German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance
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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 1, January/2024

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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.

Kyiv's allies are wilting, and support from the United States – essential to Ukraine's war effort against its much larger neighbour – is hanging in the balance as the American legislature broke for its Christmas recess without agreeing new funding. Ukraine received a morale boost when it was granted candidate status by the EU, but the fate of an essential tranche of European financial support remains at the mercy of Viktor Orban's Hungary.

European Union institutions have reached a key agreement on migration reforms aiming to stem a surge in people coming into the bloc, but the pact has been slammed by over 50 refugee rights groups, who have warned it will create a "cruel system."

Addressing what some say is a threat to people's privacy, their rights and potentially their very existence, EU officials have reached a provisional deal

on the world's first comprehensive laws to regulate artificial intelligence. Some European tech firms and French President Emmanuel Macron criticised the framework as overly restrictive, potentially hampering innovation.

Meanwhile, the war in the Middle East has increased security concerns inside Europe, and authorities in Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands have announced the arrest of seven suspects who officials say are part of an international terror network plotting to carry out attacks against Jewish communities. The detentions came after Israel's Diaspora Affairs Minister wrote to 20 European leaders and EU officials warning of Hamas cells active across the continent.

In this issue, we also brief you on fresh developments in constitutional affairs, defence and human rights across Europe.

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

Deputy Editor-in-Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

War in Europe: Attritional battles rage as Ukraine faces uncertain 2024

As 2023 came to an end, Ukraine and Russia continued to wrestle across an increasingly devastated frontline.

Despite the death and destruction of the past year, the frontlines have not dramatically changed since January 2023. Ukraine's summer counteroffensive lacked the punch to dislodge Russian forces from their positions in the south of the country. Russian forces captured Bakhmut but have been unable to work the ruined eastern city into a new avenue of attack, and are fighting another high-casualty battle in nearby Avdiivka.

However, the most decisive movements may be happening away from the trenches. Support from the United States, essential to Ukraine's war effort against its much larger neighbour, is hanging in the balance as the American legislature broke for its Christmas recess without agreeing new funding. Ukraine has been granted candidate status by the European Union, but the fate of an essential tranche of financial support remains at the mercy of Viktor Orban's Hungary. With Ukraine's allies wilting and with further Russian assaults likely to come, Kyiv will have to dig deep in the year to come.

Russian forces capture Mariinka as Avdiivka offensive stalls

Once the site of a battle between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in 2015, the small eastern city of Mariinka has been on the frontlines for nearly a decade. In December 2023, Russian forces finally captured what was left of the settlement – now devoid of life.

Russian and Ukrainian forces had been fighting in the town's ruins since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. On December 25, Russian

forces announced that they had captured the remains of the city. Ukrainian officials acknowledged the loss of the town, saying that their forces had retreated to positions outside it.

Mariinka, with its gutted apartment blocks and shattered homes, had become a symbol of the destruction wrought on Ukraine. According to the Ukrainian census, the town had a population of around 9,000 prior to the invasion. As has been the case around Bakhmut, the city's capture is unlikely to mean an end to the fighting in the area as both sides continue attempts to improve their positions. The city does not offer Russia a strategic advantage, with lakes blocking advances to the north of the settlement and Ukrainian forces now occupying pre-prepared defensive positions on the city's outskirts.

Avdiivka, which lies to Mariinka's north, remains the focal point of Russia's offensive efforts. There were limited exchanges of territory in December as Russian forces suffered heavy casualties in their attempts to stretch and strain the Ukrainian defences on the city's flanks. Russian forces entered the village of Stepove which, together with several other villages, forms a defensive belt to Avdiivka's north.

However, they were unable to progress further amid heavy resistance. Ukrainian forces continue a steadfast defence of the city, despite the increasingly icy weather and ceaseless attacks. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Ukrainian troops cited a lack of ammunition and modern fighting vehicles as a limiting factor in their efforts to hold back the powerful, albeit slow-moving, Russian offensive.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Avdiivka on December 29 to hand out medals to the city's defenders. Zelensky also visited the city of Bakhmut in December 2022, which continued to hold out for nearly six months. With Avdiivka in a more perilous strategic position, it remains to be seen if that feat can be repeated.

Elsewhere, a strike was carried out by the Ukrainian air force against Crimea on December 26, using Western-supplied Storm Shadow cruise missiles. Footage taken in the aftermath of the attack shows that a Ropucha-class landing ship, a large vessel used to ferry military supplies across the Black Sea, was destroyed. Casualties are, as ever, unconfirmed. Ukrainian sources claim around 80 sailors were killed or wounded, while Russian sources are yet to comment. [Associated Press] [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [Bloomberg] [CNN] [Euronews] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Institute for the Study of War] [Le Monde] [Reuters]

US support drains as Ukraine becomes EU candidate

Kyiv has been short of good news from its allies in recent months. Deliveries of weapons and vehicles have declined in size since 2022. With American support blocked and EU funds held up, the announcement by the European Council that the EU would begin formal negotiations to admit Ukraine to the bloc was a silver lining for the war-torn nation.

On December 14, together with Moldova, Ukraine officially began the process of joining the European Union. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban presented the only real obstacle, having campaigned in the media in the run-up to the summit against Ukraine's candidacy. However, Orban ultimately left the room during an EU summit when the vote to start the process was taken among the bloc's heads of state – a course of action credited to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

The process, which is called "accession", involves the harmonisation of standards, regulations and laws between the candidate state and the EU. Accession moves at an infamously glacial pace. Ukraine and Moldova join Albania, Bosnia, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey in the EU's waiting room. Serbia has been negotiating its membership since 2014, and Turkey, whose candidacy was frozen in 2019, had been negotiating since 1999.

Though the commencement of the accession process was met with fanfare in Kyiv, a more pressing issue for Ukraine is the bloc's EUR 50 billion support package. Orban made good on his pledges by vetoing the EU's plans.

The Hungarian leader suggested a possible compromise, whereby the funds would come from a loan from the 26 other EU member states, rather than directly from the bloc's collective budget. Following the December summit, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said he was confident of getting agreement with Orban "in late January". [Atlantic Council] [Associated Press] [CNN] [ECFR] [Euractiv] [Euronews] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Washington Post]

Meanwhile, the United States disbursed a USD 250 million support package for Ukraine in December. This may well be the final such package unless the US congress approves further funding.

The package includes ammunition, artillery rounds, rockets and other supplies – but no heavy weaponry or vehicles from American stocks. Aid for Ukraine was the subject of tense budget negotiations between US

President Joe Biden's Democratic party, which controls the US Senate, and the Republican party, which controls the House of Representatives.

The Biden administration tabled a USD 60 billion aid package, but lacked the votes to get it through. On December 6, the proposed bill – which also included funding for US allies Israel and Taiwan – failed in the Senate by a margin of 49 to 51, with every Republican senator voting against. A minimum of 60 votes in favour is required for the bill to succeed. The proposal ran up against the Republicans' insistence that stricter controls be imposed on the US border with Mexico.

With US support up in the air, Kyiv's European allies will struggle to provide Ukraine with the military hardware it needs, in the number that it needs. The EU and US accounted for 47% and 42% of military support to Ukraine respectively. The backing of the US remains indispensable for the Ukrainian military, while drawdowns from the EU play an important role in maintaining Ukraine's economy. When the US legislature re-opens in January, Kyiv will be watching the partisan haggling with bated breath. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [Atlantic Council] [Business Insider] [Council on Foreign Relations] [CNN] [The Guardian] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

Russia takes aim at Ukrainian cities, suffers retaliation

Russia launched increasingly heavy attacks against Ukrainian cities in December, but Kyiv has been able to launch retaliatory strikes.

Throughout the month, nightly drone and missile raids were launched from Russia against Ukraine. However, for the most part, Ukrainian air defences have been able to minimize the damage – preventing the mass blackouts inflicted during the 2022 campaign.

On December 29, Russia launched a massive wave of drone and missile strikes which Kyiv claims was the largest since the war began, involving a total of 158 missiles and a large number of Iranian-made Shahed drones. Ukraine claimed a high number of interceptions, and damage to the national grid appeared to be limited. Cities across Ukraine were hit, with damage to apartment blocks, shopping centres and a maternity hospital reported. Dozens were said to have been killed and hundreds injured, though the official count continues amid further Russian strikes.

An apparent retaliatory strike was launched against the Russian city of Belgorod, which lies near the border with Ukraine and which has acted as a launch site for missiles. Ukraine has not claimed responsibility for this

attack, which Russia said killed at least 21 civilians, but Kyiv has struck Belgorod before.

Moscow claimed that Western-supplied weapons were used in the attack but offered no evidence to support this. At a meeting of the UN Security Council on December 29, Russia's representative to the United Nations condemned the attack on Belgorod as "indiscriminate" and claimed that Moscow had "exclusively... targeted military infrastructure in Ukraine" – an assertion that left a sour aftertaste for many, given the number of civilian deaths caused by Russia. Moscow hit the Palace Hotel in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv in retaliation on December 30.

No significant losses appeared to have been caused to military targets in these two attacks, though footage and photographs circulated on social media depicted damage to civilian dwellings in both Belgorod and Kharkiv.

More attacks were launched against Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities in the early hours of New Year's Day and January 2, causing further death and destruction. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Economist] [Financial Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [New York Times] [The Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

EU agrees 'historic' migration pact, rights groups slam 'cruel' deal

European Union institutions have reached an agreement on migration reforms aiming to stem a surge in people coming into the bloc, to relocate over 30,000 migrants and more evenly distribute the cost of hosting them across member states.

Under the scheme, dubbed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, countries that refuse to take in migrants will be required to pay a minimum of EUR 20,000 into an EU fund for every person they deny entry to. [Reuters]

The agreement enables the creation of border detention centres, faster vetting of irregular arrivals and deportation of people denied asylum, as well as the implementation of a "solidarity" mechanism to relieve pressure on southern European countries like Greece, Italy and Spain which are receiving large inflows of migrants.

Asylum applicants with a low chance of success, such as those coming from India, Turkey or Tunisia, can be denied entry into the EU and held in detention centres at the border of the bloc. [Al Jazeera]

Although endorsed by a number of European national leaders, the pact was slammed by over 50 refugee rights groups in an openletter to the EU, who said the deal will "mirror the failed approaches of the past and worsen their consequences", creating a "cruel system that falls apart on implementation and leaves critical issues unaddressed."

'Orbanesque in cruelty'

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, a migrant rights group, strongly criticized the rules as "Byzantine in their complexity and Orbanesque in their cruelty", referring to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has previously said he stood "for an openly anti-immigration policy". [AP] [Reuters]

However, European Parliament President Roberta Metsola hailed the agreement as "historic" and "probably the most important legislative deal of this mandate", adding that it had been ten years in the making. [Euronews]

Metsola had previously told EU leaders assembled at the European Council that reaching a migration deal was necessary to ward off rising right-wing populism ahead of European Parliament elections in June. [Politico]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who has made migration reform a priority of her term in office, said the pact "means that Europeans will decide who comes to the EU and who can stay, not the smugglers. It means protecting those in need."

The preliminary agreement will need to be formally ratified by the European Council and Parliament before it becomes law. It comes after three years of negotiations, amid growing calls for an overhaul to the bloc's migration rules in the face of a rise in immigration and growing terrorist threats.

These pressures have led 14 out of 26 countries in Europe's free-movement Schengen area to temporarily reintroduce border controls, and have prompted national governments to take unilateral measures to tackle rocketing asylum requests.

Italian deal with Albania blocked

This has been exemplified by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's decision to sign a deal with Albania for the construction of migrant detention centres in the country, to host up to 36,000 people a year. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The Albanian Constitutional Court, the nation's highest, later blocked the ratification of the deal in parliament until it reviews the constitutionality of the plans and issues a final ruling. It has scheduled a hearing on the issue for January 18. [Reuters]

In the meantime, Meloni has partnered with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to fund the voluntary repatriation of migrants who have been left stranded in Tunisia after attempting to transit through the North African country to enter the EU. [Reuters] [Washington Post]

According to the EU's border agency, Frontex, there were more than 355,000 irregular border crossings into the bloc from January to November 2023, the highest level since 2016.

Meanwhile, President Emmanuel Macron has been criticized over an immigration reform that will, among other measures, make social security benefits for foreigners living in France conditional on them having a job and being in the country for five years.

The plan echoes some of the campaign cries of the far-right opposition National Rally party, which voted for the move in the French parliament. At the same time, nearly a quarter of Macron's centre-right governing coalition abstained or voted against the bill that brings in the reforms. [Politico]

(qv/pk)

EU moves to regulate Artificial Intelligence

European Union officials have reached a provisional deal on the world's first comprehensive laws to regulate artificial intelligence and set a global standard for the new technology, a policy development that may limit Europe's competitiveness in this emerging sector. [BBC]

The European Parliament will vote on the AI Act proposals early this year, but any legislation will not take effect until at least 2025. The US, UK, and China are rushing to publish their guidelines. [BBC]

The proposals include safeguards on using AI within the EU and limitations on its adoption by law enforcement agencies. Consumers would have the right to file complaints, and fines could be imposed for violations. [BBC]

EU Commissioner Thierry Breton described the plans as "historic", saying it set "clear rules for the use of AI". He added it was "much more than a rulebook - it's a launch pad for EU start-ups and researchers to lead the global AI race." [BBC]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the AI Act would help the development of technology that does not threaten people's safety and rights. In a social media post, she said it was a "unique legal framework for the development of AI you can trust." [BBC]

Reception has been mixed, with some European tech firms and French President Emmanuel Macron criticising the framework as overly restrictive, potentially hampering innovation. Macron has warned that legislation risks hampering European tech companies compared to rivals in the US, UK and China, setting the stage for a new battle over regulation of the emerging technology. [FT]

The French president attacked the new Artificial Intelligence Act, saying: “We can decide to regulate much faster and much stronger than our major competitors. But we will regulate things that we will no longer produce or invent. This is never a good idea.” Macron said he was concerned that the new law means the EU will enforce the world’s toughest regime on so-called foundational models, the technology that underpins generative AI products such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, which can churn out quantities of humanlike words, images and code in seconds. [FT]

The European Parliament and Council must still adopt the final text to become EU law. Companies are projected to feel its impact from late next year to 2026. [BBC] [GlobalFinance]

ChatGPT shrinks EU risk

In response, ChatGPT maker OpenAI has updated its terms that look intended to shrink its regulatory risk in the European Union, TechCrunch reported. The AI giant's technology has come under early scrutiny in Europe over ChatGPT's impact on people's privacy — with several open investigations into data protection concerns linked to how the chatbot processes people's information and the data it can generate about

individuals, including from watchdogs in Italy and Poland. [TechCrunch]

"We have changed the OpenAI entity that provides services such as ChatGPT to EEA and Swiss residents to our Irish entity, OpenAI Ireland Limited," OpenAI wrote in an email to users sent on December 28. [TechCrunch]

The new terms of use listing its recently established Dublin-based subsidiary as the data controller for users in the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland, where the bloc's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is in force, will start to apply on February 15 2024.

Gaining this status reduces the ability of privacy watchdogs located elsewhere in the bloc to act on concerns unilaterally. Instead, they would typically refer complaints to the principal established company's lead supervisor for consideration. [TechCrunch]

Scott Zoldi, chief analytics officer at risk analyst FICO, spoke about the ongoing US debate on whether AI innovation and regulation can coexist. "We are looking very carefully at what happens in the EU," Zoldi said. [GlobalFinance]

Global Standard

The AI Act aims to establish a global standard for AI usage, preventing systemic risks in the European market and safeguarding democracy and human rights. The law will apply to any entity operating in the EU, irrespective of location. [GlobalFinance]

Proposed by the European Commission almost two years ago, the framework now employs a risk-based approach, categorising AI applications into four groups based on the level of harm they pose. Fines for violating the act are substantial, reaching up to 7% of global turnover for the most significant violation. [GlobalFinance]

The European Parliament defines AI as software that can "for a given set of human-defined objectives, generate outputs such as content, predictions, recommendations or decisions influencing the environments they interact with." [BBC]

"Unacceptable" risks threatening safety, jobs and human rights would be prohibited. "High" risk AI, essential in private and public services, such as credit scoring, would face stringent regulations, including a mandatory fundamental rights assessment for the

insurance and banking sectors. When it comes to "lower" risk functions, such as chatbots, companies must disclose when customers are speaking to a chatbot and highlight AI-generated content. [BBC]

“The last-minute attempt to regulate foundation models has turned this on its head,” said Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl, director-general for DigitalEurope, which represents the continent’s technology sector. “The new requirements — on top of other sweeping new laws like the Data Act — will take a lot of resources for companies to comply with, resources that will be spent on lawyers instead of hiring AI engineers.” [FT]

(gc)

Israel warns European leaders of Hamas terrorist cells active across the continent

Israel's Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli wrote to 20 individual European leaders and EU officials warning of Hamas terrorist cells active across Europe. Leaders of Italy, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Greece, and Germany were among the recipients. [The Daily Mail] [The Jerusalem Post]

In his December 6 correspondence, Minister Chikli underscored Hamas's threat as an international concern, reminding European leaders of the group's hostility toward Jews, Christians, and Europeans alike, "Weeks have passed since the barbarism that Hamas committed against infants, children, the elderly, and thousands of Israeli citizens. This is not the time for ambiguity. I want to clarify this unequivocally.

Hamas has proven that their goal is to kill Jews everywhere," the Minister warned. "Unfortunately, Hamas's bloodlust is not limited to Israel and Jews but also extends to Europe and Christians. I want to remind you that in the past, Hamas members expressed the Islamic intention to conquer Europe." [The Jerusalem Post]

A "network of hatred"

Chikli's letters included evidence of specific individuals, groups, and NGOs/aid organisations that are reported to have been involved in the cultivation and financing of Hamas terror cells and activities across Europe.

According to a report from the Jerusalem Post, the letters provided intelligence on individuals such as

Italian resident Mohammed Ahmed Hanon, leader of the "Charity Association for Palestinian Support" (ABSPP) a branch of the "Union of God," a group designated as a terror organisation in the US and Israel for its role in funding Hamas, as well as Amin Abu Rashad, who was arrested in 2023 for allegedly using "seemingly charitable organisations" to transfer millions of euros from Europe to Hamas.

The correspondence also allegedly discussed the Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, an NGO designated as a terrorist organisation in 2012 due to its connection with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), another terror group banned in the EU. [The Jerusalem Post]

The Minister's letters went on to detail the actions of Muhammad Suwala (Abu Obada), a current UK resident and former member of Hamas's military wing, political bureau, and architect of the 2010 Marjayoun Ambush, in addition to Mohand Halabi who, in October 2015, murdered two innocent civilians in Jerusalem and wounded two others including a two-year-old boy. [The Jerusalem Post]

This is a phenomenon the Diaspora Affairs Ministry's head of Research and Foreign Relations, Tzur Bar-Oz, referred to as "a complex network of hatred operating in many countries, including Western and highly democratic ones."

According to him, "Hamas has been operating for many years worldwide, mainly through covert humanitarian donations." Bar-Oz added that he, Minister Chikli, and their colleagues "hope that the leaders of the countries understand what Hamas is... these are extreme people who pose a threat to citizens worldwide, not just Jews and not just in Israel. We are already seeing a response from certain countries on the ground." [The Jerusalem Post] [The Daily Mail].

The EU takes note

For their part, EU leaders appear to share these concerns. A day before receiving Chikli's letters, European representatives met in Brussels for the Justice and Home Affairs Council to discuss the increasingly unstable security situation in Europe as a result of the Israel-Hamas war. [Politico]

"With the war between Israel and Hamas, and the polarisation it causes in our society, with the upcoming holiday season, there is a huge risk of terrorist attacks in the European Union," EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson remarked to reporters

on December 5. "We saw [it] recently in Paris. Unfortunately, we have seen it earlier as well." [AP]

"The war in Gaza and Hamas's terror are exacerbating this situation," German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser told reporters. According to Faeser, the December 2 terror attack in Paris shows "just how acute and how serious the threat posed by Islamist terrorism is currently in the EU." [AP]

In response to the increased risk, Commissioner Johansson announced that the European Commission will commit an additional USD 32.5 million to buttress security for areas of increased vulnerability- particularly places of worship. [AP]

Hamas members arrested in several EU states

Authorities from Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands announced on December 14 the arrest of seven suspects that officials say are part of an international terror network plotting to carry out attacks against Jewish communities across Europe. [Reuters]

German prosecutors reported that at least four of these individuals are members of Hamas and directly linked to the Gaza-based terror organisation. The authorities arrested two men from Lebanon, one from Egypt in Berlin and a Dutch citizen in Rotterdam. [Reuters] [Fox News]

Danish authorities have not released the names of the remaining three suspects or any other details. Flemming Drejer, operational head at Demark's intelligence service (PET), said that additional suspects abroad were connected to the plot. [Le Monde]

Danish authorities will charge them with acts of terrorism under Denmark's criminal code. Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said these arrests "show us the situation that Denmark is in".

"For several years, we have noted that there are people who live in Denmark and who do not wish us well, who are against our democracy, our freedom, and who are against Danish society," Frederiksen said.

The Prime Minister added that it is "absolutely true" that "there is a high risk in Denmark." [Reuters] [Fox News] [Le Monde]

'Hamas on European soil'

German prosecutors said the suspects "have been long standing members of Hamas and have participated in Hamas operations abroad."

The federal prosecutors claim that Abdelhamid Al A, in particular, is closely connected to senior Hamas officials and was in Germany under a directive from Hamas leadership to cultivate an arsenal in the German capital, ensuring that weapons were "kept in a state of readiness in view of potential terrorist attacks against Jewish institutions in Europe." [AP] [Le Monde]

In a statement released the same day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said these investigations have revealed "Hamas infrastructure on European soil."

"In recent years, and even more so after the murderous attack on October 7, Hamas strives to expand its operational capabilities around the world — and in Europe in particular — in order to realise its ambitions to hit Israeli, Jewish and Western targets at any cost." [Reuters] [Fox News]

Germany's Justice Minister Marco Buschmann reiterated his nation's commitment to the safety of Germany's Jewish communities, saying, "Following the terrible attacks by Hamas on the Israeli population, attacks on Jews in Jewish institutions have also increased in our country in recent weeks."

"We must therefore do everything we can to ensure that Jews in our country do not have to fear for their safety again," Buschmann continued. [Reuters]

While attending an EU summit in Brussels, Prime Minister Frederiksen voiced her concern regarding the current state of European security. "Individually, these incidents are serious and worrying, but together, they paint a picture of something bigger. That we are facing a more serious and complex threat picture," she told reporters, "it is very, very serious." [AP]

(cqk/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium court orders government to cut emission by 55% by 2030

The Belgian Court of Appeals ordered the government to cut all planet-heating pollution by at least 55% by 2030 after ruling that the country's climate targets are "clearly insufficient."

Under European Union effort-sharing rules, the country had an obligation to cut emissions by only 47%. By 2021, the government had only cut emissions by 24%.

The nonprofit Klimaatzaak initially brought the case on behalf of roughly 58,000 complainants almost two years ago. Flemish Minister of the Environment Zuhal Demir has since stated she will appeal the decision further. [lecho]

According to an analysis by the Grantham Institute in March, Belgium would have to cut emissions by at least 61% by 2030 to stop the planet from heating 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures (the aim world leaders have pledged to achieve).

Belgium has lagged behind its European counterparts – the Netherlands has set a target of a 49% cut in emissions by the end of the decade, France 50%, Germany 65% and the UK a 68% cut. [TheGuardian]

(sw/gc)

France's new immigration bill criticised as pandering to right-wing

France's approval of its new immigration bill, which had been in drafting for about 18 months, has sparked

accusations that it panders to the far-right.

