein aims to overtake the current parties in government, Fine Gael and Fine Fail. Both of these parties have been in government together and at separate times for the past 100 years. [Breakingnews.ie]

The issue of homelessness was also spoken about by McDonald, who aims to implement "a real emergency response" if she is elected Taoiseach. McDonald also discussed climate change and developing energy independence in Ireland.

Since the counter attack by the Israeli military against Hamas following their October 7 terrorist attack,, Sinn Fein and McDonald have been outspoken on their intention to hold Israel accountable for what they view as a heavy handed response that may include potential war crimes. At the conference, McDonald referenced her support for Palestinians, claiming that "[o]nly a peace process, dialogue, international law can deliver peace and Palestinian freedom". [Breakingnews.ie]

Michelle O'Neill, vice president of Sinn Fein's Northern Irish branch, attended the conference. O'Neill is currently the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, where The Stormont Assembly (Northern Irish government) collapsed earlier this year due to disagreements between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Westminster over post-Brexit trading arrangements. [BBC News] [Breakingnews.ie]

O'Neill also spoke on the possibility of a united Ireland, asserting that the unionist majority in the North is "long gone", meaning that the number of people in Northern Ireland who wish for it to remain a part of the United Kingdom has declined in recent years. [The Irish Independent] [Western People]

Sinn Fein is the political wing of the former Irish Republican Army, and has traditionally sided with the pro-Palestinian cause.

(rdm/gc)

Ireland's justice minister faces motion of no-confidence

Following the riots in Dublin on November 23, Ireland's Minister for Justice Helen McEntee faces a motion of no-confidence which has been tabled by opposition party Sinn Fein, with added support for the motion from the Social Democrats. [The Journal]

The no-confidence motion comes after calls from opposition leaders for McEntee's resignation due to her response and management of the recent riots and looting, which took place in the aftermath of a tragic stabbing incident involving three school children and a creche worker last week. [The Irish Times]

McEntee has responded publicly by saying she has no plans to resign and has accused Sinn Fein of political grandstanding. The motion is expected to be defeated as a number of independent parliamentarians have expressed their support for the government.

When asked to comment, Irish Deputy Prime Minister Micheal Martin stated he was confident that the Government would win the vote and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has also stated that he believes it will fail. [The Journal] [The Journal]

(sr/gc)

Netherlands' Wilders denied approval to election campaign in shopping centre

Ahead of the elections, the anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) was denied approval to

campaign in the shopping centre 'Mall of the Netherlands' in the city of Leidschendam. 'The management of Westfield Mall allegedly denied Wilders the approval due to his politics, Wilders said on social media. [Omroep West]

Also, the Hoog Catharijne shopping centre in Utrecht was not available as an alternative 'from a security perspective, Wilders said. Due to threats stemming from Islamist, Wilders can only campaign under heavy protection. [AD]

"This makes campaigning rather difficult", Wilders said. For the past weeks the politician was able to campaign in the Markthal in Rotterdam, and in a café in his hometown Venlo. When doing so, he is always surrounded by a great number of policemen and security detail. [AD]

Mall of the Netherlands didn't respond to questions on why Wilders has been denied the opportunity to campaign. [Omroep West]

(jb/gc)

Netherlands holds biggest climate rally

Thousands of people participated on November 12 in the Netherlands' largest climate rally ever held. According to the March for Climate and Justice organisers, around 85,000 people were present in Amsterdam, compared with the 40,000 climate protest two years ago. [NOS]

Dutch police confirmed the number of participants and stated the demonstration occurred calmly and peacefully. Nobody has been arrested. [NOS]

The only notable incident at the protest took place during a speech by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg. Thunberg gave the floor to a speaker to continue her plea after organisers had her muted for chanting "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" and stating there can be "no climate justice without international solidarity." [RTL]

In response, a man climbed on stage to protest that the event had been politicised by both Thunberg and a pro-Palestine activist. The crowd reacted with division, with some cheering and others booing. [Dutch News]

Groenlinks-PvdA party leader Frans Timmermans called the chant "politically unacceptable" but said it should be left for the courts to decide. Timmermans also pointed out that Hamas and Islamic Jihad embrace the slogan, organisations who use it as a call to wipe Israel off the map. [RTL]

(jb/gc)

Netherlands arrests two for leaking information to Moroccan intel

Dutch police have arrested two individuals for allegedly possessing and leaking classified information to the Moroccan intelligence service. [NOS]

The suspects are a 64-year-old male from Rotterdam and a 35-year-old woman from Gouda. The man worked for the Dutch Anti-terrorism Task Force (NCTV) and a national police unit as a translator and analyst of Moroccan heritage. The woman is a former NCTV employee who recently started working for the police. [RTL]

The Public Prosecution Service has launched a large-scale investigation, and multiple searches have already occurred regarding the case against the two.

Outgoing Dutch Justice Minister Dilan Yesilgoz informed parliament that an independent investigation will be initiated, adding that she found the arrests “very concerning.” [NOS]

The independent investigation is separate from the criminal investigation and is in line with regulations for the security of “special information,” Yelisgöz said. [NOS]

(jb/gc)

Dutch economy contracts for third-straight quarter

The Dutch economy contracted 0.2% in the third quarter from the previous one, marking the third straight quarterly contraction, according to preliminary

estimates from the country's national statistics agency CBS. [CBS]

The economy slowed an annual 0.6% in the third quarter, compared to the third quarter of 2022, as the country witnessed a reduction in inventories, investments and exports. [ING]

The economy contracted by 0.5% and 0.4% in the first and second quarters of the year, meaning the Netherlands is still officially in recession, CBS chief economist Peter Hein van Mulligen said.

"The last time the economy contracted three quarters in a row was during the economic crisis of 2007," he said. "On the one hand, the economy is shrinking, and consumer and business confidence is also quite low; on the other hand, the labour market is still going very well. There are again many more jobs coming." [NOS]

(jb/gc)

Switzerland lifts extra restrictions against gay men giving blood

Amended blood donation criteria for gay men came into force nationwide on November 1, making ineligibility criteria the same for heterosexual and homosexual men.

Until 2017, gay men were systematically barred from donating blood – legislation originating from the 1980s at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. From 2017, restrictions were eased, allowing gay men to donate blood if 12 months had passed since having a new sexual partner.

According to the new regulations, everyone who wishes to donate blood must wait four months after their last sexual encounter with a new partner, or 12 months if they have taken more than two new partners in the last 4 months. [USNews] [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Hundreds protest against high rent in Zurich

Hundreds protested against the housing shortage in Zurich on November 4, with demonstrators marching from Turbinenplatz to Helvetiaplatz (roughly three kilometres). Speakers denounced the housing

shortage, high rent profits, and capitalism in general. [SwissInfo]

According to data released by Bloomberg City Tracker in September, the rent for apartments in Zurich is more than double that in London. UBS, headquartered in Zurich, ranked the city as having the highest risk of suffering a real estate bubble in the world. [Bloomberg]

According to a poll conducted in June by local news and activist site Tsuri, 92% of Zurich residents worry about rising rental prices, and 60% believe they will not be able to stay in the city when they make their next move due to the city's 0.07% vacancy rate.

Most respondents blamed local officials for a lack of affordable housing and the banks and international companies for dominating the housing market and charging extremely high rents. [Iamexpat]

(sw/gc)

Swiss communications minister calls for AI regulation

Swiss Federal Council Member and Communications Minister Albert Rosti stated that Switzerland needed artificial intelligence (AI) regulations in an interview published by NZZ am Sontag on November 12.

The week prior, Rosti attended the first global summit on security and AI hosted by the United Kingdom. The central theme was exploiting all the benefits of AI while managing any associated technical, political, and societal risks.

Disinformation posed the most significant threat, Rosti said, adding that this was the main consensus at the summit. "We are currently discussing in the Federal Council how to meet these challenges," Rosti said.

To this end, Rosti's Environment, Transport, Energy, and Communications Ministry will present a report on the topic by mid-2024.

The minister said that while he considers it possible that Bern will adopt the same AI regulations as the European Union, "this is a global issue," he said, pointing out that the United Nations could also play a role. [RadioLac][LaLiberte]

(sw/gc)

Switzerland extends use of nuclear power

Nuclear operators Axpo Holding AG and Alpiq Holding AG have begun extending the planned lifespan of their plants from 50 to 60 years, spokespeople for the companies told Bloomberg News on November 11. As a result, nuclear plants would be operating until about 2040. [Bloomberg]

In a 2017 referendum, the country decided to exit nuclear power but did not set a date to shut down its four existing plants, deciding they would run as long as it was safe to operate.

Alpiq is currently studying the impacts of a further extension to 80 years on safety, investments, and profitability. France, Belgium, and Finland are all working on similar plans to extend their nuclear reactors, while Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia plan to build new plants.

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo announced that five partners (Belgian, Italian, and Romanian) had signed a protocol to collaborate and develop small modular reactors. In contrast, Germany shut down its last plant in April after two decades of domestic debate. [SwissInfo] [LeSoir]

(sw/gc)

Pilot program starts in Zurich to fast-track North African asylum-seeker requests

A Swiss pilot project was launched in Zurich on November 13 to fast-track decision-making on certain asylum claims, local newspaper Tages-Anzeiger reported on November 22.

Under this project, asylum claims made by Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, and Libyan nationals will be dealt with in 24 hours.

Roughly 20% of asylum-seekers come from North Africa, but only around 2% are recognised as refugees in Switzerland. According to the State Secretariat for Migration, one reason for this low acceptance rate is that many applicants falsely list Libya as their country of origin to improve their chances of their claim being accepted. Around 10% of asylum claims made by Libyan nationals are accepted.

Authorities hope the accelerated time-line will send a negative signal to those applicants that have no chance of receiving asylum. The project is expected to run until February 2024.

The Swiss Refugee Council warns that this accelerated process is unrealistic and does not provide enough time to properly clarify the facts of asylum applications.

“It is also questionable whether asylum-seekers can talk about all relevant issues within 24 hours, such as experiences of violence or exploitation, which could make them vulnerable. The risk of incorrect decisions would in turn lead to more complaints and ultimately the process could take longer,” spokesperson Lionel Walter said in an email interview with SwissInfo.

(sw/gc)

British PM reshuffles cabinet after policy differences

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reshuffled his cabinet after political differences erupted within the party over the government’s response to pro-Palestinian protests after Israel launched its military response in the Gaza Strip to the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7. [TheGuardian]

Sunak removed Home Secretary Suella Braverman, who clashed publicly with the prime minister about the London Metropolitan Police’s handling of counter protestors against an over 300,000 pro-Palestinian markers protest and immigration policy. Sunak appointed former Prime Minister David Cameron as the country's new foreign secretary.

The government said Braverman left her job as part of a cabinet reshuffle ahead of a general election expected next year. But the dismissal came after Braverman drew anger from within the Conservative Party and the opposition Labour Party. [Aljazeera]

After pro-Palestinian protests in London, Braverman wrote an opinion piece for The Times of London in which she blamed the police for “playing favourites” and for taking a lenient stance towards pro-Palestinian protests. She described the protesters as “pro-Palestinian mobs” and “hate marchers.” Sunak told reporters that Braverman had not run the article by his office, violating the ministerial code. [Aljazeera]

Sunak appointed James Cleverly home secretary, transitioning him from his role as foreign minister. Sunak's decision was meant to reassure traditional hard-right supporters of Braverman that they still have influence over key policies on immigration and policing. [TheGuardian]

In his first comments as home secretary, Cleverly said his two main priorities in the role would be to stop small boats crossing the Channel from France and to keep people safe. Asked if he wanted to distance himself from some of the provocative language used by Braverman, Cleverly replied: "Well, I intend to do this job in the way I feel best protects the British people and our interests." [TheGuardian]

The reshuffle underscores a recalibration toward centre-right politics. The return of Cameron and the departure of Braverman mark strategic shifts in terms of political messaging. Looking ahead, the implications of this reshuffle on the party's future policy platform remain uncertain, especially in the context of potential electoral considerations.

Cameron's appointment

Cameron's appointment as the new foreign secretary marks his return to government. Notably, he has been granted a life peerage in the House of Lords and represents a 'moderate' political stance among the Conservatives. Cameron said he was "delighted to accept" Sunak's offer, adding: "I believe in public service." [The Guardian]

He said on X, formerly known as Twitter: "While I have been out of frontline politics for the last seven years, I hope that my experience – as Conservative Leader for eleven years and Prime Minister for six – will assist me in helping the Prime Minister to meet these vital challenges."

Bringing back Cameron may please moderate conservatives dismayed by Braverman's right-wing stance, but it could provoke dissatisfaction among the party's right-wing members. Jacob Rees-Mogg criticised the move, stating that Braverman understood voters' concerns better than the prime minister on matters such as immigration.

Simon Clarke, an ally of former Prime Ministers Liz Truss and Boris Johnson, criticised the decision with a post on X, emphasising the risk of the Conservative Party being unbalanced. Pat McFadden, of Labour, criticised Cameron's return as contradicting Sunak's claim of offering a change from Tory failure. [BBC]

The Liberal Democrats called for caution regarding Cameron, citing his association with the collapsed finance company Greensill Capital. Senior Labour MP Pat McFadden argued that Cameron's appointment contradicts the government's promise of change from years of Tory governance.

Braverman controversy

Braverman, whose controversial statements included perceived police' bias' and preferential treatment of pro-Palestinian protests expressed dissatisfaction with the government's direction in her resignation letter to Sunak.

She accused Sunak of repeatedly breaking commitments on issues like reducing legal migration, handling immigration challenges, and addressing antisemitism and extremism. Despite her criticisms, she supported conservative agenda policies [BBC] [The Independent].

Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper of the Labour Party condemned Braverman's actions as "highly irresponsible" and asserted that the responsibility lies with Sunak. [BBC]

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt retained his post. Esther McVey was appointed as the "common sense" minister without portfolio. Tory chairman Richard Holden replaced Greg Hands, and Andrea Leadsom returned as a junior minister in the Department of Health and Social Care [The Independent].

Health Secretary Victoria Atkins takes over from Steve Barclay, who becomes environment secretary.

(ha/gc)

Sunak outlines foreign policy focus after ministers reshuffled

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak gave a speech on November 13 about the UK's new foreign policy as his cabinet went through a reshuffle and amid the wars in Israel and Ukraine. Sunak called for "moral clarity," "protecting values" and "leading with compassion." [UKGov] [Telegraph]

Sunak called for a two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine and stressed that Israel had the right to defend itself. He called for humanitarian aid to Gaza and "practical and enduring

support" to bolster the Palestinian Authority" in the future as an opponent to Hamas in Gaza. [UKGov][

He reinforced the UK's financial and defence support of Ukraine in its war against Russia. "Together, we'll strengthen Ukraine's defence and boost their economy so they can thrive even while they fight to regain their territory," he said.

Sunak discussed the various alliances signed by the conservative, including trade alliances such as The Windsor Framework, The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and the AI summit. He discussed defence pacts, such as the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal and the Hiroshima accord. [TheIndependent]

“These treaties and alliances speak to something deeper: Our willingness to act, to shape the world, not be shaped by it,” Sunak said. “Wherever there’s a challenge, wherever there’s a threat, wherever we can promote peace and security.”

The Prime Minister's speech occurred on the same day he appointed the new Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, to his cabinet. “I’m pleased to have appointed a new Foreign Secretary who will build on everything we’ve achieved in the last year,” Sunak said. [UKGov]

(sl/gc)

British Supreme Court rules Rwanda asylum policy unlawful

The British Supreme Court court unanimously ruled on November 15 that the government’s scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda was unlawful, stating in its judgement that it would endanger the asylum seekers as they could be sent back to their home countries. [BBC]

This decision means the policy cannot be lawfully implemented in its current form. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the government would work on a new treaty with Rwanda and said he was prepared to change UK laws. [BBC]

The controversial plan to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda and ban them from returning to the UK has been subject to legal challenges since it was first announced by Boris Johnson in April 2022. The scheme, on which the Tory government has already spent GBP 140 million, was brought to the court of appeal in June

2022. The policy has faced criticism under Britain's Human Rights Act.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak appointed James Cleverly as home secretary, who will have to manage the fallout of the supreme court decision about whether the government's Rwanda deportation plan is legal. Cleverly was a key backer of the Rwanda plan, according to the Guardian. [TheGuardian]

His appointment could also be seen as a way of preparing to face down demands from the Tory right that the UK should leave the European convention on human rights (ECHR) after the supreme court rejected the government's appeal over its Rwanda policy. [TheGuardian]

Many in the Tory party, including former Home Secretary Suella Braverman, are pressuring Sunak to consider blocking the ECHR. In June, the first flight to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda was stalled due injunctions from the European Court of Human Rights, warning of "serious human rights abuses" in Rwanda. [AlJazeera] [Guardian] [Guardian]

'Stop the boats'

The Rwanda scheme was an integral component of Sunak and Braverman's immigration policy, to "stop the boats" carrying illegal migrants through the English Channel.

Cleverly said in April that he was not convinced that leaving the ECHR was necessary to ensure the immigration system was robust, and that the UK had the clout to push for changes if needed. [TheGuardian]

Sunak has said that were the "domestic legal frameworks or international conventions" to hinder these goals he would be "prepared to change our laws and revisit those international relationships." [Al Jazeera]

Sunak told MPs at Prime Minister's Questions that he was ready to finalise a formal treaty with Rwanda and was "prepared" to revive the plan. [BBC]

A treaty - which Downing Street has said it will publish in the "coming days" would upgrade the agreement between the UK and Rwanda from its current status as a "memorandum of understanding," which the government believes would put the arrangement on a stronger legal footing. [BBC]

The new text would provide the necessary reassurances the Supreme Court has asked for, the prime minister's official spokesman said.

Unanimous decision

In a unanimous decision, the court's five justices agreed with the Court of Appeal that there had not been a proper assessment of whether Rwanda was safe. The judgement does not ban sending migrants to another country, but it leaves the Rwanda scheme in tatters - and it is not clear which other nations are prepared to do a similar deal with the UK.

The Supreme Court justices said there were "substantial grounds" to believe people deported to Rwanda could then be sent, by the Rwandan government, to places where they would be unsafe.

(sl/gc)

Pro-Palestine march in London sparks clashes on Remembrance Day

An estimated 300,000 individuals rallied in London November , Remembrance Day, in solidarity with the Palestinians and to demand a ceasefire in Gaza.

The march was marred as clashes erupted between a sizable contingent of far-right counter-protesters and the police, creating a chaotic scene near the heavily guarded Cenotaph, an empty tomb or a monument erected in honour of a person or group of people whose remains are elsewhere. [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian]

The demonstrations unfolded in the wake of a series of similar marches expressing support for the Palestinian cause since the commencement of Israel's military offensive in Gaza. The offensive was initiated in response to an attack by Palestinian militia Hamas on October 7, leading to approximately 1240 deaths of Israelis and 240 taken hostage.

The catalyst for the protests was a week of parliamentary deliberations on whether to permit the march and the contentious issue of banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations during Remembrance weekend, a period dedicated to commemorating the sacrifice of soldiers in World War I. [Al Jazeera]

To prevent potential unrest on this historically significant day, more than 2000 police officers were deployed.

Despite fears, the majority of the march, spanning five kilometres, remained peaceful, following a pre-approved route. Deviations from the agreed path risked arrest, a GBP 2500 fine, and no-go zones encompassing the Cenotaph, Whitehall, Horse Guards, and Westminster Abbey Field of Remembrance, all heavily policed [The Guardian].

MET police commissioner Mark Rowley assured that measures would be in place to counteract any potential disruption, yet he declared a lack of evidence supporting an existential threat related to the march before the event, dismissing calls for a ban.

Nicholas Soames, the grandson of Winston Churchill and a former Conservative minister, acknowledged concerns but expressed trust in the police, emphasising the right to protest as a fundamental freedom defended by those who perished in WWI. [The Guardian]

The preceding week in Parliament reflected apprehension over potential unrest. Former Conservative Home Secretary Suella Braverman, advocating for the ban of pro-Palestine marches, labelled them as "pro-Palestinian mobs" and "hate marches."

She accused the police of bias in favour of these demonstrations over nationalist and right-wing protests in a Times interview subsequently banned. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak sought reassurance from police officials, asserting readiness to hold the chief police accountable [The Guardian].

Despite the predominantly peaceful nature of the march, disruptions ensued as counter-protesters forcibly breached metal gates surrounding the cenotaph, hurled missiles at the police, and attempted to reach the main demonstration. [The Guardian]

The police, investigating three antisemitic hate crimes linked to the march, made 126 arrests, with the majority being far-right protesters. [BBC]

Some of these protesters claimed motivation from Braverman's recent statement on pro-Palestine marches and the actions of the UK police.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak condemned the violence from the counter-protesters, denouncing alleged pro-Hamas chants during the march as "antisemitic" [Reuters]. London Mayor Sadiq Khan attributed the far-right insurgency to Braverman's inflammatory speech, and she was ultimately removed from the position of Home Secretary by Prime Minister Sunak [NPR].

(ha/gc)

King Charles sets out government agenda in pre-election speech

Britain's government set out its plans to tackle crime, boost growth and water down climate change measures in an agenda written by the government but delivered by King Charles to lawmakers packed into parliament's ornate House of Lords. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak signalled his intent to draw a dividing line with the opposition Labour Party before the vote expected next year. [Reuters]

With Labour running way ahead in the opinion polls, Sunak's team is hoping that his agenda will close the gap by reducing what he says is the burden of Britain's climate change targets on households and by toughening sentences for violent offenders. There was little new in the King's Speech, more a collection of what Sunak has worked on since becoming prime minister last year on a pledge to bring stability after two leaders of his Conservative party were forced from power in a matter of weeks.

A major section of the speech concerned itself with crime. The Tories introduced a new bill calling for tougher sentences on seriously violent criminals and providing greater freedom to law enforcement forces.

Sunak announced a new system wherein licensing for obtaining oil and gas in the North Sea would be given annually. The Tory government claimed this system is a pragmatic solution to the environmental goal of net zero by 2050, without compromising the economy. [Reuters]

The speech also mentions plans to reduce tobacco sales, reform the housing market and outlaw no-fault evictions for renters, attempts at catering to the youth of the United Kingdom. [BBC]

In what is most likely the last parliamentary session before the election, the speech serves as an agenda to create distinct dividing lines between the policies of the Tory Party and the opposition liberal Labour party. Reuters

The Labour party led by Keir Starmer has been staunchly critical of the government's stances on climate policy and crime. Sunak has been criticised for his silence on growing concerns about Britain's public services, LGBTQ+ rights and inflation. [Guardian]

(sl/gc)

UK plans minimum service level during strikes to prevent disruptions

The United Kingdom will announce a minimum level of service that vital public sectors, such as railways and ambulances, must maintain during any strikes by workers during the holiday season.

On November 6, the Prime Minister's office announced that parliament will set out the regulations that striking workers must follow under the Minimum Service Level Act.

The Act was passed in July following a year of strikes from workers in the railway, medical, fire and education services, demanding higher pay in the face of soaring inflation. It required striking workers to provide the "minimum services required" for functioning. [Reuters]

According to a statement by the Prime Minister's Office, if passed in parliament, the new guidelines in case of strikes would require 40% of the railway service's regular timetable to operate and specific priority routes to remain open.

Similarly, ambulance workers will ensure that vital ambulance services must be responded to. [UkGov]

Under the law, employers can issue work notices to identify people who are reasonably required to work to ensure minimum service levels are met. Unions that fail to comply will lose their legal protection from damages claims. [UkGov]

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said: "doing everything in our power to stop unions de-railing Christmas for millions of people". And "ensure more people will be able to travel to see their friends and family and get the emergency care they need." [UkGov]

The Trades Union Congress (TUC,) the organising body for trade unions, said the laws were "designed to escalate disputes – not resolve them."

It said the new guidance and a statutory code of practice "makes an already dire piece of legislation even worse" by trying to wrap unions and employers in red tape. [Guardian]

(sl/gc)

British Chancellor of the Exchequer announces 110 economic measures

British Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt announced 110 measures to boost Britain's economy during his Autumn Statement at the House of Commons on November 22. [Lord'sLibrary]

Hunt announced significant tax cuts for businesses and business owners to boost the economy. The Class 4 National Insurance, a tax paid by self-employed people acquiring profits between GBP 12,570 and GBP 50,270, will be cut from 9% to 8% from April. Class 2 National Insurance paid by self-employed people earning more than GBP 12,570 will be abolished starting in April. [BBC] [Guardian][Reuters]

Additionally, a measure that allows companies to deduct the cost of investments in machinery while declaring their taxes is meant to draw investment in the country. The 75% business rates discount for retail, hospitality and leisure firms in England extended for another year [BBC][Guardian]

Hunt has cut personal taxes to tackle the current cost of living. The primary rate of national insurance was cut from 12% to 10% from January 6, affecting 27 million people. The legal minimum wage - known officially as the National Living Wage - will increase from GBP 10.42 to GBP 11.44 an hour from April.

Hunt announced increased social security spending, with working-age benefits rising by 6.7% and state pensions rising by 8.5%. [BBC]

Commitments were also made to assist those struggling in the current economy. Hunt announced back-to-work plan pledges of GBP 1.3 billion to help people with health conditions find jobs over the next five years and GBP 1.3 billion to help people who have been unemployed for over a year. [BBC]

However, claimants in England and Wales deemed able to work who refuse to seek employment will lose access to their benefits. Also, housing benefits will increase to 30% from April. [BBC]

Hunt has also committed GBP 14.1 billion to Britain's struggling NHS and GBP 2 billion to schools. [BBC]

(sl/gc)

British Prime Minister announce GBP 29.5bn in FDI

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced GBP 29.5 billion pounds of private sector investment in Britain at a gathering of global executives aimed at catapulting the country back to Europe's top spot as a destination for foreign money, Reuters reported.

