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Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

EU leaders have unanimously approved a EUR 50 billion aid package for Ukraine after Hungary rescinded its threats to veto the funding. The deal is pivotal for Kyiv, which relies on assistance from the West to continue its fight against Russia's invasion.

However, Ukraine hasn't received the fresh support it has been hoping for from the United States, the only country capable of providing military hardware in the quantities required by Kyiv. The reason is an ongoing political deadlock in America. For the Kremlin, that amounts to a reprieve – one it will look to take advantage of on the battlefield.

Another problem for Ukraine is a widely reported rift between its president and its military's commander-in-chief which threatens the unity that has helped the nation resist Russia.

One political analyst says that Ukrainians trust both President Volodymyr Zelensky and military chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and that a corrosive spat between the pair is “like asking a child during a divorce whom they support more, mom or dad.”

Elsewhere in Europe, Turkey’s parliament has finally voted to approve Sweden’s bid to join NATO, but Budapest – in another case of a Hungarian fly in the ointment – is still holding out, making it the last of the Western military alliance’s 31 members not to give the green light.

Meanwhile, European capitals have been divided by a military campaign waged by Britain and the United States against Yemeni Houthi rebels.

At the same time, a string of European countries have suspended funding for the UN refugee agency for Palestinians – which provides a lifeline for Gaza – after allegations that some of the body’s staff took part in the attacks by Hamas militants on Israel on October 7.

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

Kind wishes,

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Top Stories - Editors’ Pick

Internal rift threatens Ukraine's unity as US support wavers

The battlefields of Ukraine look much the same as they did in 2023, though the political landscape has markedly changed.

Large-scale operations have halted along much of the frontline, apart from a few grinding battles in and around devastated settlements in the country's east. There, Ukrainian forces face an enemy increasingly superior in manpower and munitions, as Kyiv's Western backers lag in delivering on promises of aid. To make matters worse for Ukraine, a private rift between the country's president and the military's commander-in-chief threatens the unity that contributed heavily to the nation's ability to resist Russian offensives.

Future of Ukraine's 'Iron General' in doubt

After several months of rumours, a simmering conflict between Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky and his commander-in-chief, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, appears to be boiling over.

In the closing days of January, reports surfaced of a serious break between the two men, who are arguably Ukraine's most important public figures. According to sources in the Ukrainian government, and at least one Ukrainian politician close to Zaluzhnyi, the general was asked to step down by Zelensky – but refused. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence and the President's Office have denied the rumours. Zaluzhnyi has not commented publicly on the matter but has published an article for CNN on the need for Ukraine to develop self-reliance amid inconsistent Western support.

Nicknamed the “iron general” by Ukrainian media figures, Zaluzhnyi has directed his country’s largely successful resistance to Russia’s 2022 invasion. Under his leadership, Ukraine inflicted heavy defeats on the Russian army outside Kyiv, stopped its southern advance at Mykolaiv, and drove it out of the eastern Kharkiv and southern Kherson regions – defying the predictions of outside observers.

The harshest criticisms of Zaluzhnyi’s leadership have come in relation to the southern front: at first, the lack of forces to defend the southern regions in the early stages of the war, and more recently the Ukrainian army’s failure to make significant progress in its 2023 counteroffensive.

Many reasons have been floated for Zelensky’s reported decision to remove Zaluzhnyi, or at least to attempt to remove him. [CNN] [Euronews] [Guardian] [Financial Times] [Hill] [Independent] [Kyiv Independent] [Reuters]

Sources point to a breakdown in the professional relationship between the two, with Zelensky bypassing Zaluzhnyi and dealing directly with his subordinate generals in relation to military strategy, and firing and replacing some of his deputies.

Zaluzhnyi, for his part, has been outspoken in his view of the conflict, which contradicts Zelensky’s position. In his public statements and writing, Zaluzhnyi has made clear he believes that the war will be long, that Ukraine needs to develop a technological advantage to counter Russia’s numerical one, and that the war had settled into a “stalemate”. That last comment was directly addressed by Zelensky, who publicly disagreed, and said that such talk only served to help Russia.

Zaluzhnyi has also been open about his desire to see mobilization expanded in Ukraine, which is fielding far fewer soldiers than Russia. Moscow launched a partial mobilization in late 2022, which helped it to stabilize its occupation of Ukrainian territory and replenish at least some of the losses it sustained in the early part of its campaign. Mobilization, which involves more aggressive conscription and coercive measures, is politically controversial and has been thus-far avoided by Zelensky. With a bill proposing mobilization moving through the Ukrainian legislature, the subject has become a key political issue for Ukrainians.

If Zelensky is to replace Zaluzhnyi, the general’s popularity presents a significant hurdle, and may indeed be the president’s motive.

Zelensky may embody Ukraine's resistance to outside observers, but he shares that spotlight with Zaluzhnyi inside Ukraine itself. Zaluzhnyi was polled as having an 88% approval rating in December. According to research commissioned by Zelensky's office and leaked to the media in late 2023, Zaluzhnyi was viewed as the only public figure with the popularity to challenge Zelensky's government were elections to be held.

Zelensky also remains incredibly popular in Ukraine, making a public conflict between the two men all the more unfortunate and corrosive. Volodymyr Fesenko, a Ukrainian political analyst and researcher, said that Ukrainians "simultaneously trust both Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi" and that the spat between the pair was "like asking a child during a divorce whom they support more, mom or dad."

Zaluzhnyi has no obvious successor, were he to be dismissed.

The most likely candidate is thought to be the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Colonel-General Oleksandr Syrskyi. A high-profile figure who clearly enjoys Zelensky's confidence, Syrskyi has defied several Russian offensives in the country's eastern Donbas region, where he has been commanding troops since 2014. According to reports, Syrskyi had been asked if he would replace Zaluzhnyi, but is said to have declined.

Syrskyi has come in for heavy criticism from Ukrainian media and commentators for being tactically inflexible. In particular, he was criticized for keeping Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut after the loss of the nearby town of Soledar in January 2023 made its defence costly.

Another name mentioned by sources is Lieutenant-General Kyrylo Budanov. As commander of Ukraine's military intelligence, Budanov has overseen some of Ukraine's flashiest operations, such as the double bombing of the Kerch Bridge, the assassinations of several Russian commanders, and high-profile POW exchanges.

Budanov is a popular figure in Ukraine and Russian forces have made several attempts on his life since his appointment in 2020. Budanov was previously reported to have been in the running to replace Oleksii Reznikov, who served as Ukraine's defence minister until September 2023. [Associated Press] [Bloomberg] [CNN] [Economist] [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Financial Times] [Kyiv Independent] [Kyiv Post] [Reuters]

Mixed news for Kyiv as EU approves funds, US stalls

In a boost for Kyiv, a EUR 50 billion support package for Ukraine was agreed at a summit of European Union leaders on February 1, despite opposition from Hungarian nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. *(See separate story in this issue)*

EU leaders were able to overcome Orban's threats of a veto, with a key role being played at the summit by Italian hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The issue is likely to emerge again, as the Hungarian premier's political director, Balazs Orban, accused Brussels of "war fever" immediately after the summit.

The EU funding will not significantly aid Kyiv's battlefield efforts, as most of the money will come in the form of grants and loans to support Ukraine's state infrastructure.

Outside Brussels, the United Kingdom has continued to provide significant military backing to Ukraine. In January, it announced that a further GBP 2.5 billion in military aid would be forthcoming. As American commitment to Kyiv wavers, European support is becoming increasingly vital to Ukraine's prospects in the conflict. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [Atlantic Council] [CSIS] [Financial Times] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal]

With a US presidential election less than a year away, January was a busy time for America's main political parties – and a fraught period for Ukraine. The Republicans are conducting their primaries, the process by which the party chooses its presidential candidate. This year, the process is viewed as a formality, with former President Donald Trump expected to easily win the nomination. For the Democrats, anxieties are mounting, with polling showing President Joe Biden's popularity declining despite a strong economy, signalling that a close-fought election is to be expected in November.