The "toughened-up legislation," referred to by Le Monde newspaper, will introduce immigration quotas, lower social welfare payments, limit access to welfare benefits, and make it more difficult for the children of immigrants to become French citizens. It will also make it easier for authorities to expel illegal immigrants from France. [Le Monde] [The Guardian] [Le Monde]

France's left-wing parties published a joint statement denouncing the bill's passing, referred to in the document as "a disgrace to our country of human rights". [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

Since the government does not have an absolute majority in the house, the original bill proposed by President Emmanuel Macron's government was discarded after pushback from the hard left and right.

The bill was then passed to a cross-party parliamentary body that added new hardline measures to the bill, which was eventually approved by parliament. [The Guardian]

Left-leaning MP Sacha Houlie was one of 20 representatives in Macron's Renaissance party who voted against the bill. It passed with 131 votes.

Since parliament approved the bill, Health Minister Aurelien Rousseau resigned, while the current president of the Assemblée Nationale insisted that the bill be withdrawn. [The Guardian] [Reuters] [Le Monde]

The bill has received support from Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, who, according to a report by The Guardian newspaper, has insisted that the legislation contains "useful and effective measures that our fellow citizens have been waiting for." [The Guardian]

Macron has insisted that the bill does not symbolise an "ideological victory" for the far-right and that it is, in fact, a "defeat for the RN", Marine Le Pen's party. The president has referred to his taking ownership of the law as "courageous". [The Guardian] [Le Monde] [Le Monde]

(rdm/gc)

French president sparks controversy over Hanukkah ceremony

France’s Chief Rabbi Haïm Korsia visited the Elysee Palace to mark the start of the Jewish holiday

Hanukkah, sparking an immediate backlash against French Emmanual Macron president. [Reuters]

The French Republic has been a secular state since 1905, and just two days before the 118th anniversary of the law separating church and state, Macron was shown in a video, later posted on social media, alongside the chief rabbi of France as he lit the Hanukkah candle.

Opposition parties criticised Macron for hosting the rabbi. Sandrine Rousseau of the Green Party said, "it would have been possible to support France's Jewish community without allowing a religious ceremony into the Elysee". The spokesperson for *La France Insoumise* referred to the move as an "inexcusable political mistake". [Le Monde] [Forward]

The Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions said Macron's decision was an "error". [Le Monde]

In response, Macron said that he does not regret the gesture. French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne supported Macron, saying the decision was a means of showing support to Jewish communities around France during a time of rising antisemitism. [France 24] [Reuters]

(rdm/gc)

Right-wing Le Pen referred to French criminal court for alleged embezzlement

Marine Le Pen, a Rassemblement National (RN) party member, and 26 other people were referred to a criminal court in Paris by two investigating judges from France's financial crimes prosecuting unit. [France Info] [The Guardian] [France 24]

Between 2004 and 2016, the judges alleged that the individuals mentioned above misused EU public funds to pay RN party staff. If found guilty, Le Pen will face a prison sentence of up to 10 years and a fine of

EUR 1 million. She will be banned from holding public office for ten years. [The Telegraph]

A spokesperson for RN has since denied the claims, assuring reporters of Le Pen's innocence. [The Telegraph]

The RN party has been accused of accepting illicit funds and being complicit in fraud. Inquiries into the

fake job scandal began in 2015 but are believed to have begun in 2004. The scheme involved creating fake work contracts for Le Pen's party members posing as EU parliamentary assistants in return for financial gain. [Euractiv] [RFI]

In March 2024, the first hearing on the trial will take place. This will come nearly ten years after the initial inquiry into the fake job scheme took place in 2016. [Politico] [Le Monde] [RFI]

(rdm/gc)

French prosecutors investigate Paris terror attack that left one dead

France's National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor's Office (PNAT) is investigating 26-year-old Armand Rajabpour-Miyandoab for allegedly perpetrating the December 2 terror attack in Paris that left one German-Filipino man dead and wounded a 66-year-old UK citizen and 60-year-old French national.

According to French authorities, Rajabpour-Miyandoab, who was born in France in 1997 to Iranian parents, stabbed and killed the 23-year-old German tourist in the Bir-Hakeim section of Paris's 15 arrondissement, a busy area near the city's iconic Eiffel tower popular among tourists.

After the attack, Rajabpour-Miyandoab wounded two elderly victims with a hammer before being apprehended by police. [Le Monde] [France 24]

Authorities say Rajabpour-Miyandoab shouted "Allahu Akbar" during the attacks and told police that he was "angry at what was happening in Gaza, that France would be complicit in what Israel was doing." [Le Monde]

In a subsequent public briefing, anti-terrorism prosecutor Jean-François Ricard said Rajabpour-Miyandoab posted a video to X shortly before the attack in which he reportedly praised the Islamic State (IS) and pledged his support to the terror organisation and its leader Abu Hafs. [CNN] [France 24]

A troubling history

According to reporting by Le Monde, French security officials already had an active "S" file open on the young Islamic extremist, who they sighted as a national security risk.

In 2016, Rajabpour-Miyandoab was brought to the attention of France's domestic intelligence service (DGSI) for planning to carry out a terror attack in the La Défense business district just outside of the French capital; he was reportedly spurred on by the Syrian-based jihadist Maximilien Thibault (formerly part of Forsane Alizza). Rajabpour-Miyandoab was sentenced to five years for this offence and was released in 2020 after serving four years. [Le Monde]

Rajabpour-Miyandoab has a reported history of mental illness and has previously undergone treatment. French authorities and Rajabpour-Miyandoab's healthcare providers reported that his mental health had been improving. Still, they later raised concerns over his behaviour in the spring/summer of 2022, according to a French security source who spoke with Agence France-Presse (AFP). [Le Monde]

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser condemned the terror attack, which resulted in the death of a fellow German national, commenting in a December 3 interview with Funke media group, "The Islamist knife attack on a young man near the Eiffel Tower in Paris is an abominable crime. Our thoughts go to the family and friends of the victim and the others wounded in this terrible act."

France's Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne shared these sentiments and wrote in a December 2 X post that, "We [the French people] will not give in to terrorism," While French President Emmanuel Macron called that justice be delivered "in the name of the French people." [France 24]

This is the latest terror attack to be unleashed in France since the Israel-Hamas war began on October 7 and comes less than two months after the murder of a teacher in Arras, France, in an act of terror allegedly perpetrated by another young radicalised Islamist. [AP]

(cqk/gc)

Germany: Pro-business party stays in Scholz coalition

Members of the smallest party in German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's unpopular coalition have voted in a low-profile ballot to stay in the troubled government. Still, the result underlines the three-party alliance's difficulties. [ABC]

The pro-business Free Democrats, who in recent decades have leaned to the right, joined a coalition with Scholz's Social Democrats and the environmentalist Greens, both left-leaning parties, in late 2021. The government has become notorious for infighting, and the poll ratings of the Free Democrats, led by Finance Minister Christian Lindner, have declined sharply. [ABC]

The party's rules stipulate that a ballot must be held if at least 500 members demand one, and 598 members forced a vote on whether to stay in the coalition. Party headquarters announced that those who voted opted to stay in by a narrow margin of 52.2% to 47.8%, with just under 40% of members participating. [ABC]

The ballot was nonbinding, and party leaders gave it little public attention, but there was still relief at the outcome.

"The fact that only just under one-fifth of our members voted to leave (the government) is what I am experiencing too," Wolfgang Kubicki, a deputy party leader, told Deutschlandfunk radio. [ABC]

"It's not that we are all satisfied with what's going in Berlin ... but that doesn't mean we should stop governing; it just means that we as the (Free Democrats) must get better and more assertive in the coalition, and we're working on that now," he said. [ABC]

The German government led by Scholz has become known for infighting during two years in power and has seen its poll ratings slump. Germany's economy is also underperforming, but the chancellor tried to paint a positive picture of the year ahead.

Scholz New Year's Speech

Chancellor Scholz used his New Year's speech to call on his country's citizens to maintain confidence in the future as they adapt to a world experiencing multiple crises and changing at an ever-faster pace. [AP]

"So much suffering; so much bloodshed. Our world has become a more unsettled and harsher place. It's changing at an almost breathtaking speed," Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in the pre-recorded speech. [AP]

Scholz was referring to Russia's war on Ukraine, a resulting rise in energy prices, the suffering during the coronavirus pandemic, and the attack by Hamas that triggered Israel's military offensive in Gaza. [AP]

"The result is that we, too, are having to change," he said. "This is a worrying thing for many of us. In some, it is also causing discontent. I do take that to heart. But I also know this: We in Germany will get through it."

Germany economy

He said that many families will have to pay less in taxes, and the government plans to put money into the country's ailing transportation infrastructure and clean energy. [AP]

With inflation having sunk from an average of 7.9% in 2022 to 3.2% in November 2023, the lowest level in two years, Scholz spoke of a much brighter economic outlook than a year ago — even if Germany's rate of inflation is still some way higher than the Eurozone average of 2.4%. [DW]

He also referenced Germany's replenished gas supplies, described as "filled to the brim", and said the country avoided an economic downturn. [DW]

"Do you remember where we stood one year ago?" Scholz asked. "Numerous experts had forecast an economic downturn of three, four, five percent. Many feared that prices would keep on rising. There were concerns about power cuts and cold homes. [DW]

EU Importance

Scholz also stressed the importance of the European Union, especially in times of crisis. [AP]

"Our strength resides in the European Union. When the EU presents a united front, it speaks for more than 400 million people. In a world of 8 billion, soon to be 10 billion people, that's a real asset," he said. [AP]

However, the chancellor made clear that Germany needs the work of all its people to take the country forward. [AP]

"My fellow citizens, our strength also resides in the realisation that each and every one of us is needed in our country — the top researcher just like the carer, the police officer just like the delivery driver, the pensioner just like the young trainee," he said. [AP]

(gc)

German far-right party scores major election victory

Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party achieved a significant milestone by winning its first mayoral election in Pirna, Saxony. A former carpenter and the AfD candidate, Tim Lochner secured victory with 38.5% of the votes after a run-off. [BBC]

AfD leader Alice Weidel called the result "historic," emphasising its symbolic importance as the party expands beyond local councils to claim city mayoral positions.

This victory is a critical indicator for the upcoming regional elections in three eastern states, including Saxony, scheduled for September 2024. The success in Pirna comes after the AfD in Saxony was labelled "extremist" by intelligence services due to its anti-migrant rhetoric and alleged attempts to undermine democracy. Despite this, the party's national polling stands at around 20%. [BBC]

The defeated candidates from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Voters attributed AfD's success to the failure of more moderate parties to unite against the far-right movement. The CDU candidate, Kathrin Dollinger-Knuth, expressed disappointment, stating, "Unfortunately, the Free Voters decided to carry on alone and thereby paved the way for AfD success." [Financial Times]

Pirna has become the first place in Germany to elect an AfD mayor. Critics, including Christoph Heubner from the International Auschwitz Committee, have criticised other parties for not collaborating to prevent the far-right victory.

The AfD's electoral breakthrough in Pirna aligns with its "normalisation" strategy, aiming to cooperate with other parties at the grassroots level. The result underscores mainstream politicians' challenge in dealing with the increasingly popular and radical AfD, particularly in Germany's eastern regions.

The rise of the AfD could complicate efforts to form stable governments, as its polling numbers suggest other parties may need help to form coalitions without it. [BBC] [Financial Times]

(ha/gc)

Berlin traffic gridlock as farmers protest diesel tax break cuts

Thousands of farmers paralysed Berlin on December 18, protesting government budget cuts.

The coalition's plan to eliminate tax breaks for agricultural diesel and end car tax exemptions for farming vehicles sparked the demonstration, causing traffic chaos around the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. [Euronews]

The proposed measures, aiming to address climate issues, face internal dissent from the Free Democrats Party (FDP) within the ruling coalition. FDP leader Christian Durr stated the party would veto plans to abolish tax breaks, emphasising the need for fair conditions for German farmers compared to other European countries.

Agriculture Minister Cem Ozdemir and Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, a member of the Green, joined the protest, voicing concerns over the sector's burden and urging opponents to propose viable alternatives.

The protests come in response to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party coalition's agreement to fill a EUR 17 billion budget gap in 2024, which includes reducing climate-damaging subsidies and trimming some ministries' spending. The capital remains gridlocked as the clash between fiscal responsibility and environmental goals intensifies. [Euronews] [AP]

(ha/gc)

German party officials urge reversal of anti-nuclear stance

Three German political parties, including members of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), urged on December 7 for a reversal of the country's anti-nuclear policy.

Parry officials have called on the government to restart the last three power plants shut down on April 15, notably the Isar 2, Neckarwestheim 2, and Emsland plants, which contributed 6% to Germany's energy mix. The call for reconsideration comes amid concerns about the loss of cheap Russian gas after Russia invaded Ukraine. [TVP World] [Nucnet]

The decision to phase out nuclear power, endorsed by consecutive governments and initially prompted by Japan's Fukushima Daiichi disaster in 2011, has faced criticism for complicating Germany's path to climate neutrality by 2045. A recent budget crisis, triggered by a court ruling declaring climate-related credits unconstitutional, has intensified the call for

fundamental political changes in the energy sector [GCR].

Proponents have argued that nuclear technology provides reliable energy without direct emissions, which is crucial when renewable sources alone may not meet the nation's electricity demands.

Bavaria's state premier, Markus Soder, has called for an immediate restart of nuclear power. Jens Spahn (CSU) criticised the shutdown of Germany's latest reactors, describing it as a "serious traffic light error." Other prominent figures, including Saxony's Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer (CDU) and FDP parliamentary group leader Christian Durr, underscored the urgency to restart nuclear power plants and consider modern reactor concepts like Small Modular Reactors. [Clean Energy Wire] [TVP World]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has remained firm on rejecting a return to nuclear power, emphasising the country's commitment to investing over EUR 1 billion in fusion research. [TVP World]

(ha/gc)

Germany, Austria bolster security measures for Christmas holiday

In response to credible threats of a potential terrorist attack during the holiday season, Germany and Austria have heightened security measures for Christmas celebrations, particularly in key locations such as the Cologne Cathedral in Germany and around Vienna's churches and Christmas markets in Austria.

The heightened security aimed to ensure the safety of citizens and visitors during Christmas celebrations. The move follows intelligence reports indicating a severe threat, prompting both nations to take precautionary steps to safeguard citizens and visitors. [VOA] [Reuters]

Due to potential attack concerns, Cologne Cathedral, a major landmark, barred sightseeing visits and implemented stringent security checks for Christmas Eve midnight Mass.

Despite restrictions, churchgoers attended services, with Auxiliary Bishop Rolf Steinhaeuser noting it as "probably the most secure church service in all of Germany." The European Union's home affairs commissioner, Ylva Johansson, had warned of a "huge risk of terrorist attacks" over the Christmas holidays,

referencing concerns related to the Israel-Hamas conflict. [VOA]

Austria responded to similar intelligence, announcing increased security around Vienna's churches and Christmas markets. While details of the threat were not disclosed, reports hinted at a connection to an Islamic extremist group. Austrian police emphasised the heightened state of alert, citing calls for attacks on Christian events during the holiday season. [VOA]

Germany, Austria, and Spain have collectively heightened security measures in light of warnings about the rising threat of Islamist violence in Europe. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser had previously highlighted the increased risk of radicalisation amid the Israel-Hamas conflict [Reuters].

(ha/gc)

Ireland's governing coalition backtracks on proposed housing referendum

Ireland's governing coalition has backstepped on holding a housing referendum despite pledging to do so in their Programme for Government. The heads of Fianna Fail and Fianna Gael parties have announced that such a referendum is unlikely. [Irish Independent]

Tanaiste Micheál Martin has now admitted it will be "very challenging" to hold the housing referendum before the Government finishes up. "It's going to be very challenging because this referendum is March 8," Martin said. "It's very tight."

He said Housing Minister Darragh O'Brien has proposals on a possible referendum from the Housing Commission, which will be brought to the Government for consideration shortly. The Housing Commission was tasked with drafting the wording for such a referendum for EUR 700,000 to the taxpayer.

O'Brien and his task force will recommend potential constitutional reform in this area. Varadkar also addressed the referendum on women and equality set for March 2024. [The Irish Times]

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, head of Fine Gael, has proposed a change in the constitution that would allow for a right to housing, as opposed to the suggested referendum. Varadkar said, "any housing amendment worth having must make it easier to build houses." [The Irish Times]

Varadkar emphasised the need for the amendment to shorten the length of the current housing list to avoid people "seeking compensation or suing the local authority". [Breakingnews.ie]

(rdm/gc)

Ireland's justice minister survives no-confidence vote

Ireland's Justice Minister Helen McEntee won a Dail vote of confidence by a large majority on December 5, after a motion tabled by opposition party Sinn Fein following the Dublin riots on November 23. [The Journal]

McEntee won by 83 votes to 63 after a three-hour debate where the opposition questioned the police's response to the looting and rioting that occurred in Dublin. They also challenged McEntee's ministerial position. [The Irish Times] [Irish Independent]

McEntee was defended by her Government colleagues during the debate, with Tánaiste Micheál Martin commenting that the recent violence in Dublin city centre is a challenge "to all of us". [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Irish benefits for Ukrainian refugees to be cut

Ireland's government has agreed that by the end of January 2024, financial support for Ukrainian refugees in state accommodation will be cut so that the government can support future Ukrainian refugees. [The Irish Times] [The Journal] [Breakingnews.ie]

There are approximately 76 Ukrainian refugees seeking international protection in Ireland each day, and this number is expected to rise back up to 100 per day. [The Irish Independent]

The most notable changes encompass reducing social welfare payments from EUR 220 to EUR 38.80 per week and limiting the time Ukrainian refugees can be in State accommodation to 90 days. Ukrainian refugees in state accommodation also receive child benefits and medical benefits.

Once people leave the emergency accommodation after 90 days, they will be entitled to average social

welfare and job seeker's allowance rates. However, opposition leader Mary Lou McDonald expressed concern over the fact that the government still has no plan for those who must leave state accommodation after 90 days. [The Irish Independent]

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said that what Ireland is offering Ukrainian refugees is not currently in line with what is being offered in other European countries. [The Journal]

(rdm/gc)

Ireland: Former hotel intended to house asylum seekers set ablaze

A hotel earmarked for housing asylum seekers in Ireland was set on fire in County Galway in what is suspected to be a criminal attack. Nobody was in the building at the time of the fire. [RTÉ News]

The former hotel was undergoing renovation to prepare for the arrival of 70 asylum seekers. The local community criticised the decision. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar assured the public that those committing crimes like this account for only a tiny minority of the Irish public. [Breakingnews.ie]

The government condemned the attack, with Minister for Integration Roderic O'Gorman calling the arson attack "deeply sinister." He stated that the attack " was designed to intimidate people seeking international protection here in Ireland". [The Guardian]

Before the fire broke out, locals blockaded the hotel to discourage asylum seekers from entering. This sort of public reaction has become common in Ireland lately and has often escalated into arson attacks.

Across the country over the past year in counties Kildare, Dublin, Donegal, and Leitrim, attacks of this nature on properties intended to house asylum seekers and refugees have taken place, according to a report by The Irish Times. [The Irish Times]

The situation is currently under investigation by the Gardaí.

(rdm/gc)

Dutch counter-terrorism unit raises threat level to 'substantial'

The Dutch counter-terrorism unit NCTV raised the terrorist threat from level three “considerable” to level four “substantial” amid concerns that a terrorist attack happening in the Netherlands was a “realistic possibility,” the government agency said. [Rijksoverheid]

This is the first time NCTV has raised the threat level in four years.

Head of the NCTV Pieter-Jaap Aalbersberg said the increased threat level was based on the violent conflict in Israel and Palestine, Koran-burning incidents in different European countries and calls for attacks from terrorist organisations.

“Recent attacks in surrounding countries show individuals answer these calls,” Aalbersberg said. “The number of arrests in neighbouring European countries of suspects with Jihadist motives are examples. Furthermore, the threat stemming from the right-extremist and anti-establishment extremism is undiminished. [Rijksoverheid]

The threat level is an assessment by NCTV of long-term terrorist activity in the Netherlands. This assessment is updated every six months. In December 2019, the threat level was lowered from four to three. [NOS]

In Germany and France, there has been an increased chance of a terror attack. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs increased the travel advice for Paris to code yellow. This was in part due to the terror attack near the Eiffel Tower on December 2nd. [NOS]

(jb/gc)

Dutch court rules shipments of F-35 fighter jet parts to Israel can continue

The Netherlands can continue delivering F-35 parts to Israel after four human rights organisations asked the court in The Hague to halt them. The judge denied the request.

The District Court in The Hague ruled that the government must have a significant degree of freedom when weighing political and policy issues such as arms exports. [Reuters]

According to Human Rights organisations Oxfam Novib, Amnesty International, peace organisation Pax and The Rights Forum, the F-35 spare parts are enabling the Israelis to “drop real bombs on real

houses and real families," Oxfam director Michiel Servaes said during the court hearing. [AD]

The four human rights organisations have claimed the Dutch State violates international law by supplying crucial jet-fighter parts to Israel while knowing Israel violates the humanitarian warright in its war against Hamas. [NU]

Servaes said he was "deeply disappointed" by the court ruling. According to the Oxfam-Novib director, the organisations will most likely appeal the court's decision. [NU]

(jb/gc)

Switzerland to contribute funds to secure Schengen borders

The Federal Council, Switzerland's executive branch, approved on December 6 funds intended to improve Schengen border control.

The decision was finalised after the country's lower house of parliament, the National Council, voted in favour – 105 votes for, 65 against and 21 abstentions. The funds will amount to CHF 300 million from 2021 to 2027.

"It is essential to support capacities at the external borders of the Schengen area, especially in the current migration context," Liberal-Radical Party representative Jacqueline de Quattro said.

"We pay CHF 300 million while the borders remain full of holes," said right-wing Swiss People's Party representative Erich Hess. [24heures]

(sw/gc)

British government holds inquiry about Covid-19 policies

The British government held on December 11 an inquiry over handling of Covid-19 into such areas as the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, missing WhatsApp messages, the internal culture at No. 10 Downing Street, and the decision-making process led by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak offered a heartfelt apology to those who lost loved ones and suffered during the

pandemic. He defended the government's decisions, particularly those spearheaded by Johnson. [BBC]

One of the contentious issues addressed was the missing WhatsApp messages from the COVID-19 pandemic period, with Sunak explaining the challenges he faced due to multiple phone changes and having not been advised to save communication from that time. While emphasising that he was not a prolific user of the messaging system, he highlighted that crucial communications were duly recorded elsewhere. This revelation aimed to dispel concerns about potential gaps in the historical record of key discussions [BBC] [The Guardian].

A significant portion of the inquiry focused on the controversial "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme, implemented in August 2020, offering a 50% discount on food and non-alcoholic beverages consumed at participating food businesses across the United Kingdom. The scheme, designed as a response to the economic fallout of the pandemic, faced criticism for its potential role in virus transmission.

Sunak passionately defended the initiative, arguing that its primary goal was to prevent devastating job losses in the hospitality sector, maintaining that the scheme was a measured and necessary step and gave advisers ample time to voice any concerns before its implementation [BBC].

Sir Chris Whitty's earlier testimony in the COVID-19 enquiry focused on the communication failure related to the concept of herd immunity. Whitty clarified that herd immunity was never a government policy, and discussions surrounding it caused confusion among the public. The Chief Medical Officer for England stressed that opting for herd immunity was inconceivable and would have led to an extremely high death toll from the virus [The Guardian].