After the government offered permanent tax breaks for businesses to modernise plants and machinery, Sunak hoped foreign investors would help speed up Britain's moribund economy. The summit on November 27 hosted high-profile investors in tech, life sciences, infrastructure, housing and renewable energy. [Reuters]

Australian funds IFM Investors and Aware Super will pump GBP 10 billion and GBP 5 billion into projects ranging from infrastructure and energy transition to affordable housing, Sunak's office said in a statement.

The statement said Spanish power giant Iberdrola would add GBP 7 billion to its investment plans in Britain, including transmission and distribution of electricity networks. In technology, Microsoft pledged GBP 2.5 billion to build critical AI infrastructure, and Ellison Institute of Technology and Dutch company Yondr made a GBP 1 billion investment in developing data centres.

The UK is courting foreign businesses, with Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt unveiling the most significant business tax cut in modern history at the Autumn Statement.

Sunak said: "Attracting global investment is at the heart of my plan for growing the economy." He called the investment "a huge vote of confidence in the future of the UK economy." [FinancialTimes]

(sl/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Estonian prime minister expresses interest in NATO's top job

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said in Washington that she's interested in taking over the top job at NATO as the Cold War-era alliance continues to navigate Russia's war in Ukraine and homes in on common strategies against China and other emerging threats.

Speaking at the POLITICO Defense Summit, Kallas was pressed on whether she'd like to be considered for the role once NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg steps down. She responded, "Yes."

Kallas's response and visit to Washington come as worries grow in Europe, especially among the leaders of Baltic and Eastern European countries such as Estonia, that U.S. support for Ukraine's war effort is increasingly wavering. [Politico]

Kallas also addressed the country's Congress on November 18, where she prioritised Ukraine's military concerns against Russia's invasion, the crucial need for strong alliances and strengthening Estonia's military alliances. [Postimees] [Alde Party]

Following her re-election as prime minister in March 2023, Kallas has pushed to address Russia's actions in Ukraine, repel Moscow's territorial expansion in East Europe, and navigate China's perceived economic threat. [Politico]

In June, she shared her vision for a "combat-effective Europe," emphasising a perceived need to increase the European Union's military capabilities to match Russia's threat to NATO. She has also expressed interest in becoming the NATO Secretary General at the Politico Defence Summit.[Politico].

NATO diplomats and security policy experts warned Kallas' ambitions might be deemed too assertive for some members of the Western military alliance. Recent scandals, exposing her husband's continued economic ties to Russian transport companies despite her strong advocacy to cease Estonian business operations, may decrease her popularity [AP News].

(ha/gc)

Georgia approves de-oligarchisation plan

The Georgian government has approved a “De-Oligarchisation Plan” to help meet its requirement for candidacy in the European Union. [CivilGeorgia]

The plan was approved on November 27 during a parliamentary meeting led by Prime Minister Ivan Garibashvili, also a billionaire and widely viewed as the richest man in Georgia. [Forbes]

According to the PM’s Office, the plan covers seven different areas: anti-corruption and anti-monopoly measures, monitoring money laundering in political parties and corporations, media pluralism and judicial reform. [GeorgiaToday]

In June 2022, the European Commission and the Venice Commission put forward 12 priorities to be fulfilled before Georgia could achieve EU candidacy. One was ‘de-oligarchisation’, which called for “eliminating the excessive influence of vested interests in economic, political and public life.” [CivilGeorgia]

The de-oligarchisation plan was one of the nine EU implementation recommendations the European Commission gave Georgia.

(sl/gc)

Latvia passes legislation allowing same-sex civil partnership

The Latvian Parliament on November 9 legalised civil partnerships for unmarried adults, including same-sex unions, effective from mid-2024.

This development follows nine previous attempts by parliament to confer legal status on cohabiting unmarried couples and comes three years after a Constitutional Court ruling emphasising the state's

responsibility to safeguard same-sex unions [TVP World].

Latvia now aligns with progressive Baltic nations, with Estonia legalising same-sex marriage in June 2023. The new partnership institution could potentially influence Lithuania, where same-sex unions currently lack recognition. The legislation affords same-sex partners rights to a notarised registered partnership, medical decision-making, tax benefits akin to married couples, and social security advantages [Meduza].

Justice Minister Libina Egnere, from the Unity Party in power, clarifies the law does not substitute marriage but establishes a distinct legal partnership. Gay rights activist Kaspars Zalitis noted potential challenges, such as inheritance and adoption.

Public opinion on homosexuality remains divided.

Latvia elected this year President Edgards Sinkevics, the first openly gay head of state in the European Union, despite a 2019 Eurobarometer poll showing that 45% of Latvians shared being uncomfortable having a homosexual senior official.

Opposition members criticise the law as "marriage plagiarism" and express concerns about the potential adoption of same-sex unions. There are also calls for a referendum, raising the prospect of law suspension. [LSM News] [Reuters]

(ha/gc)

Senior Ukrainian cybersecurity officials sacked over embezzlement allegations

The head of Ukraine's cybersecurity agency, Yurii Shchyhol, and his deputy, Viktor Zhora, were removed from their posts on November 20 following an embezzlement probe. In a Telegram post, Taras Melnychuk, a senior Ukrainian cabinet member, first announced their dismissals. [Reuters] [Melnychuk Telegram]

Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Bureau later confirmed Shchyhol and Zhora were critical suspects in an investigation into the "embezzling of state funds amounting to over USD 1.7 million from 2020-2022." [NABU Official]

In a deleted Facebook post, Shchyhol said "I am confident that I will be able to prove my innocence

during an impartial investigation and directly in court." [The Record] [Axios]

Cybersecurity has been an essential part of Kyiv's defence following Russia's invasion, protecting against attempts to shut down Ukraine's national grid and hack into soldier's phones. [Axios] [CNN]

(md/gc)

Zelenskyy calls for changes in defence forces

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in an evening address on November 5 that the government would implement changes in the defence forces to deal with negligence, 'Sovietism' and bureaucracy in the army.

Zelenskyy said: "When we go through weeks like this, full of pain and difficult discussions, it is important for people to understand that what weighs on their hearts is seen, and the necessary changes will be made."

Zelenskyy added that negligence, Sovietism and bureaucracy prevent Ukraine and the Defence Forces from realising their potential effectively. Zelenskyy also said he is grateful to all trying to preserve the unity of Ukrainians. [Hromadske]

Zelenskyy named a new commander of the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine on November 3, who is known for conducting military operations in Russian-controlled territories.

Zelenskyy said Colonel Serhii Lupanchuk would lead the country's special forces. The president called Lupanchuk "an experienced officer, a combat officer and the right person."

The previous commander, Major General Viktor Khorenko, was appointed to a new position in Ukraine's Defence Intelligence.

Zelenskyy still needs to explain these changes, and Khorenko says he was not informed of the reasons for his replacement. He found out about it through the mass media.

"I spoke to General Valery Zaluzhnyi, who also could not explain. The commander-in-chief was supposed to make a relevant submission, but he said he still needed to do so. I don't understand what happened," Khorenko said. [Reuters]

(ad/gc)

Ukraine will not make "special exceptions" for Hungarian minorities

Ukraine's deputy chief of European Integration, Olha Stefanishyna, has confirmed that her country's 80,000 Hungarian speakers, 0.4% of the population, will not be exempt from guidelines that govern all minority groups. [Kyiv Independent)

Stefanishyna's announcement follows a series of diplomatic spats with Hungary regarding Kyiv's policy on minority languages. The laws in 2017 stipulate that 70% of all education above a fifth-grade level and 90% of published material must be in Ukrainian. It also prohibited any "publicly available" information, such as announcements and signage, appearing in minority languages. [Wilson Center] [Minority Rights]

In the most recent Hungarian protest, Prime Minister Viktor Orban announced his country would not support Ukraine in "international affairs" until the language rights of ethnic Hungarians were thoroughly restored. [Reuters]

While announcing Kyiv's position on Hungarian complaints, Stefanishyna also said her department was investigating ways to liberalise and better align Ukraine's language and education policy with EU recommendations. [Kyiv Independent]

(md/gc)

Ukraine ministry says 1,500 medical facilities attacked since Russian invasion

Ukraine's health ministry reported that more than 1,500 healthcare facilities have been severely damaged since Russia's invasion as part of what authorities say is Moscow's effort to disrupt the country's medical infrastructure. [Ukrainska Pravda]

The ministry said that 1,468 facilities have been damaged and 193 destroyed. The locations include hospitals, dispensaries, polyclinics, and maternity centres. Scores of medical supplies and vehicles have been attacked and looted. [Ukraine Health Ministry]

The head of the World Health Organisation office in Ukraine, Jarno Habicht, echoed the health ministry's findings.

He concluded that at least 1,301 medical sites, mostly in Russian-occupied territories, had been attacked. Habicht added that doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals have been killed. [Interfax]

There has been more than USD 2 billion in damage to the country's medical infrastructure by Russia, according to Mykhailo Radutskyi, head of Ukraine's Parliamentary Committee on Healthcare. Over the next decade, Ukraine would require more than USD 16 billion to restore capacity fully, Radutskyi said. [Ukrainska Pravda]

So far this year, USD 132 million has been allocated by the Ukrainian government to help rebuild. The health ministry reported that, as of November 2023, 421 damaged medical facilities were now fully operational again, and a further 413 were partially restored. [Ukraine Health Ministry]

(md/gc)

Russia plans to extend nuclear test moratorium

Russia intends to comply with the moratorium on the ban on nuclear tests, even after the withdrawal of the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the decision on November 3.

The ministry said it would maintain the moratorium, which was introduced 30 years ago. However, the statement added that any nuclear tests by the United States "will force us to take similar actions".

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on November 2 revoking Russia's ratification of the treaty, which bans nuclear explosions, including live nuclear weapons tests. The treaty did not enter into force due to non-ratification by key countries, including the United States and China. [The Moscow Times]

(ad/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Greece plans changes to judicial system to better confront crimes

The Greek government has prepared a bill to better confront crimes in the country as part of its pre-election campaign. [Kathemerini]

The bill attempts reforms in a variety of areas and with a range of goals, including how criminal trials will be expedited, what types of crimes will be punished more severely, how serious criminal cases will be tried, what will be done with arsonists and those who cause fatal road accidents on a regular basis, and, how sentences will be served in the future. [Kathemerini]

“The sense of impunity must end. An effort must be made slowly to make people aware that an illegal act, depending on its severity, will have a corresponding consequence,” said Justice Minister Giorgos Floridis. “Today, for example, you run a red light, kill two people and nothing happens. This creates the certainty for some people that they can break the law without consequences… People are tired. We want to put an end to all this,” he added. [Kathemerini]

The provisions foresee that almost all felonies, theft, robbery, embezzlement, forgery, fraud and others will be punished more severely with higher penalties. From 15 years, which is the current sentence for all serious crimes, the sentences will now be set at 20 years. [Kathemerini]

(st/gc)

Romania to level retirement age for men and women

Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu announced that Romania will set the same retirement age of 65 for both men and women from 2035. The country's last major pension reform was due to an International Monetary Fund-led aid deal between 2009 and 2010. At the time, the retirement age for men was raised to 65 and raised to 63 for women. [Reuters]

The announcement came after a meeting held by the country's ruling coalition, consisting of the leftist Social Democrats (PSD) and the centre-right Liberals (PNL).

First proposed by the Labour Ministry, the pension reform will be adopted as part of Romania's Recovery and Resilience Fund. [ActMedia] [Euractiv]

The International Monetary Fund has since advised against the pension reform because it is likely to have a negative budgetary impact – estimating that the cost of the reform will be approximately 0.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024 and an additional 1% of GDP starting in 2025. [RomaniaInsider]

(sw/gc)

Romania is not ready to uphold ECHR ruling on same-sex couples, Prime Minister says

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu told radio station Europa FM on November 23 that "Romanian society is not ready for a decision at the moment" regarding the enforcement of the European Court on Human Rights ruling in May that the country had failed to uphold the rights of same-sex couples. [Reuters]

"It is not one of my priorities and...I don't think Romania is ready," Ciolacu said. "I am not a closed-minded person, I have friends in relationships with a man, I don't have a problem with that, I am talking now from the point of view of a prime minister." [TOI]

The case was initially brought to the European court by 12 same-sex couples who had already lodged complaints with the court regarding the lack of safeguards for their unions in Romania after local registries had denied their written requests to marry because same-sex marriage is "prohibited."

The court ruled that Romania breached Article 8 of the Convention, stating all European Union members must recognise same-sex marriage.

In his radio interview, Ciolacu said that this would not be the last time Romania fails to uphold a ruling by the European court. [GCN]

(sw/gc)

Serbian president dissolves parliament, calls for an early election.

Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic dissolved parliament on November 1 and called early municipal and parliamentary elections. The new election comes just two years after his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won the last ballot. [TheGuardian]

"We live in times that are difficult for the whole world, in times of global challenges, wars, and conflicts when it is necessary that we are all united in preserving vital national and state interests of the Republic of Serbia," he said. [TheGuardian]

The Serbian president is seeking to buy time to cement his power as he tries to normalise ties with Kosovo, according to analysts.

Serbian opposition parties officially asked for an election in September after the government failed to accept demands from mass protests that erupted after back-to-back shootings in May that killed 18 people in Kosovo, half of them children.

Analysts have also said that Vucic's move is aimed at bolstering his own support to reform the SNS, whose popularity has slipped after months of opposition protests after the two mass shootings in May.

Buying votes

An investigation published in Serbia on Nov 29 accused the country's ruling party of being linked to a scheme to purchase votes ahead of nationwide polls next month. [StraitsTimes]

According to allegations in the report, a call centre tied to Vucic's SNS offered to triple employees' pay if they provided proof of their vote for the party during the Dec 17 elections.

The paper was published by the Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia (CINS), which relied on reporting by a journalist who went undercover to work at the call centre where the alleged offer was made.

The journalist said the scheme was unveiled after joining a group chat linked to the call centre job, alleging that she was later offered USD 300 if she provided proof of voting for the SNS compared to the usual day rate of USD 100.

Activists targeted

Two civil society activists in Serbia have been targeted by what are believed to be state-sponsored technical attacks, NGOs Access Now and the SHARE Foundation announced on November 28. (MSN)

The two activists, who have not been named, were reportedly critics of Serbia's government. The attacks took place during the summer, when the authorities faced a series of mass protests under the 'Serbia against violence' banner.

"Both targeted civil society members have been openly critical of Serbia's government, which has a track record of deploying spyware and other digital surveillance tools," a statement from Access Now said. (MSN)

The two individuals were notified by Apple of their potential exposure to the attacks on October 30, and reached out to Serbian digital rights NGO the SHARE Foundation seeking an assessment of the allegations and a determination of whether their devices had been subjected to known spyware attacks.

(en/gc)

Turkish Republican People's Party elects new leader

Turkey's Republican People's Party (CHP) elected Ozgur Ozel as its new leader on October 29 as the country's main opposition party looks for new political alliances and a change in strategy after a 13-year term for incumbent Kemal Kilicdaroglu, as the country gears up for local elections next March. [Reuters]

Ozel, 49, has been serving as the CHP's deputy parliamentary group chairman since 2015 and has been a lawmaker since 2011. He announced his candidacy in September, after Kilicdaroglu and the CHP's painful defeat to President Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling political alliance in the May presidential and general elections. [Reuters]

Ozel, a pharmacist by trade, received 812 of 1,366 possible votes at a tense, hours-long party congress in

Ankara that took two rounds. [Reuters]

"This is the greatest honour of my life," Ozel said after announcing the results while thanking Kilicdaroglu for his work at the party. "We are embarking on the road for local election victory," he added.

"We have believed in turning hopelessness into hope, we are hopeful," Ozel said, surrounded by applauding party members and standing alongside Istanbul Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu.

Imamoglu supported Ozel in a push for change at the CHP that has long been bogged down by in-fighting. After winning the 2019 municipal elections in Istanbul and ending Erdogan's years-long hold over the city, Imamoglu was seen as a potential new leader for the party and challenger for the presidency.

The leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Meral Aksener, congratulated Ozel's appointment via social media. [BNNNetwork]

The change of leadership in the CHP could have implications for the country's next election because of Ozel's influential position among local positions. [Financial Times]

(vt/gc)

Turkey looks to buy 40 Eurofighter typhoon jets

Turkey began talks to buy 40 Eurofighters Typhoon jets and 79 modernisation kits.

Turkey wants to buy the most advanced, newly built version of the Eurofighter, the source said. Its defence ministry and the British Embassy in Ankara said Guler discussed the issue with his British counterpart Grant Shapps in Ankara. [Reuters]

Turkish Defence Minister Yasar Guler confirmed that Turkey was in talks with the United Kingdom and Spain to buy the Typhoons, despite Germany's rejection of the proposal. [Reuters]

Turkey has moved to buy the European fighter jet to replace an order for U.S. F35 aircraft, which was cancelled by the US after Turkey’s acquisition of the Russian S400 anti-aircraft missile system, now in use by the Turkish military. [AA]

(vt/gc)

Jailed US consulate employee released after time served

Turkish Metiz Topuz, a former employee of the US consulate in Istanbul, was recently released from jail after serving a partial prison sentence. He was sentenced to eight years and nine months in jail in 2020 with the accusation of aiding the terrorist organisation of Fethullah Gules, which was accused of the attempted 2016 military coup. [Reuters]

Metiz Topuz was a translator and assistant in the US Drug Enforcement Agency. He repeatedly denied the accusations, which were based on his contacts with Gulen's network group. More than 130,000 people were also charged with the same accusations. [TurkishMinute]

Topuz's arrest has caused diplomatic tensions with Washington, which criticised theTurkish court's decision, saying that there was "no credible evidence" and the event caused an American mistrust towards Turkish institutions. [Reuters]

British economist Timothy Ash posted on X that Topuz's release could lead to an improvement in US-Turkey relations. [Twitter]

(vt/gc)

Turkey central bank increases interest rate to 40%

Turkey's central bank has raised its main interest rate to 40% as part of a concerted campaign to tackle soaring inflation in the country. The rise, from the previous rate of 35%, was much greater than expected.

[BBC]

Turkey's central bank suggested rates were approaching the level required to start lowering inflation. Inflation - which measures the rate of price rises - hit 61.36% in October and is forecast to rise further and peak in May next year at around 70 to 75%. [BBC]

While central banks globally have raised interest rates in an attempt to slow rising prices, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had resisted economic orthodoxy previously, arguing that higher rates would cause

prices to rise. This policy weakened the value of the Turkish lira and accelerated inflation. [Euronews] [BBC]

The current interest rate is the highest in the last two decades for Turkey. [NYTimes]

(vt/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Deputy attorney general probed for suspected abuse of power

Cyprus's deputy attorney general is being investigated in a probe into potential abuse of power. Savvas Angelides is suspected to have improperly suspended criminal prosecutions of three individuals, including a person charged with attempted murder.

He previously represented the three when he worked as a defence lawyer, raising concerns about a potential conflict of interest.

Angelides has denied any abuse of power. [CyprusMail] [Kathimerini] [Kathimerini] [PhileNews]

(sl/pk)

Constitutional reform plan aims to end political instability, ban technocrat PMs

Italy's cabinet has proposed a constitutional reform that aims to end the country's chronic political instability by guaranteeing 55% of seats in parliament to a coalition backing a prime minister elected for a five-year term.

The proposed change would prevent the president from appointing outside technocrats to run the government.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said the reform would stop governments that were not backed by voters from introducing policies that citizens had not supported in an election.

The reform aims to achieve political stability in a country that has had 68 different governments over the past 77 years. The plan fulfils a key policy plank in Meloni's 2022 election campaign.

But the leader of Italy's left-leaning opposition Democratic party criticized the proposal, claiming it would severely limit the powers of the president and "debase the prerogatives and role of parliament."

There is no guarantee that the planned reform will become law because it requires a change to Italy's constitution and needs the support of a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament, or majority support in a public referendum.

Meloni said she would press for a referendum if the reform plan fails to win the backing of parliament.

Her hard-right Brothers of Italy, which leads a three-party governing coalition, won 26% of the ballots cast in an October 2022 parliamentary election.

Under the current constitution, the prime minister need not be an elected politician, but can be appointed by the president.

Meloni's predecessor was an unelected technocrat. Mario Draghi, a former head of the European Central Bank, was appointed by President Sergio Mattarella in early 2021 to lead Italy's pandemic recovery. Draghi lost the confidence of parliament and resigned in October 2022. [The Local] [Reuters] [Financial Times]

(ar/pk)

Thousands of workers strike against government, seeking pay hikes

Thousands of Italian workers staged a nationwide strike on November 17 against Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right government, calling for better job security and wage increases.

Protests led by the country's two major trade unions, CGIL and UIL, were held in central Italy, including Rome and Florence, as well as in the northern city of Milan, along with port cities Genoa and Livorno.

Those taking part included public employees such as healthcare staff, teachers, and postal and transport workers who criticised Meloni's budget for 2024. The spending plan, approved in October, includes hefty tax cuts, which critics believe will result in underfunding for sectors such as education, healthcare and transport. [AFP/France24] [Yahoo]

Opposition politicians voiced support for the unions, with Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, saying: "Meloni is humiliating workers." [Reuters]

Critics have accused Meloni's government of attempting to pander to its conservative supporters through its tax-cutting measures ahead of next year's European Parliament elections. [ANSA]

Meanwhile, Maurizio Landini, the general secretary of CGIL, accused Meloni's government of an "attack on the right to strike" after Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, the leader of the right-wing League party, imposed restrictions during a transport strike in Rome. [Reuters] [AnadoluAgency]

Salvini, who also serves as transport minister, used his powers to halve the strike's duration to four hours on November 17. [Reuters] [Yahoo]

(ao/pk)

Mass protests against violence after woman killed, allegedly by ex-partner

Tens of thousands of people took part in protests in Italy's main cities – Naples, Milan, and Rome – on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, in response to the murder of a university student, allegedly by her ex-boyfriend.

Giulia Cecchettin, 22, vanished on November 11. Her body was discovered by authorities at the bottom of a ditch near Venice, northeastern Italy, on November 18.

Shortly after her disappearance, CCTV footage emerged reportedly showing Cecchettin being assaulted by her former boyfriend.

This year, 106 women have been killed by their partners or ex-partners in Italy, according to government statistics. [The Guardian] [BBC]

Critics have accused Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right government of failing to take sufficient measures to stop femicides in Italy. Earlier this year, Meloni's party abstained from an EU vote on a key international treaty to prevent violence against women. [Politico] [The Guardian]

Amid nationwide outrage following Cecchettin's death, Italian lawmakers unanimously passed a new bill on November 22 to improve protection for at-risk women. [Reuters]

Elisa Ercoli, leader of the Differenza Donna feminist group that organised the protests, said the demonstrations in Italy following the killings of Cecchettin and other women had ignited "a cultural revolution that we must complete." [Politico]

Despite political differences, Meloni, who is Italy's first female premier, and opposition leader Elly Schlein held a phone call on November 21 to address the problem of domestic violence. Meanwhile, Education Minister Giuseppe Valditara pledged to raise awareness of gender-based violence in schools. [The Guardian] [Politico]

(ao/pk)

Over 200 sentenced for mafia links in landmark trial

An Italian court on November 20 sentenced over 200 mafia members, politicians, businessmen and local officials associated with the 'Ndrangheta crime syndicate to a total of 2,200 years in prison. [BBC] [ITV] [CNN]

The trial, which started in January 2021, was the result of a drive to curb the 'Ndrangheta's corrupt influence on Italy's economy, public institutions and healthcare. [BBC]

Over three years, 338 individuals faced trial in a highly secure courtroom in the southern Italian town of Lamezia Terme which accommodated more than 400 lawyers and 900 witnesses.

Five of the defendants received life terms, while three were handed 30-year prison sentences by a panel of three judges. [BBC] [ITV]

The charges against the accused included murder, extortion, drug trafficking, loan sharking, abuse of office and money laundering.

Prominent figures among those convicted include lawyer and former politician Giancarlo Pittelli; ex-police chief Giorgio Naselli; and a former financial police officer, an ex-mayor and former regional councillors. [CNN] [BBC]

Nicola Gratteri, a leading anti-mafia prosecutor spearheading the investigation against the 'Ndrangheta, said on November 20: "We have finally demonstrated that there was a network of white-collar workers, entrepreneurs, and politicians doing business with the Calabrian clans." [The Guardian]

Regarded as one of the world's most dangerous criminal organisations, the 'Ndrangheta originated in Italy's southern Calabria region. It is estimated to control up to 80% of Europe's cocaine market and is believed to have an annual turnover of EUR 55 billion. According to Italian prosecutors, the group also operates in South America and Africa. [BBC] [ITV]

Over 50 former mafia members cooperated with the Italian authorities and testified during legal proceedings. They revealed that 'Ndrangheta members allegedly hid weapons in cemetery chapels, used ambulances for drug transport, and manipulated public water supplies to grow marijuana. [BBC]

(ao/pk)

Italy behind on NATO spending goal, despite planned defence upgrade

Italy has increased its defence budget to EUR 19.56 billion from EUR 18 billion in 2022 but still lags behind in meeting NATO's 2% defence spending target, despite plans for substantial military upgrades in the upcoming years. [Reuters] [Defensenews]

Defence Minister Guido Crosetto told parliament's defence and foreign affairs committee on November 7

that meeting NATO's 2% target by 2024 was "impossible". He also said that meeting the government's commitment to reach the target by 2028 would be "difficult". [Reuters]

In 2022, the technocratic government of the time, led by then-Prime Minister Mario Draghi, announced that Italy was postponing its commitment to the 2% target until 2028, thus missing the original deadline agreed upon by NATO leaders by four years. [Defensenews]

Italy is expected to allocate 1.46% of its GDP to defence spending this year. [Reuters]

The current hard-right government outlined plans for massive military upgrades in a budget document released in October. Some EUR 7.97 billion is to be allocated for defence procurement in 2023, with a projected increase of 43% in 2025.