No real progress has been made on a new US support package for Ukraine since December. American eyes are now largely on their country's southern border, where illegal immigration from and through Mexico has been seized on by the Republicans ahead of the election.

Ukraine aid has largely fallen victim to negotiation on this issue, with Republican leader Mike Johnson refusing to countenance support for Kyiv without policy concessions on the US border and on immigration more broadly.

Although a bill on Ukraine aid will head to the Senate floor in the coming weeks, Republicans have vowed to oppose it without significant immigration policy concessions. Democrats do not have the necessary votes to pass the bill without winning over at least 16 Republicans. It is doubtful the concessions on offer will be accepted by the Republicans at this stage, as they are keen to avoid handing Biden any legislative victories ahead of the presidential election.

As the United States is the only nation capable of providing military hardware in the numbers required by Ukraine, the political deadlock represents a significant reprieve for the Kremlin, which will look to take advantage of it on the battlefield. [ABC] [Bloomberg] [Euractiv] [Hill] [New Republic] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe] [USA Today] [Washington Post] [Washington Times]

Ukraine downs Russian planes, sinks ship, holds Avdiivka

Battlefield events followed a predictable course in January as Russian forces continued to exchange heavy casualties for incremental advances but suffered losses in areas once thought safe. Ukrainian troops continued to feel the bite of ammunition shortages, as artillery units are forced to ration shells.

Ukrainian forces allegedly destroyed a Russian long-range radar aircraft, and damaged another, on January 14. Russian bloggers have claimed that the planes were mistakenly hit by Russian air defences. Ukrainian and Western sources say that Ukraine used air defence systems to target the aircraft, which had been flying sorties over the Black Sea for some weeks. [Atlantic Council] [BBC] [Business Insider] [Forbes] [Guardian] [PBS]

The Russian Black Sea Fleet suffered another loss last month as footage released by Ukraine showed the Ivanovets, a missile-armed corvette, being struck and sunk by a group of naval drones. The release of the footage was met with fury by Russian war-bloggers. The Black Sea Fleet has lost a fifth of its strength since Russia's invasion in 2022. [Associated Press] [BBC] [Business Insider] [Euronews] [Forbes] [Hill] [Newsweek]

A Russian military transport aircraft was shot down outside the city of Belgorod, near the country's border with Ukraine, on January 25. Moscow acknowledged the loss and claimed that Ukraine had downed the aircraft, adding that the plane had been carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Ukrainian officials refused to confirm or deny shooting down the aircraft but cast doubt on the likelihood of Russia transporting POWs by air. Moscow accused the Ukrainian government of "terrorism" and said Western weapons had been used in the attack. Little evidence of these claims has been offered, and a list purporting to contain the names of the POWs allegedly killed in the plane crash included ex-prisoners already returned to Ukraine. [CNN] [Forbes] [Politico Europe] [Reuters]

In Ukraine's east, the battle of Avdiivka continued in January, with positional fighting between infantry its defining feature. Russian forces made limited advances into the southern industrial zone of the city, where the majority of buildings have now been levelled. The remaining civilian population is being evacuated as the defence of the city continues. Russian troops attempted to use sewers to move past Ukrainian positions, with mixed success.

Ukrainian artillery continues to suffer from a chronic lack of ammunition, as explosive drones are increasingly used by Kyiv's forces to compensate. Russia continues to suffer heavy casualties, but is deploying fewer vehicles as its infantry takes the lead. Russia's renewed offensive, launched in October, aimed to encircle Avdiivka from the east and west, cutting it off from supplies. However, Russian forces appear to be trying to advance through the city as their encirclement stalls. [BBC] [Business Insider] [CEPA] [Financial Times] [Forbes] [Newsweek] [Odessa Journal] [RFE/RL]

(wb/pk)

EU leaders overcome Hungary's veto threat to grant Ukraine EUR 50 bn

EU leaders from 27 member states have unanimously approved a EUR 50 billion aid package for Ukraine after Hungary rescinded its threats to veto the funding.

The agreement reached on February 1 at an EU summit is pivotal for war-ravaged Ukraine, which relies heavily on financial assistance from the West as it spends most of its domestic revenue on its fight against Russia's invasion.

Ukrainian Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko said a single day of fighting costs some EUR 125 million. [Sky News] [Reuters 1] [TIME]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed the assistance from the EU. In a post on X, formerly known

as Twitter, he said the continued financial aid would strengthen Ukraine's long-term economic and financial stability. [BBC 1] [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [The Guardian 1] [AP 1]

In a video address, Zelensky alluded to uncertainty around a multi-billion-dollar aid package from the United States, saying that the EU's commitment would "send a signal across the Atlantic".

Ukraine is relying on the US for a USD 60 billion package to replenish its military supplies. While the White House warned in December that US assistance for Kyiv would run out by the year's end, the new package continues to be blocked by Republicans in Congress, who have demanded tougher restrictions on the US-Mexico border in exchange for their support. [BBC 1] [NYT] [The Wall Street Journal] [The Guardian 2] [The Telegraph] [The Washington Post]

Meanwhile, the EU's latest aid package will support Ukraine from 2024 to 2027, the European Council said. Kyiv is expected to receive its first tranche of EUR 4.5 billion from the facility in March. [AP 1] [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1]

However, the package, composed of loans and grants, is not intended to help fend off Russia. It is designed to help Ukraine rebuild and cover state expenses, such as pensions, social payments, state salaries and public service expenditures. [France 24] [BBC 1] [AP 2] [Aljazeera 2] [The Guardian 1] [The Wall Street Journal]

Ukrainian officials warned that such payments could have been delayed without the EU aid. [FT 1] [BBC 1] The package also aims to assist Ukraine on its path to EU membership. [Al Jazeera 2] [CNN 1]

The EU has a separate plan for financing weapons and munitions. However, the bloc acknowledged that it could only deliver half of its promised one million ammunition rounds to Ukraine by March. [The Washington Post] [BBC 1]

Hungarian fly in the ointment

Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Russia's closest ally in the EU, had threatened to veto the bloc's aid for Kyiv, questioning its commitment to finance Ukraine for the next four years. [BBC 1]

The support package had been stalled since December after Hungary was the sole member state to object to the deal at a previous EU summit. Orban argued the bloc should not fund Ukraine because it is not a

member of the European Union. [TIME] [CNN 1] [AP 1] [Reuters 1] [VOA 1] [France 24]

However, on February 1 Orban finally relented. Diplomats said that, in return for his nod, EU leaders agreed to an annual vote and a review in two years "if needed", but denied him the option of a future veto. [Reuters 1] [AP 1] [DW 1] [FT 1] [Bloomberg 1] [BBC 1] [Politico 1]

Orban claimed he had "accomplished" his mission as the bloc had guaranteed that Hungary's frozen EU funds would not be directed to Ukraine. [AP 1] [The Guardian 1] [FT 1]

Brussels has withheld EUR 20 billion in funds earmarked for Budapest over concerns about corruption and democratic backsliding by Orban's administration. [FT 1] [Aljazeera 2] [AP 2]

Angry farmers

The EU summit took place against the backdrop of weeks-long farmers' protests, which have affected most major European countries.

On the day of the meeting in the Belgian capital on February 1, over a thousand tractors blocked major arteries, and angry farmers started fires outside the European Parliament building in Brussels. [Sky News 2] [BBC 2]

Farmers called on EU leaders to come up with solutions to problems such as high taxes, excessive green rules, a cost-of-living crisis and unfair competition from abroad – including from Ukraine. [The Washington Post] [Euronews]

Ahead of the summit, Orban met demonstrators outside EU institution buildings in support of what he called the "voice of the people". [AFP/Barron's] [BBC 3]

Hungarian state-funded think tank Mathias Corvinus Collegium said it was "thrilled" to help organise the farmers' rally outside the EU Parliament.

Observers say that the swelling protests could affect the outcome of the European Parliament elections in June.

EU's free trade with Ukraine extended

Meanwhile, the European Commission has announced that the EU will extend the suspension of tariffs on Ukrainian exports until June 2025 to support the economy of the war-torn country. [FT 2] [Euronews 2]

However, the Commission has at the same time proposed protective measures against cheap agricultural produce from Ukraine in an effort to quell protests by disgruntled European farmers.