Wales accusations

Sunak also denied accusations that Wales was treated differently during the pandemic in 2020 and Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales, alleged that in October 2020, during the Welsh firebreak, the Treasury had turned down requests to boost wage subsidies. However, the wage subsidies were increased after England announced its lockdown in November 2020. Drakeford cites that wage support stood at 60% in October but was uplifted to its earlier level of 80% in November. BBC

"It demonstrated that the four nations of the UK were to be treated differently by HM Treasury. It was, in

effect, acting as a Treasury for England, not a Treasury for the UK," said Drakeford. "The Chancellor... refused to fund the consequences of a public health decision taken in Wales."

Sunak denied the allegations, stating that the decision was ahead of new spending decisions in England.

"The UK government demonstrated through the pandemic that there was incredible benefit for the people in Wales and indeed Scotland and Northern Ireland of being part of the United Kingdom," Sunak said. BBC

(sl-ha/gc)

British foreign minister warns Scottish first minister after meeting with Erdogan

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron has threatened to withdraw cooperation with Scottish ministers after Scottish First Minister Humza Yousaf met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at COP28 in the United Arab Emirates without a government official present.

In a letter obtained by the BBC, Cameron wrote to the Scottish National Party's External Affairs Secretary Angus Robertson, calling the meeting a breach of protocol. Under the Scotland Act, the presence of a UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) official is necessary. [BBC]

The letter said that the Scottish government had assured the FCDO that it would provide "sufficient advance notice" to the government before the meeting but had failed to do so and conducted the meeting regardless.

The letter added that any further breaches of protocol would result in "no further FCDO facilitation of meetings or logistical support" and the reconsideration of "the presence of Scottish government offices in UK government posts." [BBC]

A representative of the Scottish government said: "The nature of events such as COP is that timings can change at the last minute, and the FCDO representative was elsewhere at the time." He added: "Any threat by the UK government to curtail the Scottish government's international engagement is misguided and would work against Scotland's interests." [TheGuardian]

James Cleverly made a similar threat when he was foreign secretary after Yousaf met the Icelandic prime minister in August, again without UK diplomats. [TheGuardian]

Yousaf discussed the climate crisis and the Israel-Gaza conflict with Erdogan. Yousaf has been highly critical of the British government's full support of Israel and its military invasion of the Gaza Strip. [AlJazeera]

(sl/gc)

Sunak announces new GBP 38,700 minimum income visa rule

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced plans to increase the minimum income to GBP 38,700 yearly for a migrant seeking to bring his family to the United Kingdom starting in 2025.

Home Secretary James Cleverly announced plans on December 4 to increase the current GBP 18,600 minimum income required for migrants on worker's visas to bring dependents. On December 21, the government announced that the increase would occur in two stages.

In early 2024, the minimum income will increase to GBP 29,000, and the final threshold of GBP 38,700 will be applied in 2025. Healthcare workers and education are exempted from this.

According to the UK Home Office, this is to "ensure people only bring dependants to the UK they can support financially." [UKGOV]

"The principle here is absolutely right that if people are bringing dependents into this country as part of their family, they must be able to support them," Sunak said. "The levels of migration are far too high." [BBC]

Sunak's conservative Tory Party criticised the initial decision to increase the minimum income to GBP 29,000 only in spring 2024.

The United Kingdom is set for elections in 2024, and Sunak has taken a firm stance to reduce immigration. Sunak has faced criticism from certain factions of the Tory Party following data being released that the inward migration in the UK had been 745,000 in the year 2022. [Guardian]

(sl/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Azerbaijani president calls for snap election

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has called for a snap presidential election in February. On December 7, Azerbaijan's presidential website said that the election scheduled for 2025 would be held in early 2024. The announcement did not share a reason.

Aliyev, who was last re-elected in 2018 for a seven-year term, has seen a surge in popularity after Azerbaijan took over the region of Nagorno-Karabakh after a nine-month blockade. [AlJazeera]

Polls have shown that Aliyev is set to win the election, given his popularity. As the result of a constitutional referendum in 2009, there is no limit on the number of terms he may serve. [AzerNews] [Reuters]

Independent political analyst Zardusht Alizade said Aliyev scheduled the elections before Russia's election in March 2024 to "neutralise and minimise possible Russian influence on the elections." [APNews]

Ari Kerimli, leader of the opposition People's Front of Azerbaijan Party, said that calling for an early election without a public debate was a sign that the authorities "are afraid of political competition even in this repressive atmosphere." [APNews]

(sl/gc)

Azerbaijan will host COP29 summit in 2024

Azerbaijan will host the climate change summit, COP 29, in 2024 after winning backing from other Eastern European nations.

According to UN rules of a rotating presidency, Eastern European countries were poised to host the summit and were responsible for unanimously electing a government. Armenia, the only country blocking the bid, retracted its stance and supported Azerbaijan as a symbol of the peace process on December 7. [Reuters]

On December 9, Azerbaijan welcomed the opportunity to host the summit.

"We're very grateful to all countries, in particular to the Eastern European group and the [COP28 summit] host United Arab Emirates for their support," Azerbaijan's Ecology Minister Mukhtar Babayev said in an address at COP28. [Reuters]

Baku's bid will still have to be voted on by the entire COP plenary, but that is usually a formality. [Politico]

Climate activists have raised concerns due to Azerbaijan's dependence on oil production for its economy. According to the US government's International Trade Administration, oil and gas production accounted for nearly half of Azerbaijan's GDP and more than 92.5% of its export revenue. [OC-Media] [TheGuardian].

(sl/gc)

Estonian minister criticises ban of pro-Palestine rally

Interior Minister Lauri Laanemets (SDE) criticised the police's decision to ban the pro-Palestine demonstration in Tartu. He expressed concerns about the perceived overreaction by the Estonian Police and Border Guard (PPA), emphasising the importance of upholding the constitutional right to freedom of expression. [ERR]

Laanemets contended that the police's decision to ban the pro-Palestine demonstration was an overreaction. He argued that the police were overly concerned about the slogans that participants might bring, pointing out that individuals detained and fined after a similar event in Tallinn were not Estonian residents.

He also stressed the constitutional protection of freedom of expression and highlighted the police's role in ensuring the security of all individuals expressing their opinions. [ERR]

The Legal Framework

The PPA initially banned public meetings in support of Palestinians in November this year, citing a legal provision prohibiting meetings that incite hatred and violence. The decision was based on concerns about potential placards containing justifications for aggression. However, the ban was later lifted, and the demonstration took place on December 2 after the police and organisers reportedly misunderstood each other initially. [ERR]

Laanemets questioned the justification for banning the demonstration, emphasising that the possibility of unknown slogans is insufficient grounds for prohibition. He acknowledged the complexities of the global Palestine-Israeli conflict and the need for a balanced approach to ensure both freedom of speech and the safety of demonstrators.

He also acknowledged the concerns from earlier demonstrations in Tallinn, where alleged foreign protestors expressed firm views. [ERR]

The Tartu Administrative Court recently rejected an appeal against the PPA's decision to ban the planned demonstration on November 17, 2023.

The court deemed the appeal lacking preventive interest since the PPA had allowed a public meeting on December 2, 2023, following the initial refusal. The complainant sought to declare that the decision was null and void or unlawful. The court's decision implies that the PPA's actions were justified, but an appeal against this ruling can be filed with the Tartu District Court within 15 days. [ERR News]

The ban on the pro-Palestine demonstration in Tartu has sparked a debate, with Laanemets criticising the police response as an overreaction. The legal framework, concerns about placard content, and recent court decisions have added complexity to the situation.

As the controversy continues, the balance between protecting public safety and upholding constitutional rights remains a central point of discussion in Estonia. [ERR]

(ha/gc)

Estonia approves updated stance on EU enlargement

Estonia's European Union Affairs Committee, in collaboration with Foreign Affairs Minister Margus Tsahkna, approved on December 8 the nation's updated stance on EU enlargement.

Estonia affirmed its support for prompt accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova and indicated a willingness to endorse Georgia's candidacy, contingent on alignment with EU foreign policy. The committee acknowledged Kosovo's diplomatic efforts to ease tensions and voluntary alignment with EU anti-Russia sanctions. [ERR News]

The committee also expressed readiness to support Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession negotiations, conditional on meeting specific criteria. Committee Chair Liisa Pakosta emphasised the importance of the rule of law, calling for annual legal assessments and cautioning against EU federalisation without a clear mandate.

The committee highlighted the need for an in-depth analysis of the impact of EU enlargement on Estonia. Discussions on the next steps in EU enlargement are scheduled for the European Council meeting in Brussels. Minister of Foreign Affairs Margus Tsahkna and Siiri Konigsberg attended the meeting, where the government positions on the European Commission's 2023 communication on EU enlargement policy were adopted [ERR News].

(ha/gc)

Georgia approves 2024 state budget

Georgia announced its annual budget on December 15 with a forecast of economic growth of 5.2 % and an average inflation rate of
2.8%. [Agenda.Ge] [ParliamentofGeorgia]

The government has forecast a budget deficit of 2.5% of gross domestic product, bringing total government debt to 38% of the GDP, according to Minister of Finance Lasha Khutsishvili. [Agenda.Ge]

Georgia has allocated 10% of its budget for defence and security. The government allocated USD 5.6 million to assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants and USD 1.1 million for the management of

labour, health, and social protection programs for IDPs from the occupied territories [CivilGeorgia]

Pensions for former law enforcement representatives will increase to USD 372 per month. Families of soldiers who lost their lives in the line of duty will receive monthly compensation of up to USD 446. [CivilGeorgia]

Georgia has committed USD 26 million to construct a port project in ANAKLIA. [RadioFreeEurope]

(sl/gc)

Georgian teachers protest education ministry hiring practices

Georgia's teachers have criticised the Ministry of Education for allegedly selecting directors for public schools based on political affiliation.

On December 4, two teachers met Minister of Education Giorgi Amilakhvari after six months of protest, alleging that candidates who were critical of the ruling Georgian Dream Party were blocked from senior positions despite having the necessary qualifications. [CivilGeorgia]

Twenty-six candidates said they were "blocked" in the second round of the selection process and have challenged their rejection in court with the support of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED). [CivilGeorgia]

In their meeting with the Minister of Education, the two teachers, Maia Ekaladze and Davit Peradze, who were on hunger strikes, demanded that the ministry admit that the selection process for school principals was unfair and that the positions were allocated selectively.

Amilakhvari denied these allegations, saying the protests were politically motivated to damage "the important reforms we have begun in the education system." [CivilGeorgia]

Ekaladze and Peradze said that they would continue to protest since they "did not receive convincing, unequivocal, timely answers." [NetGazeti]

On December 12, Amilakhvari said: "In the near future, completely fair, inclusive, transparent competitions will be announced in the remaining schools where the selection did not take place, and all interested people who have certification, or want to obtain certification,

everyone - I emphasise, we will give the opportunity to enter the competition." [NetGazeti]

(sl/gc)

Latvian authorities detain three for suspected human trafficking

Latvian authorities have apprehended three individuals in connection with suspected human trafficking at an Indian restaurant, LSM reported on December 15.

According to information obtained by LSM, the State Police initiated the investigation after receiving reports of illegal employment and potential human trafficking at the establishment. Two Indian citizens holding legal residence permits were reportedly exploited for five months, enduring forced labour and harsh conditions.

Following a joint operation with the State Labour Inspectorate on October 19, law enforcement officers discovered the victims, leading to the arrests of three suspects on November 27.

The detainees include two Latvian women and one Indian man, all without prior criminal records. As revealed by LSM, the victims had their passports confiscated, were forced to work as cooks for 12 hours a day without pay, and were compelled to stay overnight at the restaurant [LSM] [Baltic News Network].

Criminal proceedings, by Section 154.1 of the Criminal Law addressing human trafficking committed by a group with prior agreement, have been initiated. The victims, now relocated to non-governmental institutions, will receive the necessary assistance, underscoring the authorities' commitment to combating human trafficking and ensuring the well-being of victims [LSM].

(ha/gc)

Lithuania's pledge compensation for expropriated Jewish property

Lithuania's parliament approved EUR 37 million in compensation for Jewish private property seized during World War II.

The amended Law on Good Will Compensation for the Property of Jewish Religious Communities garnered support from 72 MPs, with only six in opposition and two abstentions.

The funds will be administered by the GoodWill Foundation, providing individual pay-outs ranging from EUR 5 to 10 millions for property losses. Applications for compensation, open until December 31, 2023, cater to those who lack legal avenues to reclaim ownership. The move was praised by the US government as an important step in recognising the Holocaust's impact [BNN] [JTA].

The decision follows a similar initiative in Latvia,, allowing Holocaust survivors to apply for one-time payments until the year-end.· Both Baltic nations, having a significant jewish population and history, address a longstanding issue, 80 years after expropriation. The compensation programs signify a noteworthy shift for those who suffered immeasurable losses during the Holocaust [BNN] [JTA].

(ha/gc)

Missing Russian opposition leader reemerges in gulag in Arctic Circle

Prominent opposition leader and principal rival to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Alexei Navalny, has reappeared after losing all contact with his lawyers and associates.

According to one of Navalny's lawyers, he was barred from meeting with Navalny on December 6 at IK-6 Melekhovo, the central Russian penal colony about 140 miles east of Moscow, where the 47-year-old lawyer and activist was serving a 19-year sentence for extremism. [The Wall Street Journal] [AP]

On December 25, associates of Navalny say they were finally about to track him to another prison colony in the town of Kharp, located north of the Arctic Circle in Russia's Yamalo-Nenets region.

The prison is about 1,200 miles northeast of Moscow and around 60 miles from the infamous Vorkuta coal mines- one of the most notorious Soviet Gulags. [AP]

Navalny confirmed he was transferred to the prison in Yamalo-Nenets- nicknamed "the Polar Wolf"- in a post on X the following day.

"I am your new Santa Claus," a mordant but seemingly good-humoured Navalny said. "Unfortunately, there are no reindeer, but there are huge fluffy, and very beautiful shepherd dogs. I now live above the Arctic Circle." [The Wall Street Journal]

Navalny wrote that he "was transported with such precaution and on such a strange route (Vladimir- Moscow- Chelyabinsk- Ekaterinburg- Kirov- Vorkuta- Kharp) that I didn't expect anyone to find me here before mid-January."

According to CNN, the 20-day trek covered over 3,700 miles in total. [The Wall Street Journal] [CNN]

Navalny's spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, told the Associated Press (AP) that he is "fine — at least as much as possible after such a long stage" and confirmed that a lawyer has since visited him.

Yet concern remains over Navalny's situation. Leonid Volkov, Navalny's chief strategist, expressed on X, "It is almost impossible to get to this colony; it is almost impossible to even send letters there. This is the highest possible level of isolation from the world." [AP]

Yarmysh says Navalny's relocation was a purposeful and political act to stifle the opposition leader's reach ahead of Russia's presidential elections scheduled for March 17.

"They deliberately sent him to this particular colony precisely in order to isolate Alexei as much as possible so as not to give him any opportunity to communicate with the outside world," Yarmysh explained in a December 26 X post.

"This is all happening precisely because Alexei, despite the fact that he is in prison, is still the main opponent of Vladimir Putin ... It is not surprising that they began to transfer him to another colony right now, so that he could not interfere with Putin's campaign." [AP] [The Wall Street Journal]

In 2020, Navalny spent five months in Germany recovering after being poisoned with what German authorities confirmed was a nerve agent characteristic of the Soviet-era. Navalny and his supporters accused the Kremlin of an attempt on his life, while Moscow denied any involvement in the poisoning. [AP]

(cqk/gc)

Ukraine's parliament amends minority rights laws following EU advice

The Ukrainian parliament has approved legislation that will amend restrictive minority language laws. During his nightly address, President Zelenksyy said that his government made the changes to follow EU recommendations.

President Zelenksy suggested Kyiv had now "done everything expected" and wished to see progress on Ukraine's accession to the EU. [Reuters]

Within the new ruling, minority languages that are official languages of the European Union will be granted more freedom. It addressed laws, put into action in late 2022, that stipulated 70% of all education above a fifth-grade level and 90% of published material must be in Ukrainian. [CPG] [Wilson Center]

In both secondary and private higher education, minority languages will be fully guaranteed as long as the state language, Ukrainian, is used in tandem. The rights to use minority languages in media and publishing will also greatly expand. [Ukrainska Pravda] [Babel]

The amendments extend to Russian, which lawmakers describe as "the language of the aggressor." Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine's deputy chief of European integration, said "additional safeguards" would also be included in the bill to prevent the spread of "Russian propaganda and disinformation." [Ukrainska Pravda]

(md/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Greece gives migrants work permits to tackle labour shortage

Greek lawmakers approved a bill allowing migrants to obtain a three-year residency and work permit, a step to tackle labour shortages in key sectors of an economy recovering from a debt crisis.

Greece has been a gateway to the European Union for thousands of migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe. Many of them have ended up working illegally, in sectors such as construction, farming and tourism. [Reuters] [TheProvince]

The Greek government is focusing on migrants who have already been in Greece for three years or more, have not been involved in organised crime or other criminal deeds and have been offered a job. They can apply for a work permit by December 2024. The government will try, by giving them work permits, to fill positions that unemployed Greeks don't want to cover. [Kathimerini]

After emerging from three international bailouts in 2018, Greece, like other European peers, was also hit by an exodus of workers from the labour force during the 2020-21 COVID pandemic, many of whom have never returned.

The conservative government, which was re-elected in June and has toughened Greece's policy to curb migration by hiring more border guards and increasing patrols, estimates that roughly 300,000 undocumented migrants now live in the country. [Reuters]

An estimated 30,000 people – many of them from Albania, Georgia, Pakistan, and the Philippines – are likely to apply for the new type of permit, government officials have said.

"We don't want invisible people," State Minister Akis Skertsos [Kathimerini] [Kathimerini]

(st/gc)

Greek government is working on same-sex marriage bill

The Greek government is working on finalising a bill to legalise same-sex marriages. One issue that still stands

is the right for same-sex couples to adopt children, with adoption rights to both men and women. [Balkan Insight]

The earlier lack of legal provision for same-sex couples resulted in Greece being condemned in 2013 by the European Court of Human Rights. Same-sex civil partnerships in Greece have been legally allowed since 2015. [Balkan Insight]

Prime Minister of Greece Kyriakos Mitsotakis was one out of 19 conservatives, and out of 75 total, who voted for the bill. [Kathimerini]

(st/gc)

Greece: Bomb defused during Athen riots

While Greek police union members were recently protesting in Athens against violence towards officers, a bomb was placed within the riot police headquarters. The bomb was defused before it exploded. [ABC News] [AP News]

An anonymous caller informed one of the local newspapers about the bomb. It was also placed near a university campus.

"The explosive device was found inside a plastic container, in a black bag, during a search of the premises about 100 metres from the entrance gate." [Kathemerini]

Previously, such bomb alerts and attacks have been associated with far-left militants in Greece. The Greek Riot Police Department is known to be frequently attacked by demonstrators at public squares or during major sports events. [ABC News]

According to reports, the device contained C4 explosives and gelatin dynamite, and consisted of a watch and two switches." [Kathimerini]

(st/gc)

Turkish lawmaker dies shortly after a speech in parliament

A Turkish member of parliament died after criticising Israel for its war in Gaza during an impassioned speech.

Deputy Hasan Bitmez from the Saadet Party died in Ankara City Hospital at the age of 53 on December 14. He was the chairman of the Centre for Islamic Union Research and worked for non-governmental organisations.

During his speech in the parliament, he criticised Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's strategy of ongoing trade with Israel despite the conflict with Hamas and Erdogan's stances over the conflict.

During the meeting, he was reported placing a banner saying "Murder Israel; collaborator AKP", and in his speech, he said: "You allow ships to go to Israel, and you shamelessly call it trade. You are Israel's accomplice." [Reuters]

After he concluded his speech, he fainted and fell on the floor.

BBC News said that he received first aid before the medical crew arrived. He was brought to the hospital, where he received treatment. BBC also reported that Bitmez was already in particular conditions, with diabetes and having had two heart stents. [FoxNews]

(vt/gc)

Turkish Airlines orders 220 Airbus aircraft

Turkish Airlines has ordered more than 200 Airbus aircraft to increase tourism. The order included 220 aircraft, 70 long-distance A350 jets and 150 single-aisle A321neo aeroplanes.

The event is part of a "milestone" agreement to increment Turkey as an international hub, and it is worth 10 billion USD. [FinancialTimes]

Turkish Airlines chief executive Bilal Eksi explained on social media that the order could include more aircraft, reaching 355. Turkish Airlines said in a separate corporate document that purchases are part of a "strategic plan" for 2023-2033. [RFI]

Considering the current economic trends in Turkey, deeply affected by inflation, Turkey is seeking to achieve foreign currency inflows in its territory to tackle account deficits.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan seeks to make Istanbul airport, which is already one of the world's most trafficked airports, a significant aviation hub. [FinancialTimes]

(vt/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Climate change activists hold string of protests against gov't

Italian environmental activists staged a series of protests around the country in December against the hard-right government led by Giorgia Meloni, accusing it of lack of action on climate change. [ANSA] [Associated Press] [CNN]

In recent months, Italy has faced severe flooding and violent mudslides. In November, the government declared a state of emergency in the central-western Tuscany region following floods and storms. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Climate activists from the Ultima Generazione (Last Generation) group sprayed mud and chocolate milk on the facade of St. Mark's Basilica, an iconic church in Venice, north-eastern Italy, on December 7.

Activists displayed a banner that read "Reparation fund", urging Meloni's government to allocate EUR 20 billion in compensation for damage to Italian communities caused by extreme weather. They cited the threat of rising sea levels in Venice and mudslides from earlier this year. [Independent] [Associated Press]

Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro criticised the protest, calling it a "shameful and serious" act of vandalism. He added that while climate activists have a right to protest, they must "respect the law and our cultural and religious patrimony." [Independent]

Meanwhile, demonstrators from the global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion dyed the water in Venice's Grand Canal green on December 9, in protest at what they said was a lack of progress at the COP28 UN climate summit in Dubai, an international climate change conference. [Reuters] [CNN]

Extinction Rebellion protestors also used fluorescent dye to change the colour of other rivers and canals in Italian cities, including the Po River in Turin in the north and Rome's Tiber River. [CNN]

Authorities intervened in another protest on December 12, when Last Generation activists blocked traffic on four bridges in the centre of Rome. Demonstrators held banners accusing Meloni's government of failing to minimise climate change. [ANSA]

(ao/pk)

Italian right-wing lawmakers reject minimum wage bill

Italy's ruling right-wing parties have rejected a bill put forward by the opposition that aimed to establish a national minimum wage of EUR 9 per hour.

Following lawmakers' decision to defeat the bill, leftist opposition leader Elly Schlein said: "It is a sad day for the Republic...We would like to know why [Prime Minister Giorgia] Meloni is so angry with the poor." [Euractiv]

Former premier Giuseppe Conte, the leader of the once anti-establishment Five Star Movement, said that Italian lawmakers who rejected the minimum wage bill "have turned their backs on 3.6 million workers." [Yahoo]

Italian deputies on December 6 voted 153-118 in favour of granting hard-right Prime Minister Meloni's government an additional six months to enact alternative "fairer" pay measures in the country, instead of establishing a national minimum wage. [BNN] [Euractiv]

The decision on the minimum wage bill has divided unions, with one of the country's largest, CGIL, saying that right-wing deputies had made a "serious error".

But another major trade union, CISL, has backed the rejection of the minimum wage measure due to concerns that it would have reduced the powers of trade unions. [Yahoo]

Italy is one of five EU nations where national wages are determined solely by collective bargaining between employers and trade unions. [BNN]

According to opinion polls, 70% of Italians, including some of those who voted for Meloni's nationalist government, are in favour of a national minimum wage.

(ao/pk)

Italian lawmakers reject reform of EU bailout fund, causing divisions

The Italian parliament on December 21 rejected a reform to the euro zone's bailout fund by 184 votes to 72, causing tensions with Brussels and dividing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right coalition government.