The plan includes acquiring 21 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) over the next seven years, costing around EUR 960 million.

Italy also aims to purchase 133 new tanks, allocating a budget of EUR 100 million for this purpose in 2024.

Additionally, a drone "swarm technology" programme is set to be established next year, supported by a EUR 76 million budget for research and development. [Defensenews] [TheDefensePost]

(ao/pk)

Italy: Deadly storm batters Tuscany

The Italian government declared a state of emergency in the central region of Tuscany on November 3 amid severe floods and extreme weather.

Heavy rainfall and powerful winds resulted in widespread flooding and power outages that affected areas from Tuscany's western coast to its northern region of Mugello. [Reuters]

Storm Ciaran, which brought the heaviest rain to Tuscany in 50 years, caused eight deaths in the region, Italian news outlets reported. It also affected regions across Western Europe, resulting in over 16 casualties in total. [BBC] [France24]

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni allocated up to EUR 5 million in state aid for the flooded areas in Tuscany.[The Guardian]

Severe weather also hit northern Italy in early November, including areas around Venice and Milan. [Euronews]

(ao/pk)

Snap election called as PM resigns amid corruption scandal

Portugal will in March hold its second general election in two years after Prime Minister Antonio Costa was forced to resign amid a corruption scandal in his government.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa dissolved parliament on November 29 following a final vote on the 2024 budget bill, which facilitates spending projects over the next year. [Publico]

The president said that an election was necessary to provide "clarity and direction to overcome an unexpected void that surprised and disturbed the Portuguese." [The Guardian]

Costa, a Socialist who has been premier since 2015, resigned on November 7 after prosecutors detained his chief of staff in an investigation into alleged corruption over the way the government handled lithium and hydrogen projects. [Le Monde]

Portuguese police arrested five people in total. Costa was not among them, but is under investigation.

Thousands of euros in envelopes

Authorities found tens of thousands of euros in envelopes in the office of the prime minister's chief of staff, Vitor Escaria, following a police raid on Costa's official residence.

Costa apologised to the public, saying that the corruption probe "embarrasses him." [Politico]

Explaining his decision to resign, Costa said: "The dignity of the function of prime minister is not compatible with any suspicion about his integrity, his good conduct and even less with the suspicion of the practice of any criminal act." [Reuters]

Luis Montenegro, the leader of the main opposition Social Democrats, called for a parliamentary election to take place as soon as possible. "The degradation of the government necessitates that no more time is wasted," he said. [Reuters]

Costa will remain Portugal's caretaker leader until a snap election is held in March. His Socialist party is set to elect a new chief on December 15 or 16. [Portugal Resident]

Authorities are probing suspected graft by elected officials and influence peddling related to lithium mine concessions in northern Portugal, and plans for a green hydrogen plant and data centre in the port of Sines on the south coast. [AP News]

(jw/pk)

Climate groups to take Portuguese government to court

Climate groups plan to take the Portuguese state to court, accusing the government of failing to fulfil its commitments to address climate change.

In its National Energy and Climate Plan 2030, approved in 2021, Portugal committed, among other goals, to decarbonise its economy and reduce emissions by 40% to 55% from 2005 levels.

The three environmental groups bringing the court case – Ultimo Recurso, Quercus and Sciaena – claim that the government has not enacted sufficient legislation to reach these targets. [Reuters]

They also say that projects such as the construction of a new airport demonstrate the government's lack of commitment to lowering emissions.

In a similar legal case brought in Germany in 2021, that country's constitutional court ruled the government in Berlin should reduce emissions by 70% by 2030 instead of a previous target of 50%.

Mariana Gomes, the leader of Ultimo Recurso, cited the case in Germany as an inspiration for the lawsuit in Portugal.

However, Gomes acknowledged it would be difficult to obtain a verdict that forces the government in Lisbon to increase its commitment to tackling climate change. [Diário de Noticias]

(jt/pk)

Portugal sets renewable energy production record

Portugal's production of renewable energy exceeded the country's total power consumption needs for six days in a row in early November, setting a record.

This occurred between October 31 and November 6, according to REN (Redes Energeticas Nacionais), the concession holder of the country's two main energy infrastructure networks. [Government of Portugal]. The previous record of over five days was set in 2019.

The numbers do not indicate complete reliance on clean energy, but that production through renewable sources could have met consumer needs in the country. [Government of Portugal] [Canary Media]

Portugal in 2016 set itself a 2050 deadline for reaching net-zero carbon emissions, putting it years ahead of the European Union.

The country shut down its remaining coal plants in 2022. Portuguese energy companies are now looking to develop offshore wind power and expand solar facilities. [Canary Media]

(hm/pk)

Police arrest 28 in crackdown on human trafficking

Twenty-eight people suspected of human trafficking have been arrested after hundreds of police officers raided farms in Portugal's southern Alentejo region on November 21.

The suspects are believed to be part of a crime ring that has exploited migrant workers after luring them to Portugal from around Europe, Africa and Asia.

The police operation freed around 100 migrant workers after 78 properties were raided. [Barron's News]

Cases of labour exploitation and human trafficking have been growing in Portugal in recent years, especially in the agricultural sector. Once migrants are put to work, their documents are often confiscated and they are forced to live in primitive dwellings with limited amenities.

The Council of Europe has reported that Portuguese authorities identified 1,152 suspected victims of trafficking in 2016-2020, but the number of prosecutions and convictions was low for such a number. [Reuters]

Authorities in the Alentejo region have said they face difficulties in monitoring the living conditions of migrants because of a lack of resources. [Publico]

(jw/pk)

Sanchez secures second term as PM after controversial deal with separatists

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has secured a second term in office after offering Catalan separatists an amnesty in return for their support, a controversial deal that has sparked unprecedented public protests.

The formation of Sanchez's fresh Socialist-led government follows a tumultuous several months in politics. In a June parliamentary election, the conservative People's Party (PP) won the most votes and its leader, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, was given the first chance to create a new administration.

However, he failed to muster a majority in parliament, and the king of Spain gave the next opportunity to Sanchez. In a key November 16 vote by MPs, 179 backed the Socialist leader while 171 were against him. [Reuters]

The prime minister easily secured the support of the left-wing Sumar alliance, with whom he was in coalition during his previous term, but still required the support of Catalan nationalists. Without this, Spain would have faced another general election. [El Pais]

To win the majority he needed, Sanchez promised an amnesty for separatists convicted following the north-eastern Catalonia region's failed attempt at independence in 2017.

Former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont is the most high-profile figure due to have his convictions cleared.

Sanchez said: "This amnesty will benefit many people, political leaders whose ideas I do not share and whose actions I reject, but also hundreds of citizens who were swept up in the process."

Conservative opposition leader Feijoo slammed the premier, saying: "Adopting measures that go against the general interest in exchange for personal benefit is political corruption." [Le Monde] [The Guardian]

Massive protests

Protests erupted across Spain in response to the amnesty, bringing tens of thousands out into the streets.

On November 12, demonstrations were held in towns and cities including Barcelona, Madrid, Valencia and Seville. [Reuters]

Authorities said 80,000 turned out in Madrid, but conservatives who took part in the rally quoted a figure as high as 500,000. [El Mundo]

In a similar demonstration on November 7, thousands gathered outside the headquarters of Sanchez's Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in Madrid. Thirty-nine people were injured amid clashes between protesters and riot police. [The Guardian]

(jw/pk)

Three arrested after Spanish politician shot

Three people have been arrested after a far-right Spanish politician was shot in the face by a masked gunman in Madrid.

Alejo Vidal Quadras, a former vice-president of the European Parliament, is reported to be in a stable condition after the shooting outside his home in a wealthy district of the Spanish capital on November 9. [Reuters]

Vidal Quadras was a member of the conservative Popular Party before joining the far-right Vox grouping in 2014.

Two Spanish men and a British woman have been detained in connection with the attack. [The Guardian]

After firing, the gunman jumped onto a motorcycle driven by another individual and the pair sped off, Spanish newspaper El Pais reported.

No motive for the attack has yet been uncovered. [The Guardian]

The shooting follows a tumultuous month in Spanish politics as Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez struck a controversial deal with Catalan separatist parties to secure a majority in parliament.

(jw/pk)

Merchant ship rescues 54 migrants from rubber boat south of Canaries

A merchant ship rescued 54 people from a rubber boat 185 kilometres south of Gran Canaria island on November 30 amid a recent surge in undocumented migrants arriving on the Spanish archipelago.

The crew of the Harland Point, a British vessel, said the inflatable was taking on water. They carried out the rescue because they feared that help from the Canaries would not arrive in time. [RTVE] [El País]

One of the people aboard the inflatable died, while several suffered severe hypothermia, including three pregnant women. [El País] [RTVE]

Nearly 1,800 undocumented migrants arrived on the Canary Islands, located off Africa's west coast, in the last week of November.

There have been more than 34,000 such arrivals so far this year in total, a record representing a 132% increase from 2022. [El País]

The Canary Islands are a popular gateway for migrants from Africa trying to reach Europe in search of a better life. [Reuters]

(hm/pk)

North-east Spain plans extra water shipments amid drought

Restrictions on water use have been imposed in north-eastern Spain while the authorities have started to draw up plans for extra supplies to be brought to the Catalonia region by boat if a record drought worsens. [Euronews] [AP News]

Officials moved Catalonia into the "pre-emergency" phase for drought following reports indicating that reservoirs in the region are only 15% full. [Reuters]

Restrictions have been brought in reducing an individual's permitted water consumption from 230 litres per day to 210. [AP News]

Authorities are also drawing up plans for the construction of new desalination plants. [Euronews]

Spain is experiencing record low rainfall. Since September last year, rain has been down 17% on the 30-year average.

Experts have pointed to the impact of climate change as increasing global temperatures reduce moisture in the environment, worsening drought conditions.

(jt/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Opposition SPO party confirms Marxist as its leader ahead of 2024 elections

Austria's main opposition grouping, the left-leaning Social Democratic Party (SPO), has voted for Andreas Babler, a self-declared Marxist and Eurosceptic, to continue as its leader in the run-up to parliamentary elections next year.

Babler ran uncontested, winning over 88% of the vote from delegates at an annual party conference on November 11. [Kurier] [DerStandard]. The SPO first elected Babler as its leader in June. [The Guardian].

Ahead of next year's general election, Austria's far-right opposition FPO party, led by Herbert Kickl, has been topping opinion polls. Babler criticised the "wrecking ball politics" of the FPO, adding that the SPO was "the only force" that could prevent Kickl from becoming Chancellor. [ORF.at] [DiePresse]

Austria is currently governed by a coalition comprising the conservative People's Party (OVP) and the left-wing Greens. The OVP is second in the opinion polls, followed closely by the SPO. [Euractiv] [The Guardian]

(sl/pk)

Tech giants win case over Austria's online hate speech law

The European Court of Justice on November 9 ruled in favour of tech giants Google, Meta and Tiktok after they refused to comply with an Austrian digital law that allows them to be fined for not deleting hate speech.

Austria's Communication Platforms Act of 2021 requires tech firms to delete "illegal" and "hateful speech". Companies refusing to comply are liable to fines of up to EUR 10 million. [DiePresse]

Google, Meta and TikTok challenged the law in the Austrian Federal Administrative Court, citing an EU rule which says that online service providers are only subject to the regulations of the country in which they are established.

The three companies, which have their European headquarters in Ireland, say they should only be subject to Irish rules. The Austrian court consulted the European Court of Justice, resulting in the latter ruling in favour of the companies. [Euractiv] [Reuters]

(sl/pk)

Defence minister replaced after being injured in fatal car accident

A new Croatian defence minister has been appointed after his predecessor was severely injured in a car accident that he allegedly caused.

Mario Banozic was sacked after the accident on November 11. According to the authorities, he attempted to overtake a truck without taking into account bad weather conditions. He allegedly collided with a van coming from the opposite direction, resulting in the death of the van driver. [Vijesti.hr]

Banozic was taken into intensive care. Doctors said he was in a stable condition but unable to communicate due to brain injuries. [Jutranji.hr]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic appointed Ivan Anusic as the country's new defence minister on November 13. Anusic is a vice president of Plenkovic's centre-right HDZ party. [Glas Hrvatske]

A criminal complaint has been filed against Banozic for negligence and causing a fatal traffic accident. He could face a prison sentence of up to eight years. [AP News]

(sl/pk)

Farmers protest over moves to curb African swine fever

Pig farmers in Croatia have launched protests against the government's measures to tackle an outbreak of African swine fever, saying they are not being adequately compensated for their losses.

The protests began on November 21 in the eastern Slavonia region of the country, where farmers blocked the roads with tractors. [HRT]

They were demonstrating against culling by the agricultural ministry and against a ban on trade in uninfected animals and pork from pigs whose living conditions do not meet requirements set out by the European Commission. [N1Info][Index.hr]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic announced a one-time payment of up to 600 EUR for breeders and other forms of compensation. But farmers said they were not satisfied and vowed to continue their protests. [N1Info]

(sl/pk)

Czech savings plan sparks strikes and discontent

The Czech Republic is grappling with one of its biggest outbreaks of public discontent after the fall of communism, as schools and labour unions voice their opposition to the government's austerity plans meant to curb the country's soaring budget deficit.

More than 7,200 kindergartens, elementary schools and high schools either fully or partially closed on November 27 as teachers staged a strike by walking out. [Barron's] [Radio Prague] [expat.cz]

The goal was to demand more funding for education, which the schools said is impaired by the centre-right government's efforts to cut deficits. [Reuters]

The walkout was supported by unions in the public and private sectors. Industrial workers at hundreds of companies, including the largest private carmaker, Skoda Auto, joined the protest by downing tools for an hour or two, while thousands joined an anti-government rally in Prague. [AP News] [Bloomberg]

The unions demanded higher wages for non-teaching staff to counter inflation, opposing the government's plan to gradually lift the retirement age, now at 65. [expats.cz] [AP news] [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Record protest

Union leaders said the strike was the biggest on record since the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993. [Bloomberg] [AP news]

Josef Stredula, chief of the largest union group, CMKOS, blamed the government for ignoring "the tough life it has caused". [Reuters]

Prime Minister Petr Fiala said the unpopular steps were "absolutely necessary" to tackle the country's pandemic-era borrowing spree. [AP News] [euronews]

"If we conceded, we would be giving up a good future for this country, a sustainable economy and sustainable financing," Fiala said on November 27. [Bloomberg]

He added the protests were evidence of the "political ambitions of unions and their leaders". [Reuters]

Former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, who heads the centrist opposition ANO movement, said the government should resign. [AP News]

Support for government suffers

The fiscal consolidation plans are damaging support for Fiala's government. Babis's ANO party currently tops the opinion polls with 33.2% support, according to a survey by pollster STEM for CNN Prima News. [Bloomberg]

The centre-right government has proposed tax increases, spending cuts and pension reform as a part of a package projected to reduce the budget deficit by some EUR 3.9 billion in 2024 and by EUR 6.1 billion in 2025. [AP News]

The EU and NATO country of 10.5 million reeled from a three-decade-high inflation rate of 17.5% in January. Adding to the pain have been rising energy costs aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly June 2023]

Czech President Petr Pavel signed the austerity package into law on November 22. Under the plan, the government will raise corporate tax, property tax and income taxes for high earners.

At the same time, it will increase levies on alcohol and medicine. It also plans to cut various state subsidies, operating costs and salaries. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

(yl/pk)

Ex-lawmaker jailed for rape in watershed verdict

A former member of the Czech parliament has been sentenced to three years in prison after being found guilty of two counts of rape and one count of sexual assault, in a verdict seen as a watershed moment for the country's #MeToo movement.

The case caused a public outcry. Observers said that the sentence for Dominik Feri, a former member of the centre-right Top 09 party, would encourage victims of sexual abuse to disclose their experiences to topple high-profile perpetrators. [bnn] [expat.cz]

The 27-year-old ex-lawmaker was on November 2 convicted of raping a 17-year-old girl and a woman at his residence in Prague in 2016. He was also found guilty of attempting to rape a woman at the Chamber of Deputies building in the Czech capital in 2018. [expat.cz] [BRNO]

Judge Lenka Hajkova said Feri showed no remorse and had laughed "so loud it was audible in the courtroom" during victims' testimonies. [BRNO] [Prague Morning] [expat.cz] [bne] [Euractiv]

Feri denied any non-consensual sexual encounters, and claimed that the victims' testimonies were inconsistent. [BRNO] [expat.cz]

He resigned as a member of parliament in 2021 and left the TOP 09 party following the allegations against him. [Euractiv] [Radio Prague] [Prague Morning]

(yl/pk)

Critics fear new law on foreign funding will be used to silence opposition

A new law proposed by Hungary's ruling nationalists has been criticised by civil society groups and European human rights advocates, who believe it could be used to silence critics of the government. [Telex] [Reuters] [Balkan Insight] [The Guardian]

Members of political parties or candidates running for office who receive foreign funding face up to three years in prison under the planned "sovereignty protection" law, submitted to parliament by the right-wing Fidesz party on November 21. [Telex] [Reuters] [Balkan Insight] [The Guardian]

Another component of the legislation would create a Sovereignty Protection Office to investigate civil society organisations whose "activities using foreign funding may influence the outcome of elections."

The sovereignty office would also look into groups which "engage in or support activities to influence the will of voters, using foreign funding." [Telex] [Reuters] [Balkan Insight] [The Guardian]

The Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner has called on Fidesz to abandon the bill, saying that the proposed sovereignty office would have broad powers to request sensitive information that "could be weaponized against anybody who may be considered an adversary due, for instance, to activities aimed at influencing democratic debate." [Reuters]

A group of seven Hungarian civil rights organisations echoed the commissioner's statement, saying that "the bill is part of the government's attempt to silence all critical voices." [The Guardian]

The move by Fidesz to curb foreign influence is part of its ongoing battle with the European Union, which it has accused of trying to impose left-wing policies related to gender and migration on Hungary. [Europe in Review August 2023] [Balkan Insight]

The legislation bears many similarities to a 2017 Hungarian law targeting NGOs that received foreign funding. That law was repealed after being deemed illegal by the European Court of Justice in 2021. [Balkan Insight]

(evk/pk)

Hungary launches survey of citizens criticized as 'propaganda'

Hungary's nationalist government has released a set of questions that will ask citizens their views on support for Ukraine, migration and LGBTQ+ issues as part of a survey criticized as being anti-EU. [Euronews] [AP News] [ABC News]

The questions were released on November 17 in what the government calls a "national consultation." This is the latest in a string of such polls conducted by right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban's administration since 2010.

Both the current and previous questions have been criticized as propaganda designed to manipulate citizens into supporting the ruling Fidesz party's positions on divisive issues, while sidelining opposition viewpoints. [Euronews] [AP News] [ABC News]

The survey includes a question on whether Budapest should support a four-year, EUR 50 billion European Union aid package for Ukraine when Hungary "has not received the EU funds due to it." The phrasing refers to money that Brussels has withheld from Hungary over concerns about the country's rule of law and human rights records. [Euronews] [AP News] [ABC News]

Orban and his governing Fidesz party have long claimed that the Hungarian ethnic minority in Ukraine is being oppressed by the government in Kyiv. Meanwhile, Budapest has continued friendly relations with Russia even after its invasion of Ukraine, though other EU member states have cut ties with Moscow. [Europe in Review October 2023]

Another poll question targets EU migration policy, asserting that Brussels "wants to create migrant ghettos in Hungary" and asking what Hungary should do about the issue. This appears to refer to a recent plan that would redistribute migrants across the bloc's member states and impose heavy fines on countries which turn away their share. [Euronews] [AP News] [ABC News]

Orban has often criticized the EU's immigration policies for being too liberal and has suggested that migrants could pose a danger to Hungarians and their way of life. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

Sexual minorities are also a subject of the survey questions, with one apparently accusing the EU of spreading "aggressive LGBTQ+ propaganda." [Euronews] [AP News] [ABC News]

The Hungarian government has often taken aim at the LGBTQ+ community, claiming that it is endangering

children, and has accused the EU of staging a pro-LGBTQ+ "offensive". [Europe in Review August 2023]

(evk/pk)

Hungary's ruling party re-elects PM Orban as its chief

Hungary's ruling nationalist Fidesz party has re-elected Prime Minister Viktor Orban as its leader. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

A Fidesz congress on November 18 decided to keep Orban at the helm for another two-year term. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

Orban is one of Europe's longest serving party chiefs, having held the position for a total of 27 years since 1993. The only period that he was not in the post during that time was between 2000 and 2002, when Fidesz decided that the offices of prime minister and party leader could not be occupied by one person simultaneously. [Telex]

Orban's re-election is a stamp of approval by Fidesz for his nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-EU and anti-LGBTQ+ stance. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

(evk/pk)

Tougher immigration laws planned as PM warns of terror and crime threat

Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has announced plans for tougher immigration laws, warning that migrants could destabilise his country through terrorism and crime. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

In a radio interview released on November 10, Orban said that if more migrants were to enter Hungary, it would lead to a nation "that would be unstable, that would be full of acts of terror, crime, and Gaza-like mini ghettos." [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

The right-wing prime minister, who is known for his anti-migration stance, said his government would introduce a new, stricter version of the country's primary legislation on immigration, the Aliens Act.

This would provide a clearer definition of the legal status of foreigners, lay out rules for deportation, and tighten immigration policing. Orban did not say when

such a law would be brought in. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

In June, Hungary voted against a plan backed by a majority of EU members to redistribute migrants across the bloc. The plan proposed penalties of up to EUR 20,000 for every reallocated migrant that a country turned away. [Europe in Review July 2023]

(evk/pk)

Hungary fires museum chief over World Press LGBTQ+ exhibition

The head of Hungary's National Museum has been fired after allowing minors to see a World Press Photo Exhibition containing images of LGBTQ+ people in drag.

Hungary's government, whose right-wing policies have seen it clash with the European Union, bans the "promotion of homosexuality" to minors.

The images in the exhibition, taken by Filipino photographer Hannah Reyes Morales, depicted elderly LGBTQ+ individuals living together. Some of them were shown wearing drag and makeup. [The Guardian] [AP News]

Hungarian minors were banned from viewing the images on November 1 after a right-wing lawmaker complained to the country's culture ministry about the photographs.

The ministry decided that the exhibition violated a law restricting LGBTQ+ content. National Museum director Laszlo Simon was fired for failing to comply with the regulations.

Hungary's right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his ruling Fidesz party have worked to restrict access to LGBTQ+ content, arguing that traditional family values should be protected. [The Guardian] [AP News]

The law under which Simon was sacked was enacted in 2021 to protect minors from "sexual propaganda."

Lawmaker Dora Duro, who filed a complaint to the culture ministry, said the exhibition was "clearly harmful to minors and, I think, to adults too." [AP News]

(evk/pk)

Centre-right leader Donald Tusk expected to be elected new PM

Centre-right opposition leader Donald Tusk is expected to be elected Poland's new prime minister by December 12, marking an end to eight years of rule by nationalists who have been accused of undermining democracy. [Polskie Radio]

The right-wing, populist and EU-hostile Law and Justice (PiS) party, which has ruled Poland since 2015, won more votes than any other single grouping in the country's October 15 parliamentary election. But its failure to secure a majority means it is set to be ejected from government.

The speaker of the lower house, Szymon Holownia, said that the chamber would likely appoint Tusk as premier on December 11 or 12. [Polskie Radio]

An opposition coalition led by Tusk's centrist Civic Platform (PO) party is planning to set up special commissions to probe what it says were wide-ranging abuses of power by Law and Justice, including alleged electronic surveillance of opposition figures. [Polskie Radio]

Despite failing to secure the majority of seats needed to govern, Law and Justice was given the first opportunity to form a fresh government, with conservative Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki being sworn in for a new term on November 27 by President Andrzej Duda. [Reuters]

The opposition coalition – which includes parties ranging from the centre-right to the left – criticised the move, calling it an attempt to delay their own appointment to government after winning a majority. [Reuters]

President Duda, a Law and Justice ally, defended the appointment of Morawiecki, saying that he was following tradition by allowing the single party that won the most seats an opportunity to form a government first. [Politico]

No takers for climbing into bed with PiS

However, Morawiecki has been unable to convince other parties to enter into a coalition with Law and Justice, and is expected to resoundingly lose a vote of confidence on December 11. [Politico]

The expected result paves the way for Tusk, a former European Council president, to return as Polish prime minister. He previously held the position from 2007 to 2014.

Warsaw's likely new centrist-led government is expected to rapidly begin reversing changes enacted by Law and Justice to Poland's legal system. The EU says these have undermined the political independence of the judiciary. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

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 November 2023]

'Sliver of hope' for centrists in Europe

Observers have said that voters' decision in October to eject Law and Justice means that nationalist-populist movements across the EU have lost a key ally. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

In its annual ranking of Europe's most influential people, Politico named Tusk as number one this year, saying that the reverberations of his return "would be felt around Europe."