(yl/pk)

Turkey approves Sweden NATO's membership, Hungary stalls

Turkey's parliament ratified Sweden's NATO membership bid on January 23, clearing the most significant remaining hurdle to expand the Western military alliance after 20 months of delay.

Turkey's general assembly, where President Tayyip Erdogan's ruling alliance holds a majority, voted 287-55 to approve the application that Sweden first made in 2022 to bolster its security in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Ankara endorsed Finland's membership in April last year but, along with Hungary, had kept Sweden waiting. [Reuters]

"We support NATO enlargement to improve the alliance's deterrence efforts... We hope Finland and Sweden's attitude towards fighting terrorism sets an example for our other allies," Fuat Oktay, head of parliament's foreign affairs commission and a ruling AK Party member, said during the debate.

The vote was the second step of Turkey's ratification process after the parliament's Foreign Affairs Commission approved the bid last month. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan can now sign the protocol into law. [CNN]

Hurdle cleared

Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership in May 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier that year. Finland joined NATO in April 2023, doubling the alliance's border with Russia, but Sweden has faced numerous delays in its path to accession. [CNN]

Swedish Prime Minister Kristersson said Sweden was "one step closer to becoming a full member of NATO."

The outcome cleared a significant hurdle for the Nordic country's accession into the military alliance. All NATO members must approve applications from countries seeking to join the alliance.

Hungary - whose Prime Minister Viktor Orban has friendly relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin

- is now the only member state not to have approved Sweden's accession. Orban told NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that Hungary's government supports Sweden's bid for accession. [CNN]

"I reaffirmed that the Hungarian government supports the NATO membership of Sweden," Orban wrote on X. Stoltenberg also posted on X, saying he welcomed Orban's "clear support" for Sweden's membership bid. Orban said he had invited his Swedish counterpart, Ulf Kristersson, to visit Hungary to negotiate the terms of Sweden's accession.

Turkey delays

Turkey had delayed Sweden's membership as Ankara pressed Stockholm to toughen its stance on local members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which the European Union and the United States also deem a terrorist group. [Daily Sabbah] [Reuters]

Sweden introduced a new anti-terrorism bill that makes being a member of a terrorist organisation illegal. Sweden, Finland, Canada and the Netherlands also took steps to relax policies on arms exports to Turkey. [Reuters]

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said: "We welcome the Turkish parliament's vote approving Sweden's application to join @NATO. This has been an important priority for @POTUS. Sweden is a strong, capable defence partner whose membership in NATO will make the US and the alliance safer and stronger." [Daily Sabbah]

The US Ambassador to Turkey, Jeffry Flake, reiterated the sentiment in a post on X, saying, "Sweden's accession to NATO is a critical step in strengthening the alliance" and that he "greatly appreciates the Turkish's parliament's decision to approve Sweden's entry into NATO." [CNN]

(st/gc)

US, UK strikes on Houthis divide EU nations, fail to slow rebel attacks

A military campaign by the United Kingdom and United States against Yemeni Houthi rebels has divided European capitals but has not slowed the Iran-backed group's attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

Repeated US and UK airstrikes since January 11 have failed to halt or decelerate the group's activity in the

region, the BBC and Reuters reported.

The Houthis have attacked some 30 vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden using missiles and drones carrying explosives, halving commercial traffic in the crucial shipping lane since they first hijacked an Israeli-linked craft on November 19. [Reuters] [BBC]

The Houthis began targeting commercial shipping in the Red Sea in response to Israel's military campaign in Gaza. They demanded that bombing of the Palestinian territory stop, and that food and medicine be allowed into the strip.

After initially announcing they would attack ships connected to Israel, the rebels shifted to striking mostly US and UK-connected vessels following Washington and London's launch of an air strike campaign against the Yemeni group.

To protect merchant vessels in the Red Sea, through which 12% of global trade passes, Washington launched a multinational military initiative called Operation Prosperity Guardian along with London and other allies on December 18.

Greece, Denmark and shipping-dependent Netherlands have joined the mission, but France, Italy and Spain have not, though Rome and Paris have dispatched frigates to the region. [Politico] [Reuters]

A government source cited by Reuters said Rome declined to take part in the US-led operation because any Italian involvement would have needed parliamentary approval, which would have taken time, and because Rome preferred to pursue a "calming" policy in the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, Paris has been concentrating its diplomatic efforts on avoiding an escalation in Lebanon, and worries that intervening with the US would destroy any leverage France could have in reducing tensions between Israel and the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, an official told Reuters.

EU considers its own response

The EU is also considering its own response to the Houthi attacks, separate from Operation Prosperity Guardian, although the exact remit of the plans has not been agreed upon and will likely take weeks to finalize. Some 40% of European trade with the Middle East and Asia passes through the Red Sea, and the need for ships to re-route around southern Africa has increased costs and delays. [DW]

One likely outcome, backed by Italy and the Netherlands, is the extension of an existing EU-led mission in the region named Agenor. The bloc aims to have established the mission by February 19, and begin operations soon after. [Reuters]

Houthi insurgents took control of Yemen's capital Sana'a in 2014, sparking a civil and proxy war pitting the Shia Iran-backed rebels against a Saudi-led coalition of Gulf states which supports Yemen's internationally recognized Sunni government.

With US logistical and intelligence support, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have conducted more than 25,000 airstrikes on the Houthis since March 2015. [CFR]

A Houthi attack on a British-linked fuel tanker on January 26 sparked a fire on the vessel and was the most damaging assault on a commercial ship so far. UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said London would not hesitate to take further military action against the militia, but was not seeking confrontation with the Houthis. [BBC 1] [BBC 2] [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian]

UK Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden claimed the strikes were weakening the Houthis. He also said that Britain would not be putting boots on the ground. [Reuters]

The Houthis are not listed as a terrorist organization in the UK. However, amid the turmoil in the Red Sea, Washington has announced plans to return the militia to a list of global terrorist groups. [WaPo]

(qv/pk)

Slew of EU nations freeze funds for UN refugee agency amid claims of militant links

A string of European countries have suspended funding for the UN refugee agency for Palestinians (UNRWA) after allegations that some of its staff took part in the attacks by Hamas militants on Israel on October 7.

Austria, Britain, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and Switzerland are among nations that have joined the United States, Australia and Canada in pausing funding for the UN agency, which provides a lifeline for two million people in Gaza. [Reuters] [AP News] [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian]

UNRWA commissioner-general Philippe Lazzarini said the money freezes put the agency's humanitarian work at risk, adding: "It is shocking to see a suspension of funds to the Agency in reaction to allegations against a small group of staff."

UNRWA announced on January 26 it had fired a number of employees after Israel alleged that 12 of the agency's staff were involved in the October Hamas attacks that killed some 1,200 people.

The United States, UNRWA's biggest donor, paused its funding, saying the agency needed to make "fundamental changes". A slew of countries in Europe and around the world followed America's lead.

UNRWA provides aid to millions across the Middle East, and has been the biggest supplier of food and water to civilians in Gaza during the war between Israel and Hamas. [AP News] [France 24]

In an opinion piece for Britain's The Guardian, commentator Moustafa Bayoumi wrote: "There should be no question that the 7 October attacks were atrocities. But to punish the UNRWA – and, by extension, the Palestinian people as a whole – because of accusations against 12 people is unconscionable."

He added: "It is an act of political retaliation that puts the lives of millions of people needlessly at risk".

(pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Macron reshuffles cabinet after PM resigns

French President Emmanuel Macron, on January 11, replaced his foreign, culture, and labour ministers but maintained other key figures in their posts in a reshuffle that shifted his cabinet to the political right. [Le Monde]

Before the shuffle, Prime Minister Elizabeth Borne resigned, and Gabriel Attal replaced her. At 34, Attal became the youngest prime minister of the French Fifth Republic. According to recent polls, the new politician is one of the country's most popular. [AlJazeera]

Attal is the son of Yves Attal, a respected lawmaker and film producer of Tunisian Jewish origin, and Marie de Couriss. He received his education at the private school of Ecole Alsacienne and later at the prestigious Science Po University in Paris, achieving a masters in public affairs.