The fund, established in 2012 to aid EU member states' economies, was modified in 2021 through the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) treaty. The changes were approved by all euro zone countries except Italy, without whose backing the treaty cannot enter into force. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv]

Despite calls from EU partners for Rome to ratify the reforms, Meloni has repeatedly criticised the fund's austerity measures, arguing that they might trigger a renegotiation of the nation's public debt terms.

According to Reuters, a source from Meloni's office said that Italy's rejection might prompt the EU to modify the treaty to better suit the euro zone's needs.

During the parliamentary vote, Meloni's ruling right-wing Brothers of Italy party and the League, a partner in the governing coalition, opposed the treaty. But a total of 44 MPs from the Brothers of Italy and the centre-right Forza Italia party, which is also in the governing coalition, abstained. [Bloomberg] [Euractiv]

(ao/pk)

Italian court jails couple for life over daughter's 'honour killing'

An Italian court in the northern city of Reggio Emilia on December 19 sentenced a Pakistani couple to lifetime imprisonment for the murder of their 18-year-old daughter, who had refused an arranged marriage. [BBC] [Reuters]

The victim's father, Shabbar Abbas pleaded innocent. According to Italian media reports, he told the court on December 19: "This trial is not complete. I too want to know who killed my daughter." [Reuters]

The girl's uncle, Danish Hasnain, received 14 years in prison for involvement in the so-called "honour killing", while two cousins were acquitted.

"Honour killings" occur when it is believed that a woman has brought shame to her family. According to tradition in some parts of the world, male family members are allowed to kill both the woman and any unrelated men with whom she had interactions.

Following her disappearance in 2021, Saman Abbas' body was found in northern Italy in November 2022.

Her father was arrested in Pakistan and extradited for trial in Italy in August 2023. The victim's mother, Nazia Shaheen, was tried in absentia. According to Italian media reports, she is believed to be hiding in Pakistan. [BBC]

Italian investigators said that Saman Abbas' parents had wanted her to travel to Pakistan for an arranged marriage in 2020. Prosecutors also said the victim's parents were angered after discovering she had a partner in Italy. They added that the teenager was murdered after being tricked into returning to her family home in northern Italy in 2021. [Reuters]

In a separate case, the murder of a female university student by her former partner ignited a wave of protests and demonstrations across Italy in November. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(ao/pk)

Far-right activists convicted for invading union offices in protest at Covid rules

An Italian court has convicted the head of the far-right New Force party and six other activists for invading union offices during a violent protest in 2021 against the former government's requirement for workers to have Covid-19 vaccination certificates. [Associated Press] [thelocal.it/AFP]

New Force leader Roberto Fiore was on December 20 found guilty of multiple charges including resisting public officials and an aggravated charge of causing devastation. He was sentenced to eight-and-a-half years in jail by a court in Rome.

The other six convicted defendants received prison sentences of over eight years. All denied the charges against them and claimed that the protest was peaceful. [Associated Press] [thelocal.it/AFP]

In October 2021, some 10,000 protesters gathered in Rome to oppose the then centre-left government's decree requiring employees to have Covid vaccine certificates to be able to return to work.

As the rally turned violent, demonstrators targeted the headquarters of the CGIL trade union, vandalising property, destroying computers and ripping out phone lines. [abcnews/Associated Press] [Il Sole 24 Ore]

Unions had supported the government's introduction of a vaccine certificate known as the "Green Pass."

(ao/pk)

Hard-right ruling party wants fines for schools banning nativity plays

Headteachers face fines and disciplinary action if they ditch school nativity plays during Christmas under a bill backed by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right Brothers of Italy party. [Telegraph] [ANSA]

Since Meloni came to power in 2022, her government has championed traditional family values and advocated preserving the national identity while also seeking to restrict immigration. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

The Brothers of Italy party on December 20 proposed a change in the law to make Christian Christmas traditions mandatory in schools. [ANSA]

Senator Lavinia Mennuni from the Brothers of Italy, who introduced the bill to the Senate, said: "It is absolutely fundamental to safeguard and protect our

cultural roots, of which the nativity scene is the perfect example." [Telegraph]

However, the move has run into criticism. Antonello Giannelli, the president of the ANP national headteachers' association, said: "The traditions of the country must certainly be borne in mind, but to impose them by law is out of place." [ANSA]

Meanwhile, Gianna Fracassi, secretary-general of CGIL, one of Italy's major trade unions, said: "Everyone must remember that we live in a secular country, school is secular. Actions like this which interfere, among other things, with the autonomy of schools, are not acceptable." [Telegraph]

(ao/pk)

Portugal's Socialists pick new leader after PM quits amid scandal

Former Transport Minister Pedro Nuno Santos was on December 16 chosen to lead Portugal's Socialist Party, which will try to put a corruption scandal behind it as it prepares to contest an early parliamentary election called for March.

Nuno Santos has taken over as Socialist Party chief from Antonio Costa, who was forced to resign as prime minister.

Costa, a Socialist who had been premier since 2015, quit on November 7 after prosecutors detained his chief of staff in an investigation into alleged graft over the way the government handled lithium and hydrogen projects. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Santos, 46, who was minister of transport from 2015 to 2022, comes from the left wing of the Socialist party. His political career has seen hiccups after several controversies.

He was forced to resign as a government minister a year ago due to a scandal caused by the payment of EUR 500,000 in severance money to an administrator of the national airline TAP while the carrier was the subject of a restructuring plan.

After a political crisis triggered by the corruption scandal in Costa's government, the Portuguese Socialist Party appears shaky compared to the Social Democratic Party, which observers say is the favourite to win the March elections. [Mediapart] [Ouest France]

(tn/pk)

Spain aims to phase out nuclear power by 2035

The Spanish government has announced that it plans to close all nuclear power plants in the country by 2035.

As nuclear energy requires investment in ageing infrastructure, the government's move is part of a package of policies that aim to speed up a transition to cheaper renewable sources of power such as solar and wind. [Reuters]

The nuclear phase-out is scheduled to begin in 2027, with the first units to be shut by November of that year. [BNN]

Decommissioning Spain's nuclear facilities is set to cost EUR 20.2 billion, with money coming from a special fund that plant operators have contributed to. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the government has announced measures to promote renewable power, such as altering rules governing the creation of new renewable energy projects. [BNN]

These initiatives seek to replace the 20% share of Spain's energy supply that currently comes from nuclear energy.

This policy has caused divisions in the Spanish parliament, with the opposition conservative People's Party criticising it and vowing to reverse the nuclear phase-out if elected. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Head of far-right Vox party under fire for suggesting PM could be hanged

Politicians in Spain have condemned the leader of the far-right opposition Vox party for saying that voters will want to hang Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez.

Vox chief Santiago Abascal said in an interview with Argentinian newspaper Clarin: "There will come a time when the people will want to hang him (Sanchez) by his feet."

Sanchez's team filed a complaint with Spain's attorney general, calling for Abascal to be prosecuted for "hate crime" and "insults, slander and serious threats against the government."

Vox, along with the mainstream conservative opposition People's Party (PP), has fuelled mass demonstrations against Sanchez's Socialist-led government and the premier's controversial agreement to grant Catalan separatists an amnesty. [FranceTvInfo] [AA]

Sanchez in November secured a majority in parliament, allowing him a second term in office, after promising an amnesty for separatists convicted following the north-eastern Catalonia region's failed attempt at independence in 2017. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Socialist Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares called on the People's Party to break its coalition agreements with Vox in cities and regions where the two govern jointly. [AA]

(tn/pk)

Spanish economy minister takes over as chief of European Investment Bank

Spanish Economy Minister Nadia Calviño has been appointed the new president of the European Investment Bank (EIB) after gaining the support of EU finance ministers. [Financial Times]

She was picked above her main rival for the post, Margrethe Vestager, the EU's competition commissioner.

Calviño, a senior figure in the governing Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, has been economy minister since 2018 and a deputy prime minister since July 2021. She took over as president of the EIB on January 1.

Following the confirmation of her appointment on December 8, Calviño said her priorities in her new role would be financing the green transition, offering financial assistance for the reconstruction of Ukraine, and bolstering Europe's role on the global stage. [Politico]

The EIB is the lending arm of the European Union, funding infrastructure projects and climate initiatives across the bloc.

(jt/pk)

Spanish Catholic Church audit identifies over 2,000 clerical sex abuse victims

An audit commissioned by the Catholic Church in Spain into child sexual abuse by clergymen and non-clerical staff has identified a total of 1,383 complaints and 2,056 victims so far. [Reuters/Straits Times]

The findings of the audit, which was ordered by the Church from a private law firm, were published on December 21, with the figures a fraction of those estimated by a separate independent commission earlier last year.

The Spanish Bishops' Conference, a top Catholic body, acknowledged that the data in the audit for the Church "will never be definitive". In a statement, it said that some cases occurred too long ago to come to light, while some victims were not willing to disclose their experiences. [Reuters]

The audit followed a report by an independent commission – a body that was approved by Spain's parliament – which was made public in October 2023.

The latter estimated more than 200,000 children had been sexually abused by Spanish Catholic clergy since the 1940s. [The Guardian]

Spain's national ombudsman, Angel Gabilondo, said that the number of those abused rose to more than 400,000 when cases perpetrated by lay members of the Church were included. [The Guardian]

Those estimates had been refuted by the Church authorities in Spain, which said in a statement that the figures "do not correspond to the truth". [AFP/France 24]

(jt/pk)

International schools in Spain receive bomb threats

A string of international schools in Spain on December 18 received bomb threats by email which the government described as hoaxes.

Several of the schools were inspected by police with sniffer dogs. El Mundo newspaper reported that

threats were sent to 18 international schools across the country. [Reuters]

The French embassy in Spain said in a statement that it "remains very vigilant... and asks all school management teams of the French school network in Spain to show increased vigilance." [Reuters] [EuroNews]

(tn/pk)

Cardinal given jail term in embezzlement case

Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu, the first ever churchman of his rank to be prosecuted in the Vatican's criminal court, has been found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison.

The verdict, issued on December 16, concludes what the Vatican said was the "longest and most complex trial ever experienced by the Holy See." [Vatican News]

After a lengthy investigation that included the Pope expanding the powers of the prosecutors, the trial began on March 1, 2022. There were 49 charges against 14 defendants – four companies and ten individuals – that ranged from embezzlement to fraud, money-laundering, corruption and abuse of office. [Vatican News]

The charges were related to three separate incidents. The first, known as the "London Affair", involved financial transactions on a luxury property in the heart of London. Prosecutors described this as a "highly speculative operation" that resulted in the loss of at least EURO 139 million for the Vatican.

The second involved Church funds transferred to the private bank accounts of Cardinal Becciu's brother for the purchase of a bakery in a project aiming to employ marginalized youth. The funds went instead into the local diocese's coffers.

The third centred on Cecilia Marogna, a private security contractor who was paid by the Vatican to secure the release of a Catholic nun kidnapped by jihadists but who spent the money on luxury goods.

Cardinal Becciu's lawyer has said he will appeal the verdict. [AP] [Vatican News] [The Pillar]

(ar/pk)

Church can bless same-sex couples, says Vatican

A declaration released by the Vatican, approved by Pope Francis, has opened the possibility of the Catholic Church blessing same-sex couples, triggering strong and mixed reactions around the world.

However, the Holy See has been clear that the Church's teaching on marriage has not changed and what's possible is a blessing not of the union of same-sex couples, but of the people themselves. [The Vatican]

Church leaders in Germany, Belgium and Austria have welcomed the announcement. In an interview with the media, the Flemish bishops' spokesman said: "This is a very big breakthrough because it comes from the highest body of the Church and because it also explicitly says that same-sex couples can… have the blessing." [The Pillar]

But churchmen in other countries have spoken out against the development, including in Africa, where Catholics tend to be more conservative than in Western Europe.

The British Confraternity of Catholic Clergy said that "from our own experience as pastors we conclude that such blessings are pastorally and practically inadmissible." [NCR] [NYTimes] NCR]

The declaration by the Vatican was made via an official document called "Fiducia supplicans" published on December 18 by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – the department of the Holy See in charge of the teachings of the Church.

(ar/pk)

Pope Francis announces he won't be buried at the Vatican

Pope Francis has disclosed that he plans to be buried at St. Mary Major Basilica in Rome, rather than St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

The pope has a strong connection with St. Mary Major Basilica, visiting it to pray before and after his international trips.

It has been a recent tradition – since 1903 – for popes to be buried at St. Peter's. However, it is not

uncommon for pontiffs to be buried elsewhere. There are six popes buried in St. Mary Major Basilica, the last being Clement IX, who was laid to rest there in 1669. [USCCB]

Pope Francis, 87, in late November began suffering from a bronchial infection, which caused him to cancel his planned trip to the United Arab Emirates to attend the COP28 global climate conference in early December. He has since recovered and is in good health, according to the Holy See. [Vatican News]

(ar/pk)

Vatican scientist: COP28 outcome too soft but still a breakthrough

A top scientist at the Vatican has said that the outcome of the COP28 global climate summit in Dubai was "softer" than what Pope Francis had been calling for, but that it was still a "pleasant surprise".

Nearly 200 parties, including 154 governments, signed an agreement – known as the 'stocktake' – at the end of the summit on December 13 that included a pledge to "transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero [emissions] by 2050 in keeping with the science." [UN]

The head of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Science, Joachim Von Braun, said this fell short of Pope Francis's call for a complete end to the use of fossil fuels by 2050, and thus was "disappointing", but added that the formal agreement to phase down fossil fuels was a "breakthrough".

The pope had also been calling for a focus on poverty, and while some aspects of the issue were covered in the final COP28 agreement, this did not go far enough, according to Von Bruan.

Pope Francis had planned to attend the climate summit in Dubai and deliver an address, but his trip was cancelled due to poor health. The Vatican's Secretary of State delivered the address on his behalf. [Vatican News]

(ar/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Court says advice by agency that gives legal help to migrants is partly unconstitutional

Austria's Constitutional Court has declared that advice given by the Federal Care Agency (BBU), set up under a formergovernment to provide legal help for asylum seekers, is partly unconstitutional. [DerStandard]

The BBU, which is overseen by the Federal Interior Ministry, had been under examination by the court since 2022, amid concerns that the advice it gives to migrants is not sufficiently independent of political influence. [KleineZeitung]

The Constitutional Court ruled that the agency violates the right to an "effective legal remedy". [KleineZeitung]

The BBU was set up in 2019 under the former coalition government of the conservative Austrian People Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) to provide free legal advice to asylum seekers before court proceedings. [KleineZeitung]

FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl, under whom the agency was conceived during his time as interior minister, called the decision by the Constitutional Court "incomprehensible." [DerStandard]

Kickl said that the BBU makes clear to migrants that there is "a clear separation between the important right to asylum" and "illegal immigration from all over the world to create a cover for the right to asylum." [DerStandard]

Kickl, who has a firm anti-immigration stance, has been leading in the polls ahead of parliamentary elections due to be held in October 2024. [Euractiv]

(sl/pk)

Croatian economy minister dismissed amid alleged corruption scandal

Croatia's economy minister and a special advisor have been dismissed by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković amid a scandal allegedly involving corruption and collusion with the opposition.

Economy and Sustainable Development Minister Davor Filipović was fired on December 12 after the Nacional news outlet shared an audio recording that apparently showed his advisor Jurica Lovrinčević offering advertising space from a number of state-owned companies and institutions to a local television network.

In return, Lovrinčević demanded to be paid half the money himself, Croatian media reported. [Vijesti.hr]

Meanwhile, the Vecernji news outlet published text messages by Lovrinčević that allegedly shared confidential information from the economy ministry with a member of the opposition centre-right Most party. Vecernji reported that this information was used by Most to criticise the government. [Index.hr]

"The entire attack by Most was an orchestrated, political effort to cause damage to the government that I lead," said Plenkovic. [Vijesti.hr]

Filipovic has claimed that he was unaware of his advisor's actions. Lovrinčević has denied taking bribes. [Jutranji.hr][BalkanInsight]

(sl/pk)

Croatia violated rights of expelled stateless man, European court rules

The European Court of Human Rights has ordered Croatia to pay EUR 5,000 compensation and the same amount in costs to a stateless person who was expelled from the country after the security services deemed him a threat. [European Court of Human Rights] [Balkan Insight] [Novi list]

The man complained that he was not told why he was said to pose a security threat, meaning he could not argue against his expulsion.

The man had been granted permanent resident status in Croatia in 2008. Three years later, he applied for Croatian citizenship and was told that in order to be successful, he had to renounce his citizenship of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He did so and became a stateless person.

In 2014, he was summoned by Zagreb police and allegedly asked to provide information on the Muslim community, Balkan Insight reported. He refused.

The next year, his permanent residency in Croatia was revoked and he was ordered to leave the country.

The European Court of Human Rights ruled on December 5 that Croatia had violated his rights.

(mr/pk)

Czech student shooter kills 14, injures 25 in unprecedented rampage at Prague university

A 24-year-old Czech graduate student shot dead 14 people and wounded another 25 at his Prague university, in the country's deadliest assault in decades.

The bloodshed took place on December 21 at the Faculty of Arts building of Charles University, where the shooter was a master's student. [BBC] [The Time 2] [DW 1]

Czech President Petr Pavel, a retired NATO general, said he was "shocked" and offered "deep regret and sincere condolences" to the victims' relatives, as did the leaders of the EU, France, Germany, Slovakia and the United States. [DW 1] [FT]

Day of national mourning

Prime Minister Petr Fiala declared December 23 a day of national mourning to remember the victims. It was marked by a minute of silence, and flags on official buildings were flown at half-mast. [Reuters 2] [France 24] [BBC 3] [AP 1]

Authorities confirmed on December 22 that all 14 victims were killed inside the university building. None

of them were foreign citizens. [Independent 1] [Aljazeera 1] Earlier, the gunman had killed his father.

Interior Minister Vit Rakusan said the mass shooting was unrelated to "international terrorism" or any extremist ideology. [France 24] [FT] [AP 1]

"It's a horrible crime, something the Czech Republic has never experienced," said Rakusan, adding that the perpetrator had no accomplices. [AP 1] [Reuters 2] [DW 1]

The lone gunman was identified as David Kozak, who shot himself after armed officers cornered him on the balcony of the Faculty of Arts building. [Telegraph] [The Time 1] [Independent 1]

It was the Czech Republic's first-ever school shooting.

Kozak had owned seven legally registered firearms since the spring, including the AR-15 assault rifle that he used to fire randomly at his fellow students. [The Time 1] [CNN]

Public criticism

Czech police have been criticised for their handling of the mass shooting.

Interior Minister Rakusan said officers had lacked "particular proof or information" indicating that the suspect intended to "do something so terrible".

Police said the gunman was a high-achieving student of Polish history with no prior criminal record. [Reuters 2] [AP 1] [BBC 2]

On the day of the shooting, authorities had received a tip that the suspect had taken a train to Prague from his hometown on the outskirts of the capital to commit suicide. [The Washington Post] [Reuters 2] [The Time 3]

Soon afterwards, his father was found dead in Hostoun, a village 20 km west of Prague. Police found a device that seemed to be a bomb at their shared family home. [FT] [The Washington Post] [BBC 2] [The Time 3] [The Time 1]

Following the death of the man's father, police launched a nationwide search for the missing suspect, who was due to attend a lecture at the Faculty of Arts building at Charles University. [Reuters 2]

Officers evacuated the premises, but the gunman went to a faculty building nearby. [The Washington Post] [The Guardian 1] [Aljazeera 1] [BBC 2]

Dramatic footage was later circulated on social media showing people forced to perch on a ledge several storeys high to hide from the attack.

Media images also showed terrified crowds fleeing the building. Some students barricaded classrooms with chairs and desks to save themselves from the shooter.

More potential victims

After a search of Kozak's home, the authorities also suspect that he was involved in the killings of a 32-year-old man and his two-month-old daughter. They were found shot dead in a forest on the eastern fringes of Prague on December 15. [Reuters 2] [AP 1] [Aljazeera 1]

Authorities said that since the mass shooting, they have detained several individuals for either threatening to replicate the attack or to kill Kozak's entire family. [BBC 4] [Telegraph 2]

Relaxed gun laws

The Czech Republic, a European Union and NATO country of 10.5 million, has a low level of gun crime, despite its firearms laws being relatively relaxed compared to the rest of the EU. Over 300,000 Czechs are legal holders of some 1 million weapons for self-defence, hunting and sport. [Reuters 3]

The Speaker of the upper house of parliament, Milos Vystrcil, said the country would debate how to prevent future gun crimes. [Reuters 3]

(yl/pk)

Hungary approves jail terms for election candidates with foreign funding

The Hungarian parliament has passed a law aiming to protect the country from foreign influence, a measure critics fear will be used to silence those who oppose the nationalist government and its erosion of democratic standards. [Telex] [Reuters]

The "sovereignty bill", proposed by the ruling right-wing Fidesz party and approved by lawmakers on December 12, will punish candidates and parties running for election that receive banned foreign funding with up to three years in prison.

The law also sets up an Office for the Protection of Sovereignty, which will monitor and investigate potential cases of foreign interference. [Telex] [Reuters] [Europe in Review December 2023]

Prominent Hungarian NGOs and the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner have criticised the legislation, saying that the powers of the sovereignty office could be used as a political weapon against advocates of democratic norms. [Telex] [Reuters] [Europe in Review December 2023]

The US ambassador to Hungary has compared the bill, first proposed by the Fidesz party in November, to Russia's "foreign agent" law, which also penalizes individuals and groups with international connections. [Reuters]

Nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has denied accusations of undermining democracy, has been locked in a long-running row with the European Union, which his Fidesz party believes is attempting to impose left-wing policies on Hungary. [Telex] [Reuters] [Europe in Review December 2023]

Opposition parties fined

Meanwhile, Hungary's State Audit Office has imposed a fine of HUF 500 million (EUR 1.3 million) on opposition parties over foreign funding they received in the run-up to last year's parliamentary elections. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet] [Hungary Today]

In an investigation, the audit office found that the US organization Action For Democracy had donated around HUF 1.7 billion to opposition parties that formed a coalition known as the Everyone's Hungary Movement ahead of the elections.

An unnamed Swiss organization was also found to have donated around HUF 1 billion to the movement, which failed to unseat the nationalist government in the September 2022 vote. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet] [Hungary Today]

The audit office announced in a preliminary report that HUF 260 million of the donations was illegal, and said the opposition parties had "ignored the good-faith practice of not accepting foreign funds for election campaigns, circumventing the law in financing their coalition." [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet] [Hungary Today]

The Everyone's Hungary Movement has denied that the foreign financing was illegal. It says that the ruling Fidesz party is trying to muzzle the opposition. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

(evk/pk)

Hungarian parliament adopts tougher rules on guest workers

Lawmakers in Hungary have voted to adopt new legislation that increases regulations on guest workers and non-EU citizens seeking to enter the country. [Magyar Nemzet] [Telex]

The law, introduced to parliament by the ruling right-wing Fidesz party, includes a variety of new provisions to ensure that jobs are not being taken from the country's citizens.