Tusk's strong performance in Poland's election, Politico said, is "a sliver of hope for centrists across the Continent, who have watched in despair as populist forces moved from the fringes and into government: Giorgia Meloni is in power in Italy, Putin pal Robert Fico is back in Slovakia, the far-right Alternative for Germany is surging in the polls, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's right-wing Fidesz party looks stronger than ever.

"And that's before anyone mentions the two blond elephants in the room: the Donald T. on the other side of the Atlantic, and Geert Wilders' stunning first-place finish in the Dutch election."

(ek/pk)

MEPs from Poland's ruling coalition stripped of immunity over anti-migrant rhetoric

Four MEPs from Poland's ruling coalition have been stripped of their immunity from prosecution over anti-migrant rhetoric during a local election campaign five

years ago. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio] [Euractiv] [EU Observer]

The move paves the way for the four lawmakers to be charged with hate crimes in their home country. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio] [Euractiv]

During 2018 local elections in Poland, the ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party released a video portraying a future in which the country is plagued with crime and violence as a result of an influx of Middle Eastern refugees. [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

The four MEPs in question – Patryk Jaki, Beata Kempa, Tomasz Poreba and Beata Mazurek – liked or shared the video, resulting in a case being brought against them by activist and founder of the NGO Centre for Monitoring Racist and Xenophobic Behaviour, Rafal Gawel. [Polskie Radio] [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

Gawel alleged that the four lawmakers had violated Article 256 of Poland's penal code, which forbids incitement of hatred based on nationality, ethnicity, race or religion. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

Gawel is himself wanted by the authorities in Poland after being convicted of fraud and embezzlement several years ago. After fleeing the country, he was granted political asylum in Norway, where he still lives. [Euractiv] [Polskie Radio] [Notes From Poland]

In addition to the four MEPs, eight Law and Justice politicians have been named in the case brought by Gawel – including Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak and Culture Minister Piotr Glinski. [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland]

A Warsaw court asked the European Parliament to remove the immunity from prosecution the MEPs enjoy so that the case could be brought to trial. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

In November, the European Parliament's legal committee approved the request, leading to the issue being put to a vote by EU lawmakers, who backed the move. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

The four Polish MEPs accused the European Parliament of attacking their freedom of speech, arguing that their actions had been "within the bounds of freedom of public dialogue." [Polskie Radio]

Kempa said: "For the first time in the history of the European Parliament, MEPs lost their immunity for liking something on Facebook. Something new is

coming: political trials for liking on the internet. Bravo – communism is back." [Notes From Poland]

The governing Law and Justice party has been accused by the opposition of demonising migrants in a populist tactic to win support.

However, in October parliamentary elections, voters decided to eject the party from power after it ran a campaign in which migration was presented as a key threat to Poland. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

(ek/pk)

New pro-Kremlin government wins confidence vote in Slovakia

A new government has secured a mandatory parliamentary vote of confidence in Slovakia, despite controversy over its Russia-friendly foreign policy and its moves to soften anti-corruption measures.

With the vote, populist Robert Fico has secured his fourth term as prime minister after an election campaign heavy on pledges to end military support for Ukraine.

In the 150-seat parliament, 78 of the 143 lawmakers present on November 21 expressed confidence in Fico's coalition government, which was sworn in at the end of October. [AP News]

Fico gained a majority in the legislature after striking a coalition deal with the centre-left Hlas (Voice) and the ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). [Europe Monthly November 2023]

As part of the vote of confidence, MPs endorsed Fico's 2024 budget. The new government is set to impose a special bank tax and levies to help tackle the country's rocketing deficit.

'Different from the mainstream'

Fico, who blamed "Ukrainian Nazis and fascists" for initiating Russia's invasion, has pledged to pursue a "sovereign" foreign policy, asserting that his government is willing to "say different things from the mainstream". [Europe Monthly April 2023]

He has openly opposed the EU's sanctions on Russia, and insisted that Bratislava has the right to veto Ukraine's potential NATO membership. [BBC] [AP News]

Some observers fear that Fico's comeback may steer Slovakia away from its pro-Western course, and could see Bratislava aligning with Hungarian nationalist leader Viktor Orban 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. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

More lenient on corruption

Fico's government is set to reduce corruption penalties as part of its commitment to reform the legal system.

Fico said Slovakia's prisons are overcrowded, arguing that the government should either build more detention facilities or enact policies to ensure that "only those who are supposed to be in jail will be there". [Euractiv]

Some police officials and elite investigators handling corruption cases have either been dismissed or instructed to stay at home in recent weeks.

New Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok suspended police vice president Branko Kiss, who investigated organised crime and corruption cases dating back to past Fico-led governments. [Politico]

But a court ruled on November 9 that removing Kiss from his position was unlawful and ordered his immediate reinstatement. [Tasr]

Fico's previous term in power was cut short when he was forced to step down as prime minister in 2018 to contain a political crisis following the killings of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. The murders sparked mass street protests.

Kuciak had been investigating suspected high-level corruption involving an alleged business link between the Italian mafia and Fico's leftist Smer party. [Europe Monthly May 2023] [DW] [FT]

After an anti-graft government took office in 2020, dozens of oligarchs, senior officials, former politicians and prosecutors linked to Fico's Smer were charged with corruption, especially over allegations of public procurement and VAT fraud.

(yl/pk)

Slovakia unveils tax hikes to meet social spending commitments

Slovakia's new government will raise taxes and levies to fund social spending under a 2024 budget aimed at narrowing the country's soaring deficit.

Populist Prime Minister Robert Fico returned to power for his fourth period in office after winning parliamentary elections at the end of September on a campaign to slowly cut the eurozone's highest budget deficit. [Reuters]

Fico's administration promises to impose a special tax on banks in an effort to "redistribute [their] excessive profits". [Bloomberg]

The government also plans to raise tax levels for higher earners and homeowners with multiple properties. Additionally, it will increase levies on tobacco and alcohol while considering a tax on sweetened drinks. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [bnn]

Facing increased social spending and sluggish economic growth, Bratislava is grappling with the eurozone's largest budget deficit, projected to jump to almost 7% of gross domestic product this year – more than double the EU's ceiling of 3% of GDP. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Eurostat]

Fico's administration aims to lower the general government deficit by 0.5% of GDP in 2024. [Bloomberg] [Reuters] [bnn]

Despite the soaring deficits, the government is set to introduce measures including an extra pension payment for seniors and subsidies for households with higher mortgage rates.

The Slovak parliament approved the spending plan as part of a vote of confidence in Fico's government on November 21. [Bloomberg] Europe Monthly October 2023]

(yl/pk)

Anti-corruption probe investigates PM

Slovenia's Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, an independent state body, has begun an investigation into Prime Minister Robert Golob. [Vecer] [Delo] [Dnevnik] [Euractiv] [Republic of Slovenia]

Golob, the leader of the ruling left-wing Freedom Movement party, has been accused of applying "unauthorized pressure" on officials in the interior ministry to delay the arrests of two alleged Russian spies. [Vecer] [Delo] [Dnevnik] [Euractiv]

Officials from the anti-corruption commission notified Golob of their investigation in early November, before informing the public on November 20.

The commission said that "during a careful and thorough review" it had detected "a suspicion of a violation of integrity, as defined by the Act on Integrity and Prevention of Corruption." [Vecer] [Dnevnik] [Delo]

One of Golob's most vocal accusers is former Interior Minister Tatjana Bobnar, who resigned in December 2022 over what she says were the Freedom Movement's attempts to put political pressure on the police. Her criticisms are thought to have precipitated the investigation into Golob's conduct. [Vecer] [Delo] [Dnevnik] [Euractiv]

In October, Bobnar testified to a committee of Slovenia's lower house of parliament that investigates political interference in state bodies. She alleged that Golob had delayed the arrests of two suspected Russian spies until January 2023 in order to ensure that the detentions did not overshadow a referendum victory for his government in November 2022.

In the referendum, Slovenians largely voted in favour of a move by Golob's government to depoliticise the state-owned RTV Slovenia broadcaster. [Vecer] [Delo] [Dnevnik] [Yahoo News] [EiR December 2022]

The referendum was initiated by the opposition in a bid to destabilise Golob politically and to prevent the adoption of laws drafted by his administration.

Both Golob and Slovenia's national intelligence service (SOVA) have denied Bobnar's claims. [Vecer] [Delo] [Dnevnik] [Euractiv] [Yahoo News]

The intelligence service said that the date on which the suspected Russian spies were detained was chosen "based on operational and tactical reasons, and most certainly not at the request of the prime minister or anyone else." [Yahoo News]

Golob, meanwhile, has called Bobnar's accusations "hallucinations." [Euractiv] [Yahoo News] [Delo]

(evk/pk)

Journalists say new law on courts would flout democratic norms

A journalists' association in Slovenia has warned that potential new legislation would restrict public access to information about the country's courts, contradicting democratic norms. [Večer] [Novinar]

The Association of Journalists of Slovenia spoke out on November 6 after parliament proposed amending the law so that the Supreme Court can choose which judgements are released for the public to see on the court's website.

Meanwhile, another draft law would bar the public from accessing information about the country's judiciary, including employee salaries and other data. [Večer] [Novinar]

In a statement, the journalists' association said that such changes would go against democratic rights and norms. It added: "For Slovenia, it would mean a departure from the long-standing practice pursued by all democratic countries – that is, the transparent operation of all three branches of government." [Večer] [Novinar]

(evk/pk)

Trust in political institutions falls: survey

Slovenians have lost trust in political figures and institutions in recent months, a survey has found.

The study by a private research firm scored public institutions on a scale from -100 to 100, with positive scores correlating with large amounts of trust, and negative scores indicating lower levels.

Slovenia's legislature, the National Assembly, as well as the prime minister, opposition parties, and the government in general, all received scores between -42 and -55 points.

This marks a sharp decline of trust in centre-left Prime Minister Robert Golob in particular, who has seen a 17-point drop since the last such survey in March. [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

Meanwhile, civil protection institutions, including firefighters, and small Slovenian companies received the highest scores. Valicon, the firm that conducted the survey, said it believes that increased trust in the former is a result of their role in aiding citizens after

severe flooding in August. [Slovenia Times] [EiR September 2023]

(evk/pk)

Slovenia set to receive EUR 541m in EU recovery funds

The Slovenian government expects to receive EUR 541 million from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility by the end of the year. [Delo] [Vecer]

In late November, the European Commission approved Ljubljana's plan for using grants and loans from the fund, which was set up by the EU to respond to economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A final decision on funding allocations will be made by EU member states on December 21. [Delo] [Vecer] [European Council]

Ljubljana amended its plan on how to spend the money from the recovery fund after catastrophic flooding in Slovenia and a train accident in August. The changes will put more funds towards flood prevention and rail renovations. [Delo] [Vecer]

(evk/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Charges dropped against ex-defence minister and former spy chief

Denmark has dropped charges against an ex-defence minister and against a former head of the country's foreign intelligence agency, who were accused of leaking state secrets.

Prosecutors announced the move after the Supreme Court of Denmark decided that the trials of the two men would need to be public, meaning that the classified information in question would also have to become public.

In a series of interviews in 2020 and 2021, former defence minister Claus Hjort Frederiksen alleged that the Danish Defence Intelligence Service had helped the US National Security Agency (NSA) eavesdrop on leaders in Germany, France, Sweden and Norway.

Claims in 2013 that the NSA had tapped German government phones, including that of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, sparked diplomatic tensions between Washington and Berlin. French President Emmanuel Macron said that, if such activities had been carried out, "this is not acceptable between allies." [AP News]

Meanwhile, Lars Findsen, the former head of the Danish foreign intelligence agency, was charged with leaking classified information to six people, including two journalists.

Both he and Frederiksen denied any wrongdoing.

The two men were charged under a section of the criminal code which comes with a maximum prison sentence of 12 years, but which has not been used for over 40 years. [The Guardian]

Denmark's Prosecution Authority said in a statement: "The classified information is crucial to the cases. Without the ability to present [this] in court, the prosecution has no chance to meet the burden of proof." [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Danish court rejects man's bid to be recognised as secret agent

A Danish court on November 8 rejected a bid by a man who wanted the government to acknowledge that he had worked for the country's intelligence services as a secret agent.

Ahmed Samsam, a Danish national of Syrian origin, claimed that he had worked for Denmark's domestic security service (PET) and its foreign intelligence service (FE) between 2012 and 2015 in Syria. [Politiken]

In 2018, he was convicted by a Spanish court and sentenced to eight years in prison for joining Islamic State militants in Syria. He was later transferred to Denmark, where his term was cut to six years. [Reuters]

Samsam sued the Danish government in an effort to be acknowledged as a secret agent, hoping that would allow him to reopen the case in Spain. [AP News]

Denmark's intelligence agencies refused to confirm or deny whether he had worked for them, saying they could not discuss the identities of their informants. [Reuters]

Peter Biering, a defence lawyer for the two services, said: "To do so would harm their ability to speak to sources, to protect them and prevent terrorism." [France 24]

The Danish court said its ruling would not affect Samsam's legal position in Spain. Samsam has appealed against the verdict. [Danish Broadcasting Corporation]

(km/pk)

New ministers appointed in Cabinet reshuffle

The Danish coalition government announced on November 23 that three ministries will have new heads after a Cabinet reshuffle.

Stephanie Lose of the centre-right Venstre (Liberal) Party has been chosen as the new economy minister following the resignation of her predecessor Jakob Ellemann-Jensen. [Berlingske]

Ellemann-Jensen, the Liberal Party's leader, had been under pressure amid poor ratings for his grouping in the opinion polls. He resigned on October 23, announcing that he was retiring from politics. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Meanwhile, Mia Wagner of the Liberal Party takes over as minister for digitalization and gender equality. She is best known for her role as an internet personality and former chief executive of the Freeway Group, a venture capital firm that owns shares in some of Denmark's major web businesses. [Reuters]

Morten Dahlin, an MP from the Liberal Party, has been appointed as minister for cities and rural areas, the Church, and Nordic cooperation.

The changes mean that Louise Schack Elholm of the Liberal Party has stepped down as Church minister, while Marie Bjerre of the same party will no longer be the minister for digitalization. [The Local]

(km/pk)

Denmark plans new green tax on air travel

The Danish government has proposed a new tax on air travel to help finance the country's transition to 100% sustainable fuels by 2030.

The plan was unveiled on November 9 by the coalition government led by the centre-left Social Democrats.

The proposed tax will be phased in between 2025 and 2030. The amount charged will vary based on the length of flights, with shorter journeys costing less. On average, it will be DKK 100 (EUR 13.40). [ERA]

Half of the expected DKK 1.2 billion in proceeds from the new levy will be used to finance Denmark's green transition. The remainder will be used to fund welfare payouts for the elderly. [Danish Broadcasting Corporation]

Lars Aagaard, Denmark's Minister for Climate, Energy and Utilities, said: "The aviation sector in Denmark must – just like all other industries – reduce its climate footprint and move towards a green future." [Reuters]

(km/pk)

EU commissioner joins Finland's presidential race

Finland's representative on the European Commission, Jutta Urpilainen, has announced she will run in her

country's presidential election in January. [Politico] [Bloomberg]

Urpilainen, the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, will be officially backed by the opposition centre-left Social Democratic Party. [Bloomberg] [Politico]

"I want that we Finns can continue to commit to not leaving anyone behind," Urpilainen told reporters. "That is why I am available as SDP's candidate in the presidential election." [Yle] [Politico]

She is leaving her post at the European Commission to begin her campaign.

The Finnish elections, scheduled for January 28 with a potential second round in February, mark the end of incumbent President Sauli Niinisto's period in office. He has served the maximum two terms allowed. [Politico]

Urpilainen, 48, holds the distinction of having been both Finland's first female finance minister and its first female representative in the European Commission. [Bloomberg]

A recent poll by Finnish national broadcaster Yle indicates that Urpilainen is supported by 4% of respondents, placing her seventh in the presidential race.

Leading the pack is former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, followed by former Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, with central bank governor Olli Rehn in third place. [Yle]

The Finnish president, while holding a largely ceremonial function, plays an important role in foreign policy, an area in which Niinisto was notably active, especially in Finland's entry to NATO earlier this year amid the Ukraine crisis. [Bloomberg]

(rs/pk)

Most Finns unhappy with PM Orpo's government: survey

Most Finns are dissatisfied with the coalition government headed by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, according to a new survey. [Yle]

The poll, conducted by research firm Verian, found that 60% of the 1,272 respondents rated the government's

performance as poor or fairly poor. [Iltalehti] [MTV Uutiset]

This discontent is notably higher among supporters of opposition parties like the Left Alliance, the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the centre-left Green Party. Supporters of the ruling parties, particularly the centre-right National Coalition Party and the right-wing populist Finns Party, are more satisfied. [Yle] [Iltalehti]

Orpo's government, a four-party coalition formed in June 2023, is viewed as the most right-wing in recent Finnish history. It faced a rocky start as a series of racism scandals involving members of the Finns Party prompted widespread protests and concerns. [MTV Uutiset] [Europe in Review October 2023]

The survey also explored whether Finns thought the government was stable enough to last until the end of the electoral term. The public was divided: 43% believed the government would survive, while the same number thought it would fall. [Yle] [MTV Uutiset]

(rs/pk)

Ex-member of far-right ruling party suspected of sending fake bombs: report

Finnish authorities suspect a former member of the ruling far-right Finns Party of sending fake bombs to political organisations, national broadcaster YLE has reported. [Yle]

The suspect, a 43-year-old man, is believed to have sent fake explosive devices in February to seven political party offices, including those of the opposition centre-left Green League, the Left Alliance, and the centre-left Social Democrats, several months ahead of parliamentary elections. [Helsinki Times] [Yle]

In March, the man was detained on suspicion of inciting criminal activity through his online posts. He has authored several articles on accelerationism, which is an extremist philosophy that advocates the use of violence to start a "race war" and hasten the collapse of society. [Yle]

Although police released the man in April, he remained a suspect. Finnish authorities have not released his name. [Yle]

Riikka Purra, the chairperson of the Finns Party, condemned violence and described the case as

“chilling and also saddening”. [Helsinki Times]

In October, members of a far-right extremist group were sentenced for crimes committed with terrorist intent. The main suspect had manufactured 3D-printed firearms, while the group had discussed assassinating former Prime Minister Sanna Marin. It was Finland’s first terrorism-related conviction against far-right extremists. [Europe Monthly October 2023] [Yle]

The anti-immigration, populist Finns Party, which joined the country’s four-way coalition government in June, has recently been plagued by racism scandals involving some of its key members. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

(rs/pk)

Court clears Christian MP of hate speech against gays

Finland’s Court of Appeal has cleared a Christian MP and former interior minister of hate speech charges over several public comments she has made since 2004 about gay people. [Yle]

The court unanimously concluded on November 14 that the remarks by Paivi Rasasen, whose centre-right Christian Democrat party is a member of Finland’s ruling coalition, had not insulted or slandered gay people as “defined in the criminal code.” The decision upholds a ruling by a Helsinki district court in March 2022.

Rasasen had described homosexuality as a "developmental disorder" and a sin. [Reuters]

Following the latest verdict, Rasasen declared the decision was a victory for “the rights of thousands and thousands of Christians” and that “free speech lives in Finland.”

Rasasen was initially charged in 2019 when she protested against the Finnish Lutheran Church’s endorsement of gay Pride events. Taking to Twitter, she quoted Bible verses that condemn homosexuality.

Several other comments by her, including in radio appearances and a 2004 article opposing gay marriage that she penned, were also highlighted by a state prosecutor. [BBC News]

Finnish LGBT+ rights organisation Seta has called for the country’s non-discrimination laws to be widened so

that harassment of groups as well as individuals is banned.

(md/pk)

Gov't faces political crisis over EU energy package

The centre-left Agrarian Party has threatened to leave Norway's ruling coalition – a move that could trigger a political crisis – if a package of EU energy rules is transposed into domestic law. The party says the package undermines the Nordic nation's energy sovereignty. [Bergens Tidende]

An Agrarian withdrawal could cause the collapse of the coalition government led by Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre of the centre-left Labour Party. [Politico]

The EU's Clean Energy for All Europeans package stipulates that at least 32% of the bloc's power production must come from renewable sources by 2030. [European Conservative]

The plans have caused controversy in Norway, which has abundant natural resources, where opponents see the legislation as a crackdown on the country's energy sovereignty.

Controversy in Norway over EU rules broke out in 2018 with the adoption of Brussels' third energy market package, leading to higher power prices and less control of energy markets by Norwegian regulators. [Politico]

Agrarian Party leader Trygve Slagsvold Vedum, who is also Norway's finance minister, said earlier this year that the latest EU package "is not on the government's table now and if it appears, the Agrarians won't let it pass. We will not give up more power in this area." [Borsen Dagbladet]

Norway is not a member of the EU but, under the European Economic Area agreement, is a part of the bloc's internal market, and implements laws drawn up by Brussels.

(jb/pk)

Green groups sue Norway over oil and gas plans

Environmental activists have launched a lawsuit against Norway's plans for oil and gas extraction, claiming the country is pouring "gasoline on the fire" of the climate crisis. [AFP/Barrons]

The legal bid, filed by Greenpeace's Nordic branch and Young Friends of the Earth Norway, is challenging the government's decision to develop three North Sea oil and gas fields. An Oslo court began hearing the case on November 28.

"We are confident that we can win this fight against Norway's aggressive gas and oil policy, which continues to wreak havoc on the climate and people all over the world," said Frode Pleym, head of Greenpeace in Norway.

"This case is part of a movement where people across the world are holding those responsible for the climate and nature crises accountable," Pleym added. [Greenpeace]

The legal challenge builds upon another climate lawsuit brought by the same two NGOs. In 2020 they lost a case against drilling in the Arctic, after Norway's top court concluded that both parliament and the government had the authority to award new oil exploration permits.

However, the Supreme Court also said the government should take into account the impact of the emissions that would eventually result from the development of new fields. [Reuters]

In the latest lawsuit, the two NGOs pick up on this remark, and have asked the Oslo district court to declare approvals for the three North Sea fields invalid, arguing that the permits did not sufficiently take climate impact into account. [BNN Bloomberg]

Gina Gylver, head of Young Friends of the Earth Norway, said: "It is time that the government puts children's best interests first in oil matters, and stops fuelling the climate crisis by locking us into decades of more oil and gas." [Greenpeace]

(jb/pk)

Norway opens first spaceport in Europe for satellites

The first launch base in Europe for small satellites has been officially opened in northern Norway, delivering a boost to the commercial space industry. [Space News]

“Andøya Spaceport is the result of a long-term national ambition”, said Christian Hauglie Hanssen, director general of the Norwegian Space Agency.

The facility was opened on November 2 and satellite launches are expected to start next year.

The site’s operator, the Andøya Space company, will offer technical infrastructure, while German satellite companies Isar Aerospace and Rocket Factory Augsburg (RFA) will offer launch capacity for international customers. [Business Norway]

Once fully completed, Andøya spaceport will have several launchpads from which small to medium satellites can be deployed. [Space]

The government has allocated NOK 365.6 million (over EUR 30 million) to the project, and the Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Fisheries has a 90% stake in Andøya Space. [RFA] [Business Norway]

From the spaceport, located 300 km within the Arctic Circle, satellites can quickly reach polar orbits, while research rockets can be easily launched into the northern lights and atmosphere over the North Pole. [Business Norway]

The site is also suitable for launches because it generally doesn’t have too much wind. [Romsenter]

Putting satellites into orbit from Andøya has been discussed since the mid-1990s, though launches of research and test rockets from the site started in the early 1960s. [Romsenter]

(jb/pk)

Swedish PM condemns far-right’s call to flatten mosques

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has condemned the leader of a far-right party which the ruling coalition needs to maintain a majority for controversially advocating the demolition of all mosques.

Jimmie Akesson, the head of the Sweden Democrats, said that mosques spread “anti-democratic, anti-Swedish, homophobic, anti-Semitic propaganda or general disinformation.” [Euronews]

Kristersson, a conservative, heads a centre-right minority coalition government that does not include

ministers from the Sweden Democrats, though it is dependent on the far-right party for a parliamentary majority.

Kristersson said: “In Sweden, we don’t tear down places of worship. I think it is a disrespectful way of expressing oneself, a polarising way of expressing oneself. This misrepresents what Sweden stands for internationally.” [SVT]

Akesson’s remarks come at a delicate time for Sweden as the Nordic country has yet to complete its NATO accession process – a step that still needs to be approved by Turkey.

Former Social Democrat Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson warned that Akesson’s comment “worsens the image of Sweden, does not facilitate our NATO application, and further increases polarisation in our country.” [X.com] [Politico]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan earlier this year called on Sweden to take measures to stop acts such as public burnings of the Koran by protesters. [AP News]

(jb/pk)

‘Flawed way of life’ could lead to deportation as migration rules tightened

Foreigners who have abused Sweden’s welfare system, or have links to criminal gangs or high debts, face losing their residence permit and possible deportation under government plans to tighten migration rules.

The Swedish centre-right minority ruling coalition, consisting of the Moderates, Christian Democrats and Liberals, is reliant on the far-right Sweden Democrats – who want to severely curtail immigration – for a parliamentary majority. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

The government has launched an inquiry to investigate how foreigners with a “flawed way of life” could have their residence permit revoked. [The Local]

“A basic condition for successful integration is that people who want to live in Sweden respect basic norms and live in an honest and orderly manner,” Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard said on November 21, announcing the inquiry, which is to present its findings by early 2025. [Euractiv]

In October, the leaders of the three-party ruling coalition and the far-right Sweden Democrats said that the Nordic nation had "significant problems" with foreign-born people who are unemployed and live on benefits.