In 2016 he joined Macron's party La République En Marche, which opened for him a great political rise. [TheGuardian]

Macron has had a rough 2023 with the unpopular reforms on pensions and immigration. This move is seen as an effort to regain popularity before the European Parliament elections that will be held in June 2024. In the French system, the PM is assigned by the president, in this case Macron himself, and is held accountable for the parliament. Attal will be focusing on domestic policy, economic policy, and ministerial coordination. [AlJazeera]

The new prime minister is already under the public spotlight, seeking to re-energise the French government, which is struggling to advance reforms in parliament with a rigidly positioned far-right. Some French political analysts have highlighted that the positivity brought by Attal won't distract the French population for too long and they will soon re-focus on the real governmental struggles. [BBC]

New foreign minister

Stephane Sejourne became foreign minister, replacing career diplomat Catherine Colonna. Sejourne is Attal's ex-partner and head of Macron's Renaissance party. He was also president of the centrist group Renew Europe but left after joining the French government. [Politico]

An unnamed politician told Politico that his departure from Renew "will create a vacuum" ahead of the European Parliament elections this summer.

Under Sejourne, French foreign policy will become more involved in European affairs than his predecessor, Catherine Colonna. Forging "Europe as a powerhouse will be one of his priorities," an unidentified Sejourne aide said. [Politico]

'Shift to the right'

Rachida Dati, a justice minister under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy and a member of the right-wing opposition Les Republicains (LR) party, was named culture minister in a surprise appointment. She was charged with corruption in 2021 over consulting services to a subsidiary of Renault-Nissan, charges she has denied. [Le Monde]

Eric Ciotti, leader of the party, announced that Dati would be excluded from the party following her appointment. [Le Monde]

Catherine Vautrin, a former minister in the right-wing presidency of Jacques Chirac and another ex-member of LR, is the new labour and health minister. Her predecessor was centre-left politician Aurelien Rousseau, who had resigned in December following his disagreement with a controversial immigration law. [Franceinfo]

With no ministers from the left but many from the right, this new cabinet ministry demonstrates a shift to the right in Macron's second presidential term. [Le Monde]

Education minister criticised

Amelie Oudea-Castera was named the new education minister. She was formerly the Minister of Sports. [The New York Times] [The European Conservative] [Le Monde]

Oudea-Castera has been criticised for comments regarding the public school system and for sending her children to private school. The minister's three sons attend "an elitist Catholic private school in central Paris known for its traditionalist approach to religious education," Politico reported. [Politico]

Since Oudea-Castera cited understaffing as the reason for putting her children into private school, the biggest union in the public education sector denounced the new minister for her "absurd and inflammatory" remarks. [Politico][Le Monde]

(gdp-rdm/gc)

French farmers protest new taxes and regulations

French farmers protested nationwide against new government restrictions on the number of animals allowed on farms, pesticide bans, and nitrogen in fertilisers. They joined other European farmers across the European Union bloc in what has been dubbed the "manure protests." [France 24] [Agriland]

Newly appointed French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal has tried to de-escalate the situation by promising key concessions, notably to end the rising fuel costs and the simplification of regulations. Yet, riots have not ended. Instead, about 91 farmers who protested in a food market in Rungis, near Paris, got under custody by the French police. Protesters were aiming to stop the food deliveries to arrive at the supermarkets. [BBC]

The largest farm union in France, FNSEA, has protested against the measures they argue are causing hardships for French farmers. More than 1,000 farmers, with their tractors, rallied in the streets of the French city of Toulouse, causing major traffic disruptions. [CBS News] [Reuters]

The latest protests came nearly a year after the first farmer protests in Paris, when farmers sprayed government buildings with manure in Dijon in December 2023. [Sky News] [Agriland]

France, Europe's largest agricultural producer, has increased the price of fuel, animal feed, and other fees as the government seeks to impose environmental regulations on the farming industry.

Farmers have rallied against the government's decisions to meet Europe's climate targets in Germany. Farmers have protested against reducing subsidies to farmers in the Netherlands and Romania. [Daily Express] [ABC News] [Reuters]

With these protests forming significant divisions between the government and people in France, there are fears that the far-right is receiving more and more support from frustrated farmers. [Reuters]

As reported by *The Guardian*, "the more pressing threat is the attention that farmers' protests have attracted from far-right and populist parties, as well as radical conspiracy theorists". With the European elections

looming, increased far-right support is something that Macron is hoping to deter. [The Guardian]

According to French farmers, the government's implementations of provisions since January 26 are insufficient to address the issues that the French farmers are facing. Protests are aiming to obtain better remuneration for their produce, decreased red tape and further protections against cheap imports spread. Farmers have been using their tractors to block the roads and highways, slowing the traffic. [France24]

The government, recognizing the relevancy of the movement, sent on January 31 armoured vehicles to safeguard the food market in Paris. Protests have also begun spreading out around Europe, reaching Belgium, Spain and Italy. To limit the damage, the EU has suggested limiting farm imports from Ukraine and easing some green regulations. [Reuters]

Protests against immigration law

Protests against the country's new immigration law broke out in France on January 21, with 75,000 people demonstrating nationwide. In Paris, there were approximately 16,00 people.

Many French politicians also participated in the protests, notably far-left La France Insoumise's (LFI) Manon Aubry and Olivier Faure from the Partu Socialiste (PS).

The bill focuses on decisive measures for those considered foreigners. One purpose is to strengthen France's ability to deport foreigners deemed undesirable and to increase the difficulty for non-French people to access social welfare.

The militant group Marche des Solidarites said that "the marches must demonstrate that public opinion does not stand with the racists and fascists". [LeMonde] [ABCNews]

The bill reflects the centrist Macron's current effort to push the government to the right, recognizing the imminent European elections this June 2024. According to polls, right-wing parties are gaining popularity across Europe, potentially influencing the government's decision-making. [France24]

The French Constitutional Council, France's highest court, rejected 32 of 86 measures in the statute on January 25, including those restricting access to social benefits and family reunification, as well as Parliamentary immigration quotas. [LeMonde]

(rdm-vt/gc)

France needs to build 14 nuclear reactors, minister says

French Energy Transition Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher said the country must build 14 new plants instead of the six new nuclear plants it has planned to reduce its dependency on fossil fuels.

The minister spoke to the newspaper La Tribune Dimanche, explaining that it is a top priority to increase France's renewable energy mix to decrease the country's dependence on fossil fuels, aiming to reduce per capita energy consumption from 60% to 40% by 2035. [Reuters]

Like other European countries, France has announced its goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050. The government started using nuclear power in the 1970s, after the 1973 oil crisis, building over 50 nuclear plants that constituted approximately two-thirds of the electricity production.

To meet climate change goals, France continues using nuclear energy as a source of electricity, seeking to construct new power plants to reach the environmental goal. [France24]

French President Emmanuel Macron stressed France's commitment to nuclear energy during the Dubai COP28 climate summit, saying that "nuclear energy is back" after the signature of the final paper. France currently has 56 reactors producing approximately 70% of the country's electricity, surpassing the UK and Germany. [PowerTechnology]

(vt/gc)

France buys 42 Rafale jets with a $5.5 billion price tag

France has bought 42 Rafale jets for a total value of more than $5.5 billion.

The Rafale is a 4.5-generation fighter, close to the Eurofighter Typhoon jet. The new jets will receive upgrades to the F5 standard, which might include UAV based on the European nEUROn combat drone program. [DefenseNews]

The Rafale is a 4.5-generation fighter, close to the Eurofighter Typhoon jet. The new jets will receive upgrades to the F5 standard, which might include UAV based on the European nEUROn combat drone program. [DefenseNews]

The jets, from the aircraft maker Dassault Aviation and partners Thales, Safran and MBDA, are expected to be delivered between 2027 and 2032. The aircraft will be with the standard four configurations, but they can upgrade to standard 5, allowing them to fly with remotely piloted aircraft. Of the 42 ordered jets, 12 will replace those sold in 2021 to Croatia.