Employers must check to make sure that no Hungarian will take a position before hiring a guest worker for that job, and only as many such workers can enter the country as there are vacancies. [Magyar Nemzet] [Telex]

Non-EU citizens will still be able to receive residence permits ranging from 90 days to an indefinite period based on government approval. [Telex]

Hungary's new regulations come as the country experiences both a labour shortage and a re-industrialization campaign, both of which require foreign nationals to come in and fill jobs. In 2022, the number of guest workers in Hungary increased by 81,000, and experts predict that more than 200,000 will need to be employed to meet future labour demands. [Telex]

Nationalist Hungarian politicians, meanwhile, have campaigned against guest workers entering the country. The leader of the far-right Mi Hazank (Our Homeland) party, Laszlo Toroczkai, has said it is important that "Hungary remains a Hungarian country." [Telex]

(evk/pk)

Support wanes for Hungary's ruling Fidesz party: poll

Support for Hungary's ruling right-wing Fidesz party has fallen, according to a new poll. [Telex]

The survey by the IDEA Institute, conducted between November 30 and December 13, found that Fidesz was

backed by 43% of voters, down from 52% a year ago. [Telex] [Idea Institute]

Meanwhile, only 26% of Hungarians polled indicated that they would definitely vote for Fidesz in an election, while 38% said they were undecided. In December 2022, 32% said that they would vote for Fidesz. [Telex] [Idea Institute]

It is unclear exactly why support for Fidesz has decreased. However, it may be linked to Hungary's inflation, which was the highest of all EU countries in November at 9.6%, and an economic slowdown. [Reuters]

The liberal Democratic Coalition had the highest support of all opposition parties in the latest poll, with 12% of those surveyed indicating that they would vote for the faction. [Telex]

The far-right Mi Hazank, the centrist Momentum Movement, and the satirical Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party each received around 7% of voter support in polls, meaning they would be represented in parliament if an election was held. [Telex]

The IDEA Institute's poll also showed that Prime Minister Viktor Orban, head of the Fidesz party, enjoys the highest level of support of all the country's political leaders – 37% of those surveyed said that they would like to see Orban continue in an important political position.

The next most popular figure is Gergely Karacsony, Budapest's liberal mayor, whom 29% of voters would like to continue seeing in an important political role. [Telex]

(evk/pk)

EU-friendly government sworn in, ending eight years of nationalist rule in Poland

Poland's new EU-friendly government was sworn in on December 13, ending eight years of nationalist rule and bringing hope of normalised relations between Warsaw and Brussels. [Reuters] [AP]

The new governing coalition is made up of parties ranging from the centre-right to the left, and is led by former European Council president Donald Tusk, who has returned as Polish prime minister. He previously held the position from 2007 to 2014. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

During its two terms in power, the right-wing, populist and EU-hostile Law and Justice (PiS) party had faced accusations from the bloc of democratic backsliding, introducing controversial judicial reforms and eroding women's and LGBTQ rights. The nationalists' migration policies and the tightening of the government's grip on state media were also highly criticised. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Law and Justice, which had ruled Poland since 2015, won more votes than any other single grouping in the country's October 15 parliamentary election, but failed to secure a majority. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Reuters]

Law and Justice was given the first opportunity to form a new government, with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki being sworn in for a fresh term on November 27 by President Andrzej Duda. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

However, as was widely expected, Morawiecki was unable to convince other parties to form a coalition with Law and Justice. He lost a vote of confidence on December 11, paving the way for the opposition to form a coalition government. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [AP]

Donald Tusk, who leads the centrist Civic Platform (PO) party – the largest in the new coalition government – subsequently won a vote of confidence on December 12. [AP]

President Duda – a Law and Justice ally who had tried to delay the transition of power as long as possible – then swore in Tusk and his new cabinet on December 13. [AP]

Vow to restore rule of law

The Tusk-led coalition had run an election campaign promising to reverse many of the former government's changes and rebuild positive relations with Brussels to unblock EU funds that were frozen over rule-of-law concerns. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

One of the new government's first decisions was to begin setting up commissions to probe various alleged legal abuses committed by Law and Justice during its time in power.

The Tusk administration set up a special commission to investigate Law and Justice's failed attempt to hold the 2020 presidential election as a postal vote, a move which the new ruling coalition says was illegal. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

Law and Justice – which itself also voted in favour of establishing the commission – argues that it was trying to keep citizens safe during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic and that its actions were within the law. [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

The newly appointed governing coalition has also announced plans to create commissions to probe alleged electronic surveillance of opposition figures and a visas-for-cash scandal that emerged in September. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Shakeup of propaganda machine

However, perhaps the most high-profile move Tusk's government has made since being sworn in has been its shakeup of Poland's public media.

The new culture minister, Bartlomiej Sienkiewicz, dismissed and replaced the heads of the country's state broadcasters, TVP television and Polish Radio, as well as the state press agency, PAP. [BBC News] [AP]

The TV broadcaster's 24-hour news channel, TVP Info, was also temporarily taken off-air. [Reuters]

The ruling coalition argued that the measures were necessary to restore impartiality and plurality in the public media, which had been widely accused of becoming a vitriolic government propaganda mouthpiece over years of Law and Justice rule. [DW] [BBC News]

Meanwhile, leading Law and Justice politicians, as well as President Duda, called the changes illegal and unconstitutional. [BBC News]

In a public display of opposition to the reforms, members of Law and Justice, including party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski and former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, staged a sit-in protest at TVP headquarters in Warsaw. [Euronews]

In response to the government's actions, Duda vetoed a budget-related bill, depriving public media of further funding. [DW]

This prompted Culture Minister Sienkiewicz to place TVP, Polish Radio and PAP into liquidation. [DW]

In a social media post, Sienkiewicz said: "In the current situation, such action will ensure the continued operation of these companies, allow necessary restructuring to be carried out and prevent layoffs of employees." [DW]

(ek/pk)

Populist PM plans to scrap anti-graft office, triggering protests and EU doubts

Slovakia's populist Prime Minister Robert Fico has caused concern in the US and the EU by announcing plans to abolish his country's Special Prosecutor's Office (USP), which has handled high-level cases of corruption, murder and organised crime over the past two decades.

The opposition has organised protest rallies, claiming that Fico's plans are designed to obstruct investigations into individuals linked to his leftist ruling Smer party and will undermine the rule of law. [The Guardian]

Fico's new government, appointed in October, aims to push legislation through in a fast-track procedure to disband the anti-graft office by mid-January 2024. [AP 1] [The Slovak Spectator] [TVP World]

The measure, which requires parliamentary and presidential approval, would mean that ongoing prosecutions of serious crimes would be returned to regional offices, which have not dealt with such cases for almost 20 years. [AP 1]

Fico, a polarising figure who returned to power last year on a pro-Russia platform, said on December 6 that the Special Prosecutor's Office "significantly contributed to the violation of human rights". [Bloomberg]

"The evil in the form of [USP head Daniel] Lipsic must end," said Fico, who has claimed that the office's prosecutions are politically motivated. [Reuters 1] [The Guardian] [Politico]

Lipsic said his office had itself become a political target. [The Guardian] Since 2020, the USP has charged dozens of senior officials and business people, many of whom were affiliated with Fico's Smer party during his previous tenure as prime minister.

President Zuzana Caputova, a strong advocate of liberal politics and a former anti-graft lawyer, said on December 8 that she would thwart Fico's plans to shift the prosecution of serious crimes from a national to regional level.

However, Fico's three-party ruling coalition, which has a majority in parliament, can override a presidential

veto through a simple majority. [AP 2] [Reuters 3] [Reuters 2] [The Slovak Spectator]

US, EU issue appeals

The US embassy in Bratislava released a statement urging Fico not to rush through his plans "without proper and thorough consultation with stakeholders at the national and European level".

The European Commission, the EU's executive, has asked Fico's administration to hold off from the reforms, which include cutting sentences for people who have committed some financial crimes. [Reuters 1] [Europe Monthly December 2023] [The Slovak Spectator 2]

President Caputova said that Fico was motivated by a personal agenda rather than the shortcomings of the anti-graft office, and warned that the EU could suspend funds for Slovakia. [Reuters 2] [Bloomberg]

The European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) has also raised concerns. Tine Hollevoet, an EPPO spokeswoman, said Fico's planned changes would mean that Slovakia could no longer guarantee "effective, proportionate and dissuasive criminal sanctions" for misuse of EU funds. [Euractiv] [Politico]

Fico has pledged to align with the European Commission's expectations but observers say that his plans could place Slovakia in a situation similar to neighbouring Hungary and Poland. Both nations have had EU funds frozen for eroding the independence of their court systems. [Reuters 1] [Bloomberg]

Opposition stages rallies

Slovakia's former pro-Western Prime Minister Eduard Heger flew to Brussels to convey his concerns to the European Commission. He called Fico's plans "poisonous", saying they would undermine the country's democracy. [The Guardian] [Politico]

Michal Simecka, who heads the centrist opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, said that Fico's government was aiming to ensure "impunity for people close to Smer". [Politico] [The Guardian]

Several opposition parties – including PS, the Christian Democrats and Freedom and Solidarity – organised rallies in Bratislava as thousands denounced the new government's planned changes. [Reuters 4] [The Slovak Spectator 2]

"We'll defend our democracy," Simecka said at one of the protests on December 12, calling Fico's proposals

"a pro-mafia package". [AP 3] [AP 4]

Protests also took place in smaller cities across the EU and NATO country of 5.4 million. [Reuters 4] [AP 4]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia's main opposition slams new government's 2024 budget plan

Slovakia's main opposition leader has criticised the 2024 draft budget amid concern over the country's budget deficit – the widest in the eurozone – after a series of government promises to increase welfare spending.

"It is a budget proposal that cannot be called anything other than pre-bankruptcy," Michal Simecka, the leader of the centrist opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, said on December 11. [Euractiv]

Simecka's pro-Western PS party became the strongest opposition grouping after coming second in parliamentary elections in September.

Referring to Fitch Ratings' decision to cut Slovakia's sovereign credit by one notch to A-, Simecka said that the Slovak government was set to follow Greece's path to bankruptcy with its proposed fiscal plan. [Euractiv]

In a statement published on December 8, Fitch Ratings said its downgrade reflected "a deterioration in public finances and an unclear consolidation path".

The A- sovereign credit rating with a stable outlook is the nation's lowest since 2004. [Global Economy] [Slovak Spectator]

30% windfall tax on bank profits

Populist Prime Minister Robert Fico returned to power after campaigning heavily on vows to boost social spending while at the same time promising to cut the budget deficit. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Fico has pledged to impose a 30% windfall tax on bank profits to deliver on his pre-election commitments. Finance Minister Ladislav Kamenicky said the bank tax should generate some EUR 340 million in budget revenue in 2024. [Bloomberg 1]

Fico's administration is set to introduce a package of social welfare measures, including aid for households facing higher mortgage rates and energy bill subsidies.

Facing sluggish economic growth, Bratislava is grappling with the eurozone's widest budget deficit, projected at 6.5% of gross domestic product in 2023 – more than double the EU's ceiling of 3% of GDP. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Bloomberg 2]

The draft budget aims to curb the general government deficit by as much as 0.5% of GDP in 2024. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Bloomberg 2]

Banks unhappy

Several large banks operating in Slovakia have asked Fico to reduce or scrap the proposed special tax on their profits.

In a joint letter to Fico, the banks said the tax would "weaken the predictability of the business environment and undermine investor confidence". [Bloomberg 3]

The government also intends to plug the budget deficit with measures including steeper levies on tobacco and alcohol, along with increased tax levels for higher earners.

The budget plan has been sent to parliament for final approval.

(yl/pk)

Press groups say funding cuts for public broadcaster threaten its independence

Slovakia's new government will jeopardise media independence by reducing state funding for public broadcaster RTVS, a group of journalists and press freedom organisations have warned.

In an open letter published on December 13, the organisations appealed to Slovak lawmakers and President Zuzana Caputova, a strong advocate of liberal politics, to reject proposed budget cuts for the public broadcaster.

The groups said populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, whose coalition government secured a mandatory parliamentary vote of confidence in November, intended to exert control over RTVS.

"The unexpected decrease of RTVS's annual funding... creates pressure on the public media to seek extra subsidies at risk of concessions on its independence," said the letter, a copy of which was published on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) website.

As part of budget savings, Fico's cabinet proposes to curb the state broadcaster's funding from 0.17% to 0.12% of gross domestic product (GDP), leading to a EUR 55 million decrease in RTVS's annual budget. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Since returning to power last year, Fico has targeted media critical of him and his leftist ruling Smer party. His cabinet announced in November that Fico would suspend all communication with four media outlets as they air "hostile political views based primarily on publishing false information". [Bloomberg] [Slovak Spectator] [bnn]

Among them is Aktuality.sk, where investigative journalist Jan Kuciak worked before he and his fiancée were murdered in 2018.

Kuciak was probing suspected high-level corruption involving an alleged business link between the Italian mafia and Fico's Smer party. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

The killings sparked mass protests, forcing Fico to cut short his stint as prime minister in 2018 to contain national outrage.

(yl/pk)

New media law will increase transparency, independence, gov't says

The Slovenian Ministry of Culture has proposed a new media law to parliament that it says will promote greater transparency and journalistic independence. [Dnevnik] [Vecer]

Released to the public for debate on December 12, the proposed legislation aims to tackle long-standing issues that have affected the Slovenian media space. [Dnevnik] [Vecer]

Under one proposed change, media outlets would be required to meet criteria related to objectivity in order to receive public funding. This, the Ministry of Culture believes, would make it more difficult for political parties to unfairly distribute state resources to media groups of their choice. [Dnevnik]

The proposal also lays out plans for a new media register, which would collect data on media ownership and state advertising for the public to view. With this information, the ministry believes that the government would be able to assess media concentration and take

steps to increase the pluralism of news sources, while also encouraging transparency. [Dnevnik]

Among other topics covered in the draft law are greater protections for the independence of journalists and media outlets, a broader legal definition for the media, and safeguards against disinformation. [Dnevnik] [Vecer]

It has been over 20 years since Slovenia last updated its media laws. Observers say that the Ministry of Culture's proposal is an important chance for reform and modernization. [Dnevnik] [Vecer]

(evk/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark bans Koran burnings amid freedom of speech concerns

The Danish parliament passed a law on December 7 banning the "inappropriate treatment" of religious texts, triggering concerns about freedom of speech, after a series of Koran burnings in 2023.

The bill was passed with 94 votes in favour and 77 against. It prohibits "inappropriate treatment of writings with significant religious importance for a recognised religious community." [BBC]

Last year, a series of Koran burnings in Denmark and Sweden heightened tensions with Muslim nations. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

Danish Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard said that over 500 demonstrations including burnings of the Koran or of flags have been recorded since July 2023. [Reuters]

Hummelgaard added in a statement: “We must protect the security of Denmark and the Danes. Therefore, it is important that we now have better protection against the systematic insults we have seen for a long time.”

The new law has been criticised for limiting freedom of speech.

The leader of the right-wing populist Denmark Democrats Party, Inger Stojberg said: “It is a betrayal. A huge failure on the part of the government.” [France 24]

Breaking the new law can result in fines and up to two years in prison. [Le Monde]

(km/pk)

Queen Margrethe II announces abdication

Denmark’s Queen Margrethe II announced on live TV during her traditional New Year’s Eve speech that she plans to abdicate.

The 83-year-old became Europe’s longest-serving monarch after the death of Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022. In July, Margrethe became the longest-reigning monarch in Danish history. [Reuters]

Referring to a successful back operation she underwent in February 2023, she said: “The surgery naturally gave rise to thinking about the future – whether the time had come to leave the responsibility to the next generation.” [BBC]

Margrethe became heir to the crown in 1953 at the age of 13, after a constitutional amendment allowed women to inherit the throne. She ascended to that position in 1972.

In her New Year’s Eve announcement, she said: “I have decided that now is the right time. On 14 January 2024 – 52 years after I succeeded my beloved father – I will step down as queen of Denmark.”

She will be succeeded by her eldest son, Crown Prince Frederik.

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen voiced gratitude to the monarch, saying: "On behalf of the entire population, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Her Majesty The Queen for her lifelong dedication and tireless efforts for the Kingdom." [Politico]

(km/pk)

Denmark to end green energy scheme amid conflict with EU rules

Denmark has announced plans to end a green energy scheme due to a conflict with European Union regulations.

Last February, Climate, Energy and Utilities Minister Lars Aagaard said the "open-door" scheme had been suspended due to worries that it breached EU state aid rules by allowing energy companies to install offshore wind farms without them paying for those rights. [Reuters 1] [Reuters]

The energy ministry said in a statement on December 19: "It has not proven possible to adjust the open-door scheme within the framework of EU regulation in a way that would facilitate a faster expansion of offshore wind." [Energy Watch]

The initiative aimed to help Denmark reach its goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 70% by 2030 and transitioning toward renewable energy. [UN] [Politiken]

(km/pk)

Environmental tax on plane travel planned

The Danish government on December 15 decided to introduce a new "green" tax on plane passengers from 2025, saying the move would help provide funds to make the air travel industry more environmentally-friendly. [Reuters] [ETX Studio/MSN]

The decision comes after the government in November proposed levying an average tax of 100 Danish crowns (EUR 13.41) on air passengers.

(mr/pk)

New electricity bidding zone planned in Baltic Sea

The Danish Energy Agency on December 18 announced plans to create a new electricity market bidding zone to include Denmark's planned construction of an "energy island" in the Baltic Sea.

The energy cluster around Bornholm Island will consist of wind turbines expected to supply enough green electricity to power over five million households. [Danish Energy Agency]

The project is expected to help Denmark phase out the use of fossil fuels. [Bornholm Regional Municipality]

Bornholm Island is part of the DK2 bidding zone but due to expected structural congestion on the grid connecting the planned energy cluster with Zealand, the Energy Agency said that a new DK3 area was needed.

The future bidding zone will become effective when the energy island begins operating by the end of 2030. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Finland drafts tougher rules on asylum seekers

Officials at the Finnish interior ministry are drafting a bill that would prevent applicants who are considered a threat from moving forward into Finland after filing asylum claims.

Finland's government, comprising members of a four-party coalition formed in June 2023, is viewed as the most right-wing in the country's recent history. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The new rules would affect those who provide misleading information to the authorities when applying for asylum or who are deemed to pose a threat to national security because they have a serious criminal record, for example.

The goal is to prevent those who are unlikely to be granted asylum from moving freely in Finland or continuing to other parts of Europe. [Helsinki Times]

Earlier, the interior ministry announced in December that Finland was shutting its border with Russia to

prevent an inflow of asylum seekers. The frontier is to remain closed until January 14. [New York Times]

Finnish authorities said that a recent rise in migrants from across the Russian border was orchestrated by Moscow to retaliate for Helsinki's increased cooperation with the United States. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The Kremlin denies this charge.

In response to the border closure, the Council of Europe – the continent's leading human rights watchdog – published a letter on December 11 saying it was "concerned about the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants." [Reuters]

Under the changes planned to Finland's Aliens Act, asylum seekers restricted from moving freely in the country would have to have their claims processed within four weeks instead of the usual maximum processing time of six months. [Yleisradio Oy (Yle)]

(km/pk)

Finland achieves electricity independence

Finland reached self-sufficiency in its electricity production in 2023, helped by a rise in nuclear- and wind-generated power.

The country used to import 20-25% of its power but "those times are behind us", said Asta Sihvonen-Punkka, an executive at Finland's electricity system operator Fingrid. [YLE]

Last year saw the much-delayed third reactor at Finland's Olkiluoto nuclear power plant starting regular output. The country also saw wind power production rise. Meanwhile, the share of fossil fuels in its energy mix is falling. [ERR]

"Emissions from power generated and consumed in Finland over the last five years have been cut in half, a process that continues courtesy of the third reactor, wind and solar power," said Sihvonen-Punkka, who is set to become Fingrid's new CEO. [ERR]

Helping the country to reduce its dependence on power from abroad was the combination of a mild winter and energy saving habits after Russian imported electricity was cut off in 2022. [YLE]

A diversified energy palette was deemed crucial after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

(jb/pk)

Finnish economy in recession, says central bank

The Finnish economy has entered a recession, with gross domestic product shrinking 0.5% in 2023 and expected to contract 0.2% in 2024, the country's central bank has said. [Bank of Finland]

The head of forecasting at the Bank of Finland, Meri Obstbaum, said the recession reflected similar trends in Sweden, Finland's largest trading partner, and more widely in the eurozone.

Obstbaum also suggested that a lack of cheaper energy and raw materials from Russia, the flow of which stopped following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, was denying Finnish industry a "competitive edge." [Helsinki Times] [Helsingin Sanomat]

Antti Lindtman, the head of the centre-left Social Democratic Party, Finland's largest opposition grouping, criticized the right-wing coalition government over its handling of the economy. He argued the country could face "big cuts to social security", which would hit the most disadvantaged citizens. [Lindtman X Post]

Annika Saarikko, the leader of the opposition Centre Party, similarly declared that "the government's economic policy is failing." She argued that Prime Minister Petteri Orpo should open up a dialogue with the opposition. [Saarikko X post]

(md/pk)

Volcano erupts in south-west Iceland, fishing town evacuated

A volcanic eruption in Iceland on December 18 brought disruption to the nation's south-west Reykjanes Peninsula, as magma and dangerous gases spread many kilometres outwards.

Earlier, seismic warning signs prompted the pre-emptive evacuation of some 4,000 people from the nearby fishing town of Grindavik in November. [NPR] [Reuters]

Amid the eruption, experts warned that a geothermal power plant serving 30,000 citizens was at risk from the lava flows. Iceland's capital Reykjavik was threatened by smoke and gas that was carried 42km from the eruption site. [The Telegraph] [Newsweek] [Global News]

Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir said such events were "the norm" for Icelanders, even if they posed challenges.

As the scale of the eruption decreased, further immediate risk to citizens and vital Icelandic infrastructure appeared to be over. [CBC] [BBC]

The town of Grindavik was spared and no casualties have been reported. However, the government has ordered all citizens and tourists to avoid the nearby mountainous Stóra-Skógfell and Hagafell area following the air-lift of a stranded hiker on December 20. [The Guardian]

Fresh warnings were issued by Iceland's Meteorological Office on December 28 after the discovery of new magma buildups "very similar" to those that led to the initial eruption. [Newsweek] [Iceland Monitor]

(md/pk)

Norwegian lawmakers back deep-sea Arctic mining

Norway's minority government and the country's main opposition parties on December 5 struck a deal to authorize exploration in the Arctic Ocean with a view to the deep-sea mining of key minerals, despite environmental concerns.

Norway is poised to become the first country to engage in ocean seabed mining on a commercial scale, thereby reducing China's monopoly in the supply chain of minerals crucial for many green industries. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

The planned extraction area, between Iceland and Norway's Arctic Ocean island of Svalbard, contains metals and minerals crucial for producing batteries, computers, mobile phones and wind turbines, according to the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate, a government agency. [AP]

Norway, one of the world's wealthiest nations due to its vast oil and gas reserves, hopes the mining plan will help diversify its economy away from fossil fuels.

“The renewable green industries run on minerals. This is an important contribution internationally,” Bard Ludvig Thorheim, a lawmaker from the opposition Conservative party, told reporters. [Financial Times]

The mining plan was agreed upon between the two groupings in the minority centre-left government, the Labour and the Centre Party, and the opposition Conservatives and the Progress Party. [AP]

The maritime area being eyed by Norway is 280,000 square kilometres in size, roughly the size of Italy. Oslo claims it has the sole right to mine in the area, but Russia, the European Union, and the UK dispute this claim. [Financial Times]

Any mineral extraction will require approval from the Norwegian parliament. [AP]

Lawmaker Thorheim told Reuters that the plan had been keenly debated to find a balance between the need to protect the environment and economic viability. He said he hoped this equilibrium would become the “international standard” for deep-sea mining. [Reuters]

‘Irreversible consequences’

However, Norway’s environment agency has opposed the plans, warning of “significant and irreversible consequences for the marine environment”, while the UK and Norwegian fishing industries have criticized the idea. [Financial Times]

The World Wide Fund for Nature and other environmental NGOs have also voiced concern, arguing that the world can achieve carbon neutrality without deep-sea mining. [WWF]

The mining proposal has been welcomed by Norway’s offshore oil and gas industry as it creates the prospect of alternative jobs amid the winding down of fossil fuel industries. The Nordic country aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. [Reuters]

(gdb/pk)

Norway probes suspected illegal loan to security authority

Norway’s justice minister has announced an investigation into a suspected illegal loan taken out by the government-controlled National Security Authority (NSM). [News in English]

Last year, the NSM leased new office space in the city of Fornebu, near the capital Oslo, owned by private real estate firm Norwegian Property. The space needed to be modified to suit NSM's needs, resulting in the latter borrowing a total of around NOK 200 million (around EUR 18 million) from Norwegian Property.