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's government, which came to power after September 2022 general elections saw the end of eight years of Social Democrat rule, has vowed to crack down on immigration and on a surge in crime by gangs. [Europe Monthly November 2023] [Europe Monthly October 2022]

Currently, foreigners who apply for a permanent residence permit in Sweden have to show they "live an orderly life". A criminal record could lead to a permanent permit being refused.

Earlier in November, the Swedish parliament accepted the government's plan to tighten requirements for some family members who want to join immigrants living in the Nordic nation. [The Local]

The new rules are part of an agreement between the minority government and the Sweden Democrats.

Under the new law, which came into force on December 1, a residence permit may be refused for a foreign partner or spouse if either the partner in Sweden or the partner intending to join them is under the age of 21. The current age limit is 18. [The Local]

Stenergard said the change would help prevent forced marriages. She added that the age limit of 21 is the highest permitted by EU law. [Schengen Visa Info]

Stenergard also said her country was facing major challenges in integrating migrants into Swedish society. [Schengen Visa Info]

The government has already imposed other restrictions on immigration. It has raised the income requirement for foreigners seeking work visas and introduced stricter biosecurity measures for undocumented immigrants. [Europe Monthly January 2023]

(jb/pk)

Sweden will not deport man behind Koran burning, fearing he may be tortured

Sweden's migration agency has announced that it will not deport an Iraqi man responsible for controversially

burning copies of the Koran, saying that he would be at risk of torture in his home country.

The desecration of a copy of Islam's holy book outside a Stockholm mosque by two men on June 28, amid a major Muslim holiday, sparked outrage in Turkey and other Muslim countries. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Iraqi refugee Salwan Momika, who organized and participated in the event, said that he wanted to protest against the institution of Islam.

The Swedish authorities have filed preliminary hate speech charges against him.

Meanwhile, the country's migration agency determined that Momika had given false information on his application for asylum in Sweden, according to broadcaster TV4. [AP News]

The agency decided that Momika should be deported. However, spokesperson Jesper Tengroth said it would not follow through because Momika would be at risk of torture in Iraq.

"This person risks being subjected to torture and inhuman treatment if he returns to his home country. We have therefore decided that there is an obstacle to enforcing the deportation," Tengroth said. [AP News]

He added that if the situation in Iraq changed, Momika would be expelled from Sweden.

Momika said he had been exercising his right of freedom of speech to criticize Islam, adding: "I am not leaving Sweden. I will live and die in Sweden." [Reuters]

Recent demonstrations led by Momika have raised concerns that Sweden may become a target for Islamic extremists.

In October, two Swedish football fans were killed before a match in Brussels by a gunman who specifically targeted the pair because of their nationality, Sweden's prime minister has said. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

In August, Sweden's security service announced the elevation of the country's terror threat level to "high" as the government said that several attacks had been foiled following a string of public burnings of the Koran. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

(km/pk)

Sweden eyes expansion of nuclear energy

The Swedish government has announced it will launch an inquiry into facilitating the use of nuclear energy. The Nordic country is searching for ways to fast-track its transition to fossil-free electricity production, while securing energy supply in times of crisis. [Xinhua]

The inquiry will focus on expediting assessments of permits for nuclear power plants and examine fee adjustments for applications. The centre-right government will also examine nuclear waste management. [Bloomberg]

“Nuclear power has a central and decisive role in our climate transition,” Climate and Environment Minister Romina Pourmokhtari told a press conference. “We therefore need to initiate a substantial expansion of nuclear power.” [Bloomberg]

Sweden aims to achieve 100% fossil-free electricity generation by 2040, while ensuring that production levels are sufficient to meet the growing demands of industry. [Xinhua]

Currently, six nuclear reactors at three sites generate some 30% of the country’s total electricity, according to the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority. [Swedish Radiation Safety Authority]

Far-right party comes out in support of climate goals

Meanwhile, the far-right Sweden Democrats, whose support the minority centre-right government needs to have a majority in parliament, have made a policy U-turn, and have backed the ruling coalition’s goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2045. [The Local] [BNN]

“Unlike before, the whole bloc of parties supporting the government is now backing Sweden’s climate goals,” Climate Minister Pourmokhtari said in a statement. [The Local]

The about-turn by the Sweden Democrats means the country’s parliament is now united in support of climate targets. These are based on three principles: climate policy should be combined with economic growth; it should have an international perspective with a focus on cutting global emissions; and it should incorporate developing technology with more fossil-free electricity. [The Local]

“Climate policy should be effective, it should be tolerated by citizens and it should create jobs and growth. We don’t want a policy of shutting things

down," said the Sweden Democrats' spokesperson on the environment, Martin Kinnunen.

The Sweden Democrats are not officially in government but without their backing, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson would not have a parliamentary majority.

(jb/pk)

Stockholm court acquits Russian-Swedish dual citizen of spying for Moscow

A Stockholm court has acquitted a Russian-born Swedish citizen of charges that he spied on Sweden and the United States for Moscow.

Sergey Skvortsov was indicted in August amid allegations that a company he owns was a platform for unlawfully procuring technology from the West and for circumventing sanctions in order to increase Russia's military capabilities between 2013 and 2022. [Reuters]

A prosecutor sought a five-year jail term for Skvortsov, whom he identified as a serious threat to US and Swedish security. [BBC]

But a Stockholm district court said in its verdict that Skvortsov's business was "only intended for the procurement of technology from the West and not aimed at obtaining information concerning Sweden or the United States that may constitute espionage." [AP News]

(km/pk)

Strikes break out as Tesla refuses to sign collective bargaining deal

Strikes in Sweden have put pressure on electric vehicle company Tesla after its refusal to sign a collective bargaining agreement with mechanics.

On October 27, 130 members of metalworkers' union IF Metall walked out of seven workshops across the country that service Tesla vehicles over a lack of a collective agreement – an arrangement that most Swedish employees have. [Bloomberg]

Other trade unions and dockworkers at some of Sweden's major ports stopped the delivery of Tesla

cars in early November in solidarity with the mechanics. On November 17, this blockade was expanded to include all the country's ports.

Electricians also stopped repair work for Tesla's charging stations across Sweden. [Reuters 1]

Meanwhile, the Service and Communications Employees' Union (Seko) said on November 20 it would halt the delivery and collection of mail at all Tesla sites in the Nordic nation. [Euronews]

Stefan Lofven, a former centre-left Social Democrat prime minister, said on Facebook: "It should be obvious for a company to follow the customs that exist in the countries where it operates, but it looks like Tesla has intended to ignore the Swedish labour market model. It looks really bad and the company's actions must of course be both pointed out and opposed!" [Facebook]

Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla, called the strikes "insane."

On November 27, the electric vehicle company sued Sweden's Transport Agency over postal worker strikes that blocked the delivery of licence plates for Tesla cars. The transport agency is responsible for the production of the plates and oversees state-owned postal company PostNord.

Tesla said that the transport agency had "a constitutional obligation to provide licence plates to vehicle owners." [New York Times]

On the same day, a district court issued a temporary ruling that the agency had to resume issuing licence plates for Tesla, despite the postal worker strikes. [Reuters 2]

(km/pk)

Corruption probe examines pension fund Alecta

A prosecutor in Sweden has launched a preliminary inquiry into suspected corruption related to a multi-billion investment by pension fund Alecta.

The investigation, which follows a report submitted by the country's financial watchdog (FSA) to police at the end of November, will look into investments by Stockholm-based Alecta into property group Heimstaden Bostad that led to over EUR 1.8 billion in losses.

The chair of Alecta, Ingrid Bonde resigned in October. [Reuters] [Financial Times] [Bloomberg]

An internal investigation took place in September looking at whether Alecta had followed rules when it ploughed EUR 4.2 billion into Heimstaden Bostad, giving it a 38% stake in the residential real estate firm.

An Alecta spokesperson said that the company had already handed over all requested information and would continue to do so. Heimstaden, one of Europe's biggest real estate companies, said that the investigation did not directly affect the group. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Brussels cuts EU growth forecast but expects rebound in 2024

Europe's economy will grow more slowly this year than previously expected before rebounding in 2024, while inflation will continue to fall, the European Commission has said in its latest forecast.

The EU's executive on November 15 downgraded its 2023 GDP growth projection to 0.6% for both the 27-member bloc and the 20-nation eurozone. In its summer forecast, the commission had predicted that growth in both would be 0.8% this year.

The EU attributed the expected slowdown to the high cost of living, rises in interest rates and weak external demand.

But the commission expects growth to rebound next year to 1.3% in the EU as a whole and 1.2% in the euro area.

“For consumers, inflation in the euro area is going in the right direction, declining to its lowest level in two years, to 2.9% in October, from its 10.6% peak a year ago,” the EU’s executive said.

“With lower inflation, higher incomes, and a pick-up in exports, the economy should recover, albeit modestly,” it added.

Unemployment in the EU is likely to remain broadly stable at 6.0% both in 2023 and 2024, according to the commission. [Euronews] [Xinhua] [European Commission]

The bloc’s executive said it expected Belgium, France, Italy, Malta and Slovakia to have budget deficits well above 4.0% of their GDP next year and in 2025 – meaning that the EU is likely to take disciplinary steps against those nations. [Reuters]

(pk)

Armenia announces plans for South Caucasus economic integration

Armenia announced a plan for connectivity, peace and cooperation in the South Caucasus at the 6th Paris Peace Conference.

The country's Prime Minister Nikol Pashniyan unveiled the "Crossroads of Peace" project on November 10 to connect the region through improved economic and trade relations. The plan also aims to enhance communication between Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran through infrastructure development, including roads, railways, pipelines, cables and electricity lines. [ArmenPress]

Each country would ensure border, customs control and security of all the infrastructures. The infrastructures can be used for domestic transportation and internationally through reciprocity and equality. [ArmRadio]

Armenia also revealed its plans to connect the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea by using a regional railway network inactive for 30 years. [ArmenPress]

The plan responds to Azerbaijan's demand for control over the Zangezur corridor, a transport link connecting Azerbaijan with Iran that passes through Armenia. The link could potentially threaten Armenia's territorial integrity. [ArmenianWeekly]

However, according to Pashniyan, Azerbaijan has not shown much interest in the Crossroads of Peace project.

"They, it seems, are no longer interested in this project because they are carrying out that connectivity project with Iran," he said. "We are absolutely not against that." [Armenpress]

Azerbaijan forcefully annexed the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh in September,, which had remained independent from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Armenia is now reliant on Iran as a regional ally to support it against rivals Azerbaijan and Turkey after ties with Russia became recently strained following Armenian criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. [Foreign Policy]

(sl/gc)

Divided over Ukraine, Central European leaders discuss regional security

The presidents of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – nations that are divided over military aid for Kyiv – met on November 22 to discuss the war in Ukraine and regional economic coordination. [TVP World] [Polskie Radio] [AP News]

The leaders held talks in Prague at a summit of the Visegrad Group, or V4, a regional cooperative formed by the four Central European countries, two of which have Kremlin-friendly governments. [TVP World] [Polskie Radio]

The Czech Republic's Petr Pavel, whose country holds the group's rotating presidency, said that "it is in our imminent interest that Ukraine succeeds." He added that "the Russian aggression affects us all, and therefore supporting Ukraine is a matter fundamental for our security." [TVP World]

Poland's Andrzej Duda, whose country, like the Czech Republic, has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine since the Russian invasion in 2022, echoed Pavel's comments, saying that "Ukraine needs constant support and we must support Ukraine." [Polskie Radio]

Hungarian President Katalin Novak said the Visegrad Group has "a common position that Russia should not win this war." However, Hungary's ruling nationalist Fidesz party, from which Novak hails, has maintained strong ties with Moscow throughout the war.

At the same time, Budapest is critical of the government in Kyiv for its treatment of Ukraine's Hungarian minority. In Prague, Novak emphasised that the rights of this group could not be negotiated. [AP News] [TVP World] [Europe in Review October 2023]

Centre-left Slovak President Zuzana Caputova made her support for Ukraine clear, insisting that aid for Kyiv "is important and makes sense." However, her views differ sharply from those of the new government in Bratislava led by populist, pro-Kremlin Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Fico's ruling leftist Smer party recently ended Slovakia's military support for Ukraine. [Europe in Review November 2023] [AP News] [TVP World]

Regional infrastructure and economic development were also discussed at the Prague summit as a way of increasing security. Poland's Duda noted the importance of investing in new highways and railways to allow easier transport of goods and delivery of aid to Ukraine. [TVP World] [Polskie Radio]

Hungary's Novak said it was important for the Visegrad Group countries to work together to develop their energy sectors. [TVP World]

(evk/pk)

COP 28 launches in Dubai as European leaders recommit to climate change goals

The 28th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the 1994 United Nations Convention on Climate Change started in Dubai on November 30 as European leaders recommitted themselves to climate change goals prior to the summit. [UN] [COP28] The first COP conference took place in Berlin in 1995.

EU Central Bank President Christine Lagarde, European Investment Bank President Werner Hoyer, and International Energy Agency (IEA) President Fatih Birol released a joint statement on November 24 calling on European representatives to take a leading role in new clean energy investment and regulatory initiatives at COP28. [ECB]

The European Climate Law passed in 2021 mandates and provides a regulatory framework for achieving net zero emissions for the European economy by 2050 across all economic sectors from transportation to energy production. [EU]

The framework includes a goal of 30 million net zero emission vehicles by 2030, an over tenfold increase over a decade from the 1.9 million electric vehicles on European roads in 2021. By 2035 all cars sold in the EU are to be net zero emission vehicles, either electric or e-fuels, which are drop-in fuels that can substitute for gasoline in conventional engines and are based upon hydrogen. [EC] [Eurostat]

However, OPEC oil demand predictions are based upon the realisation that there is no equivalent mandate in other economies outside the approximately 450 million population of the EU to mandate fossil fuel powered vehicle elimination. [EC]

Demand for the internal combustion engine may in fact continue to grow globally as the world population continues to increase at the rate of approximately 367,000 births compared to 190,000 global deaths per day according to UN statistics, leading to an additional 25% world population increase from nearly eight billion in 2023 to ten billion by 2085. [UN] [Our World in Data] [NYT]

OPEC projects that global oil demand will continue to grow despite European and Western energy policy while the EU predicts that Western policy, projected through international financial institutions and laws, will lead to a significant reduction in the number of fossil fuel powered vehicles worldwide over time and commensurate global oil demand.

(rw/gc)

Estonia's chairmanship OSCE bid vetoed by Russia and Belarus

Estonia's 2024 bid to chair the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) faced a diplomatic blow as Russia and Belarus jointly vetoed the move, the Estonian foreign ministry said on November 21. [BNN]

Estonia's Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna expressed regret and emphasised the OSCE's duty to uphold fundamental values despite external pressures [BNN].

Tsahkna stressed the need to isolate Russia internationally rather than yield to pressure. [Euromaidan]

(ha/gc)

France, Germany, Italy sign deal to boost investment in EU space industry

Italy, France and Germany have signed a deal to invest EUR 340 million annually in the Ariane 6 rocket programme, aiming to boost the European space industry and compete with its Chinese rivals and Elon Musk's SpaceX in the US. [Bloomberg] [Financial Times]

The Ariane 6 programme, launched in 2014 by the European Space Agency (ESA) and the Arianespace company – jointly owned by European firms Airbus and Safran – was supposed to start flights in 2020, but has faced delays. The ESA has scheduled its first flight for 2024. [Space]

The agreement between Rome, Paris and Berlin, inked on November 6, allocates funds for 42 launches of the Ariane 6 rocket until 2030, up from an initially planned 15 launches.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said the deal "marks a decisive turning point in this history of European space exploration." [Bloomberg]

Meanwhile, Rome has withdrawn its Vega-C launcher from the Arianespace project under the new agreement, choosing instead to operate independently through Italian aerospace manufacturer Avio. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

The Ariane 6 rocket will receive a minimum of four missions from public institutions each year, while the Vega-C launcher will be awarded at least three missions.

(ao/pk)

France, Germany and Italy discuss AI regulations

France, Germany, and Italy have discussed regulations on artificial intelligence (AI) development.

The countries highlighted the importance of a mandatory self-regulation code of conduct (COD) to

accelerate negotiation at the European level, including the European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council. [Reuters]

The European Parliament, recognising AI's potential threats and incredible power, presented an AI Act to contain AI risks in June 2023. The initial discussions proposed a code of conduct that would be legally binding for major AI providers, primarily the USA. Italy, France and Germany have opposed resistance to the initial Act, arguing that it should be imperative for everyone to prevent mistrust. [EuroNews]

The three European countries suggested avoiding initial sanctions, but they should be regulated after violating the code of conduct. They also recommended that a general-purpose AI system be applied for specific applications and not as a funding model, as suggested by the Parliament Act.

A foundation model would maintain the neutrality and safety of technology and AI. Rome, Paris and Berlin added that the imposition of the EU Act would prevent governments from mastering AI technology, which is currently a global priority. [Politico][Euractiv]

(vt/gc)

German foreign minister urges swift peace talks in visit to Azerbaijan and Armenia

During her official visit to Azerbaijan and Armenia in early November, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock urged both countries to resume peace talks to find a political resolution to the longstanding conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

At a press conference in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijani, Baerbock emphasised that "people throughout the region are hoping for peace. This requires a willingness to struggle for a new coexistence for the benefit of all, Azerbaijanis and Armenians alike, and she urged the return of the Armenian population of Nagorno Karabakh, virtually all of whom fled the region in September to seek refuge in Armenia during the Azerbaijani military annexation of the ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan." [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [ZDF] [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesschau]

Before meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Baerbock addressed the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict by engaging with refugees from

Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia. [Deutschlandfunk] [Tagesschau]

Nagorno-Karabakh, a region within Azerbaijani territory predominantly inhabited by Armenians, experienced a violent civil war in the 1990s that led to its separation from Azerbaijan with the backing of Armenia.

In violation of a 2020 ceasefire agreement, Azerbaijani forces initiated a large-scale offensive against the region on September 19, resulting in the displacement of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians. Feeling abandoned by Russia, Armenia is now seeking international support from Europe. [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Tagesschau] [ZDF]

Baerbock's reception in Azerbaijan was warm, particularly during a meeting with Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov. While Bayramov expressed openness to peace talks, he accused Armenia of unlawful territorial claims. He accused Baerbock of appeasing Armenia by using both Azerbaijani and Armenian names for places in Nagorno-Karabakh. [Tagesschau] [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung]

Germany has committed EUR 9.3 million in humanitarian aid for Nagorno-Karabakh refugees.

Baerbock also supports a phased approach to visa liberalisation to bring Armenia closer to the European Union (EU). [Tagesschau]

Expressing confidence in EU Council President Charles Michel's mediation efforts, Baerbock stressed the need for mutual willingness for peace. Additionally, while Iran and Turkey have offered themselves as mediators in the peace process, Baerbock voiced concerns about their potential impartiality regarding the conflict. [Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung] [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Hungary signals opposition to EU accession talks for Ukraine

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said the EU should not begin accession talks with Ukraine.

After the European Commission recommended that such negotiations start with Kyiv amid its war with Russia, the Hungarian nationalist leader said that Ukraine is “in no way ready” to join the bloc.

Orban's public remarks indicate that Budapest may refuse to support Kyiv when EU leaders decide whether to begin Ukraine's membership process in December.

Hungary, which has remained friendly with Russia throughout the war in Ukraine, has continually opposed EU moves to send weapons and funds to Kyiv. [Al Jazeera] [RFE/RL] [Reuters]

Orban has accused the government in Kyiv of violating the rights of ethnic Hungarians who live in western Ukraine to justify his lack of support for EU membership talks with the country. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

Budapest has also long been at odds with Brussels, which has withheld billions of euros in funds from Hungary over the country's rule of law and human rights violations.

However, Orban has said he "would like to make it very clear that the Hungarian rejection of the start of talks with Ukraine over EU membership is not subject to a business deal... it cannot be linked to the issue of [EU] funds that Hungary is entitled to get." [Reuters]

Hungary's stance could be a major obstacle to Ukrainian hopes of joining the EU given that a decision by the bloc's members to start discussions must be unanimous. However, the Ukrainian minister overseeing integration with Europe said she was "confident" her country would succeed, despite challenges from Budapest. [Reuters]

(evk/pk)

IEA releases report designating 2023 a 'moment of truth' for petroleum industry

The IEA released a report titled "The Oil and Gas Industry in Net Zero Transitions" on November 23 calling on the global petroleum industry to make "pivotal" choices to ameliorate the effects of climate change, which the report claimed is being largely caused by the burning of fossil fuels. [IEA] [IEA Report]

The report notes a 40% increase in investment in clean energy investment since 2020 and predicts peak oil and gas demand will occur by 2030, after which demand may fall by 40% or more by 2050. IEA advocates that the industry commit to a net zero target itself, producing zero carbon emissions in the production of fossil fuels, and invest in hydrogen,

liquid biofuels, carbon capture, solar, and offshore wind instead of in further fossil fuel production.

Oil Producing Export Countries (OPEC) President Haitham Al Ghais accused the IEA of "vilifying" the oil and gas industry in their report noting oil and gas provided energy security as well as reliable energy at lower prices than intermittent renewable fuel sources. [Reuters]

IEA noted in their report that without reduction in fossil fuel output there was not enough electricity in the world to offset the annual carbon emissions resulting from the burning of fossil fuels. IEA advocates the oil and gas industry plan to decrease production significantly over the next three decades, however, OPEC predicted significant fossil fuel consumption growth for the next 20 years in its World Oil Outlook 2045 released in 2023. [OPEC]

(rw/gc)

Italian PM says European leaders 'tired' of Russia-Ukraine war in hoax call

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said that European leaders were "tired" of the Russia-Ukraine war during a prank call by Russian comedians posing as African officials. [Reuters] [Yahoo] [Politico]

The Russian hoaxers, Vladimir Kuznetsov and Alexei Stolyaro, have faced accusations of targeting prominent Western individuals who have criticised Moscow since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

Francesco Talo, an adviser to Meloni, resigned after assuming responsibility for the call being put through to the Italian premier.

Meloni told a press conference on November 3: "This matter was not handled well, we are all sorry." [Reuters] [Yahoo]

She added that her comments did not indicate a change in her government's support for Kyiv.

The 13-minute prank call took place on September 18. An audio recording of it was released online on November 1.

During the exchange, Meloni also criticised Italy's EU partners for failing to give Rome enough support in addressing an escalating immigration crisis. [Politico]

In recent months, Meloni's hard-right government has negotiated with the EU for stricter measures on illegal migration. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

(ao/pk)

Latvia, Lithuania leaders visit in Kyiv

Baltic leaders Ingrida Simonyte of Lithuania and Edgars Rinkevics of Latvia denounced Russian aggression during their visit to Kyiv on November 24. [RFE/RL]

Lithuanian Prime Minister Simonyte paid her respects at a memorial dedicated to Ukrainian defenders, emphasising the need to support and secure a lasting peace in Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told Latvian President Rinkevics that Ukraine needed US Congress assistance and European Union (EU) support with a proposed EUR 50 billion aid package and initiated a dialogue on Ukraine's potential EU membership to defeat Russia. [RFE/RL]

Latvian President Rinkevics proposed a substantial extension of sanctions to include products from Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories.

(ha/gc)

NATO members suspend security pact after Russia withdraws

Hours after Russia completed its withdrawal from a landmark European security pact on November 7, NATO member countries froze their participation in the agreement, which sought to cap key weapon stockpiles and prevent Cold War rivals from amassing military equipment near their mutual borders.

The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe was signed in 1990 while the Soviet Union was crumbling, and was fully ratified two years later, after the end of the Cold War. [WSJ]

The treaty established limits on key sectors of military supplies and required the destruction of excess weaponry, as well as setting regional caps to block concentrations of equipment near borders. [VoA]

The pact was unpopular in Moscow at the time of its ratification, as the Soviet Union possessed more

conventional weapons than its NATO rivals. [Al Jazeera]

Once Moscow pulled out of the agreement, NATO deemed it "unsustainable" that its members abide by constraints that Russia was no longer following.

Germany's foreign ministry stressed that NATO allies had not fully withdrawn from the deal, which could still be reinstated should Moscow radically change its behaviour. Regardless, Berlin plans to stick to the weapons limitations imposed in the treaty. [AP]

Moscow's move was long in the making. Russia suspended its participation in the pact in 2007, but remained active in the treaty's governing body until 2015. [Arms Control] [TASS] [Euractiv]

Moscow had criticised the United States' push to expand NATO, which it said had caused members of the military alliance to circumvent the treaty's restrictions. Russia argued that the admission of Finland to NATO earlier this year and Sweden's application to join meant the treaty was dead. [Reuters]

(qv/pk)

NATO chief commits to Bosnia's territorial integrity

The NATO Secretary General has reaffirmed support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and conveyed his worry about Russian interference in the Balkan nation. [AP]

General Jens Stoltenberg expressed his deep concern about the destabilising effects of foreign interference within the volatile region in Sarajevo on November 5. Current Bosnian Serb President Milorad Dodik has called for secession of the Serbian region of Bosnia and unification with Serbia. [AP]

"The Allies strongly support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina," Stoltenberg told reporters in Sarajevo. "We are concerned by the secessionist and divisive rhetoric as well as malign foreign interference, including Russia."