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal said the order “is excellent news for our sovereignty, our security and our armed forces who will benefit from extra Rafales with modernised operational capacities.” Additionally, the order will significantly contribute to the French economy, providing more than 7.000 jobs in different French companies. [BreakingDefence]

(vt/gc)

Germany's Scholz condemns far-right policy of mass deportation

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has condemned alleged plans by far-right groups to deport millions of immigrants, including those with German citizenship if they come to power.

The plan was unveiled after members of far-right groups reportedly convened at a mansion outside Berlin to discuss mass deportations. The plan has prompted widespread protests across Germany, with citizens opposing the far-right resurgence. [AP]

In the first Bundestag general debate of the year on January 31, Scholz delivered a speech denouncing the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and called for unity among democratic parties. The debate followed revelations that officials from the AfD had met with right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis to discuss the controversial concept of "remigration," a term synonymous with mass deportations.

Scholz invoked Germany's Nazi past, urging voters to reject the far right and advocating for a stronger European Union. [DW]

Opposition leader Friedrich Merz of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union echoed Scholz's sentiments, denouncing the AfD and its ties to

extremism. However, he also blamed Scholz's coalition government for contributing to the rise of the far-right, stating that not all AfD voters are extremists but are frustrated with the policies of traditional parties. [DW]

Mass protests

The alleged far-right plan, as reported by Correctiv, has led to massive protests across Germany. The streets of Berlin became a sea of signs, flags, and umbrellas as an estimated 150,000 citizens gathered in front of the Bundestag to express their vehement opposition to the far-right's growing influence in Germany.

The demonstration on February 3 marked the latest in a series of large weekend rallies against the plan.

Under the rallying cry of "We are the Firewall," demonstrators transformed the space next to the national parliament into a powerful display of unity against collaboration with the far right. Despite intermittent rain showers, the protest drew more participants than organisers had anticipated, making it one of the largest gatherings in recent memory.

Demonstrations have occurred in other German cities, including Freiburg and Hannover, where thousands voiced their opposition to the resurgence of the far-right. The demonstrations started three weeks ago after investigative journalists' group Correctiv exposed the alleged meeting of right-wing extremists discussing mass deportations. [Euronews]

Resurgent ideologies

Many expressed concerns about the resurgence of ideologies reminiscent of the country's darkest times. The sheer scale of the demonstrations, occurring not only in major cities but also in numerous smaller cities across the country, underscores the widespread concern over the resurgence of far-right ideologies in Germany. [Euronews]

Jonas Schmidt from Bremen emphasised the need to prevent a recurrence of the 1930s, stating, "We absolutely must not allow the stories that we experienced in 1930 or even back in the 1920s to happen again."

Kathrin Zauter, another protester, found the strong attendance "really encouraging," emphasising that the protests demonstrated the strength of a united and diverse citizenry. "This encourages everyone and shows that we are more — we are many," she said.

Responding to the protests, Scholz praised the citizens' presence as "a strong sign for democracy and our constitution." He reiterated that anyone opposing Germany's democratic order would be scrutinised by domestic intelligence and the judiciary, emphasising the lessons learned from Germany's history, particularly the atrocities of the Nazi era. [Euronews]

The far-right AfD, founded in 2013, has grown in popularity. It currently polls at 23%, up from 10.3% in the 2021 general election. The party's anti-migrant stance has resonated, particularly in eastern Germany, where it leads in polls for upcoming state elections. Despite the alleged plot, the deportation of German citizens is constitutionally impossible without a two-thirds majority in both parliamentary houses [DW].

Immigration has surged in Germany in the past decade, as has crime, which many German voters see as causative, and this perception has been reinforced by state sponsored studies identifying criminal arrests based upon immigration status. [BBC] Violent crime rose 11% in Germany in 2022 according to the German Federal Police Office (FKA) with a 35% rise in teenage suspects between the ages of 14-18.

(ha/gc)

Germany set to implement new immigration policy in 2024

Germany will implement comprehensive changes to its immigration policy in 2024, focusing on making the country less attractive for asylum-seekers and facilitating migration for skilled workers.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has signalled a shift toward "large-scale" deportations for rejected asylum applicants. The Repatriation Improvement Act aims to increase deportation numbers by ending advance announcements, extending asylum detention to 28 days, and granting enhanced search powers to the police.

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser emphasised the need to act against dangerous individuals, including criminals, consistently and suspected criminal associates [DW].

Germany is actively negotiating agreements with several countries, including Georgia, Moldova, Kenya, Colombia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, to designate them as "safe countries of origin" and facilitate returns. Simultaneously, efforts are underway to streamline

asylum application processing, reducing the current two-year duration to three to six months.

Asylum-seekers undergoing the procedure will receive fewer benefits, with welfare payments accessible only after three years and deductions for food in state housing. Various German cities are transitioning to card-based systems for benefits to prevent transfers to relatives [DW].

In contrast, the country is introducing reforms to attract skilled labour migration]. Based on language proficiency and professional experience, a points system will grant eligible immigrants a one-year visa, lower income requirements, and easier family reunification. The EU Blue Card is expanding to cover sectors facing labour shortages.

From March, foreigners outside the EU can work in Germany while awaiting qualification approval, and a special immigration quota for Western Balkan countries is set to double to 50,000 people in June [DW].

Moreover, Germany has passed a law easing rules for foreigners seeking citizenship, emphasising attracting skilled labour to address the shortage. The new law shortens the residency requirement for citizenship from eight to five years, and individuals showing integration efforts, such as language proficiency or voluntary work, can apply after three years. The legislation also lifts the ban on dual nationality for non-EU citizens [Financial Times].

This dual approach - making the country less attractive for some while welcoming skilled workers - reflects Germany's delicate balancing act amid demographic deficits and rising right-wing sentiments. The move to ease citizenship rules sets Germany apart from other European countries, tightening naturalisation criteria [Financial Times].

(ha/gc)

AfD leader calls for German exit referendum from EU

In a bold move that challenges Germany's traditionally pro-European stance, Alice Weidel, co-leader of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, has called for a referendum on Germany's EU membership. Weidel's announcement comes amid a surge in support for the AfD, which is currently polling at 23% nationally. [Politico]

In an interview with the Financial Times, Weidel stated that the AfD aims to reform the EU and address what they perceive as a "democratic deficit" by curbing the powers of the unelected European Commission. She emphasised that if reform proves impossible and the sovereignty of EU member states cannot be restored, a referendum similar to the United Kingdom's Brexit could be pursued. [Financial Times]

Despite the AfD's openly anti-European stance, polls conducted in September 2023 indicate that most of its own voters (52%) would unlikely support a 'Dexit'. The party's increasing popularity, currently at 22% in the polls, has triggered concerns among mainstream parties and led to anti-far-right protests across the country. [Politico] [Financial Times]

The AfD's recent involvement in a controversial meeting with neo-Nazis and extremists to discuss a "remigration" plan has further fuelled public outrage and anti-AfD demonstrations. Distancing herself from the meeting, Weidel fired a staffer who attended but has faced criticism for downplaying the deportation plan during a Bundestag debate. [Politico] [Financial Times]

Germany's domestic intelligence agency has designated large sections of the AfD as extremist and several of its officials are under surveillance. Despite these challenges, the party is expected to perform well in crucial elections in September, particularly in the eastern states of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia. [Financial Times]

Weidel, known for her background in economics and a career in finance, has projected an image of bourgeois respectability for the AfD, attracting middle-class voters beyond its traditional hard-right base.

While she acknowledges that the AfD may not come to power in Berlin before 2029, she believes a future role in government is "inevitable," predicting that mainstream parties, starting with the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU), will abandon their boycott. [Financial Times]

(ha/gc)

German court allows cut in funding for far-right party

A landmark ruling by the German Constitutional Court will allow the German government to cut off state funding to the far-right Homeland Party (Die Heimat),

formerly known as the National Democratic Party (NPD), even though it is not banned.