The NSM, which is responsible for preventive national security, answers to the justice ministry.

The Norwegian constitution forbids state ministries or agencies from borrowing money as all funding must come from budgetary allocations approved by parliament. [BNN Breaking][News in English]

The justice ministry said the NSM had "gone far beyond its authority" in agreeing to the loan, which also carried "unfavourable terms" with interest rates of nearly 10% per year. [News in English]

NSM's director, Sofie Nystrøm, offered her resignation immediately after the controversial loan agreement came to light. Nystrøm maintains that the justice ministry was informed of the NSM's plans. However, the justice ministry argues that it was only shown a draft lease, not details of any external private loan. [BNN Breaking]

"This is a very serious matter," Justice Minister Emilie Enger Mehl told reporters, while claiming she was only made aware of the loan in November 2023.

(jb/pk)

Sweden plans tougher foreign aid policy in effort to cut migration

The Swedish centre-right government, which relies on the support of the far-right Sweden Democrats for a parliamentary majority, has announced a historic reform in its foreign aid policy. Beneficiary countries will have to cooperate with efforts to repatriate migrants who fail to gain asylum status to continue receiving such aid. [Regeringkansliet]

The announcement comes after leaders of parties in the minority coalition government and the head of the Sweden Democrats noted, in an op-ed article for Dagens Nyheter newspaper, that the country saw 26% fewer asylum applications in 2023 than the previous year due to new, stricter migration policies. [Dagens Nyheter]

"Sweden's aid policy is undergoing a historic change", Aron Emilsson from the Sweden Democrats told reporters, adding that foreign aid would now work to reduce the root causes of irregular migration. [Euractiv]

It simply "does not make sense to provide aid to states that work against Swedish interests," Emilsson added. [European Conservative]

(jb/pk)

Tesla under pressure amid labour dispute

Electric vehicle company Tesla is under growing pressure amid a series of strikes in protest at the carmaker's refusal to sign a collective bargaining agreement with employees in Sweden.

The strikes were started by mechanics from the IF Metall union. 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, the blockade was expanded to include all the country's ports. Electricians also stopped repair work for Tesla's charging stations across Sweden. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Tesla came under more pressure as the Swedish strike gained sympathy among employees in other Nordic countries. Finnish transport workers' union AKT started a blockade of Tesla vehicles bound to Sweden in all Finnish ports on December 20. [Reuters]

A large Danish pension fund said it had sold its holdings in Tesla because of the company's refusal to enter a collective agreement deal, while Denmark's largest trade union joined the sympathy strike. [The Guardian]

"We sold our Tesla shares on December 6, when they had a market value of 476 million Danish crowns," (USD 68.9 million) PensionDanmark said. [Reuters]

Nordic nations are key for Tesla. Sweden was its fifth biggest market by number of new car sales, with Tesla's Model Y being the top-selling car in that country in 2023. [The Guardian]

In a setback for Tesla, the company has lost a legal case against Sweden's postal service. A Swedish court ruled on December 7 that PostNord does not need to

deliver licence plates to Tesla that are being blocked by the postal service's workers. On December 22, an appeal court rejected Tesla's appeal against the earlier verdict. [Reuters]

(jb/pk)

Two dead after accidents at 'gigafactory' battery plant in Sweden

Two workers have died in separate accidents at Northvolt's large-scale battery "gigafactory" in northern Sweden.

Started in 2017 by two former Tesla Inc. executives, Northvolt is a Swedish battery developer and manufacturer that was the first European company to produce a battery cell from a so-called gigafactory in December 2021.

One Northvolt employee died on December 15 from severe burns following an explosion related to a battery production line in early November. After the accident, Northvolt stopped the production line pending a safety review but later restarted it.

The other employee died after a crane accident on December 14 at a construction site while working to extend Northvolt's battery factory, in the northern town of Skelleftea. [Financial Times]

Peter Carlsson, CEO of Northvolt, said: "The situation is devastating, and we are now working hour by hour to help each other through this." [Göteborgs-Posten]

Authorities have launched an investigation into the two accidents. [The Local]

(km/pk)

Eleven charged over Sweden's 'largest environmental crime'

Eleven people have been charged over what a prosecutor described as Sweden's largest environmental crime.

Waste management company NMT Think Pink has been accused of illegally dumping around 200,000 tonnes of trash at 21 sites across 15 municipalities in Sweden. [Sveriges Radio]

An investigation uncovered harmful levels of substances including arsenic, dioxins and lead, The Guardian reported.

In 2020, parts of Stockholm were affected by smoke from a blaze at an abandoned rubbish site operated by the company that burned for over two months.

Senior prosecutor Linda Schön said: “The scary thing about environmental toxins is that many times we don’t see the effects immediately, but it is the next generation that has to pay the price.” [The Guardian]

Another senior prosecutor, Anders Gustafsson, said a preliminary investigation had revealed “the largest environmental crime in Sweden in terms of scope and organisation”.

At a court hearing in the southwestern city of Karlstad on December 28, five people were charged with serious environmental crime including Think Pink CEO Bella Nilsson and her former husband Thomas Nilsson. Five others were charged with environmental crime and one with aiding and abetting serious environmental crime.

All of the accused deny any wrongdoing.

Think Pink has declared bankruptcy, leading to controversy about who should bear the costs of cleaning up the illegal waste: municipal authorities, Think Pink, or the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. [Dagens Nyheter]

The trial is expected to take several weeks.

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU bodies reach compromise on Media Freedom Act

Representatives of the European Union's governing institutions came to an agreement on December 15 over a bill seeking to promote press freedom and diversity within the bloc, after lawmakers clashed until the last moment over controversial national security caveats. [Euractiv]

Dubbed the European Media Freedom Act, the bill would introduce transparency requirements over media ownership and funding. It also requires national governments to install an oversight system to preserve the editorial freedom of public media, and imposes checks on media mergers. [Politico]

European capitals led by Paris pushed for a national security carve-out in the rules. Under such an exemption, governments would not have been banned from using spyware or other methods to try to uncover journalists' sources.

Negotiators for the European Parliament, the European Commission and the EU Council ultimately reached a compromise on the issue by removing any explicit reference to national security in the wording of their agreement.

Instead, it mentions that governments should "respect the effective editorial freedom of media service providers, while improving the protection of journalistic sources, including against the use of spyware." [RSF] [Investigate Europe]

The bill was introduced by the European Commission in September 2022. The provisional agreement will now need to be adopted by the European Council and Parliament before the rules can enter into effect.

(qv/pk)

EU Commission and Parliament agree on new transportation plan for Europe

The EU Commission and EU Parliament agreed to update the Trans-European Transport Network Ten-T guidelines on December 18. [EC, EC]

The TEN-T was established under a 2013 regulation to reduce travel time between and connect 424 European cities and towns, primarily by rail, road, inland waterways, and short sea routes. [EU News]

The update provides additional funding to connect TEN-T municipalities via a 27-year plan to 2050. The proposed regulation will now undergo technical finalisation and must be passed separately by the EC and European Parliament to become law.

The proposed TEN-T plan establishes additional updates to the environmental regulations requiring participating jurisdictions to develop sustainable urban mobility plans to reduce transportation emissions by constructing new cycling paths and sidewalks by 2027.

The plan also provides funding for strategic transportation, extending new rail links to Ukraine and Moldova while eliminating previous plans to build links to Russia and Belarus. The plan significantly upgrades electric rail transport, improving funded train speeds to 160 KPH. Electric rail will lead in nine new transportation corridors outlined by the regulation.

The plan also integrates the EC 2021 Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy. [EC]

The Smart Mobility Strategy includes measures to build transportation infrastructure across the EU, including new electric vehicle charging stations and building autonomous vehicle-to-vehicle and vehicle-to-signal communications to improve safety and traffic management. This includes an update to technical specifications for interoperability (TSIs) for all modes of transportation in TEN-T and relies heavily upon new 5G communications networks. [European Parliament Think Tank]

US follows EU lead

The US is following the EU's lead in this area.

The 2021 EU plan was released the same year as a similar policy initiative in the US, the Bipartisan

Infrastructure Law (BIL), which has a broad scope to build out electric vehicle charging stations and nationwide digital transportation infrastructure, according to the leader of the ICF International transportation consulting practice Jeffrey Ang-Olson during a June 13 interview.

Sensors in new cars will allow network transportation systems through onboard sensors and traffic control systems on the ground. This could assist drivers in braking at intersections and, in the future, govern autonomous EV transportation within cities to avoid accidents.

On June 22, 2022, the EU mandated that all new vehicles sold in 2024 include Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA). This onboard system warns drivers when speeding through a four-level warning series, culminating in automated de-acceleration of the vehicle. [Autoweek] [EC]

The US BIL mandates a system to detect drivers impaired by drugs or alcohol be included in all new cars sold starting in 2026. [US Department of Transportation]

The current TEN-T plan mandates the connections of all major airports to long-distance rail. Future TEN-T sensor networks could be expanded in three directions to include governance of flight patterns for electric vertical takeoff and landing (e-vtol) aircraft taxis on multiple flight elevations, planes above, and trains and EVs below. The current new TEN-T regulations showcase the continued advancement of international transportation planning in Europe and globally.

New TEN-T regulations demonstrate that new European transportation infrastructure will continue to develop with three main goals: increasing continental integration, digitisation, and decreasing carbon emissions.

(rw/gc)

Austria proposes allowing Bulgaria, Romania into 'Air Schengen' zone but wants concessions

Austria has said it is open to Europe's passport-free Schengen area being expanded to include Bulgaria and Romania, but with unrestricted journeys to be permitted only for citizens of the two eastern European countries who travel by air.

In return, Vienna wants security at the EU's external borders stepped up.

Austria has long been opposed to admitting Bulgaria and Romania into the free-travel Schengen zone, citing concerns about illegal immigration from the two nations.

Austria, along with the Netherlands, vetoed a joint bid by Bucharest and Sofia to join the Schengen area in December 2022.

However, on December 9, Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner announced that Vienna would relent, though only on plane travel. [Oe24]

Karner, of the governing conservative People's Party (OVP), said that Austria's position on an "Air Schengen" system had been conveyed to the European Commission, the EU's executive.

In return for its proposed concession, Karner said Vienna was calling for "massively strengthening the protection of the [EU's] external border." [Reuters] [SchengenVisaInfo]

Ahead of Austria's parliamentary elections this year, the far-right Freedom Party, which wants to clamp down on illegal immigration, is topping the opinion polls. [Reuters]

In September, Romania threatened Austria with a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice for blocking the eastern European nation's accession to the Schengen area – the world's largest passport-free zone – which is intended to allow the unrestricted movement of people between 27 European countries. [Politico]

(sl/pk)

Denmark, Norway pledge more aid for Ukraine

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has said her government will propose a new support package for Kyiv worth EUR 1 billion, while Norway has announced it will send EUR 250 million in aid and anti-air defence weapons to Ukraine.

The aid was announced after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky travelled to the Norwegian capital, Oslo, on December 13 to meet with the leaders of

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden ahead of an EU summit in Brussels.

Since the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022, the five Nordic countries have provided around EUR 11 billion in support for Kyiv.

In a joint statement after the meetings with Zelensky in Oslo, the five nations said: "The Nordic countries will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes... Russia must end its aggression and withdraw its forces immediately and unconditionally from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders." [Reuters] [France24]

(km/pk)

Estonia, Lithuania disapprove of IOC permitting Russian athletes in Paris Olympics

The recent International Olympic Committee (IOC) decision allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete as Individual Neutral Athletes (AIN) in the 2024 Paris Olympics has sparked strong criticism from Estonia and Lithuania.

Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna, denouncing the move on social media, stated, "Allowing Russian athletes to participate without a flag will not wash away the blood on their hands." [Yahoo News]

Lithuania's Foreign Minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, echoed the sentiment, calling it against the spirit of the Olympics. [MSN]

The decision, reversing the earlier stance, prohibits these athletes from displaying national flags or participating as teams. Ukraine is now considering a potential boycott. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal revealed a coalition of 35 countries ready to join the boycott. [MSN]

The IOC's decision, announced on December 8, 2023, has faced criticism from Ukraine and its allies, accusing the IOC of enabling Russia to weaponise the Olympics amid the conflict in Ukraine.

Russia argues that the neutral participation requirement is discriminatory, pointing to the inclusion of Israeli athletes in the 2024 Games amid the conflict in Gaza. The IOC maintains that Russia's war with Ukraine is a unique situation. [NPR]

Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland had earlier threatened to boycott if Russian and Belarusian athletes were allowed to participate, intensifying geopolitical tensions surrounding the Paris Olympics [NPR].

(ha/gc)

Finnish court blocks extradition of suspected Russian paramilitary leader to Ukraine

Finland's Supreme Court has ruled that a suspected leader of a Russian ultra-nationalist paramilitary organisation who is wanted on suspicion of war crimes in Ukraine will not be extradited to that country.

The court cited the potential for "inhuman and degrading treatment" in Ukrainian prisons as the reason for denying Kyiv's request to extradite Yan Petrovsky.

The request was lodged following Petrovsky's arrest in Finland last year. [Reuters] [YLE]

The Supreme Court decided that he should remain in Finnish border police custody for the immediate future. The Ministry of Justice in Helsinki has begun its own investigation into Petrovsky as a terror suspect. [YLE] [Kyiv Independent]

Petrovsky is believed to be a commander in the Rusich Group, a far-right unit affiliated with the Russian Wagner mercenary group, and was allegedly involved in atrocities during fighting in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2015. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

The Rusich Group returned to Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. It has been accused by the US of "special cruelty" in the eastern Kharkiv region. [Counter Extremism]

The Rusich Group is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UK, US and Canada. Petrovsky is subject to several Western sanctions. [FT]

Finnish immigration officials said last year that Petrovsky had been granted a residence permit in Finland because his true identity was not known to the country's authorities at the time.

He was detained in July, ostensibly for visa violations, while applying for asylum in Finland under the name

Voislav Torden. [Reuters] [European Views]

In response to the court decision to block his extradition, Ukraine's Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin admitted the pressures of war had brought challenges in adhering to international standards of detainment in Ukraine.

However, he was confident an extradition deal for Petrovsky could eventually be agreed, suggesting that Finland's Supreme Court had "not assessed his guilt, but only the conditions of his detention." [FT]

(md/pk)

Turkish parliamentary commission approves Sweden's NATO member bid

After months of political haggling by Ankara, the Turkish Parliament's Foreign Affairs Commission approved Sweden's North Atlantic Treaty Organization membership bid.

The majority of the Turkish committee voted on December 26 to approve Sweden's membership. The committee, which strongly supports Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, voted in favour after Stockholm took steps to lift restrictions on defence sales and adjusted its anti-terrorism laws in response to Ankara's demands. [APNews] [NYTimes]

Erdogan's AK Party, its nationalist MHP allies, and the main opposition CHP voted to ratify. In contrast, the small Islamist Felicity party and right nationalist Iyi party voted against it. The Turkish Parliament's General Assembly must also approve Sweden's NATO membership.

Erdogan raised objections in May 2022 to both Swedish and Finnish requests to join the alliance over what he said was their protection of those Turkey deems terrorists and over their defence trade embargoes, Reuters reported.

Turkey ratified Finland's bid in April, but it kept Sweden waiting until it took more steps to crack down on local members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which the European Union and the United States also list as a terrorist group. In response, Stockholm introduced a new anti-terrorism bill that makes being a member of a terrorist organisation illegal, saying that it had upheld its part of a deal signed last year. [Reuters] [APNews]

In a statement following the commission's approval, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom said Sweden welcomed the move and looked forward to joining NATO. On social messaging platform X, Boris Ruge, NATO Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Security Policy, said the commission's approval was "excellent news." [Reuters] [APNews]

Turkey's past efforts of delaying Sweden's entrance into the alliance had faced disapproval from other NATO members, highlighting that Erdogan was leveraging its position for national gains. Erdogan has reminded that the decision of Sweden's membership was not his but the Turkish Parliament's responsibility. [NYTimes]

(vt/gc)

Chairman of NATO military committee pressures Bern to join united front against Russia

The chairman of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Military Committee, Rob Bauer, urged Switzerland to increase its solidarity with NATO against Russia during an interview with the Swiss-German newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ).

"We want to improve interoperability between NATO and Swiss armed forces," Bauer said, adding: "We also wish to continue training together, for example, in the cyber coalition exercise in which the Swiss army participates."

"If the Russians win, not only would Ukraine lose as a country, but it would also be a sign that an autocrat can get away with such a violation of the international order."

Bauer added: "Switzerland's neutrality also depends on the rules-based international order. All states must recognise a neutral country as such and respect its neutrality. This also requires a rules-based security order."

He noted that even though Finland and Sweden officially adopted a policy of neutrality, they both wanted to join NATO after Russia's invasion. [SwissInfo]

(sw/gc)

Erdogan accused UN of mishandling Gaza conflict

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticised the United Nations for failing to prevent the conflict in Gaza, adding that the Security Council's five permanent members - the United States, Russia, China, Britain, and France - do not represent the world.

Erdogan also called for re-evaluation of the United Nations Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court. Turkey does not view Hamas as a terrorist group and hosts some of its members. [Kathimerini]

Erdogan has called for Muslim countries to be included in the United Nations Security Council and expressed his disapproval of its policies and its five members by saying that "the world is bigger than five". [Daily Sabbah]

(st/gc)

Nordic countries sign defence cooperation deals with US

Sweden, Finland and Denmark have separately signed defence cooperation deals with the United States amid Russia's war in Ukraine and heightened geopolitical tensions.

Sweden

As it waits to be admitted to NATO, Sweden inked an agreement under which it expects to more easily receive support from Washington in the event of a war or security crisis.

The Defence Cooperation Agreement, sealed on December 5, saw the two countries agreeing on conditions for US forces to operate in Sweden. The deal regulates issues such as the legal status of American troops, access to deployment areas and pre-positioning of military materiel in Sweden. [Swedish Government]

Swedish Defence Minister Pal Jonson said: "It will create better conditions for Sweden to be able to receive support from the United States in the event of war or crisis." He added: "It will also be good for Nordic defence cooperation." [European Conservative]

Under the deal, a total of 17 military bases, installations and other facilities will be made available

to the United States, with Jonson stressing that the Americans will be using existing bases rather than building their own. [Defense Cooperation Agreement]

The agreement is the first of its kind between Stockholm and Washington. Sweden has historically been a neutral country and did not participate in any of the two world wars. [European Conservative]

The US State Department praised Sweden as a "strong, capable defence partner that champions NATO's values, and will further strengthen the Alliance once its NATO accession is complete." [Reuters]

Sweden's efforts to join the Western military alliance must be approved by all NATO members. Stockholm is still waiting for the green light from Ankara and Budapest.

Finland

Meanwhile, Helsinki and Washington on December 18 signed an agreement regulating US access to military facilities and areas across Finland, which became a member of NATO in April 2023.

The deal covers the prepositioning of defence equipment, supplies and materials, and entry and movement of US aircraft, vessels and vehicles. [Defence Cooperation Agreement]

Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen said the agreement, inked in Washington, "significantly deepens the bilateral cooperation between Finland and the US and supplements the country's NATO membership."

A senior Russian diplomat criticised the deal, warning that Finland would be "the first to suffer" if war broke out between NATO and Russia. [POLITICO]

Five of the 15 bases, training and storage areas covered by the US-Finnish deal are located in the far northern Lapland area. The northernmost site mentioned in the agreement is the Border Guard Base in Ivalo, a small town located only 50 kilometres from the frontier with Russia. [The Barents Observer]

Denmark

Copenhagen struck a 10-year defence agreement with Washington on December 19 that allows US soldiers and military equipment to be based in the Nordic country, Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said. [Reuters]

The deal marks a shift in Danish military policy as US troops will be able to be permanently stationed at three air bases. [Defence Cooperation Agreement (Download)]

“We live in violent times with many forces challenging our democracy and the democratic rules of the game,” Frederiksen said.

It is not yet clear how many US soldiers will be deployed in Denmark. [Euractiv]

The agreement does not cover Greenland or the Faroe Islands, which are largely self-governing parts of Denmark. The deal still has to receive the green light from parliament, which the government estimates could take a year. There will be no nuclear weapons based on Danish territory. [Euractiv]

(jb/pk)

FBI helps Cyprus probe alleged sanctions-busting by Russians

FBI agents have been sent to Cyprus to help local police investigate how Russian oligarchs allegedly managed to avoid EU sanctions thanks to a network of lawyers and accountants on the eastern Mediterranean island.

The US agents are working as part of a global crackdown against Russian oligarchs and a web of suspected enablers who have helped hide their wealth. [The Guardian]

In an interview with The Associated Press in November, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides said that in response to both recent and previous claims that financial service providers in his country had assisted oligarchs in evading sanctions imposed after Russia invaded Ukraine, he had sought out the help of a “third country” which he did not name.

Earlier this year, the US and Britain imposed sanctions on a range of individuals and bodies in Cyprus for facilitating suspicious transactions. [The Guardian] [AP News]

(tn/pk)

Armenia and Azerbaijan agree to work towards peace treaty

Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed to work towards a peace treaty before exchanging war prisoners.

The two countries released a joint statement on December 7, saying they had a "historical chance to achieve a long-awaited peace in the region." Both reaffirmed their intention to "normalise relations and to reach the peace treaty on the basis of respect for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity." [AlJazeera] [APnews]

In a gesture of goodwill, Azerbaijan will free 32 Armenian prisoners of war, while Armenia will release two Azerbaijani service members, in agreements reached during talks between the office of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the administration of Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev. [AlJazeera]

Armenia also supported Azerbaijan's bid to host the COP29 in 2024 by withdrawing its candidacy. Azerbaijan has supported the Armenian candidature for Eastern European Group COP Bureau membership. [APnews] [PrimeMinister'sOfficeArmenia]

Both countries have said that they will continue to work towards the peacemaking process through "confidence-building measures" and have called on the international community to support "building mutual trust between the countries." [PrimeMinister'sOfficeArmenia]

(sl/gc)

EU will strengthen mission in Armenia

The European Union (EU) will increase the size of the EU Mission Armenia (EUMA) to promote regional security.

On 11 December, the EU Foreign Affairs Council said they would expand the EUMA's staff in Armenia from 138 to 209. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, called it a way to boost stability between Armenia and Azerbaijan. [ArmRadio] [ArmenPress]

"We believe that there is a historic chance to achieve peace in the region. It is an opportunity. We are committed to continue our support to these efforts – by working together with both Armenia and Azerbaijan," Borrell said.

"The fact that we have decided to increase by such an important number our staff on this mission shows our

clear commitment to the stability in the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan and [is] an important contribution to the peace efforts." [EEASEuropa]

(sl/gc)

Armenia and Cyprus deepen military cooperation

Armenian Minister of Defense Suren Papikya visited Cyprus to discuss bilateral relations with his Cypriot counterpart Michalis Giorgallas.

The meeting on December 12 focused on the long-standing relationship between the two countries, including defence cooperation and trilateral cooperation with Greece. [ArmRadio]

Giorgallas said that the meeting "builds upon the long-standing bilateral relationships" and confirms the "bonds of friendship, mutual trust and respect between the two countries." [ArmRadio]

The countries emphasised further cooperation in the defence sector and security, including training programs, exchanging expertise in various domains, techno-military cooperation, and matters of mutual interest. [News.am]

Papikya thanked Cyprus for its principled stance on Armenia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [CyprusMail]

(sl/gc)

Row over report that Austrian army boots are made in Romania

A local Austrian television station sparked a national controversy after revealing that boots for the country's army are being made in Romania, where labour is cheaper. [Exxpress] [BNN] [Digi24] [Libertatea] [EVZ]

Michael Bauer, a spokesperson for the armed forces, said in a post on X that an EU-wide tender had been announced for the footwear. He added that no one would produce army boots in Austria for the same price and in the same quantities as in Romania.