"This threatens to undermine stability and hampers reform," Stoltenberg said. "All political leaders must work to preserve unity, build national institutions, and achieve reconciliation, this is crucial for the stability and the security of the country."

There has been growing Russian interference in Bosnian politics with widespread fears that Putin is hoping to destabilise the region in an attempt to detract global attention from its invasion of Ukraine. [AP]

(en/gc)

NATO air patrols to shift from Estonia to Latvia and Lithuania

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization will shift its air patrols in the Baltics from Estonia to Latvia and Lithuania in March as Amari Air Base undergoes reconstruction.

The move is part of a collaborative effort with Germany, emphasising NATO's operational flexibility in the region, according to Tristan Sauer, a Global Data defence and aerospace analyst [Postimees] [Airforce Technology].

The temporary relocation reflects NATO's commitment to adaptability and shared defence objectives. Germany has played a crucial role in this initiative, contributing fighter jets to cover the two rotations during Amari's reconstruction [Postimees].

While the fighter jets are expected to return to Amari Air Base after the reconstruction is completed, Sauer suggested in May that the move provides NATO forces, including Germany, an opportunity to test interoperability in novel locations. This strategic shift also opens the possibility for additional NATO facilities in Latvia and Lithuania over the next decade [Airforce Technology].

Since the Baltic States joined NATO in 2004, the importance of maintaining a visible and reliable deterrence force in the region has become increasingly evident, particularly in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent deterioration of security in Eastern Europe.

(ha/gc)

Slovenia extends border checks with Hungary and Croatia

Slovenia has extended checks at its borders with Hungary and Croatia until December 21 amid what the government in Ljubljana says is a heightened risk of

terrorism as a result of escalated tensions in the Middle East. [Slovenia Times] [Foreign Brief]

Slovenia originally introduced the controls between October 21 and November 21, fearing that terrorists could make their way into the country and other European nations.

Slovenia's foreign ministry plans to notify fellow EU member states and the European Commission that it could extend security checks by half a year, though the country's interior minister has said that he hopes to lift the measures as soon as terrorist threat levels decrease. [Slovenia Times]

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

However, a swathe of countries in the Schengen zone have recently enacted border controls. [Financial Times] [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Border checks within the Schengen area have become more common since 2015, when streams of migrants began flowing into Europe, triggering a crisis.

Since instating border controls in October, Slovenian police have turned away around 290 foreign nationals, with an official saying that some of these were a threat to internal security. [Slovenia Times] [Foreign Brief]

(evk/pk)

United Kingdom hosts global AI summit

A two-day conference on the risks posed by Artificial Intelligence, held in Bletchley England on November 1-2, brought together government leaders and tech executives from around the world, including the US, EU and China. [Reuters] [BNN][UK GOV][Reuters]

Since the launch of ChatGPT in November of 2022 there have been growing concerns around the potential existential threats posed by AI 'frontier' technology, including AI-enabled cyberattacks and AI-formulated bioweapons. [Reuters] [BNN][UK GOV] [Reuters]

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak initiated the Summit as part of the UK's attempt, post-Brexit, to be an intermediary between the US, EU and China. [Reuters] [BNN][UK GOV][Reuters]

With representation from 29 governments, the summit was heralded as a success by British digital Minster Michelle Donelan, who said in a press conference that "it was an achievement just to get so many key players in one room." However, given the low level of trust between many Western governments and Beijing on technology, some questioned whether China should have been there.

The US made clear the invitation to China had not come from them and US Vice President Kamala Harris's announcement of a new US AI safety Institute, happened outside the Summit, at the US Embassy in London. [Reuters] [BNN][UK GOV][Reuters]

The "Bletchley Declaration", signed by 29 governments present at the Summit, outlines a commitment to international cooperation on identifying risks of shared concern and building risk-based policies that address the risks. [UK GOV]

South Korea will co-host a virtual mini-summit on AI within the next six months, and France will host the next in-person summit in 2024. [Reuters] [BNN][UK GOV][Reuters]

(ar/gc)

Ahead of UN summit, Vatican pledges commitment to tackling climate change

Ahead of a UN global summit, the Vatican has reiterated its commitment to tackling climate change by signing a statement along with senior religious leaders from various faiths that urges politicians to take action on the environment.

The "interfaith statement", which pledges efforts to mobilise communities on climate change, was approved by 28 religious leaders, including Anglicans, Buddhists, Coptic Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox and Evangelical Christians, Hindus, Jews, Shia Muslims, Sikhs and Sunni Muslims.

The document was signed at the end of the first day of the Global Faith Summit on Climate Action held on November 6-7 in the United Arab Emirates, in the lead-up to the United Nations COP28 summit in Dubai from November 30 to December 12.

Pope Francis is known for his strong position on the environment. In 2015, in the run-up to the COP21 summit, he released an encyclical – an official Church document – calling for commitments on climate action.

The Paris Agreement, signed at COP21, was the first binding international treaty on environmental change.

The most recent official document from the Vatican on the climate was released on October 4. In it, Pope Francis outlined his hopes for COP28, calling for "binding forms of energy transition" that are efficient and readily monitored. [Vatican]

Francis cancelled his planned visit to the Dubai climate gathering due to poor health. He had been scheduled to deliver a speech on December 2. It would have been the first time a pope attended a UN climate summit since they began in 1992. [Vatican News 1] [Vatican News 2] [Vatican News 3] [EuroNews]

(ar/pk)

Western allies pushing Ukraine to negotiate peace with Russia, German newspaper reports

Ukraine's Western allies hope to "nudge" it towards negotiations with Russia, the German tabloid Bild reported on November 24, citing unnamed sources.

The United States and Germany will carefully manage lethal aid to Kyiv to maintain Ukraine's defence and provide leverage in negotiations, but not to advance into Russian-occupied territory, Bild reported. [Bild] [Kyiv Independent]

Bild reported, citing an unnamed German government official, that Zelenskyy should realise that things cannot continue like this. Other news organisations have been unable to verify Bild's reporting. Both the US and Germany have rebuked Bild's claims.

In a November 27 briefing, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said Washington has no policy of "inciting" Kyiv to make peace. The German government also stated that "only Ukraine can set a date for the start of peace negotiations." [Ukrainska Pravda] [DW]

However, a November 4 report from NBC News also suggested that US and European officials were beginning to pressure Ukraine into peace talks. An unnamed US official told NBC that some of Kyiv's allies had approached it with "broad outlines" on how peace negotiations with Russia would proceed, including potential Ukrainian concessions. [NBC]

Ukraine's President Zelenksyy has vehemently denied all claims his allies are calling for negotiations behind the scenes. At a press conference with EU Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen in early November, Zelenksyy said "no one among our partners" was telling him to "sit down with Russia, talk to it, and give it something." [The Guardian]

So far, the first overt move towards negotiations among engaged parties has come from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Speaking to the G20 in late November, he made his first public mention of peace since his nation launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Putin called on the international community to "think of ways to stop the tragedy" of armed conflict in Ukraine and declared Russia had "never refused peace talks" with Kyiv. [Reuters]

(md/gc)

Czech Republic joins forces with Taiwan to help rebuild Ukraine

The Czech Republic and Taiwan sealed an agreement on November 10 to help Ukraine rebuild its critical infrastructure, which has been pounded by Russia during the war mounted by Moscow on its western neighbour.

A memorandum of understanding between the Czech Republic and Taiwan, which do not have formal diplomatic ties, will see the two partnering on assisting Ukraine with restoring water and energy systems. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan.gov] [Taiwan News]

Tomas Kopecny, the Czech envoy for Ukraine reconstruction, said on November 10 that his country shared “a strong connection with Taiwan”. He referred to Taiwan as a “great ally and friend” in supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine. [Reuters] [bnn]

Taiwan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Chun said: “It is only the unity of democratic countries that will be able to punish and deter authoritarian countries [from making] the same wrong decision again.” [Reuters]

Taiwan and Ukraine are both democracies whose territories have been claimed by much larger authoritarian neighbours.

Taiwan has considered itself a *de facto* nation after splitting from China amid a civil war in 1949, while

Beijing has long pledged to bring the self-ruled island under control, by force if necessary. [AP News] [BBC]

In January, Czech President Petr Pavel faced a backlash from China for taking a call from his Taiwanese counterpart Tsai Ing-wen, despite Beijing's repeated warnings. The move by Pavel underlined a clear shift from the stance of his predecessor Milos Zeman, who favoured a Beijing-friendly foreign policy to win Chinese business. [AP News] [Politico] [Europe Monthly June 2023] [Al Jazeera]

The Czech centre-right government has sought to maintain robust informal contacts with Taiwan since taking power in 2021. In March, the Czech parliament's lower house speaker, Marketa Pekarova Adamova, led a delegation of some 160 people on a trip aiming to bolster bilateral ties in trade, research, education and culture. [Taipei Times] [Taiwan News]

(yl/pk)

Armenian leader snubs Moscow-led security alliance

Armenia's Prime Minister decided not to attend the Collective Treaty Security Organization, a Moscow-led Security Alliance in Belarus. [News.am]

Prime Minister Nikola Pashniyan's decision to not attend the CSTO has been an example of Russia and Armenia's deteriorating relationship following the capture of the Nagorno-Karabakh region by Azerbaijan earlier this year. Russia was primarily responsible for peace-keeping in the region. [ABCnews]

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said: "The West, whose plans in Ukraine have failed, is now gripping Armenia, trying to tear it away from Russia." [Reuters]

Pashniyan has made comments critical of its dependence on Russia. Further, Armenia has voted to join the International Criminal Court, which indicted Russian President Vladimir Putin for alleged war crimes connected with the war in Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said: "We hope that Armenia does not change the vector of its foreign policy and remains our ally." [Moscow Times]

Pashinyan had a telephone call with Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko at the initiative of the

Belarusian side, the PM's office informed Armenian News-NEWS.am. They discussed matters related to organising the CSTO

Collective Security Council meeting to be held on November 23 in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. [News.am]

Pashinyan informed Lukashenko that he would not be able to participate in this meeting and expressed hope that his CSTO colleagues would treat this decision with understanding.

(sl/gc)

Croatia, Hungary to build links through culture

Croatia and Hungary have agreed to launch a cultural cooperation programme that will run until 2026.

The agreement was signed during an official visit by Croatia's minister of culture and media, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, to Budapest on November 21. She was invited by her Hungarian counterpart, Culture and Innovation Minister János Csák.

The ministers said their countries had an overlap in culture due to the presence of a Croatian minority in Hungary and of a Hungarian minority in Croatia.

The cooperation programme will include visits by national theatre groups, artistic and literary activities. [HRT] [BudapestTimes]

(sl/pk)

Czech government freezes Russian state-owned properties

The government in Prague has stepped up its sanctions on Russia by freezing real-estate assets in the Czech Republic owned by the Kremlin.

"This is the end of commercial activities used by Russia to finance the murdering of Ukrainians," Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky said on X, formerly known as Twitter, on November 15.

Top of Form

The centre-right, pro-Western Czech government has expanded its sanctions to include a real-estate company overseeing foreign assets owned by Russia. [Radio Prague]

"The company's commercial activities are as of today illegal," the government said in a statement, without disclosing the firm's name. [Reuters] [Czech Foreign Affair Ministry]

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on November 16 that the Czech move to freeze Russian properties was illegal under international law. He warned that Moscow may retaliate against Prague's "unfriendly steps". [Tass] [Radio Prague]

The Czech Republic has also urged EU countries to restrict Russian diplomats' visas and residence permits, so as to allow travel solely within the host country rather than the rest of the Schengen area.

Additionally, Prague has appealed to the bloc to only accept biometric passports because these are harder to forge. [FT] [Euractiv] [Barrons] [The Brussels Times]

(yl/pk)

European Commission recommends Georgia for EU candidate status

The European Commission (EC) recommended Georgia for formal EU candidate status, as it fulfils the conditions set out for membership. The EC President Ursula von der Leyen made the announcement on November 8.

Georgia would be given candidate status "on the understanding that certain reforms and steps are taken," the EC president said. [Reuters]

In March 2022, the EU outlined 12 priorities for Georgia to address as a part of the accession process.

Some of the priorities include fighting disinformation, addressing the issue of political polarisation and protecting human rights. Further, it also called for complete judicial reform, including comprehensive reform of the High Council of Justice and the Prosecutor's Office.

It also called for electoral reforms to have a free, fair and competitive electoral process in 2024. [CivilGeorgia]

According to the European Commission's 2023 Communication on the EU Enlargement Policy Report, Three of these 12 priorities have been completed. The European Council will decide on granting the status in December 2023. [CivilGeorgia]

(sl/gc)

EU set to unfreeze millions for Hungary

Hungary is likely to receive around EUR 900 million in EU recovery funds – money that has up to now been frozen over rule-of-law concerns – after approval from the European Commission on November 25. [Reuters] [Euronews] [AP News]

A decision to make the payments, which Hungary plans to put towards green energy projects, will ultimately come down to the position of a majority of EU member states, who are set to settle the issue on December 8.

Countries have traditionally accepted others' national post-pandemic recovery plans once they are approved by the European Commission, indicating that Budapest will likely receive its funds. [Euronews]

The Commission, which is the EU's executive branch, had stalled the payout of billions of euros to Hungary over its nationalist government's failure to address democratic backsliding and rule-of-law concerns, which include government control over the media and courts. [Europe In Review December 2022] [Europe in Review January 2023]

Unlocking a portion of the payments may be a strategic move by the commission in an effort to win Budapest's support for continued European aid to Ukraine. [Reuters] [Euronews] [AP News]

Hungary's nod for renewed EU funding for Kyiv is critical, as a proposed EUR 50 billion aid package must be approved unanimously by member states when it is discussed by nations in the bloc in mid-December. [Reuters] [Euronews] [AP News]

Hungary has continually acted as an obstacle when it comes to EU support for Ukraine. Budapest has justified its stance by accusing the government in Kyiv of oppressing ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Hungary has remained close to the Kremlin throughout the war in Ukraine, even though other European countries cut ties with Russia early in the conflict. [Europe in Review October 2023]

(evk/pk)

Finland closes border crossings with Russia, accusing Moscow of organising flow of migrants

Finland has closed all of its eight border crossing points with Russia, accusing Moscow of orchestrating a rise in Middle Eastern and African migrants illegally traversing the frontier to seek asylum. [Reuters] [AP News]

The 1,340 km border between Finland and Russia is also the European Union's external frontier.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said in a post on social media platform X: "Russia's instrumentalisation of migrants is shameful. I fully support the measures taken by Finland." [AP News]

European border control agency Frontex, which had nine guard officers working in Finland, said on November 23 it was sending an additional 50 as well as equipment such as patrol cars. [CBC]

Finnish border guards reported that 89 people illegally crossed the frontier between November 13 and 14, compared to 91 in the four months leading up to November 12. The migrants were primarily from Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, and had entered Russia legally.

Finland closed four crossing points with Russia on November 17, shut three more on November 23, and closed the last one on November 28. [BBC] [CBC] [BBC]

Moscow had warned that Finland would face consequences when the Nordic nation, after a long commitment to non-alignment, joined NATO. Finland became a member of the Western military alliance in April this year as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

'Malice' by Russia?

Finnish President Sauli Niinisto said his country had to be prepared for "certain malice" from Russia. [AP News]

Meanwhile, Finnish army colonel Matti Pitkaniitty told the BBC that Moscow had changed its policy and was letting asylum seekers approach Finland's border without proper documentation.

Pitkaniitty said that entering the EU through Russia was safer for illegal migrants than making a hazardous journey across the Mediterranean Sea. He added: "Once word gets around, we may see a rapid increase in numbers."

In 2021, thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants crossed into EU member states Poland and Lithuania after flying to neighbouring Belarus, a Russian ally. [Europe in Review November 2021]

The EU accused Belarusian strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko of using migration as a weapon of "hybrid warfare" to destabilise the bloc. [BBC]

In September, Estonia's foreign minister, Margus Tsahkna, said he was concerned about a possible "hybrid attack" from Russia. He suggested Moscow could "test the borders" of EU and NATO member states. [Euronews]

Estonian Interior Minister Lauri Laanemets said his country would consider closing border points with Russia if the number of people crossing increased. [Euractiv]

(gdb/pk)

Georgian civilians shot by Russian troops

Russian troops fatally shot a Georgian civilian and arrested another in occupied territory, according to the Georgian State Security Service (SSSG). The Georgian citizens were residents of the Russian occupied South Ossetia.

On November 6, Russian border troops shot Tamaz Ginturi multiple times and detained Levan Dotiashvili, 33. Ginturi's body was later discovered by law enforcement. [CivilGeorgia]

A statement released by South Ossetia's de facto Foreign Ministry said that the two men had "displayed an extreme level of aggression towards the servicemen of the border guard and posed a threat to their life and health." [Eurasia.net]

The Georgian State Security Service held a technical meeting with representatives of the Government of Georgia and Russia and the EU Monitoring Mission calling for the release of Dotiashvili.

In the past residents of South Ottesia have reported being detained and harassed by Russian troops for

“Illegally border crossing” into Georgian Territory. [CivilGeorgia]

(sl/gc)

Germany commits to doubling aid to Ukraine

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's coalition plans to double military aid to Ukraine to EUR 8 billion, pending approval by the parliament. [Reuters]

This initiative is part of a broader strategy to bolster Germany's military capabilities, positioning the nation as 'the backbone of European defence'. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Germany has emerged as Europe's largest military supplier to Ukraine, providing EUR 17 billion in aid. [France 24]

If sanctioned by the German Bundestag, where the Scholz coalition holds the majority, this investment would mark the first increase in Germany's defence budget in 30 years, surpassing 2% of its Gross Domestic Product. [Bloomberg]

Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said it is a pledge of steadfast support for Ukraine. Parliament member Andreas Schwarz describes the move as 'the right thing to do' and emphasises Germany's commitment to NATO. [Reuters]

This policy shift follows previous hesitations to support Ukraine militarily, attributed to Germany's reliance on Russian energy, 50% Russian gas, and post-war commitment to global peace [France 24].

Germany's military expansion could enhance its credibility worldwide, aligning with its ambition to become NATO's European hub. Bloomberg

(ha/gc)

Germany and Italy forge solidarity deal

Germany and Italy have announced a solidarity deal to strengthen their diplomatic ties and address shared concerns, with a notable focus on energy security. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the accord in Berlin on November 22 following the first intergovernmental summit between the two nations in seven years. [Welt] [Deutsche Welle] [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

The agreement, initiated under Italy's previous government led by Mario Draghi and now continuing under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni from the right-wing Brothers of Italy party, underscores a commitment to collaboration despite political differences. Notably, Scholz, hailing from the centre-left Social Democrats, found common ground with Meloni, driven by shared concerns regarding the war in Ukraine, irregular migration, and the pressing need for diversified energy sources. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

Key components of the deal include the development of a planned pipeline for gas and hydrogen transport between the two nations, with a specific focus on building the south corridor for gas and hydrogen. This involves

the creation of a hydrogen-ready pipeline traversing the Alps, linking North Africa with southern Germany.

Additionally, a German-Italian gas and solidarity deal takes precedence, with both nations aiming to mitigate each other's potential production setbacks. [Reuters] [Tagesschau] [Welt]

Despite this cooperative effort, certain areas of contention, particularly regarding migration, persisted. Tensions surfaced regarding German sea rescuers, with Meloni seeking increased support to address irregular migration, having previously signed a deal with Albania to establish reception centres outside the European Union.

Chancellor Scholz expressed some openness to Meloni's migration plans, signalling possible rapprochement and aligning Germany more closely with Italy's stricter stance. [Tagesschau] [Reuters]

The 31-page action plan, while emphasising the importance of initiating new forms of international cooperation, especially in the Mediterranean and North Africa, needs a formal treaty.

However, a commitment to ongoing talks is evident through establishing an annual forum involving defence and foreign ministers to foster closer economic ties. [Reuters] [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Greece welcomes Turkish efforts to stem migration flows

During an interview with Al Jazeera, Greece's migration minister welcomed the Turkish government's willingness to reduce migration flows from Asia into Europe. [Al Jazeera]

"From the Greek point of view, it looks like a u-turn in a positive way, and we are here to take advantage of it fully and to help the u-turn," Dimitris Kairidis said. [Al Jazeera]

He was comparing the new Turkish attitude to Ankara's policy in March 2020, when Turkey unilaterally departed from a four-year-old agreement with the European Union that obliged both sides to hold back undocumented refugees and migrants. [Al Jazeera]

Thousands of them stormed the Greek border fence along the Evros river in Thrace, nearly overwhelming Greek police. Kairidis, whose government took office in July, visited his Turkish counterpart, Ali Yerlikaya, on October 19.

"I was presented with a lot of data from the Turkish side," Kairidis said. [Al Jazeera]

Turkish authorities said they had arrested 140,000 undocumented people attempting to cross into Europe since the beginning of the year. Some 40,000 had been deported to their countries of origin. And Turkey said it had arrested 5,000 smugglers. [Al Jazeera]

Separately, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis supports international policies for stronger border control in order to protect the European Union from the potential massive entrance of undocumented immigrants. Greece has reached an acceptable level of accepting and assisting them. [To Vima]

(st/gc)

Greece prime minister expects visit from Erdogan

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said he expected a visit from Turkish President Recep Erdogan on December 7 in Athens.

The meeting was initially scheduled to be in Thessaloniki but due to organisational issues, it was moved to Athens. Mitsotakis said he hoped to rebuild a healthy international relationship with Turkey regardless of the two countries' different stand towards the Israeli-Palestine conflict. [Kathemerini]

(st/gc)

Lithuanian minister urges enhanced military alliance with Poland

Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis has called for a substantial increase in military cooperation with Poland and unveiled a comprehensive 10-point plan to address the escalating Russian military threat.

Landsbergis stressed the importance of contemplating "worst-case scenarios." He emphasised shared responsibility with Poland for safeguarding the vulnerable NATO Suwalki Gap, a geographic and natural configuration enhancing defences against military invasion. [TVP World]

In response to Russia's ambitions, the minister advocated for strategic projects in communication and infrastructure with Poland, along with increased military collaboration. He urged drawing lessons from Ukraine and strengthening partnerships with Nordic and Baltic countries. [TVP World]

Addressing a potential Russian attack on Lithuania, Landsbergis cautioned against complacency, underlining the nation's need to prepare for "worst-case scenarios" and assign 4% of Gross Domestic Product to defence. [TVP World]

Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics echoed these concerns, expressing certainty about Russia's aspirations to revive the Russian Empire. He emphasised a perceived strategic goal for Russia, mainly if it succeeds in its invasion of Ukraine. Latvia aims to augment NATO's presence and enhance defence capabilities in response to potential evolving geopolitical tensions in the Baltics [Yahoo News].

After Russia invaded Ukraine, Baltic nations have strategically aligned to fortify their defences, prioritising collaborative efforts within NATO [TVP World] [Yahoo News].

(ha/gc)

Norway to develop next-gen missile with Germany

The Norwegian government has announced it aims to develop a next-generation Naval Strike Missile (NSM) in

cooperation with Germany, with the Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace company as the lead industrial partner. [Regjeringen]

Norwegian Defence Minister Bjorn Arild Gram said in a statement: "We need to begin the work today to develop the weapons that will protect us against tomorrow's threats."

He added that the new missile would strengthen Norway's defences and its ability to strike targets at long distances. The projectile will be known as the SuperSonic Strike Missile (3SM) Tyrfing and is scheduled to be ready in 2035. [Regjeringen]

The current version of the missile was developed by Kongsberg in the early 2000s. It was introduced into the Norwegian armed forces between 2011 and 2015 and has since been selected by the navies of 13 countries.

The 3SM will be a sea-skimming, terrain-following anti-ship and land-attack weapon designed to strike heavily defended land and sea targets. [Shephard Media]

"The new strike missile project will ensure that Norway retains its position as a world leader in missile production, based on seamless cooperation between industry, governments and research establishments," Kongsberg President Eirik Lie said in a statement.

Gram said that Germany was Norway's "most important European partner for cooperation on defence equipment and a majorly important ally in NATO."

(jb/pk)

Polish protest leaves thousands of trucks stuck at Ukrainian border

Polish truck drivers, protesting against what they say is unregulated Ukrainian competition, blocked several key border crossings in November, stranding thousands of trucks. [Reuters] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Euronews] [VOA] [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The truckers, accompanied by Polish farmers, began their blockades on November 6, causing kilometres-long queues of vehicles at four separate border crossings. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

They are angry at Ukraine-registered trucks being exempted from permits needed to transport goods

into Poland and the rest of the EU. The Poles say that lower priced Ukrainian goods are undercutting and hurting their business. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

The demonstrations follow protests by Polish farmers earlier this year against the import of cheap Ukrainian grain to Poland. [Politico]

Slovak truckers joined their Polish counterparts on December 1 by beginning a blockade of their own at Slovakia's only entry point for trucks into Ukraine. [Reuters]

After Russia launched its full scale invasion of Ukraine last year, the EU waived a requirement for Ukrainian hauliers to obtain entry permits before bringing goods into the bloc, in a show of economic support for Kyiv. [BBC News] [Al Jazeera]

'Stab in the back'

Poland has been one of Ukraine's staunchest allies since the beginning of the invasion. But after the border protests started, the Ukrainian ambassador to Warsaw called the blockade a "stab in the back."[BBC News]

Pawel Ozygala, a protest organiser in the border town of Dorohusk, said: "I think the EU wanted to help Ukraine, and that's fine. But it didn't really think through the fact that Ukraine would take over our markets." [BBC News]

"We support Ukraine, but we need to support our own families too," he added. [BBC News]

The protesters are demanding that permits for Ukrainian trucks entering the EU are reinstated – with exemptions for military and humanitarian aid. [Reuters]

They are also demanding that empty trucks from the bloc be exempt from an electronic queuing system in Ukraine. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Ukraine's Deputy Infrastructure Minister, Serhiy Derkach, said that sub-zero temperatures and shortages of food were causing stranded Ukrainian truckers to suffer, and that efforts to evacuate them had begun. [Reuters]

"We have already run out of time to agree on compromises," Derkach added. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the president of the Ukrainian Association of International Carriers, Leonid Kostiuchenko, said:

“Frankly speaking, the more we talk to [the Polish protesters] the less hope we have.” [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

Romanian PM calls for extraordinary meeting to discuss Schengen zone accession

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu said on November 6 that the country’s failure to join the Schengen zone was a “profound injustice,” singling out Austria’s continued veto against Romanian accession.