The court in Karlsruhe justified its decision by stating that Die Heimat extremism aimed to undermine or eliminate the country's democratic system, leading to the party's exclusion from state party funding for six years. [Al Jazeera]

This decision, the first application of a law passed in response to a previous court ruling in 2017, sparks a debate about whether a similar move could be made against the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a popular far-right party currently ranking second in most polls with approximately 22% support.

The law frees hardline parties of state funding and tax benefits. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser emphasised that the ruling signals that the state would not fund anti-democratic forces. [Al Jazeera]

The exclusion of Die Heimat from state funding for six years means the party will no longer benefit from tax concessions, reportedly saving about EUR 200,000 (USD 217,000) from 2020 due to tax-free inheritances. Die Heimat still needs to qualify for public funding based on the votes it receives in European, federal, or state elections. [Al Jazeera]

The ruling follows a controversial report by Correctiv, revealing discussions among some AfD members about policies such as mass deportations of people of foreign origin. This prompted widespread protests across Germany, and intelligence agencies had already classified the AfD as a right-wing hardliner in three eastern states. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters][Correctiv].

Chancellor Olaf Scholz welcomed the ruling and stated that Germany would assess its ramifications. Some politicians view this decision as a potential blueprint for addressing the AfD's far-right policies.

In contrast, others propose banning the party or removing specific individuals' rights to prevent them from being elected. However, any legal move against AfD funding would likely be a protracted process, unlikely to be completed before the 2025 federal vote [Reuters].

(ha/gc)

Germany train union strike disrupts passengers, freight services

Germany's train union strikes have caused severe disruptions to passenger and freight services across Europe's largest economy.

The train drivers' union, GDL, initiated the strike on January 10 against the country's state-owned railway operator, Deutsche Bahn, over working hours and pay. The central issues in the wage dispute included GDL's demand to reduce shift workers' hours from 38 to 35 hours per week without a pay reduction.

Commuters and travellers struggled with limited alternatives, including long-distance bus or car travel and flights, as only around 20% of Deutsche Bahn's long-distance trains operated, and regional and commuter trains in major cities were also affected. [AP]

Despite attempts by Deutsche Bahn to legally prevent the strike, a court order on January 10 allowed the industrial action to proceed, extending until January 13. The strikes intensified on January 22, with GDL calling for a six-day strike affecting passenger and freight services, further exacerbating the turmoil. [AP] [AP]

As of February 2, the situation has worsened, with local transport at a standstill in 80 cities across Germany, including the disruption of services at Hamburg airport. Local transport authorities and airport ground handling services have joined the strikes, affecting buses, trams, subway trains, and flight operations.

The strike's impact varied across cities, with Berlin experiencing a temporary walkout while other regions, including Hamburg, Cologne, and Hannover, faced an entire day of strikes. [Euronews]

The strikes coincided with an unrelated one-week strike by farmers, further contributing to traffic problems in the country.

Despite calls from Germany's Transportation Minister Volker Wissing for both sides to return to the negotiating table, GDL union head Claus Weselsky insisted it was up to Deutsche Bahn to present an improved offer. [AP]

(ha/gc)

Germany detains five suspects related to Cologne Cathedral terrorism threat

German authorities have taken five individuals into custody in connection with an alleged plot to attack the iconic Cologne Cathedral on January 1.

The suspects, believed to be part of a broader Islamic extremist network across Germany and Europe, were planning a New Year's Eve attack using a car loaded with explosives. Police Chief Johannes Hermanns stated that all detainees are associated with this extremist network [AP] [EU-OCS].

Cologne police, acting on information received shortly before Christmas, conducted extensive searches at the cathedral's underground parking garage, deploying explosive detection dogs. Fortunately, no explosives were found. The heightened threat led to the closure of the cathedral for tourists since Christmas Eve.

Interior Minister Herbert Reul praised the arrests as a success, emphasising the police's proactive measures against increased extremist activity.

Meanwhile, EU Observer reports that two of the suspects, facing longer detention, are believed to be connected to the Islamic State-Khorasan, an offshoot operating in Afghanistan, Germany, Madrid, and Spain. The remaining three suspects, arrested on Sunday, were released. Authorities continue to investigate the alleged plot, underscoring the persistent threat of extremist activities. [AP] [EU-OCS].

(ha/gc)

Ireland justice minister introduces new hate crime and hate speech bill

Ireland's Minister for Justice Helen McEntee is poised to introduce a new hate crime and hate speech bill this year after the bill swiftly progressed through the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament last year. However, the bill still needs to be debated in parliament due to various concerns about its wording. [The Journal]

The Irish Times summarised the bill: "The new hate speech and hate crime bill will create new aggravated forms of certain existing criminal offences such as assault, where those offences are motivated by hatred against people with a "protected characteristic" such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability". [The Irish Times]

The Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022 will replace the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, which is

not fit for purpose, according to the government, in an online age. The new bill aims to secure convictions more quickly than the one it will replace. [The Irish Times]

The bill intends to create new laws to deal with hate crimes and to expand the group of people with "protected characteristics" to include gender and disability. The bill will also make it an offence to deny or trivialise genocide. [Citizens Information]

While the bill initially garnered support across the political spectrum in Ireland, there has been a change in the climate of opinion owing to fears over the right to free speech. This matter has been weighed in on by members of the Irish parliament, as well as by high-profile people like Elon Musk and Donald Trump Jr. [BBC News] [The Irish Times]

However, in Section 11 of the bill, the matter of freedom of expression is dealt with, and it is made clear that "discussion or criticism of matters relating to a protected characteristic does not constitute incitement to hatred in and of itself". [The Irish Times] [The Irish Times]

The issue of privacy rights and the lack of a distinct definition for the terms "hate" and "hatred" have also been discussed in debates surrounding the bill. [RTÉ News]

Ireland's attempt to introduce new hate crime and hate speech laws is something that has already been achieved across Europe. In her statement to the Seanad last year, the minister for justice emphasised that Ireland "will be one of the last countries in Europe to enact such legislation". [Government.ie]

A member of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), Liam Herrick, has given his opinion on the matter, too, stating that Ireland has "had a historical gap of having no hate-crime legislation, which is a clear gap in our criminal legal system for many decades. And it's required by international human rights law regarding incitement to hatred". [RTÉ News]

(rdm/gc)

Ireland's Lower House defeats motion to support South Africa's genocide case against Israel

Ireland's Lower House of Parliament defeated a motion by the Social Democrats that called on the Irish

government to support South Africa's case against Israel under the Genocide Convention in the International Court of Justice.

The government put forward a counter-motion that was passed by 71 votes to 62 on January 24. The government's motion said it would "strongly consider" an intervention in the South Africa vs. Israel case "as a matter of urgency" after the court has made its order on preliminary measures and the filing by South Africa of its presentation in the case and "following the necessary legal and policy analysis." [Irish Times]

Social Democrats leader Holly Cairns condemned the ruling and commented that she believes it is "a disgrace that we are sitting on the fence, watching this happen and not taking action." [RTE]

Her party colleague, Catherine Murphy, said Israel was participating in a land grab. "This is about wiping out the Palestinian people or removing them from their homeland," she said. "That is what this is about. It is about a genocide. It's about ethnic cleansing." [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Irish anti-immigration activists clash with police

Prominent anti-immigration activists gathered outside a hotel in Roscrea on January 15, where asylum seekers would receive shelter. [The Journal]

Up to 300 demonstrators clashed with police deployed to deal with the protests, and a man was arrested during this standoff. [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Far-right Dutch leader struggles to form government

Far-right Dutch Leader Geert Wilder's efforts to form a new government have stumbled as political parties disagree on fiscal and immigration policy after stunning Europe with this election victory in November. [Yahoo]

An immigration policy known as the "Distribution Law," which aims to spread asylum-seekers more fairly around the country, has created divides between the

four parties forming the coalition. Wilders strongly opposes it. [AP]

"We have a problem," Wilders told reporters in The Hague, the morning after a decision by senators from a key Dutch political party involved in the coalition talks to back legislation that could force municipalities to house asylum-seekers. He posted "MY GOD" in capitals after the news broke. [AP] [Yahoo]