A total of 35,000 pairs have been ordered under a EUR 5 million contract signed until 2025. The first batch

reached Austrian soldiers on the country's national day, October 26.

The boots, which were designed in Austria and cost under EUR 140 per pair, are produced in the northern Romanian city of Oradea.

(mr/pk)

Vienna backs EU sanctions on Russia as Kyiv removes Austrian bank from blacklist

Vienna has backed the 12th package of EU sanctions against Russia after Ukraine agreed to remove Austria-based Raiffeisen Bank International from its blacklist.

The Ukrainian government said that the bank was taken off the list on December 16 "for the period of bilateral consultations involving representatives of the European Commission." [Reuters]

Austria had called for Raiffeisen Bank International to be taken off the blacklist created by Kyiv in return for approving the latest EU sanctions package against Russia.

The list, which names "international sponsors of war", aims to denounce companies doing business in Russia and indirectly supporting the war against Ukraine economically. The blacklist has no legal standing, but is symbolically important. [ORF.at]

The Kurier news outlet reported that Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg had criticised the list compiled by the Ukrainian anti-corruption authority as "arbitrary".

Raiffeisen is the largest Western bank operating in Russia and had called its inclusion on Kyiv's list "unfair". CEO Johann Strobl has expressed the need to divest from Russia, in "full compliance with local and international laws and regulations" by "a sale or spin-off" of the bank. [Kurier]

(sl/pk)

Azerbaijan expels two French diplomats

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry ordered two French diplomats on December 12 to leave the country within

48 hours due to actions "incompatible with their diplomatic status."

The ministry stated that it had summoned French Ambassador Anne Boillon to express a "strong protest over the actions of two employees of the French Embassy." The foreign ministry did not provide information about specific actions by the pair. On December 13, France expelled two Azerbaijani diplomats in a move of reciprocity. [Reuters]

Relations between Azerbaijan and France have been tense amid France's attempts at mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Following Azerbaijan's takeover of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, France has made multiple attempts at mediation.

In October, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev refused to attend a round of talks with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, citing the European Union's and France's alleged "biased position" on the dispute.

In November, Aliyev accused France of inciting conflicts in the Caucasus in recent decades by arming Armenia. [VoaNews]

(sl/gc)

Belgium releases agenda for European Union presidency

Belgium released a guide on December 8 setting out its agenda before assuming the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union on January 1.

The agenda focuses on data privacy, security and technology, and artificial intelligence development. [iapp] [europa]

(sw/gc)

Czech, Austrian leaders call for urgent EU action on illegal migration

Prague and Vienna have appealed to the EU to urgently reform its migration policy to protect the bloc from illegal arrivals and people-smuggling, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has said in a meeting with Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer.

“The current situation is unsustainable,” Fiala said on December 4, adding that a “common European

solution" was needed quickly. [Euractiv] [Radio Prague]

The two nations urged the EU to step up its efforts to combat illegal immigration through measures such as stricter checks on the bloc's external frontiers, faster deportation procedures, and collaboration with third countries. [Czech Government] [bnn]

The Czech Republic and Austria have temporarily reinstated border checks with neighbouring Slovakia in response to an influx of migrants entering from Slovak territory. [AP]

Fiala said both Prague and Vienna were "unhappy" with the temporary border controls, adding that only a Europe-wide solution could address the root causes of illegal migration. [Euractiv]

Under a new EU pact, nations most affected by migration can request "solidarity support" from other members of the bloc, including the relocation of asylum seekers and financial aid. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

In the Visegrad Four (V4) group – a regional cooperation platform that brings together Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary – the Czech Republic is the only country supporting the EU migration pact.

Slovakia, Hungary and Poland have refused to host relocated migrants from other EU states. [Euractiv] [BBC]

(yl/pk)

Denmark-UK power interconnector comes online

The Viking Link, the world's longest land and subsea electricity interconnector, became operational on December 29, transporting power between the UK and Denmark. [oedigital.com] [National Grid Group]

It cost EUR 1.97 billion, and stretches 475 miles between the UK and Denmark, with a capacity of 1.4 GW.

The project is a joint venture between the UK's National Grid and Danish power and gas network operator Energinet. It is able to transport electricity for up to 2.5 million British homes, bringing millions in savings for UK consumers over the next decade due to cheaper imported power from Denmark.

(mr/pk)

Macron hosts Hungarian Prime Minister ahead of EU summit

Before member states gathered for a European Union summit, French President Emmanual Macron hosted his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orban, at the Elysee Palace. [Reuters]

Macron tried to change Orban's resistance to EU aid to Ukraine amid its ongoing war with Russia since February 2022. Orban has opposed additional assistance and is viewed within Europe as a supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin. [Politico]

On the summit agenda was the issue of Ukraine and Moldova joining the bloc. A EUR 50-billion aid package for Ukraine was also discussed by EU leaders, despite Orban's demand that this topic be considered at a later stage. [France 24]

Any decision to access the EU relies on the unanimous support from existing members, hence the importance of changing Hungary's position.

The outcome of the summit, held on December 14 and 15, entailed Orbán vetoing the multi-million euro aid package for Kyiv. [Foreign Policy]

According to a report by Le Monde newspaper, this veto represented Orban's attempt to blackmail Brussels into releasing the funds the EU has withheld from Orban since l2022 due to Hungary's "backsliding of democratic norms". [Le Monde]

Following the summit, Macron said that during his talks with Orban at l'Elysee, Orban confirmed that Ukraine would not block talks if the required reforms to gain accession into the EU are completed by next year. [The Guardian]

(rdm/gc)

European Council grants Georgia candidacy status

The European Council granted on December 14 candidacy status to Georgia while opening membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

"This historic victory belongs to you, to our undefeated, unbroken, freedom-loving Georgian people," Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili said. Thousands of Georgians took to the streets of Tbilisi to celebrate. [CivilGeorgia]

Georgia's road to membership will be determined by its adherence to the European Union's 12 priorities, which require Georgia to fight disinformation, address political polarisation and protect human rights. It must complete judicial reform, including comprehensive reform of the High Council of Justice and the Prosecutor's Office. Furthermore, it must implement electoral reforms so that the process is free, fair and competitive in 2024. [Europe Monthly December]

Georgia's EU membership will face challenges due to its relationship with Russia. While Russia and Georgia have long disputed the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream Party has been accused by the opposition of being soft on Moscow. [Reuters]

Georgia has also declined to impose sanctions on Russia as the EU and other Western countries have done despite Moscow and Tbilisi having no formal diplomatic relations.

Georgia proposed a bill in March which would brand non-governmental organisations and media outlets receiving money from abroad as "foreign agents," mirroring a Russian law. According to Reuters, the EU believes this legislation could doom Georgia's accession hopes. [Reuters]

(sl/gc)

Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region transfers territory to Russia

The de facto leader of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia signed a law under which the Bichvinta complex, a Black Sea resort built in the Soviet era, will be transferred to Russia. [CivilGeorgia]

Protests erupted outside the parliament building in the regional capital, Sukhumi, after the legislative body decided in an overnight session. Aslan Bzhania, the de facto ruler, signed the law on December 27.

Georgia's Foreign Ministry called the transfer of property an "illegal act and the continuation of Russia's policy of occupation of the indivisible regions of

Georgia, which grossly violates the fundamental principles of international law." [RFE]

Russia's envoy to Abkhazia, Mikhail Shurgalin, said that Russia would only rent the buildings in the territory for 49 years and not the land. [RFE]

Asida Shakryl, a former de facto ombudswoman of the breakaway region, called the move illegal.

"Lawmakers have ignored the constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia.... They have to explain why they had decided to discuss the issue during the night," Shakryl said. "They have to justify the legitimacy of that sort of session." [RFE]

The international community should "properly assess this new illegal step by the Russian Federation aimed at encroaching on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia," the foreign ministry said.

Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and Georgia's other breakaway region, South Ossetia, in August 2008, following Abkhazia declaring independence from Georgia in 1992.

(sl/gc)

Germany commits to permanent troop deployment in Lithuania

Germany has committed to deploying a permanent brigade of about 4,800 soldiers in Lithuania, near the Russian border, by 2027.

This marks Germany's first permanent foreign troop deployment since World War Two, a response to NATO's pledge to strengthen its presence on the alliance's eastern border following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine [Reuters].

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius likened the move to the Cold War-era stationing of allied forces in West Germany, emphasising Germany's duty to protect the eastern flank. The brigade, including troops from NATO's existing multinational battle group in Lithuania, will be fully operational by 2027, with most units arriving between 2025 and 2026 [Reuters].

Lithuania committed about 0.3% of its GDP to building infrastructure for the German troops. The deployment faces challenges, including funding concerns, equipment shortages, and potential strain on Germany's finances. Nevertheless, Germany sees this

deployment, named Panzerbrigade 42, as a "lighthouse project", demonstrating its commitment to NATO allies and transforming the Bundeswehr into a "war-ready" force [Reuters] [Politico].

The new unit will be stationed at Rukla and Rudninkai in Lithuania, close to the Suwalki Gap, a strategic chokepoint. Lithuanian officials emphasise the need to be ready for various scenarios, with Russia remaining the main threat to Lithuania and NATO [Politico].

(ha/gc)

Lithuania urges unity in EU values

Lithuania's representative to the European Union, Arnoldas Pranckevicius, has hinted at Hungary's potential departure from the European Union, emphasising the crucial need for solidarity and mutual trust among member states.

The comments come in the wake of Hungary's controversial veto of a EUR 50 billion financial aid package for Ukraine, with Prime Minister Viktor Orban linking the decision to releasing frozen funds earmarked for Hungary [RBC].

Pranckevicius expressed hope that a particular member state never faces the hardships endured by Ukraine and suggested that if a country is unwilling to share in the EU's core values, leaving might be the only viable option. This stance underscores the growing tensions within the EU, as Hungary's actions draw criticism for potentially jeopardising European unity and values [Ukrainian World Congress].

As the EU grapples with internal divisions, particularly regarding Hungary's position, diplomatic efforts are expected to intensify in the coming weeks to address the challenges and reaffirm the foundational principles that define the European Union [Ukrainian World Congress].

(ha/gc)

EU unblocks billions for Poland as new gov't vows to improve rule of law

The European Union has approved the release of EUR 5.1 billion to Poland in the first payment of blocked recovery funds, amid pledges from the new government in Warsaw to reverse democratic

backsliding under its predecessor. [Independent] [Reuters] [AP] [Polskie Radio] [Euronews]

The funds fall under an EU scheme for member states to transition to cleaner energy and reduce reliance on Russian fossil fuels. [Reuters] [AP]

Newly appointed Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said: "This is not just a gift. This is serious money earmarked for our energy sovereignty and we will try to spend this money very quickly and wisely." [AP]

Tusk also said that Warsaw has submitted a request for an additional EUR 7 billion to be unblocked. [Polskie Radio]

The money is part of Poland's share of the EU's Recovery and Resilience fund. The country has been allocated a total of EUR 34.5 billion in loans and EUR 25.3 billion in grants in such money. [Euronews]

The fund is designed to help EU member states recover from the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. But Brussels withheld money from Poland over accusations of democratic backsliding by the previous government in Warsaw. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

The former ruling nationalist populist Law and Justice (PiS) party – which had long been in conflict with Brussels over the erosion of rule-of-law in Poland – was defeated in parliamentary elections in October, ending its eight-year spell in power. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Poland's new coalition government – which was sworn in in December and includes parties ranging from the centre-right to the left – has pledged to reverse controversial changes to the judiciary made by the eurosceptic Law and Justice and restore democratic norms. [Reuters] [Independent] [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Speaking at a joint press conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in December, Tusk said: "We know that the rule of law is very important. It is about our place in Europe. It is about our common values." [AP]

Von der Leyen said: "I welcome [Poland's] commitment to put the rule of law at the top of your government agenda and your determination to address all the concerns that have been expressed over the last years by the European Court and by the Commission." [AP]

"We will need to make up for lost time," she added. [Reuters]

The unblocked tranche of EUR 5.1 billion is not subject to the EU's conditions on restoring the rule of law. However, Warsaw still needs to take steps to ensure the independence of the judiciary before all the money reserved for Poland is unfrozen. [Reuters] [AP]

Commenting on the new Polish government's pledges, EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders said: "There is the commitment. The message is very important about the rule of law. But that is not enough. We need to see the reforms. That will take some time." [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

European rights court faults Poland for not recognising same-sex unions

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled that Poland is violating the European Convention of Human Rights by not legally recognising same-sex unions. [Politico] [Reuters] [Notes From Poland]

The December 12 verdict came on the same day that the Polish parliament gave a vote of confidence to a new coalition government made up of parties ranging from the centre-right to the left, ending eight years of rule by nationalists who were hostile to the LGBTQ+ community. [Euronews]

Five same-sex couples brought a case to the ECHR in 2017 and 2018 after unsuccessfully trying to receive legal recognition for their partnerships in Poland. [Notes From Poland]

The nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, now ejected from government, argued that same-sex unions harm children and contravene the concept of traditional marriage, which it said is a part of Poland's Christian heritage. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

But the Strasbourg-based court rejected that reasoning, ruling that failing to provide legal recognition of same-sex partnerships violated citizens' right to respect for their private life. [Reuters]

In a statement, the ECHR said: "The Court considered that the Polish State had failed to comply with its duty to ensure that the applicants had a specific legal framework providing for the recognition and protection of their same-sex unions."

It added: “That failure had resulted in the applicants’ inability to regulate fundamental aspects of their lives and amounted to a breach of their right to respect for their private and family life.” [Reuters]

Under the previous Law and Justice-led government, Poland had long been criticised for having some of the most restrictive anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in the EU. [Politico]

Law and Justice’s defeat in Poland’s parliamentary elections in October gave many hope that a new government, led by the centre-right Civic Platform (PO) party, would enact laws to expand rights for the country’s LGBTQ+ community. [Notes From Poland]

Civic Platform leader Donald Tusk, who was sworn in as prime minister by the president on December 13, made the recognition of same-sex partnerships a priority during last year’s election campaign. [Reuters] [Politico]

(ek/pk)

Russia completes shipment of tactical nukes to Belarus

Russia has completed its shipments of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, according to the country's president, raising international concern. [SkyNews][AP]

At a Moscow-led economic bloc meeting in St Petersburg, Alexander Lukashenko said the deliveries were finished in October - though he didn't say how many or where they had been deployed. Tactical nuclear weapons, which are designed for use on the battlefield, have a short range and a low yield compared with much more powerful nuclear warheads fitted to long-range missiles. [SkyNews]

They can have a yield as small as about one kiloton, significantly less than the 15 kiloton-yield of the US bomb used on Hiroshima during the Second World War. [SkyNews]

(gc)

Slovakia gets EU extension for exporting Russian oil-based products to Czech Republic

Slovakia has secured a one-year exemption from the EU's sanction rules on Russian oil, allowing the country's only refiner to export Russian-origin oil products to the Czech Republic.

Refiner Slovnaft has said it needs more time to allow a further shift to non-Russian crude. [Reuters] [Politico] It added that if the exemption was not granted, it would have produced for the Slovak domestic market only. [FT]

Slovnaft is owned by Hungarian energy firm MOL, which owns refineries in Slovakia and Hungary. It cut its dependence on Russian crude in its processing activities from 95% to 60% in 2023. [Reuters 2]

EU leaders agreed to embargo most Russian crude imports by the end of 2022, but landlocked countries such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic were exempted from the bloc's ban as they shifted to new sources. [AP News]

Bratislava and Prague urged the EU to extend Slovakia's permission to export Russia-origin fuel to the Czech Republic beyond a deadline of December 5, 2023, arguing that otherwise shortages would drive up fuel prices in the central European region. [FT] [Politico]

Poland and the Baltic states opposed the extension, voicing concerns that it would run counter to the bloc's joint effort to undermine Russia's funding for its military operations in Ukraine. [FT]

(yl/pk)

Slovenia pledges EUR 1.5m for demining efforts in Ukraine

Slovenia has announced it is donating EUR 1.5 million to Ukraine to aid demining efforts in the war-torn country. [Kyiv Independent] [Euromaidan Press]

Ukrainian Economy Minister Yuliia Syvyrdenko thanked the Slovenian people, saying that her nation is "incredibly grateful for the support and assistance" it has received after it was invaded by Russia. [Kyiv Independent] [Euromaidan Press]

Since October, international donors have pledged over USD 530 million towards demining efforts in Ukraine, which includes sending technical equipment to the country and educating civilians about mines. [Kyiv Independent] [Euromaidan Press]

After it was invaded by Russia in February 2022, Ukraine has become the most mine-affected country in the world, with over 30% of its territory covered in explosives which endanger civilian lives and create an economic burden by making many crops unharvestable. [Kyiv Independent] [Euromaidan Press]

(evk/pk)

Use of airport critical for deal with UK on Gibraltar, Spanish minister says

Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares said on December 10 that a deal with the UK on the post-Brexit status of Gibraltar would have to include joint use of the British territory's airport.

Since the UK left the European Union in 2020, London and Madrid have been holding negotiations on Gibraltar's future relationship with mainland Spain. A temporary agreement allows the free movement of workers and tourists across the Gibraltar border. [Reuters]

Spain has proposed a deal that rules out any hard border between the mainland and Gibraltar. Madrid is in favour of freedom of movement and also wants Spain to be able to use the airport. [Politico]

British Foreign Minister David Cameron has yet to comment on Spain's proposed deal.

(jt/pk)

Erdogan visits Athens

Turkish President Erdogan visited Greece to discuss with Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis trade and regional issues concerning the two countries on December 7. [TheGuardian]

Before the meeting, Erdogan said he sought a "new chapter" in relations based on "win-win" cooperation. [France24]

Relations between the two countries have historically been troubling under different domains: energy, the case of Cyprus, migration issues and the issue of the Aegean Sea. With Turkey and Greece in NATO, rebuilding trust through cooperation is an effective strategy to avoid military disputes. [APNews]

Ergodan visited Greece in 2017. However, the visit was unsuccessful because of disagreements regarding the countries' borders. This visit saw the two countries signing a joint declaration for implementing good neighbouring relations. Erdogan emphasised its willingness to increment bilateral trade from 5.5 billion USD to 10 billion USD. [AlJazeera]

The leaders hope to establish new closer ties.

Erdogan suggested new domains for expanding cooperation and finding potential grounds for cooperation regarding nuclear energy. He added that Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis reacted warmingly to the proposition. [Reuters]

The two countries agreed to boost trade and establish communication channels between coastguards to tackle the issue of migration.

"About migration, we noted that there is a substantial reduction in flows during the last period," said Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis."

"I would also add that this is a result of a much better cooperation between the police and the coastguard of both our countries. And this cooperation can be and has to improve even more."

In a joint press conference with Mitsotakis, Erdogan said there was "no problem that couldn't be resolved" between them.

"We want to make the Aegean Sea a sea of peace and cooperation. As Turkey and Greece, we seek to be an example to the whole world. I am speaking frankly: there is no problem between us that can not be solved."

A significant agreement made during the talks is the joint declaration of friendly ties and good neighbourly relations, with which the two sides sealed their will for "calm waters" in the Aegean Sea, maintaining the peaceful atmosphere between Athens and Ankara during the last few months and more confidence-building measures between the two sides. [Euronews]

But differences do remain - especially over Cyprus. Ankara favours a fair solution "based on the realities on the island," implying a two-state solution. Meanwhile, Athens says the only solution is based on the island's reunification based on the UN resolutions. [Euronews]

Other agreements include deals on trade, energy, education, agriculture, sports, technology and tourism.

[Euronews]

Mitsotakis said a "realistic target" over the next five years was for bilateral trade, which currently stands at over EUR 5 billion, to increase to EUR 10 billion. Mitsotakis also said he had been invited to Ankara and intended to visit Turkey in the spring. [Euronews]

(vt-st/gc)

Turkey, Hungary vow to deepen ties as Erdogan visits Budapest

A visit by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Hungary has led to promises of increased cooperation between the two countries. [Al Jazeera] [Telex] [Euronews]

During the visit, which took place in late December, Erdogan and Prime Minister Viktor Orban discussed strengthening energy ties. Hungary aims to start importing natural gas through Turkey in 2024. [Al Jazeera] [Telex] [Euronews]

NATO enlargement was also discussed, though neither leader made an official statement regarding the subject. [Al Jazeera] [Telex] [Euronews]

Despite hopes that the Turkish and Hungarian legislatures would approve Sweden's NATO accession in the autumn, the two countries continue to be the only members of the alliance that have not ratified the Nordic nation's bid to join. [Al Jazeera] [Telex] [Euronews] [Europe in Review September 2023]

Erdogan recently made his country's approval of Sweden joining NATO conditional on the US Congress approving Ankara's request for F-16 fighter jets.

Orban, meanwhile, has said he supports Sweden's bid, but that he does not believe the matter of accession is urgent. At the same time, Budapest has accused Swedish officials of being "repeatedly keen to bash Hungary" on rule-of-law issues. [Al Jazeera] [Telex] [Euronews]

The meeting between Erdogan and Orban follows talks between their countries in late August, where the purchase of natural gas and NATO were also discussed. [Europe in Review September 2023]

(evk/pk)

Turkey sends fighter jets to Romania

Four Turkish F-16 fighter jets arrived at Romania's 86th Borcea Airbase in southeastern Romania on December 6 to participate in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)'s enhanced air policing mission. Seventy-one personnel were also dispatched.

The mission will run until March 2024. [AA]

(sw/gc)

Ukraine receives French ships to aid with grain exports

France will deliver a second merchant ship to Ukraine to aid its grain exports in the Black Sea. The news was announced by French Transport Secretary Clement Beaune. [Ukrainska Pravda]

Beaune confirmed the ship had left Dunkirk, France in order "to better feed the world" and that France's commitment to Ukraine is "total" and that their "solidarity will not stop." [Beaune X] [Kyiv Independent]

The ship will join thirty some vessels that have been transporting goods, including 700,000 metric tonnes of grain, out of Ukraine. Exports over the Black Sea have come under increased pressure since July 2023, when Russia backed out of an agreement that protected shipping during its invasion of Ukraine. [Kyiv Independent]

(md/gc)

Action plan reached on Ukraine-Poland border blockade

Ukrainian and Polish trade representatives will seek to end the extensive backlog of trucks stranded on either side of their shared border. Ukraine's Press Service said both parties had reached an "agreement of common positions to unblock the border." [Ukrainska Pravda]

Polish truckers and farmers began to blockade the border with Ukraine in early November, leaving thousands of vehicles and drivers stranded on either side of the state boundaries. The demonstrations were prompted by the EU's waiving of tariffs and permits on Ukrainian goods, which those on the Polish side say

resulted in unfair market competition. [Euromaidan] [CPG]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk welcomed the progress, believing the “emotions and blockade” at the border could be relieved. However, he also confirmed that current EU tariff regulations would remain in place until June 2024 but hoped compromises could be sought at an “operational level.” [Reuters]

On December 23, Polish farmers halted their blockade of the main road routes into Ukraine following further promises of action on domestic grain prices from Tusk. As a result, border authorities on both sides initially announced that traffic would now begin to move as usual. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

However, Poland’s truckers have not yet ended their protest and continue to block border crossings into Ukraine. As a result, more recent reports suggest upwards of three thousand trucks remain stranded on either side of the border. [Euromaidan]

(md/gc)

UK official expresses gratitude to troops in Estonia

The United Kingdom’s Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defense People, Veterans, and Service Families, Andrew Murrison, expressed deep gratitude to British troops stationed at Tapa Camp, Estonia, emphasising their pivotal role in reinforcing NATO's alliance. [ERR News]

Minister Murrison, during discussions with Estonian Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur, reaffirmed the enduring defence ties between the nations. He acknowledged the sacrifices made by service personnel and their families, highlighting their critical contribution to peace and security. [GOV] [ERR News]

While inspecting Tapa Camp facilities, Minister Murrison commended recent improvements, including the introduction of a Navy, Army, and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI) welfare facility and enhanced catering options. [ERR News]

The visit aligns with the October 2023 Defence Cooperation Arrangement, solidifying the UK-Estonia defensive relationship for the next decade.