Austria and the Netherlands both vetoed the joint bid by Romania and Bulgaria to join Europe’s visa-free travel zone in December 2022. The Netherlands’ veto centres on Bulgaria.

While Vienna maintains its position on the veto, the country’s president, Alexander van der Bellen, has since criticised the move, stating the decision “was not the right one.” [ScehgenVisaInfo]

“It’s Romania that shouldered the bulk of the transit of Ukrainian exports,” Ciolacu said. “It’s a necessity for

Europe to have Romania and Bulgaria in Schengen.” Both countries have been members of the EU since 2007.

“It’s very hard for me to accept that Austria benefits from the European Sky Shield initiative even though it’s a neutral country, while Romania allocates 2.5% of its GDP for defence,” Ciolacu said.

Ciolacu said that he will be asking the Spanish government (currently holding the EU’s six-month rotating presidency) to hold an extraordinary Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting in December to revisit the bid. The meeting would follow a Dutch election on November 22, after which the country’s position on the bid may change.

While Ciolacu said that Bucharest would consider splitting its bid from Bulgaria’s, Sofia released a statement suggesting that it saw “no indications” that the bids would be split. [Bloomberg] [SchengenVisaInfo 2]

(sw/gc)

Romania signs energy deal with Hungary

Romanian Energy Minister Sebastian Burduja signed key agreements with the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Szijjarto, reaffirming the countries' cooperation in guaranteeing energy security.

Szijjarto announced on Facebook that he and Burduja had agreed to increase the capacity of the interconnectors between Bucharest's and Budapest's gas networks so that Hungary could access as much of the gas extracted from the Black Sea gas fields as possible. Hungary and Romania will also begin preparations to link their electricity grids.

Burduja added that Hungary could continue to transport Russian nuclear fuel through Romania. [NEI]

In a separate address, Burduja also stated that Romania is prepared to supply gas from Azerbaijan to Moldova and other regional countries in need during the upcoming winter season.

"If we have special requests from Moldova or other states in the region, we are ready to activate the option with Azerbaijan secured by Romania last spring, through which we have access to 1 billion cubic metres of gas," he said.

"If even this volume is not enough, we have the possibility to import liquefied natural gas via the Greece-Bulgaria-Romania or Turkey-Bulgaria-Romania route." [AzerNews]

(sw/gc)

Slovakia's new government axes EUR 40m military aid package for Ukraine

Slovakia's new government has axed its predecessor's plan to send more ammunition and rockets to Ukraine, fulfilling a campaign pledge by pro-Kremlin Prime Minister Robert Fico to end military assistance to Kyiv in its battle against Russian invaders.

"With great pleasure, I can announce that the whole cabinet unilaterally rejected sending these weapons and ammunition to Ukraine," Fico said on November 8. [bne]

Fico was sworn in as prime minister in late October. His triumph in Slovakia's parliamentary elections the previous month caused alarm in Europe that he could gang up with Hungary's nationalist leader Viktor Orban

to further strain Western allies' unity on helping Kyiv resist Russia's invasion. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Fico, a populist who campaigned heavily on pro-Moscow and anti-liberal sentiment, has criticised Western military support for Ukraine. He has called on the EU to shift from being "an arms supplier to a peacemaker", a stance criticised by Kyiv but echoed by Orban. [bnn] [bnn] [Guardian]

The scrapped Slovak military support package, worth some EUR 40 million, comprised 140 KUB air defence system rockets, 4 million rounds of small arms ammunition, over 5,000 rounds of 125 mm cannon ammunition, and eight missile launchers. [Politico] [Guardian] [Reuters] [bne] [Spectator]

Diplomats have said the decision by Slovakia, a NATO and EU member state of 5.4 million people, to halt the package was unlikely to impact Ukraine's battlefield capability. [Reuters] [Reuters] [The Washington Post] [France 24]

In October, President Zuzana Caputova refused to approve a military aid package proposed by Slovakia's previous, pro-Western caretaker government, saying the administration had limited power following its unsuccessful attempt to secure a parliamentary vote of confidence. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Continued commercial arms exports

Fico has insisted that Slovakia's foreign policy orientation will be shaped by its national interests. He made it clear on November 6 that his three-party coalition government would not prevent private defence manufacturers from exporting munitions to neighbouring Ukraine. [Reuters] [bnn] [bne] [Bloomberg]

Fico said his priority is replenishing his country's depleted ammunition and equipment stock. He ordered Defence Minister Robert Kalinak to draw up an inventory of Slovakia's military supplies, adding that Bratislava would also focus on strengthening its air defence capabilities. [Euractiv] [Reuters]

The country's previous centre-right caretaker government was one of Ukraine's strongest backers, supplying military equipment including 13 Soviet-era MiG-29 jets, T-72 tanks and an S-300 air defence system. [Reuters] [The Washington Post]

It approved 13 military aid packages worth EUR 671 million in total after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine

war in February 2022. [Bnn] [The Washington Post] [bne]

(yl/pk)

Swiss president receives French counterpart

Swiss President Alain Berset welcomed his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron in Bern on November 15, the first state visit of a French president since former-president Francois Hollande met with then-head of state Simonetta Sommaruga in 2015.

On November 16, Macron participated in a debate at the University of Lausanne and visited the European Organization for Nuclear Research (more commonly known as CERN).

Macron's state visit follows a period of particularly strained Swiss-French relations. "We're coming out of a period of mutual distrust," said political scientist François Cherix in an interview with Swiss newspaper SwissInfo.

"The French felt themselves blindsided on the Rafale business, when one part of the federal government was still negotiating with Paris while another had decided on the American plane. Now it's a question of turning the page and moving on," Cherix said, referring to Bern opting for American F-35 fighter planes instead of French Rafale aircraft.

During the official visit, Macron called for an "acceleration" of the complex negotiations for a framework treaty between Switzerland and the European Union (EU), which were brought to an abrupt end by Bern in May 2021. As a result, the Swiss-EU has a series of bilateral agreements that currently govern relations.

'You are Europeans'

"You may not know it yet, but you are Europeans!" Macron said during his address. [Le Temps]

While Switzerland is a member of the Schengen zone, approximately 60% of Switzerland's merchandise trade is with the EU. While 1.4 million EU citizens reside in Switzerland, many issues remain contested between Bern and Brussels.

Technical discussions resumed in April last year. However, official negotiations can only continue by

establishing a framework treaty laying out Bern's objectives. [SwissInfo]

Swiss authorities announced the week before Macron's visit that such a negotiating mandate with Brussels would be drafted before the end of the year. The Elysee has since replied, calling this "excellent news."

Once the mandate is drafted, it must still be consulted with parliament, cantons, and social partners in Switzerland.

Broad support

"Bern will want to ensure very broad support from the population because any agreement with the European Union will ultimately have to be validated by a referendum," said Lara Artelli, an expert on Swiss-EU relations at the Jacques Delors Institute, in an interview with local newspaper Les Echos.

Artelli added that the right-wing Swiss People's Party (UDC), which typically opposes any rapprochement with the EU, receives about 30% of the vote.

On November 13, Swiss State Secretary Alexandre Fasel travelled to London for the annual strategic dialogue between Switzerland and the UK. These annual meetings result from a memorandum of understanding signed by then-Swiss President Ignazio Cassis and his British counterpart in April 2022. [Le Conseil Federal]

(sw/gc)

Turkey criticises EC report on EU membership bid

The European Commission's annual report on Turkey's long-stalled EU membership bid is "unjust and biassed," the Turkish foreign ministry said.

The report by the European Union's executive arm criticised Turkey's "serious backsliding" on democratic standards, the rule of law, human rights and judicial independence.

"We categorically reject unfounded claims and unjust criticisms, particularly on the political criteria and the Chapter on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights," the Turkish foreign ministry said in a statement.

The European Commission said in a report that Turkey did not meet the principles of the rule of law, human

rights, freedom rights in counterterrorism operations and democratic standards to join the European Union. [EuropeanCommission]

The Commission also said Turkey did not comply with the principles of the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms in its counterterrorism operations.

"The government has a legitimate right and a responsibility to fight terrorism, but it is essential that it does so in full compliance with the principles of the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms," the report said.

The Turkish ministry said the allegations were unfair and highlighted "the insincerity of EU's approach and a clear double-standard", adding that fundamental rights issues were contentious even among EU member states.

The Commission's report is meant to update Turkey's progress towards meeting standards for EU membership. It could strain ties that are already troubled over immigration and, more recently, the war between Israel and the Hamas armed group in Gaza. [AlJazeera]

(vt/gc)

Turkey increases exports vital to Russia's military

Turkey's exports to Russia of goods vital for Moscow's war machine have soared this year, heightening concerns among the US and its allies that the country is acting as a conduit for sensitive items from their own manufacturers, the Financial Times reported. [FinancialTimes]

The growing trade, and the corresponding rise in imports to Turkey of 45 civilian materials used by Russia's military, has undermined US and European attempts to curb Moscow's ability to equip its armed forces, fuelling tensions between Ankara and its Nato partners. [FinancialTimes]

In a sign of how it has become a priority in Washington to rein in this trade, Brian Nelson, US Treasury under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, visited Istanbul and Ankara, where discussed "efforts to prevent, disrupt and investigate trade and financial activity that benefit the Russian effort in its war against Ukraine." [FinancialTimes] [KyivIndependent]

It has been recorded that the amount of exports reached €144 million, three times higher compared to previous years. The US raised concerns especially regarding the export of microchips, which have been recognized as "high priority" by Washington. [Euronews]

The United States, European Union, the UK and Japan are trying to limit the inflow of goods, distinctively microchips, communication equipment, telescopic sights, and so on, to Russia. The exports are labelled as being destined to Central Asian countries, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, however these countries did not report an increase of incoming goods. [MoscowTimes]

(vt/gc)

MBDA's UK branch to supply Poland with air defences for EUR 4.6 bn

The British branch of European missile manufacturer MBDA on November 7 signed a GBP 4 billion (EUR 4.58 billion) deal to supply Poland with ground-based air defence systems. Britain said it is the largest commercial deal ever between the two countries. [Reuters]

The medium-range system, called Common Anti-Air Modular Missiles – Extended Range (CAMM-ER), can be used to counter cruise missiles and fighter jets. [Financial Times]

Britain's defence ministry said the agreement would complement Poland's Narew air defence programme, following Warsaw's acquisition of MBDA CAMM shorter-range missiles in April as part of a GBP 1.9 billion deal. [MBDA] [Reuters]

"The agreement also covers extensive technology transfer ensuring the production of rockets and launchers in Poland," Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said on X.

Last year, London, Warsaw and Kyiv agreed to develop trilateral cooperation by strengthening their defence capabilities. [Reuters]

Fearful of Moscow, Poland's outgoing nationalist government embarked on a military spending spree after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, buying hardware from countries including the US and South Korea. [Financial Times]

(gdb/pk)

United Kingdom, Germany cooperate on path to Net Zero

The two largest economies in Europe have agreed to a new partnership for a green transition.

The UK and Germany committed to cooperating on offshore wind and electricity interconnection, sharing knowledge and expertise on carbon capture and storage, strengthening regional energy security, and sharing best practices on net zero policies.[UK GOV][UK GOV][EuroWeekly]

The agreement was part of the two countries "doubling down" on commitments made under the Paris Agreement to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees. The announcement was made on November 3, leading to the COP28 meetings in Dubai from November 30-December 12.

The partnership announcement builds upon the September 26 agreement between the two countries to advance renewable hydrogen technologies. [UK GOV][UK GOV][EuroWeekly]

(ar/gc)

Belgium calls for sanctions against Israel

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Petra de Sutter called on her government to adopt sanctions against Israel and to investigate their bombings of hospitals and refugee camps in Gaza in an interview with local Nieuwsblad newspaper published on November 8.

"It is time for sanctions against Israel. The rain of bombs is inhumane," De Sutter told Nieuwsblad newspaper. "It is clear that Israel does not care about the international demands for a ceasefire," she said. [Reuters]

De Sutter added that an import ban on products coming from occupied Palestinian territories should be implemented and that violent settlers, politicians, and soldiers responsible for war crimes should be banned from entering the European Union.

On November 9, the country's Minister of Development Cooperation Caroline Janez announced

that Brussels was considering recognising the state of Palestine in an interview with Al Jazeera. [TRT]

"This is necessary to achieve peace in the long term," Janez told Al Jazeera.

On November 6, Prime Minister Alexander de Croo said at a press conference that Israel's campaign in Gaza was "disproportionate." [Al Jazeera]

(sw/gc)

Danish freight firm in EUR 9.3b joint venture with futuristic Saudi city

Danish freight company DSV has set up a EUR 9.3 billion joint venture with Saudi Arabia's NEOM to help develop a new futuristic city on the Red Sea.

The joint project will provide logistics services for NEOM, which is owned by the Saudi state. NEOM will hold a 51% stake in the partnership, while DSV will have 49%. [Bloomberg]

The NEOM project, worth around EUR 468 billion, was first announced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017 as part of his plans to diversify his country's economy away from oil.

In a joint statement, DSV and NEOM said: "The joint venture will provide end-to-end supply chain management, development and investments in transport and logistics assets and infrastructure as well as transport and delivery of goods and materials within NEOM." [Reuters]

The futuristic city in Saudi Arabia is to eventually house nine million people and will operate on renewable energy. [DR]

Critics have accused the project of serious human rights violations, while the involvement of Danish companies has also come under fire.

According to independent media and research centre Danwatch, the foreign ministry in Copenhagen has encouraged Danish companies to invest in the project.

The foreign ministry said that Danish firms "are aware of responsible corporate behaviour and have made it clear how they want to work with social responsibility, including compliance with the UN's guidelines for human rights and business."

(km/pk)

Finland buys air defence system from Israel

Finland will acquire Israel's "David's Sling" air defence system in a EUR 317 million deal between the two countries. The agreement was signed in Tel Aviv on November 12 by Finland's ambassador, Nina Nordström, and Israel's defence minister, General Eyal Zamir.

David's Sling is a medium-range rocket defence system designed to intercept missiles within a 185-mile radius. Finland's Defence Minister Antti Kaikkonen said it would "extend the operational range of Finland's ground-based air defence capabilities significantly."

Israel first deployed David's Sling in 2017. Most recently, it has been used during Israel's war with Hamas where it has shot down missiles launched from Gaza. [Times of Israel] [defence-blog.com]

Amid geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, some objections have been raised in Finland to the deal for the rocket system. In parliament, the opposition socialist Left Alliance has called on the government to suspend all arms trade with Israel.

Finnish Defence Minister Kaikkonen insisted that halting the agreement was "out of the question." He argued that, in light of the war in Ukraine and border tensions with Russia, a robust air defence infrastructure was "crucially important." [Helsinki Times] [yle]

(md/pk)

Macron calls for ceasefire in Gaza

While attending an international humanitarian conference, French President Emmanuel Macron called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Officials from over 50 nations participated in the conference to provide Gaza's civilians with direct aid. [BBC News] [France 24] [France 24]

Macron asserted that there is "no justification" for the killing of innocent civilians in Gaza and "that there is no other solution than first a humanitarian pause, going to a ceasefire, which will allow [us] to protect... all

civilians having nothing to do with terrorists". [BBC News]

The president condemned the actions of Hamas and drew on France's own experience with terrorism during his speech. [The Guardian]

Macron insisted that there is "no reason" for "babies... ladies... and old people" to be "bombed and killed" in Gaza.

He also clarified that "[t]he fight against terrorism can never be without rules". [Al Jazeera] [Euractiv]

France will provide an extra EUR 80 million in humanitarian aid to the civilians of Gaza. [Euronews]

(rdm/gc)

France issues arrest warrant for Syrian president over crimes against humanity

France has issued an arrest warrant for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for complicity in crimes against humanity. [Le Monde]

France claims universal jurisdiction for war crimes and crimes against humanity. According to Le Monde, this allows "French courts to prosecute foreign perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed outside of France on foreign nationals". [Le Monde]

In August 2013, the Syrian government carried out a series of chemical attacks in Damascus and other surrounding areas. The attacks killed over 1,000 people and injured over 6,000. [Al Jazeera]

It was revealed shortly after the attack that the Syrian regime at the time was responsible for targeting civilians with nerve agents. The incident is still considered the most significant chemical weapon attack of the Modern Age. [Relief Web]

In 2013, Syria agreed to join the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Since joining, the OPCW has alleged that the Syrian regime, too, used chemical weapons during the civil war in 2011. [Le Monde]

The Paris court's division dealing with crimes against humanity has been investigating the case since 2021 when it received complaints from NGOs and Syrian associations in France. [France 24]

International arrest warrants have also been issued for Assad's brother, who was affiliated with an elite Syrian military unit, and two armed forces generals. [Le Monde]

The warrant for a sitting head of state marks a significant diplomatic escalation between France and Syria, and the assertion of French universal jurisdiction, which may conflict with the interpretation of international law by the U.S., UK, and other western powers under the presumption of sovereign immunity.

(rdm/gc)

Ireland's Lower House rejects motion to remove Israeli ambassador

A motion to expel Israeli Ambassador to Ireland, Dana Erlich, from the country was defeated in the Lower House of Parliament, along with the motion regarding the referral of Israel to the International Criminal Court (ICC) by the Irish government. [The Irish Times] [Breakingnews.ie]

The former motion was put forward by the Social Democrats. It was backed by Sinn Féin, whose party leader, Mary Lou McDonald, claimed that Erlich should "no longer enjoy diplomatic status in the country". [BBC News]

The foreign affairs spokesperson for the Social Democrats cited "the failure of the Israeli state to cease the deliberate targeting of civilians, journalists, UN staff and healthcare workers" as the reasoning behind filing the motion. [The Irish Independent] [The Irish Times] [The Journal]

'Logic escapes me'

With several Irish citizens still in Gaza, Irish Deputy Prime Minister Micheal Martin insisted that expelling the Israeli ambassador would only lessen the chances of the Israelis cooperating with the Irish in returning these citizens home.

Martin told reporters: "Logic escapes me as to how we are to meaningfully seek to get our Irish citizens out of Gaza if one of the countries that we're working with, we break off relations with". [Breakingnews.ie]

The decision to table these motions came days after Israeli Heritage Minister Amihai Eliyahu told an interviewer at

The Israel Times: Palestinians “can go to Ireland or deserts”. [The Irish Times]

The Israeli Prime Minister subsequently distanced himself from the comments, claiming that Eliyahu’s views do not reflect the views of the Israeli government. [Breakingnews.ie]

Israel summons Irish ambassador

Prime Minister Varadkar's statement regarding the release of Irish-Israeli hostage Emily Hand, kidnapped by Hamas during its October 7 attacks, has been criticised by the Israeli government.

Varadkar posted: “This is a day of enormous joy and relief for Emily Hand and her family. An innocent child who was lost has now been found and returned, and we breathe a massive sigh of relief. Our prayers have been answered.” [X]

His statement caused outrage in Israel and prompted criticisms by Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen.

Cohen wrote: “Emily Hand was not ‘lost’, she was kidnapped by a terror organisation worse than ISIS that murdered her stepmother. Emily and more than 30 other Israeli children were taken hostage by Hamas, and you @LeoVaradkar are trying to legitimise and normalise terror. Shame on you!”, while Herzog commented that Varadkars statement was “unacceptable”. [X][X]

Ireland’s ambassador to Israel, Sonya McGuinness, was also confirmed to have been summoned by the foreign minister for reprimand over Varadkar’s comments. [RTE]

Varadkar responded to this controversy by remarking: “I think the vast majority of people understand what I was saying, recalling the amazing joy and awe that occurs when a child comes home. I've always been consistent in my unequivocal condemnation of Hamas and hostage taking.” [Breaking News]

(rdm-sr/gc)

Norway prepares to recognise independent Palestinian state

The Norwegian parliament has approved a resolution calling on the government to be ready to recognise an independent Palestinian state, but to do so only when

such a move could positively impact peace efforts in the Middle East. [TRT World]

The resolution was backed on November 16 by an overwhelming majority, with eight of 10 parties voting in favour. Only the conservative Christian Democrats and the Progress Party voted against.

The measure, proposed by Norway's ruling coalition, calls for "recognition of a Palestinian state when this could have a positive impact on the peace process, without making a final peace accord a condition." [TRT World] [Barrons]

Norway's government consists of a minority coalition formed by the centre-left Labour Party and the Centre Party, and relies on the support of the Socialist Left Party for a parliamentary majority. [News in English]

The Reds, Socialist Left, Liberals and the Greens, all opposition parties, wanted to move beyond the proposition approved by parliament. They supported an initial proposal by the Reds to recognise a Palestinian state immediately. [News in English]

(jb/pk)

Wagner Group plans to deliver air defence weapons to Hezbollah, WSJ reports

Russia's Wagner mercenary group intends to deliver the Russian SA-22 anti-aircraft system to Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed terror organisation based in Lebanon, the Wall Street Journal reported on November 2, citing US intelligence officials. [WSJ]

Information, including evidence of alleged communications between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and leaders of Wagner and Hezbollah obtained by US intelligence officials, indicates that the SA-22 system, also known as the Pantsir-S1, is in Syria, where the Wagner Group is awaiting approval to transport it to Hezbollah in Lebanon. [The New York Post] [CNN]

Wagner forces have long been active in Syria, where President Assad has relied heavily on mercenary troops in conjunction with Hezbollah fighters in the country as a means of maintaining his position.

The Russian paramilitary organisation has formed a "very close operational bond with Hezbollah over the past years in Syria," Charles Lister, program director for Syria and counter-terrorism and extremism at

Washington's Middle East Institute, said. "It's not a secret that that relationship continues." [WSJ]

Russia joined China in voting for a UN Security Council resolution calling for humanitarian pauses in fighting and to stop arming Hamas. Russia's deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov hosted Hamas leadership in Moscow just weeks after October 7. [Europe in Review Monthly, September] [Reuters] [New York Times]

The White House's National Security Council spokeswoman, Adrienne Watson, referred to these actions and the WSJ report as "concerning."

"We know that Russia has refused to condemn Hamas for its horrific terrorist attack on Israel, and they recently hosted Hamas officials in Moscow," Watson said. [WSJ]

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to the accusations. "We have already said that de facto, such a group [Wagner] does not exist," he said, adding that "All of these musings are, as a rule, based on nothing and have no foundation." [Reuters]

(cqk/gc)

Spanish PM hints at unilaterally recognising Palestinian state

Spanish Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has hinted that his country may unilaterally recognise a Palestinian state even if the EU as a whole does not, in a move which triggered a diplomatic row with Israel.

Sanchez told reporters during a news conference in Egypt: “I think that the moment has come for the international community, especially for the European Union and its member states, to recognize the state of Palestine.” [Daily Sabah]

Nine of the EU’s 27 individual member countries recognise a Palestinian state.

Sanchez said recognition of a Palestine state should ideally come at the EU level, before adding: “If this is not the case, Spain will take its own decisions.” [Daily Sabah]

Sanchez’s comments on November 24 sparked a diplomatic row between Spain and Israel which saw the ambassadors to both countries summoned by the host nations.

During a visit to Israel on November 23, Sanchez asked Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu to "work now to implement a two-state solution". [Le Monde]

Meanwhile, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen accused Sanchez of giving terrorism a boost after the Spanish premier commented on the "indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians" by Israel during its military operations in Gaza.

In response, Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said in a statement: "The accusations of the Israeli government are false and completely unacceptable. We categorically reject them." [Reuters]

(jw/pk)

Gaza war strains Turkey-Israel ties

The mounting death toll in Gaza has seen Turkish politicians, especially President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, become increasingly direct in their criticism of Israel. [AlJazeera]

Erdogan recently said he had severed ties entirely with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over Israel's onslaught, although he did not lower the level of communications between the governments. "We erased him and threw him away," Erdogan said. [AlJazeera]

Erdogan referred to Israel as a terrorist state, and he also commented on his NATO allies, saying: "Those who do not speak out against Israel's crimes against humanity are just as much accomplices in these crimes as the perpetrators." [WSWS]

Turkey's first lady, Emine Erdogan, also criticised Israel for their effort to "wipe out a nation" and praised her homeland and the Turkish Red Crescent for compassion and helping those in need during international conflicts. [Daily Sabah]

On November 4, Turkey announced its recalling of its ambassador to Israel, citing the "unfolding humanitarian tragedy in Gaza caused by the continuing attacks by Israel against civilians and Israel's refusal of calls for a ceasefire and the continuous and unhindered flow of humanitarian aid." [NewArab]

Boycotts

Turkey's parliament discontinued purchasing Coca-Cola and Nestle products previously being sold at

government buildings in an expression of support for the Palestinians. Government officials unanimously decided to throw away all such products previously purchased and not allow any new ones in the future.