People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) senators supported the proposal. The lower parliament has already approved the plan, known as the "Distribution Law," that aims to spread thousands of asylum-seekers nationwide more fairly. [AP]

The VVD senators' decision came despite opposition from the party's new leader, Dilan Yesilgpz-Zegerius — a former asylum-seeker who is in talks with Wilders and two other party leaders about the contours of a new coalition after Wilders' November 22 general election victory. [AP]

Public finances

Wilders has lashed out at Dilan Yesilgoz, calling her "sour" after she appeared to aim at him in a speech to her party. Yesilgoz has offered to support a Wilders cabinet in parliament but not actively participate, sparking anger from Wilders and her party faithful. [Yahoo]

Public finances have also emerged as a dividing line. The Netherlands reportedly needs to find some EUR 17 billion in spending cuts. Still, Wilders has instead vowed tax cuts and no significant reductions in spending, infuriating the fiscally prudent and anti-corruption champion Pieter Omtzigt and his New Social Contract party, whose support Wilders needs if he wants to form a majority. [Yahoo]

About two months after Wilders' far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) overturned the political landscape with potential consequences for the rest of Europe, he's still struggling to form a ruling coalition. Wilders' Party for Freedom, or PVV, won the most seats in the election, putting him in the driving seat to form a new alliance after four previous administrations led by outgoing VVD leader Mark Rutte. [AP] [Politico]

Europe stunned

Wilders stunned the Netherlands and Europe by storming to victory in November's election with an anti-Islam, climate-change-denying manifesto. Wilders campaigned on pledges to drastically rein in

immigration, and he has long been an outspoken critic of the legislation to distribute asylum seekers across the country. [AP]

Ronald Plasterk, the official overseeing the horse-trading, must report to parliament by February 12 at the latest on progress in the talks. [Yahoo]

If the four parties cannot form a government, Wilders has proposed the possibility of new elections if the talks founder. The latest polling suggests support for Wilders' PVV is soaring, with one showing a staggering 50 seats out of 150 for the far-right party. [Yahoo]

"There are serious doubts as to whether the four parties can find sufficient middle ground for the foundations of a coalition agreement," said Sarah De Lange, professor of Political Pluralism at the University of Amsterdam.

De Lange sees three possible outcomes from Plasterk's report: kicking the can down the road and continuing talks, starting negotiations between different parties, or a new vote. She sees fresh elections as the least likely option, especially as parties are not keen to run two campaigns with European elections in June.

(gc)

Netherlands witnesses sharp increase in unaccompanied children applying for asylum

The number of unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the Netherlands has sharply increased in recent years – from 2,191 in 2021 to around 6,000 in 2023.

Children are being sent ahead of family members to increase chances of eventual reunification. [De Telegraaf]

“The ever-increasing influx of unaccompanied minors is extremely worrying and unsustainable,” said parliamentarian Ruben Brekelmans of the centre-right VVD party.

“Asylum policy should not be more flexible for young people than adults. Otherwise, young people will be pushed ahead. That applies, for example, to border controls, detention, the Dublin agreement, and returns. Finally, Dutch policy on unaccompanied minors and family reunification must be tightened.” [NLTimes]

The IND, the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service, told the Dutch newspaper Telegraaf that the same family reunification rules apply to children and adults. But there are European rules that could make it more attractive to send a child ahead to first apply for asylum. The European asylum agreement will soon allow adult asylum seekers to be detained at the European external borders to assess the chances of their applications, but that is not permitted for children. [De Telegraaf]

(jb/gc)

British Town Hall debt crisis alarms MPs, warn of staggering levels

The British Public Accounts Committee has raised alarms about a financial crisis for the country's town halls amid record-breaking debt levels. UK councils collectively owe a staggering GBP 97.8 billion, equivalent to approximately GBP 1,400 per person [BBC].

Thurrock Council in Essex faces a daunting GBP 1.4 billion debt, prompting fears for the sustainability of local services. The committee, led by Meg Hillier, forewarns of severe and lasting consequences if more councils follow Thurrock's path into bankruptcy [BBC].

Draft budgets reveal a grim financial outlook for Thurrock, Woking, and Nottingham City Councils. All three councils have been grappling with financial challenges, mainly stemming from failed commercial ventures in which they had invested public funds . Woking, in particular, tops the list with a debt figure of nearly GBP 19,000 per person, the highest in the country [BBC]

Warrington, ranking third with GBP 1.7 billion in debts, highlights the risky nature of council investments, with a collapse of an energy firm it partly owned in 2022. Moody's September warning of potential council bankruptcies due to poor governance, high borrowing, and falling property values ring true. [BBC]

London's Barking and Dagenham Council emerged as the most indebted, owing over GBP 1 billion. The Labour-run council cites population changes, poverty, and austerity, stressing the urgent need for increased central government funding. In contrast, the Conservative-run Bromley Council had a balanced budget but anticipated challenges sustaining social care services [BBC News].

The diversity in financial challenges across councils underscores the need for central government funding reform to ensure the stability of local authorities, according to the Labour-run council. As town halls grapple with mounting debts, the effectiveness of current measures, outlined in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, remains under scrutiny. [BBC] [BBC News]

In the face of this crisis, questions persist about the future of essential public services as councils strive to navigate their way out of this financial quagmire [BBC].

(ha/gc)

Former PM Johnson urges Sunak to amend Rwanda deportation bill

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson has supported Conservative rebels seeking amendments to the controversial Rwanda deportation bill, challenging the authority of his successor, Rishi Sunak.

The rebellion within the Conservative Party has intensified, with key figures like Lee Anderson and Brendan Clarke-Smith publicly supporting amendments against international human rights laws. The dissent was fuelled by a poll, reportedly funded by right-wing opponents of Sunak, indicating widespread public support for the removal of asylum seekers without the right of appeal. [The Guardian]

Johnson expressed his support for the changes on social media, emphasising the need for the bill's legal robustness and endorsing proposed amendments. [The Guardian]

The Rwanda Bill, proposed by Johnson in April 2022, called for processing asylum seekers' claims in Rwanda for a five-year trial. Successful applicants would stay, while unsuccessful ones would settle in Rwanda or seek asylum elsewhere.

No return option to the UK would be allowed. This way, the government aims to deter illegal entry after January 1, 2022. Still, the plan has faced scepticism, with no asylum seekers sent to Rwanda so far, and doubts about its deterrent effectiveness. [BBC]

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Filippo Grandi, a Spanish national, delivered a fresh blow to the Prime Minister, stating that the Rwanda bill and the treaty with Kigali were incompatible with international refugee law.

Grandi's last position was High Commissioner for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), whose funding was recently suspended by five NATO members when employees were discovered to have participated in the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel. [Reuters] Downing Street has dismissed the UNHCR's assessment, asserting that the necessary legal framework was in place and highlighting their partnership with Rwanda. [The Guardian]

Sunak, facing a significant political crisis in his authority, wants to push through the Rwanda deportation bill despite the internal rebellion. The bill, designed to circumvent a Supreme Court block on the Rwanda plan, has been met with resistance from within his party, particularly from the liberal and law-and-order wings. [The Times]

Sunak, who views the Rwanda policy as central to his electoral strategy, faces a delicate balancing act between appeasing moderates within the party and satisfying hardliners who believe the bill is insufficient in deterring migration. The UN's criticism of the plan as incompatible with international refugee law adds another layer of complexity to the situation. [The Times]

Despite attempts by right-wing members to toughen the bill through amendments, Sunak remains confident that the proposed legislation strikes the right balance. He contends that breaking international law could jeopardise the agreement with Rwanda, and the bill aims to disapprove specific human rights laws about Rwanda-related asylum claims. [The Times]

In a significant development, Sunak secured approval for the controversial Rwanda bill in the House of Commons on January 17, 2024, winning the crucial third reading by 320 votes to 276. This victory, however, follows the resignation of two party deputy chairmen and a junior ministerial aide who opposed the bill. The legislation will now move to the House of Lords, where peers have threatened to amend the deportation plan to ensure compliance with international law. [Euronews]

(ha/gc)

United Kingdom declares Hizb ut-Tahrir a terrorist organisation

The British government has declared the Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir a terrorist organisation and banned it from organising within the country, citing

concerns over antisemitism and allegations of promoting terrorism. [The Guardian]

Hizb ut-Tahrir, already banned in several countries, including Germany and Indonesia, will be prohibited from recruiting, holding protests, and conducting meetings across the United Kingdom. Home Secretary James Cleverly said that the group is antisemitic and actively promotes terrorism, including praising the attacks carried out by Hamas on October 7 in Israel.