As the first Battalion Royal Regiment of Fusiliers leads NATO's enhanced Forward Presence mission,

Murrison's visit echoes a tradition of high-ranking British officials expressing gratitude to troops stationed in Estonia [ERR News], showcasing the enduring camaraderie between the two nations.

(ha/gc)

United Kingdom accuses Russia of cyberattacks

The British Foreign, Common Wealth and Development office accused on December 7 the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) of a cyber attack against politicians, civil servants, journalists, NGOs and other civil society organisations. [TheGuardian]

The United Kingdom alleged that Russia made "unsuccessful attempts to interfere in UK political processes" by targeting high-profile individuals and entities with cyber operations. [UKGOV]

Leo Docherty, a minister under David Cameron, told the House of Commons that a group called Centre 18, a unit within the FSB, has been involved in cyber-espionage and a subordinate group called Star Blizzard was involved in the hacking activity targeting "British parliamentarians from multiple parties." [AlJazeera] [UKGOV]

They also alleged that the hack of UK-US trade documents that were leaked ahead of the 2019 General Election – previously attributed to the Russian state, was conducted by this group. [UKGOV]

In response, the UK and US sanctioned Ruslan Aleksandrovich Peretyatko and Andrey Stanislavovich Korinets, members of the Star Blizzard Group.

Foreign Secretary David Cameron said: "In sanctioning those responsible and summoning the Russian Ambassador today, we are exposing their malign attempts at influence and shining a light on another example of how Russia chooses to operate on the global stage. We will continue to work together with our allies to expose Russian covert cyber activity and hold Russia to account for its actions." [UKGOV]

(sl/gc)

UK imposes new trade and financial sanctions against Russia

The United Kingdom has announced legislation prohibiting British citizens and companies from trading in a wide range of Russian metals. The sanctions announced on December 14 by the Department for Business and Trade target “goods, technology, and sources of funding that could support Russia’s war against Ukraine.” [UKGOV]

The UK claims that the banned goods include those that carry a risk of military or industrial usage.

The legislation also stated that a British person “must not directly or indirectly acquire metals which originate in Russia or are located in Russia,” as announced by the G-7 in May. The United Kingdom has separately banned the import of diamonds from Russia along with a prohibition of ancillary services for Russia related to metals. [Bloomberg]

Financial measures to support businesses that decide to divest from Russia were introduced in the legislation.

New reporting obligations were also announced for businesses from December 26 to ensure compliance with existing sanctions. [UKGOV]

(sl/gc)

British minehunters aim to boost Ukrainian navy capabilities

In a strategic move to enhance Ukraine's maritime capabilities, the United Kingdom has spearheaded a Maritime Capability Coalition in collaboration with Norway to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security and reinforce Ukraine's position in the Black Sea region.

British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps has confirmed the transfer of two Royal Navy minehunter ships, originally HMS Grimsby and HMS Shoreham, to the Ukrainian Navy. Renamed Chernihiv and Cherkasy, these vessels will be crucial in securing vital export routes for Ukraine, particularly countering the threat posed by Russian sea mines [The Guardian] [GOV].

The joint initiative, launched alongside Norway, aims to provide long-term support to Ukraine and encompass training, equipment, and infrastructure. As part of the Maritime Capability Coalition, the UK and Norway will work closely with the Ukrainian Navy to develop various capabilities, including the rapid expansion of a maritime force in the Black Sea and the continued development of a Ukrainian Marine Corps.

Shapps emphasised the significance of this effort, underscoring the beginning of a sustained commitment to strengthen Ukraine's maritime capabilities, ensuring compatibility with Western allies and bolstering security in the Black Sea [GOV]. Norway's Defence Minister Bjorn Arild Gram echoed the sentiment, underlining the importance of supporting Ukraine in building a lasting naval capability [The Guardian].

As Ukraine faces economic challenges due to the Black Sea blockade imposed by Russia, this initiative promises to restore Ukraine's maritime exports.

The coalition builds on existing support provided by the UK, with over GBP 4.6 billion in military aid allocated since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 [The Guardian].

Turkey threatens

Turkey said it will not allow two minesweepers that the United Kingdom donated to Ukraine to pass its straits linking the Black Sea to the Aegean under the country's founding treaty. [Almonitor]

"Our pertinent allies have been duly apprised that the minesweeper ships donated to Ukraine by the United Kingdom will not be allowed to pass through the Turkish Straits to the Black Sea as long as the war continues," the Turkish Presidency's Communication Directorate posted on X, denying reports suggesting otherwise. [Almonitor]

The body cited the 1936 Montreux Convention, one of the founding treaties of the modern Turkish Republic, which gives Turkey sovereignty over the strategic Bosporus and Dardanelles straits that link Asia and Europe. Under the pact, Turkey is obliged to seal off its straits to military vessels' passage to and from the Black Sea during wartime. [Almonitor]

Turkey "immediately classified Russia's special military operation against Ukraine as 'war' and, in accordance with Article 19 of the Montreux Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits, closed the straits to warships of the belligerent parties," the directorate added. [Almonitor]

(ha/gc)

Sunak speaks to Zelensky, offers condolences

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, according to a January 2 statement from the PM's office. [GovUK]

He offered his condolences to all those Ukrainians killed and injured in barbaric Russian airstrikes over the Christmas period. The Prime Minister said the UK would continue to stand steadfastly by Ukraine as they fight aggression and occupation, throughout 2024 and into the future. [GovUK]

The leaders discussed recent developments in the conflict, including progress in the Black Sea and the success of the Ukrainian air defence, bolstered by UK-supplied ground-to-air missiles. The Prime Minister set out ongoing UK work to provide military and diplomatic support to Ukraine, including through further deliveries of lethal aid, support for President Zelenskyy's peace plan and a long-term security framework. [GovUK]

(gc)

France urges Hezbollah to deescalate Israel-Lebanon border tensions

France's foreign minister met with officials in Lebanon, including the current prime minister Najib Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, on December 18 to deescalate the mounting tension along the Israel-Lebanon border. [AP]

Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna told reporters during a press conference at the Pine Palace- the official residence of the French ambassador to Lebanon- that "[the] escalation must stop." "The dangers of the conflict spreading are still high... I am very worried," she said. [AP]

France, along with the UK and US, is pursuing a diplomatic solution to quell the intensifying fighting along Israel's northern border.

Since Hamas's October 7 terror attack on Israel, which left over 1,200 Israelis dead and another 240 taken hostage, Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed terror organisation and significant political party in Lebanon, has launched hundreds of rockets across the border, targeting Israeli civilians and military personnel.

Israeli intelligence also suggests that the terror group currently has approximately 150,000 rockets and missiles aimed directly at Israel, many of which can

reach primary civilian targets throughout the nation's interior. [AP]

Diplomatic channels

Israeli defence officials have accused Hezbollah of violating UN Security Council resolution 1701, which helped bring the previous month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah to a close in 2006.

Under the resolution, the presence of armed factions is prohibited within the roughly 18 miles between the border and Lebanon's Litani River. [CNN] [The Jerusalem Post]

The Israeli parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee Chairman Yuli Edelstein told Reuters that Israel's goal is to move Hezbollah's forces back to this position through diplomatic means if possible. "This is a goal, I think, that we are trying to reach, at this stage, through diplomatic channels," Edelstein said.

The chairman called France and other key nations to intervene diplomatically.

"We are turning to every normal country, be it the United States, France, Arab countries- anyone who could somehow influence the situation and has some influence in Lebanon." [Reuters]

In a December 12 statement, Hezbollah's deputy leader, Naim Qassem, said Lebanon's front with Israel would "remain open all the while the aggression on Gaza continues."

A day later, Hassan Fadlallah, a senior Hezbollah politician, said of Israel's diplomatic pursuits, "These are proposals that are not on [Hezbollah's] agenda or the country's [Lebanon's] agenda, and no one has spoken about them with us, and we are not prepared to even listen to them." [Reuters]

(cqk/gc)

Drone targets French warships in Red Sea

The French Languedoc warship located in the Red Sea shot down two drones from Yemen. The drones were intercepted and shot down on December 9.

The Defence Ministry of France explained in a press conference on December 10 that the response was “legitimate defence” because the drones were targeting the French warship. The general staff added

that the interception happened 110 kilometres from the Yemeni coast and the port of Al Hudaydah on the Yemen coast, a location that is under Houthi's control. [France24]

Yemen's Houthi militants said that they would target all ships directed to Israel regardless of their nationality; they have already attacked other Israeli-linked ships. The group is mainly against Israel in the Israel-Hamas conflict, and it is receiving additional support from Iran. [Reuters]

(vt/gc)

Russia, Iran finalise plans to dump the dollar

Russia and Iran have finalised an agreement to trade in their local currencies instead of the US dollar, Iran's state media reported. The agreement was sealed during a meeting between the governors of the two countries' central banks in Russia, it said. [BusinessRecorder]

Both Iran and Russia are subject to US sanctions. "Banks and economic actors can now use infrastructures including non-SWIFT interbank systems to deal in local currencies," Iranian state media said. Members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union signed a fully-fledged free trade agreement with Iran on December 25. [BusinessRecorder]

Russia and Iran have been working to shift away from the dollar, after the US leveraged the greenback's global dominance to slap economic sanctions on the two countries in recent years. The move is also part of a wider drive among a string of nations to reduce their reliance on the dollar in international payments and investments. [MSN]

Countries from China to Brazil have been pushing to increase the global usage of their own currencies, while the BRICS group of nations has been weighing the possibility of a shared tender. More countries have joined the trend this year — Indonesia recently set up a task force to widen the use of its currency, the rupiah. [MSN]

(gc)

Swedish PM demands release of EU employee held in Iran

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has called for the immediate release of a Swedish European Union employee held in Iran.

Johan Floderus, who works for the EU's diplomatic service, was arrested in Iran in April 2022. He has been charged with spying for Israel and "corruption on earth" – a serious offence that can be punished with the death penalty.

Kristersson told a press conference: "We demand his immediate release." [Reuters]

Tensions between Stockholm and Tehran increased in 2019 when Sweden arrested a former Iranian official suspected of torturing and executing political prisoners in Iran in the 1980s.

The former official, Hamid Noury, was found guilty and handed a life sentence in July 2022. Noury appealed but a Stockholm district court upheld his guilty verdict in a hearing on December 19. [France24] [Reuters 2]

Meanwhile, Iran announced on December 10 that it had started Floderus's trial.

(km/pk)

United Kingdom imposes new sanctions against Iran

The United Kingdom introduced on December 14 new sanctions on Iranian officials to disrupt their "hostile activities."

The sanctions, in coordination with the United States, target the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Esmail Qaani, and individuals linked to Iran's relationship with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

According to the British Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, the sanctions aim to target Iran's drone programme by strengthening export restrictions on components and imposing transport sanctions on ships associated with sanctioned individuals. [UKGOV]

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said: "The behaviour of the Iranian regime poses an unacceptable threat to the UK and our partners. It continues to threaten people on UK soil and uses its influence to destabilise the Middle East through its support to armed groups, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad." [UKGOV]

The UK has targeted more than 350 Iranian individuals and organisations, including other leading IRGC commanders and Tehran's prosecutor general. [NewArab]

(sl/gc)

Austria and US hold annual strategic talks

Austria and the US have held an annual "strategic dialogue" aimed at strengthening cooperation and bilateral relations.

The political director of the Austrian foreign ministry, Gregor W. Kössler, hosted the US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, James C. O'Brien, in Vienna on December 4. [Vindobona]

The meeting emphasised the importance of transatlantic cooperation and addressing geopolitical and regional security issues.

Both countries "expressed unwavering support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine", the US State Department said in a statement.

It added that Vienna and Washington "reaffirmed their joint commitment to and solidarity with Israel in light of the Hamas terror attacks on October 7" while voicing concern about the "deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and the need for unhindered humanitarian access and the protection of civilians. "

They also voiced support for the prospective accession of Western Balkans countries to the EU. [USGov]

On bilateral issues, Vienna and Washington said they were committed to increasing cooperation through the State Partnership Program between Austria and the US state of Vermont, apprenticeships and enhanced people-to-people exchanges, including professional development and cultural exchanges. [BMEIA]

Both countries also stressed the importance of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to regional security.

The next such bilateral meeting is set to take place in Washington in 2024. [USGov]

(sl/pk)

Latvia will receive four Canadian helicopters to bolster NATO deterrence

Latvia will receive four Griffon helicopters from Canada as part of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization to bolster its defences, according to Canadian Defence Minister Bill Blair during his visit to the Baltic country.

He said Canada will send helicopters to Latvia for NATO's "deterrence mission" to bolster its eastern flank in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine [Global News].

Canada has also committed to doubling its troop presence in Latvia by 2,200 by 2026, accompanied by a squadron of 15 Leopard two tanks. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's USD 2.6 billion investment reinforces this commitment [Global News].

Canada's Royal Canadian Air Force will deploy the four Griffon helicopters, marking Europe's first consistent tactical aviation presence since the 1990s. A USD 800 million upgrade contract extends their service life into the 2030s. Chinook helicopters will follow periodically from the fall of 2025 [LSM].

Canada will also allocate USD 15 million for infrastructure improvements at Camp Adazi, home to 1,700 troops, including 800 Canadians.

Additional funds support living conditions and accommodations at Ceri, the brigade's headquarters. Canada's actions reinforce NATO's commitment to Latvia, enhancing deterrence capabilities amid geopolitical challenges amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine and fear of military operation expansion [LSM].

(ha/gc)

Latvia and US sign deal for procurement of NSM coastal defence systems

Latvia and the United States have reached a USD 105 million deal to procure cutting-edge Naval Strike Missile (NSM) Coastal Defense Systems. The announcement on December 8 underscores a significant stride in Latvia's commitment to fortifying its national defence capabilities [LSM].

The US will contribute 70% of the total contract amount. The NSM, manufactured by Raytheon and Kongsberg, will be a critical component of Latvia's

National Armed Forces (NBS), enhancing coastal defence capabilities [LSM].

Defence Minister Andris Spruds, in a statement to Latvian Radio, highlighted the pivotal role the anti-ship missile system would play in safeguarding Latvia's coast, ensuring the safety of shipping routes, and contributing to NATO's collective defence [LSM].

The NSM, with a striking range of 185 kilometres, is anticipated to be delivered in 2027. US Ambassador Christopher Robinson praised the collaboration, emphasising its significance in the face of evolving geopolitical challenges [Naval News].

This procurement aligns with Latvia's broader defence strategy, reflecting a proactive approach to bolstering national security and contributing to regional stability. The joint effort showcases the enduring partnership between Latvia and the United States in addressing contemporary security concerns [Naval News].

(ha/gc)

Ex-deputy PM of North Macedonia denied entry to US over corruption allegations

A former deputy prime minister of North Macedonia has been denied entry into the United States on the grounds that he allegedly engaged in “significant corruption”.

Kocho Angjushev is accused of abusing his previous position as deputy premier in charge of economic affairs by favouring his private business interests. He denies the allegations.

Angjushev held that post from 2017 to 2020 in the government of the centre-left SDSM party.

He was also the honorary consul of Malta in the North Macedonian capital, Skopje. The Maltese foreign ministry fired him from the role, which he had held for two years, after he was refused entry to the US in December.

Corruption has been an ongoing concern for North Macedonia, which has been striving for European Union membership since 2004 and grappling with political instability.

In its Corruption Perception Index for 2023, the Transparency International watchdog ranked North Macedonia 85th among 180 countries.

The EU's executive, the European Commission, said in a report in November that corruption in North Macedonia remains "prevalent in many areas and is an issue of concern". It added that "no progress was made" in recent months. [NewsBook] [Times of Malta]

(tn/pk)

Norway donates USD 50m to help save Brazil's rainforest

Norway has pledged to donate an additional USD 50 million to Brazil's Amazon Fund to help conserve the South American country's rainforest.

Brazil and Norway announced the donation on December 11, during the United Nations COP28 climate change summit in Dubai.

It is the first such donation by Norway since the Amazon Fund was frozen by former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right nationalist, in 2019. [Reuters]

Reopening the fund was one of the first acts by Bolsonaro's leftist successor, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, when he became president at the start of last year.

The fund can only receive donations when Brazil lowers deforestation. Under Bolsonaro, deforestation had hit a 15-year high. [Reuters]

Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said: "The 50% reduction in deforestation in the Amazon in 2023 is the result of President Lula's capacity to take directed measures. This is important for Brazil and the world." [Government of Brazil]

Brazilian Environment Minister Marina Silva said: "Brazil has a commitment to zero deforestation by 2030, and Norway's support is essential." [XM]

The Amazon Fund was created in 2008 by President Lula during a previous term in office and allowed international support for efforts to combat deforestation. The Norwegians were the first donors to the fund, and contributed around USD 606 million from 2009 to 2018. [Government of Brazil]

(jb/pk)

Spain ejects US embassy staff suspected of offering cash for secrets: report

Two US embassy staff have been quietly ejected from Spain after being accused of bribing local intelligence officers for government secrets, the El Pais newspaper has reported. [Reuters]

The expulsions followed an inquiry within Spain's intelligence agency, the CNI, prompted by the revelation that two Spanish agents had accessed classified information unrelated to their assigned duties. [El Pais]

According to El Pais, the probe found that one of the Spanish agents had been enlisted by American officials to acquire classified information in exchange for a "large sum" of money. [El Pais]

On December 7, Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles said that Madrid had lodged a complaint with the US. However, she emphasised that the incident would not adversely affect diplomatic ties between the two countries, who are allies and members of NATO. [Aljazeera]

(jt/pk)

Italy pulls out of flagship Chinese Belt and Road project

The Italian government has confirmed its withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a strategic global trade and infrastructure plan. [BBC] [CNN] [Financial Times]

Hard-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said the BRI "has not produced the results that were expected."

However, she maintained that Rome would continue to seek good relations with Beijing, saying on December 7: "I think that we should... improve our cooperation with China on trade, the economy." [Reuters]

Italy signalled last year that it planned to leave the Chinese global scheme. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Meloni had criticised a previous Italian government's decision to join the BRI, calling it a "serious mistake" and pledged to quit the initiative during her campaign for office in 2022. [BBC]

Following Italy's formal decision to withdraw, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said on December 7: "China firmly opposes any attempts to smear or

undermine the cooperation in building the Belt and Road." [Financial Times]

Italy joined the BRI in 2019 despite criticism from its US and EU allies, and is the only G7 country to have taken part. The initiative, launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, aims to link China with Europe and Asia through infrastructure. [BBC] [The Guardian]

The US has claimed that the BRI involves massive projects that nations are unable to finance, providing China with leverage for its geopolitical goals. [BBC]

(ao/pk)

Russia warns Japan about providing Patriot air defence system to Ukraine

A move by Japan to provide Patriot air defence systems to Ukraine will have "grave consequences" for Russia-Japan ties, Reuters reported, citing the Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

Relations between Moscow and Tokyo, already difficult, have deteriorated sharply since Russia sent tens of thousands of troops into Ukraine in Feb. 2022. Japan has joined its Western allies in imposing sweeping economic sanctions on Russia. [Reuters]

Japan said it would prepare to ship Patriot air defence missiles to the United States after revising its arms export guidelines, in Tokyo's first significant overhaul of such export curbs in nine years. [Reuters]

Although Japan's new export controls still prevent it from shipping weapons to countries that are at war, it may indirectly benefit Ukraine in its war with Russia as it gives the United States extra capacity to provide military aid to Kyiv. [Reuters]

(gc)

British defence minister meets Japanese and Italian counterparts in Tokyo

British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps met with his Japanese and Italian counterparts, Minister Minoru Kihara and Minister Guido Crosetto, in Tokyo on December 14.

The three countries signed a treaty for a "combat air programme" that aims to develop an innovative stealth

fighter jet with supersonic capability and equipped with cutting-edge technology. [UKGOV]

The treaty is critical to the 'Global Combat Air Programme British Prime Rishi Sunak announced in 2022. The programme's headquarters will be in the United Kingdom, and its development will begin in 2025. [SkyNews]

According to a statement by the British defence ministry, the Tempest aircraft aims to have a powerful radar that can provide 10,000 times more data than current systems and will begin operations in 2035.

"The UK-based headquarters will also see us make important decisions collaboratively and at pace, working with our close partners Italy and Japan, and our impressive defence industries, to deliver an outstanding aircraft," Shapps said. [SkyNews][UKGOV]

The British government has committed just over GBP 2 billion towards the original Tempest programme alone, with industry partners investing about GBP 800 million. Japan's defence ministry is seeking to set aside USD 513 million for the programme for the 2024-25 fiscal year. [FinancialTimes]

The United Kingdom has also committed to deploy more of its naval forces in 2025, following the deployment of the Royal Navy's Carrier Strike Group in 2021.

"Such deployments send a strong deterrence message while presenting important opportunities for engagements with key partners," Shapps said. "Japan is our closest security partner in Asia, and the task group's visit to the country will only serve to strengthen our military and diplomatic ties. [UKGOV]

(sl/gc)

France closes embassy in Niger

France has closed its embassy in the Niger capital of Niamey for an indefinite amount of time after tension erupted between the two countries.

Paris closed the embassy in response to restrictions from the new military government in Niger, which forbids the French embassy from functioning normally. [BBC]

Following the coup d'état in Niger on July 28, France already declared that it would withdraw from the

country.

After the coup, protesters attacked the French embassy. The military junta currently ruling the country declared the French “persona non grata” and requested that all the Western nations leave the country. [APNews]

The embassy closure has underscored the tensions that emerged during the coup, where the French ambassador Sylvain Itte was also ordered to be expelled by Mali and Burkina Faso, two countries that have also witnessed coup d’états in previous years. [Reuters]

(vt/gc)

Russia reopens embassy in Burkina Faso

Russia has reopened its embassy in Burkina Faso after it was shut more than 30 years ago, officials have said.

Burkina Faso was a close ally of former colonial power France, but has pivoted towards Russia since the military seized power in a coup in 2022. The junta has expelled French diplomats and has shut France's military base in the country. At the same time, it has been strengthening military and diplomatic ties with Russia. [BBC]

(gc)

Croatia aims to open embassy in New Zealand amid hopes of boosting trade

Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlic Radman has said his country plans to open an embassy in New Zealand amid hopes of boosting bilateral trade.

The announcement on December 8 came during a visit by Radman to Wellington for talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters.

Radman also met New Zealand’s Trade Minister Todd McClay to talk about bilateral economic cooperation, and the president of the Supreme Court of New Zealand, Helen Winkelmann, to discuss cooperation in the field of justice. [CroatiaWeek]

New Zealand voiced support for Croatia’s hopes of joining the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Zagreb’s negotiations on

signing a Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement with Australia in 2024. [TotalCroatiaNews]

Radman's meetings also focused on connections in the form of the Croatian diaspora in New Zealand. He met parliamentary representatives of Croatian origin and visited a Croatian cultural centre in Wellington. [CroatiaWeek] [TotalCroatiaNews]

(sl/pk)

Team:

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