This is Turkey's "silent" protest against the conflict in the Middle East.[Reuters] [AA]

"It's clear that the Turkish government is always going to be more supportive of the Palestinian Authority than Israel in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," said Matthew Bryza, who served as the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia from 2005 to 2009, in a recent interview when discussing Ankara's potential to play a mediating role between Israelis and Palestinians. [NewArab]

"President Erdogan and all of his senior national security officials are always, have been, and remain very clear in condemning the settlements in the West Bank, the Israeli security forces' violence against Palestinians, and the violation of Palestinian rights," Bryza said.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Turkey in March 2022, and Netanyahu had plans to visit Ankara in July (which were cancelled due to Netanyahu's health issues at the time), highlighting the intensity of efforts to improve bilateral relations before the war on Gaza erupted last month. [NewArab]

Receiving Gazans

Ankara is currently trying to bring in its territory as many victims as possible from Gaza . Nearly 200 people from Gaza travelled to Turkey on November 20. [Reuters]

The people who have arrived in Turkey received medical treatment there, which is now significantly limited in Gaza. Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said that Turkey is trying to bring as many cancer patients as possible, aiming to reach 1,000 patients. [JerusalemPost]

Along with people in need of medical care, citizens of Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) have also been evacuated from the region. The principal route for them to leave the conflict zone is through the Rafah Border, which connects Gaza to Egypt. A successful operation that allowed 100 individuals to arrive in Turkey was jointly conducted by the Turkish Foreign Ministry and the Disaster and Emergency Authority (AFAD). [AA]

First Lady Erdogan praised Turkey as an “oasis of peace” and urged the rest of the world to assist Palestine during this international conflict and unrest. [Daily Sabah]

Scholz comments on Erdogan criticism

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz commented on Erdogan’s criticism of Israel, saying that Israel is a democracy and “a country that is bound to human rights and international law and acts accordingly. Therefore, the accusations against Israel are absurd.” [TimesOfIsrael]

Scholz’s comments were made before the two leaders met in Berlin on November 17. During the meeting, the two leaders discussed immigration, trade and defence. Scholz did not mention Erdogan’s direct comments on Israel during the meeting. The visit was supposed to last two days, but Erdogan only stayed one.[Reuters]

(vt-st/gc)

Turkish-Iraqi relations could improve with new transportation project, analyst says

The Turkey-Iraq Development road project is a significant economic investment and initiative between the two countries that could potentially aid in trade and infrastructure, Nazmul Islam, a political science professor at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, told Anadolu Agency (AA). [Daily Sabbah] [AA]

The Turkey-Iraq Development road will increase trade between Iraq and Turkey, and further improve their foreign relations. The two countries are considering a 745-mile-long railway running between Mosul and the Gulf of Turkey. [AA]

The project overlaps with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was approved during a G-20 Summit in New Delhi in September.

The IMEC aims to build a road connecting India with Europe. The infrastructure will run through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Greece. It will bring new economic opportunities to all countries involved, more jobs, and an increase in political stability and cooperation. [Daily Sabbah]

(st/gc)

Turkey and Iran leaders discuss conflict in Gaza

Turkish President Recep Erdogan and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi held a phone call to discuss the war in Gaza. The two called for a permanent cease-fire and additional humanitarian aid for the Palestinians in Gaza. They also discussed the agenda for the upcoming meeting for the Turkey-Iran High-Level Cooperation Council. [AA]

(st/gc)

Erdogan meets with Algerian president

Turkish President Recep Erdogan met with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on November 21 in Algiers to strengthen bilateral relations through the Turkey-Algeria High-Level Cooperation Council. They also discussed topics on regional stability, including the ongoing conflict war between Israel and Gaza. [AA]

International trade agreements between Turkey and Algeria reached USD 5.3 billion USD last year and Turkish Erdogan expects it to reach USD 6 billion by the end of this year.

Turkish companies are currently the largest investors and employers in the non-hydrocarbon sectors in Algeria. Erdogan wants to enhance energy and renewable energy trade with Algeria.

Tebboune said he views his country's international relations with Turkey as strong and stable. [AA]

(st/gc)

United Kingdom increases humanitarian support for Gaza

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron announced an additional GBP 30 million in humanitarian aid to Gaza, bringing the total to GBP 60 million since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7.

Cameron made the aid announcement in Israel, where he met with Israeli and Palestinian authorities. He called for greater access to Gaza for humanitarian support, particularly medical supplies and fuel, during his visit. Gaza needs fuel to power its hospitals and desalination plans for clean water. [UKGOV]

The increase in humanitarian support came two days after Cameron met with foreign ministers from Arab-Islamic countries in London. The delegation, formed as a 'Peace Committee', included foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Secretary General of the League of Arab States, and the Ambassador of Qatar.

The officials discussed how to reinvigorate diplomatic efforts towards a viable two-state solution.The meeting in London was part of the Arab and Islamic ministers' tour of meetings with counterparts in the capitals of each permanent member of the UN Security Council. However, their first stop was in Beijing, even though China is not a member of the UN Security Council. [Al Jazeera] [UKGOV]

(ar/gc)

United Kingdom urges Iran to prevent escalation in Mideast conflict

Former British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly urged Iran to use its influence to prevent an escalation in the Israel-Hamas war during a conversation with his Iranian counterpart on November 3.

The US and coalition troops have been attacked at least 55 times in Iraq and Syria since October 17, according to Reuters. The UK has 100 soldiers in Iraq as part of the coalition. [Reuters] [UK Army]

The Foreign Secretary also warned that Iranian-backed threats against people in the UK must stop. The UK government has been vocal on the Iranian regime's threats against UK-based journalists, including statements made in the House of Parliament in February of this year, reporting '15 credible threats since the start of 2022 to kill or kidnap British or UK-based individuals by the Iranian regime.' [UK GOV]

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which works closely with Hamas and other militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, has long built up a network of influence in the UK. [The Guardian]

(ar/gc)

Pope says Israel-Hamas war has become 'terrorism'

Pope Francis has said that the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Islamist group Hamas has “gone beyond war to become terrorism.”

He made the unscripted comments at a weekly general audience at the Vatican on November 22.

The same day, the pope held separate meetings with Israeli relatives of hostages held by Hamas, and Palestinians with family in Gaza.

Controversy erupted after some of the Palestinians who met the pontiff reported that he had used the word “genocide” to describe the situation in Gaza. A Vatican spokesperson denied the claim.

The meetings and the pope’s comments came hours after a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas was announced, allowing humanitarian aid to be sent into Gaza and some Israeli hostages to be released.

Previously, at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York on November 6, the Vatican’s representative reiterated the pope’s call for an immediate release of hostages and a ceasefire.

On November 21, at an executive session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva, a Vatican representative said that “dialogue is the only solution for a long-term end to the ongoing violence.” [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Vatican News 1] [Vatican News 2]

(ar/pk)

Portuguese consulate in Brazil searched amid corruption probe

The Portuguese consulate in Rio de Janeiro has been searched by Brazilian and Portuguese authorities as part of a probe into suspected corruption in handing out visas.

The search on November 7 was ordered by Brazil’s Federal Court, which received authorization to carry it out by Portuguese authorities. [Publico] [Portugal Resident]

The Brazilian federal police said the searches were part of an investigation into “crimes of corruption, embezzlement and falsification of documents.” [Schengen Visa News]

It is expected that any visas found to have been obtained illegally will be revoked.

Brazilian citizens do not need a visa to enter Portugal or any other country in Europe's passport-free Schengen travel area, meaning that applications at the Rio de Janeiro consulate are made mostly by foreign nationals residing in Brazil.

(jw/pk)

US removes Switzerland from currency manipulation list

The United States Department of Treasury removed Switzerland from its currency manipulator monitoring list in its latest semi-annual report on November 7.

The report reviews the macroeconomic and foreign exchange policies of the twenty largest US trading partners, evaluating them based on whether they hold significant trade or current account surpluses and make persistent, one-sided interventions in favour of their sovereign currency to manipulate exchange rates.

Switzerland was first added to the monitoring list in 2020. [Finews]

The Swiss National Bank (SNB) responded the next day on November 8, saying it had noted the decision. "Together with the Swiss authorities, the SNB remains in contact with the US authorities to explain Switzerland's economic situation and monetary policy," the SNB elaborated. [Reuters]

(sw/gc)

Macron visits Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

French President Emmanual Macron met with the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to strengthen relations with the two countries, which Russia and China have historically influenced.

Macron met with Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on November 1. Their meeting focused on improving ties in the aerospace, energy and pharmaceutical industries as France looked for alternative resources to Russian supplies.

Tokayes referred to France as a "key and reliable partner", showing positive attitudes towards the new

bilateral relations. [AlJazeera]

Macron met with Uzbekistan President Shavkar Mirziyoyev on November 2. They discussed projects focused on uranium and agriculture industries. Uzbekistan is the globe's fifth largest uranium provider. Macron is the first French president to visit the country since 1994. [LeMonde]

The meeting demonstrated the Central Asian countries' willingness to boost their economy and diplomacy through an openness policy. Russia remains one of the main economic partners of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, yet the countries seek to improve their openness towards the West with trade and foreign investment. [France24]

France's cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could help the two bCentral Asian countries limit their ties with Russia, while providing crucial natural resources to France. [Reuters]

(vt/gc)

Greece’s PM holds talks with China’s Xi

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis met with top Chinese officials to make Greece a “bridge” between the European Union and China. [Kathimerini][Euractiv] [Naftemporiki]

“Greece can act as a bridge between the EU and China for a more balanced relationship,” a government source told local media before the visit. [Kathimerini] [Euractiv][Naftemporiki]

Mitsotakis met China’s President Xi Jinping as well as Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang. He was accompanied by the Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, Christos Staikouras, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Costas Fragogiannis, who was in charge of Economic Affairs. [Kathimerini][Euractiv] [Naftemporiki]

During the meetings, the entire range of bilateral relations was reviewed, which Mitsotakis described as “strong and mutually beneficial”. At the same time, their strengthening was discussed, especially in economy, trade, tourism and culture. Mitsotakis made particular reference to upgrading the Greek economy to the investment level by Chinese companies and to the investment opportunities in Greece, which, as he said, has left the crisis-era behind. [GreekCityTimes]

Mitsotakis placed particular emphasis on economic cooperation and specifically on increasing Greek exports, especially agricultural products, to China and collaboration in tourism so that the arrivals of Chinese tourists in Greece reach pre-pandemic levels. [GreekCityTimes]

Mitsotakis expressed appreciation for the enlargement and improvement of Piraeus' port and emphasised Greece's readiness to welcome pre-COVID-19 numbers of Chinese tourists. Mitsotakis mentioned the Western disapproval of Chinese investments in Greece. He firmly stated that Greece is ready to bridge international relations between the EU and China. [Kathimerini][Euractiv][Naftemporiki]

Mitsotakis asked for improved air relations between the two countries and offered more Greek exports from the agricultural and standardised products sector to reach China soon. [Kathimerini][Euractiv] [Naftemporiki]

(st/gc)

Italy aims to lure Chinese tourists with new tax-free shopping rules

The Italian government has lowered the minimum limit for tax-free shopping in a move expected to attract more Chinese visitors and boost tourism, a key sector of the country's economy.

Mario Boselli, president of the Italy-China Council Foundation (ICCF), said the measure would have a "positive impact on tourism overall" and that it was "one further reason for Chinese travellers to choose Italy as their destination."

Under the new rules, non-European tourists will be able to enjoy tax-free shopping when they spend a minimum of EUR 70 in Italy, down from the current minimum of EUR 154. [TheStar] [Xinhua]

The initiative is part of the government's budget for 2024, which includes plans for EUR 24 billion worth of tax cuts and hiked spending, despite market worries about strained public finances. [Reuters]

(ao/pk)

Lithuania-Taiwan ties may shift after 2024 election

The 2024 political shifts in Lithuania may change its bilateral relations with Taiwan, just two years after the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Offices in Taipei and Vilnius. [VOA]

A European Values Center for Security Policy, a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty, showed a preference among opposition parties for a more cautious approach to deepening ties with Taiwan ahead of the 2024 elections. [VOA]

While some opposition members may want a shift in policy to prevent further tension with China, Vilnius University scholar Tomas Janeliunas argued against a drastic change due to the perceived "political cost." [VOA]

"After two years of engagement with Taiwan, we have some specific agreements with Taiwanese companies and organisations, especially in the field of semiconductors, but we shouldn't neglect the risk of some changes in Lithuania's current relationship with Taiwan and China caused by domestic political shifts," Janeliunas told VOA by phone.

During the last two years, Taiwan and Lithuania have opened trade offices in both capitals, Taipei and Vilnius, and trade between the two countries grew 50% from 2021 to 2022. [VOA].

One of Lithuania's leading tech companies, Teltonika, signed an agreement with Taiwan's Government-funded Industrial Technology Research Institute to help launch domestic semiconductor production in 2027 using Taiwanese technology. [The Baltic Times] [VOA].

In addition, Lithuanian companies involved in specialised laser technology agreed to work with the research institute to set up the Ultrafast Laser Technology Research and Innovation Center in Southern Taiwan, focusing on medical and industrial applications. [VOA]

Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said officials from Lithuania and China had been talking about potentially normalising diplomatic relations after Beijing downgraded diplomatic ties with Vilnius in 2021 following the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania.

China could recalibrate

While some observers view Lithuania's move as the government's response to domestic political pressure,

Marcin Jerzewski, an analyst of EU-Taiwan relations at the European Values Center for Security Policy, told VOA by phone. China could recalibrate Lithuania's relationship with Taiwan as a condition for both sides to normalise diplomatic ties.

"China might say they would only be willing to restore full diplomatic relations with Lithuania if the name of the Taiwanese representative office is amended," he said. [VOA]

According to Asta Skaisgiryte, chief foreign policy advisor to Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseada, Taiwanese investment needs to meet expectations.

Deputy Economic Minister Karolis Zemaitis deemed the Taiwan-Lithuania cooperation economically "fruitful," with Taiwan's representative, Eric Huang, highlighting its multi-layered foundation in shared values and political trust. This collaboration aligns with the EU's Anti-Coercion Instrument, guarding against trade restrictions from third countries, a response to China's adverse reaction to Lithuania's Taiwan ties in 2021 [European Council] [VOA].

(ha/gc)

Turkey's Erdogan travels to Tashkent

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan travelled to Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, to attend the 16th Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) summit from November 8-9. [Daily Saba][MFA Turkey][AA]

The ECO is a political and economic intergovernmental organisation founded by Türkiye, Pakistan and Iran in 1985 to serve as a platform to discuss and improve development and promote trade and investment opportunities. It currently has seven more members: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The ECO Summit, held every two years at the level of heads of state and government, has been held 15 times so far, and the last summit was held in Turkmenistan in November 2021.[Daily Sabah][MFA Turkey][AA]

Erdogan's visit to Uzbekistan underscores Turkey's dedication to enhancing trade relations and cooperation with fellow ECO member states. Erdogan conducted high-level meetings to further improve the free trade agreements and infrastructure between the two countries. [Daryo]

Upon their arrival at Tashkent International Airport, Erdogan was warmly welcomed by the Prime Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulla Aripov, and other high-ranking officials according to Uzbek newspaper Daryo. [Daryo]

The meeting was marked by friendly discussions and formal greetings between the leaders, highlighting the importance of international cooperation in today's complex global landscape.

Uzbekistan, with its 33 million people, is a significant partner in Turkey's economic development, and more than 1,300 companies in the country are supported by Turkish capital. [Daily Sabah][MFA Turkey][AA]

(st/gc)

British and Indian PMs discuss Middle East conflict, trade

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke with the Prime Minister of India on November 3 about the need to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East and about aid for the civilians in Gaza.

The two leaders also spoke on the progress in the Free Trade Agreement negotiations between the countries. [UK GOV][Reuters]

The free trade talks started under Former Prime Minister Borris Johnson in 2021. The UK aims to gain a larger market for whisky, premium cars, and legal services.

A deal between the two countries would be India’s first FTA with a developed country. The UK’s insistence on investment protection provisions ensuring companies have access to international arbitration has been reported as one of the main sticking points. There have been 13 rounds of negotiations.

(ar/gc)

United Kingdom and Japan strengthen military ties

The United Kingdom and Japan agreed to strengthen their defence ties and military cooperation, allowing joint military exercises in each other's territories, after a meeting of foreign ministers of the Group of Seven industrialised nations on November 7.

They reaffirmed the historic 'Hiroshima Accord', a strategic defence partnership between the two countries signed in January 2023. Both countries' foreign Ministers and defence Ministers ratified the Reciprocal Access Agreement. The partnership calls for joint military exercises with increased security cooperation and communication. [APNews] [UKGOV] [Reuters]

The ministers also affirmed their commitment to developing the Global Combat Air Programme, which aims to create a next-generation fighter jet in 2035. The UK also emphasised its plan to reinforce its military presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Further, collaboration on economic security issues such as "supply chain resilience" and "intellectual property theft" is a shared priority for both countries. [Reuters]

The UK-Japanese partnership has emerged in response to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific. The United Kingdom has called for a "free and open Indo-Pacific." [APNews]

(sl/gc)

Historic visit by bishop triggers hope of improved Vatican-China ties

In a historic first, a state-appointed Catholic bishop from mainland China visited Hong Kong in November, in what was seen as a symbolic gesture that could help improve strained ties between the Vatican and Beijing.

The five-day trip began on November 14, when the state-backed Bishop of Beijing, Joseph Li, met Vatican-appointed Hong Kong Cardinal Stephen Chow.

China’s ruling Communist Party aims to assert state control over religion. Its moves to appoint Catholic bishops who are not recognised by the Vatican have been a long-standing source of strain on relations between Beijing and the Holy See.

In 2018, the Vatican reached a secret agreement with Beijing on the appointment of Chinese bishops. The accord has been extended twice, most recently in October 2022. Details of the deal are not public, but the Vatican has disclosed that the agreement involves “consensual decisions”.

The Chinese Communist Party’s appointment of a new bishop in Shanghai in April 2023 was seen as a flagrant

violation of the accord. However, in September, Pope Francis insisted that relations with Beijing were going well.

Establishing full diplomatic relations with Beijing would necessitate the Holy See severing ties with Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [National Catholic Register] [AP News] [Vatican News]

(ar/pk)

Cyprus plans info campaign in Congo and Nigeria to dissuade migrants

Cyprus is planning an information campaign in Congo and Nigeria to dissuade migrants from coming to the Mediterranean island nation.

Cyprus has had the highest number of new asylum applications in the EU in proportion to its population for the last six years. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

As a result of a previous information campaign, the number of new applications between March and October this year fell by around a half. A total of 7,700 were submitted compared to 15,200 in the same period of 2022. [Financial Mirror] [Kathimerini]

Meanwhile, in order to meet international and European obligations, Cyprus is taking measures to strengthen its capacity for receiving and hosting migrants, Interior Minister Konstantinos Ioannou said. [Cyprus Mail]

(jt/pk)

German president seeks forgiveness for colonial abuses in Tanzania

During his visit to the southwestern Tanzanian city of Songea on November 1, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier formally apologised for the atrocities committed by German colonial forces in the early 20th century.

The president addressed the dark chapter of German history, characterised by the massacre of approximately 300,000 members of the Maji-Maji resistance between 1905 and 1907.

The rebellion was sparked by a German policy compelling Africans to cultivate cotton for export in German East Africa. [Deutschlandfunk] [Euronews] [BBC] [TAZ] [ZDF]

In an address to the descendants of Chief Songea Mbano, a prominent leader of the Maji-Maji resistance, Steinmeier acknowledged the brutality of the German colonial troops. "It shames me," he said. "I am ashamed about what German colonial soldiers did to your forefather and his fellow warriors [Euronews]." [TAZ] [ZDF]

This event is part of a broader reckoning within Germany regarding its colonial past, spurred by the efforts of activists and historians. Germany's colonial empire, which once spanned several modern African nations, including Tanzania and Namibia, was dissolved after the First World War. In 2021, Germany officially acknowledged its role in committing genocide in Namibia and pledged financial aid to the country. [Euronews] [ZDF]

During his Tanzanian visit, President Steinmeier pledged assistance in locating the remains of Chief Mbano and other Maji-Maji fighters. Currently, thousands of human remains from former colonies are scattered across German museums, prompting discussions on repatriation.

Steinmeier and Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan discussed official negotiations regarding the potential return of cultural assets and human remains to the African nation. [Tagesschau] [BBC] [ZDF]

However, while some welcomed the apology, critics argue it falls short, questioning Germany's commitment to sincerity.

The German activist organisation Decolonize Berlin expressed on the social media platform X that "such a reappraisal can only be successful if the descendants of the victims of German colonialism are centrally and bindingly included in this process." [TAZ]

(if/gc)

Germany aims to strengthen economic ties with African nations

On November 20, German officials in Berlin hosted a Compact with Africa conference, signifying the country's commitment to establishing long-term economic partnerships with African nations.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, along with Economy Minister Robert Habeck, European Union (EU) Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and French President Emmanuel Macron, convened with 10 African heads of state and over 30 ministers from across the continent to discuss critical economic issues, such as green energy and migration. [Stern] [Tagesschau] [Stuttgarter Zeitung] [Deutsche Welle]

Initiated during Germany's 2017 G20 presidency, Compact with Africa aims to attract foreign private investment to stimulate African economies. The initiative currently includes thirteen permanent African member countries, with additional nations like Angola, Zambia, Nigeria, and Kenya participating as guests. [Deutsche Welle] [Stern] [Stuttgarter Zeitung] [Tagesschau]

Germany's growing interest in the African continent is evident through Chancellor Scholz's recent visits to Nigeria and Ghana and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's tours of Tanzania and Zambia. Scholz has also advocated for the African Union (AU) to secure a permanent seat in the G20. Meanwhile, AU leaders have urged Germany to support Africa's prosperity by alleviating its debt burdens, which hinder economic progress. [Stern] [Tagesschau] [Stuttgarter Zeitung]

The geopolitical landscape, characterised by Russia's war in Ukraine and Europe's growing scepticism toward economic collaboration with China, has amplified Africa's importance. The diversification of energy sources, including hydrogen from Namibia and gas from Senegal, is a crucial consideration for German officials. Scholz has pledged four billion EUR to support the EU Commission's Africa-EU Green Initiative, emphasising Africa's significant role in pursuing a climate-neutral future. [Tagesschau] [Stern] [Stuttgarter Zeitung]

German companies have also demonstrated substantial interest in Africa's raw materials and potential for climate-friendly energy. The German government aims to facilitate private foreign investment by providing favourable guarantee conditions. [Stern] [Stuttgarter Zeitung]

While the initiative has garnered broad support across various public sectors, some critics contend that this enthusiasm only sometimes translates into concrete policies.

The international development organisation One, founded by U2 singer Bono in 2004, commended the conference's ambitions but urged Germany to take more tangible actions. Stanley Achonu, the Nigeria

Director, has emphasised that "the German government should not just talk about investments, but should plan and support them [Stern]." [Tagesschau]

(if/gc)

Ukraine and Sierra Leone restore relations after 20-year break

Ukraine has resumed diplomatic ties with Sierra Leone after a 20-year break after President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a telephone call with his counterpart, Julius Maada Bio. Zelenskyy announced the resumption of relations on Telegram.

Zelenskyy congratulated Sierra Leone on its election to the United Nations Security Council for 2024-2025. He hoped for "continued consistent support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty."

The two presidents discussed the Ukrainian Peace Formula and "consolidating support for the Ukrainian vision of peace among African countries, including on regional platforms."

Zelenskyy also spoke about the GrainFromUkraine initiative and invited Julius Maada Bio to the second summit of the initiative. [Ukrainska Pravda]

(ad/gc)

British and Australian ministers visit nuclear submarine manufacturing site

British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps and Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles visited Rolls-Royce's nuclear reactor manufacturing site in Derby.

They met the first group of Australian nationals training within the UK industry to understand how the next generation of conventionally armed nuclear-powered submarines is being constructed. [UK GOV]

Rolls-Royce will supply all the nuclear propulsion plants for the UK and Australian submarines. The Ministers saw the first nuclear propulsion plant components being built for the UK's SSN-AUKUS programme. This represents one of the first stages of building the submarines.

This follows an injection of GBP 4 billion of UK funding to British businesses, including Rolls-Royce, for developing the UK's SSN-AUKUS submarines announced earlier this year. [UK GOV]

(ar/gc)

Team:

Abigail Obina (ao), Aimee Rae (ar), Anastasiia Dovbysh (ad), Caleb Klubben (cqk), Eanna Mackey (em), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Eva Kaim (evk), Frederik Schnell (fs), Geoffroy de Blegiers (gdb), Giulia Taraborrelli (gt), Glen Carey (gc), Harmia Amadi (ha), Henning Glaser (hg), Iva Fehr (if), Jack Waters (jw), Jeroen Bos (jb), Joss Thomas (jt), Katherine Mansfield (km), Lara Cin (lc), Marcus Donaldson (md), Maria Diatlova (mrd), Maria Rusu (mr), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rebecca Deasy-Millar (rdm), Rex Wempen (rw), Rohini Singh (rs), Silviya Topchiyska (st), Simone Lobo (sl), Sophie Riordan (sr), Stephanie Wild (sw), Valeria Tabelli (vt), Venus Phuangkom, Warren O'Broin (wb), Yi-Ting Lo (yl)

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