Critics argue that the group has been advocating violence, especially in the aftermath of the Israeli strikes on Gaza, with Hizb ut-Tahrir refusing to condemn Hamas and expressing support for the attacks on Israeli citizens. [The Guardian]

The organisation has called to "wipe out that Zionist entity", and references to "the monstrous Jews" and their alleged goal of establishing a caliphate in the Middle East have further fuelled accusations of promoting extremism, which the leader, Abdul Wahid, has denied, emphasising a separation between his professional and political life. Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, has expressed support for the ban, emphasising the government's responsibility to assess the evidence and intelligence related to the threat posed by Hizb ut-Tahrir. [The Guardian] [BBC News]

Hizb ut-Tahrir has consistently denied links to violence and terrorism, stating that it will challenge the proposed ban using all available legal means. The group contends that the move to proscribe it aligns the UK with other authoritarian states, silencing a voice advocating for an Islamic civilisational alternative in the Muslim world [BBC News].

The Home Office's decision comes after a review prompted by a protest organised by the group in October, during which attendees were accused of chanting "jihad". The banning order, enforced on January 18, criminalises belonging to or expressing support for the group. [ITVX] [BBC News]

The decision to ban Hizb ut-Tahrir underscores the ongoing debate between national security concerns and freedom of expression, highlighting the challenges faced by governments in addressing organisations accused of promoting extremism.

(ha/gc)

King Charles diagnosed with cancer, Buckingham Palace says

King Charles has been diagnosed with a form of cancer, says Buckingham Palace. The type of cancer has not been revealed - it is not prostate cancer but was discovered during his recent treatment for an enlarged prostate. [BBC]

The palace said the King began "regular treatments" and will postpone public duties during them. The Monarch, 75, "remains wholly positive about his treatment and looks forward to returning to full public duty as soon as possible," it added. [BBC]

No further details are being shared on the stage of cancer or a prognosis. [BBC]

Charles informed both his sons personally about his diagnosis, and the Prince of Wales was said to be in regular contact with his father. The Duke of Sussex, Prince Harry, who lives in the United States, spoke to his father and will travel to the UK to see him in the coming days. [BBC]

(gc)

Northern Ireland names Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill First Minister

Michelle O'Neill, a nationalist politician, has become First Minister of Northern Ireland as power-sharing resumed after a two-year break. [CNN]

O'Neill of the pro-united Ireland party Sinn Fein, once the political arm of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), said in an address to lawmakers following her appointment:

"Today opens the door to the future. I am honoured to stand here as First Minister." [CNN]

After her selection as first minister, she called this a "historic day which represents a new dawn." She added: "That such a day would ever come would have been unimaginable to my parents' and grandparents' generation." [WashingtonPost]

In earlier remarks to The Washington Post, O'Neill noted that the restoration of government "respects the result" of the May 2022 election — when Sinn Fein, for the first time, won the largest share of seats in the assembly and the right to hold the first minister job

under Northern Ireland's delicate power-sharing agreement. [WashingtonPost]

Funding priorities

O'Neill told BBC that all parties in the Stormont Executive agree that Northern Ireland needs a better funding model from Westminster. Northern Ireland's public services were being "starved" by the government. [BBC]

O'Neill told the BBC that Northern Ireland's funding model is the "number one priority issue that we have collectively" in the Northern Ireland Executive. [BBC]

The UK government is due to release a GBP 3.3 billion package now that power-sharing has been restored, much of which is earmarked to resolve public sector pay disputes and ease strain on public services. [BBC]

O'Neill said that the offer from the Treasury "acknowledged that we're underfunded", adding that it was an issue "we're all going to turn our attention to so that we can then, in turn, do things better in terms of health, education and public services." [BBC]

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Georgia removes icon of Stalin from main cathedral

The Georgian Church has removed an icon depicting Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin meeting a Russian

Orthodox saint from its main cathedral. The Georgian Church said the painting had been taken away to be "amended" as there was "insufficient evidence" the two had ever met. [BBC]

The painting has caused a public outcry and was recently splashed with blue paint in a protest by an activist. Church leaders and the ruling party have condemned the action. The Patriarchate of Georgia said that icons had to portray "real stories" and that the depiction of Stalin had to be changed. [BBC]

A court in Georgia has ordered five days' detention for a woman who defaced the religious icon of Stalin, an act which ignited large protests last month in the capital Tbilisi, her lawyers said. The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association confirmed in an email to Reuters that Natalia Peradze, also known as Nata, was convicted of petty hooliganism. [Reuters]

(gc)

Latvia reintroduces compulsory military service amid Russian threat

Latvia has reinstated compulsory military service in response to the escalating tensions with Russia, emphasising the need for a more robust defence posture amid an international conflict/crisis. The move comes in the wake of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, raising concerns about the security of Baltic states.

Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics, in an interview with Current Time [RFERL], highlighted the necessity of conscription, stating that the voluntary basis for military service alone would not be sufficient to protect the nation.

Latvia, a NATO member since 2004, has heeded warnings from NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and military experts regarding potential Russian threats to the Baltic region. Responding to these concerns, the Latvian parliament voted in April 2023 to reintroduce mandatory military service, which officially began at the start of this year for men aged 18 to 27. [RFERL]

Under the new legislation, conscripts will serve 11 months in the regular armed forces or National Guard. After completing their mandatory service, they will become reservists in the National Guard for an additional five years, involving ongoing training commitments. Notably, women aged 18 to 27 can

voluntarily apply for military service. The move is part of Latvia's broader strategy to bolster its defence capabilities in the face of potential threats [RFERL].

Simultaneously, Latvia has taken steps to fortify its cybersecurity defences, responding to an increasing number of Russian cyberattacks since the onset of the war in Ukraine.

According to Microsoft data, the country, with a population of 1.9 million, including a significant ethnic Russian minority, ranks fifth in cyberattacks related to the Russian invasion. President Rinkevics emphasised the importance of strengthening punishments for state-related cybercrimes, signalling the government's commitment to address this evolving threat. [RFERL]

On January 17, the second batch of Latvian citizens, numbering around 120, commenced their eleven-month mandatory military service. Notably, these individuals volunteered for the service, receiving a monthly wage of EUR 600 (net) and compensation of EUR 1,100 upon completion. So far, the voluntary nature of the recruitment process has allowed Latvia to avoid compulsory conscription. However, the government plans to have 600 individuals in national service in 2024, with a second cohort of 480 expected to start in July. [LSM]

Latvia's decision to reintroduce compulsory military service underscores its commitment to enhancing national security amid the evolving geopolitical landscape and the perceived threat from Russia. The move reflects a proactive approach to ensure a robust defence posture and preparedness in facing challenges to Baltic sovereignty, including participation in essential military exercises. [RFERL] [LSM]

(ha/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bombing in Athens triggers concerns of terrorism resurgence

A powerful bomb blast in central Athens has sent shock waves across the country, with authorities concerned about what they call a new era of terrorism, Voice of America reported. [VOA]

Surveillance footage showed the powerful blast exploding before the nation's Labor ministry, shattering its steel-and-glass façade and gutting offices as far up as the sixth floor.

A Greek newspaper received a phone call from an unknown caller that a bomb had been planted at the ministry and had informed the police, who cordoned off the area before the explosion, which caused damage to the building and broken windows, police said. [JPost]

The caller said a previously unknown guerrilla group, calling itself the Revolutionary Class Self-Defense, was behind the attack, a police official said anonymously. [JPost] [VOA]

Surrounding buildings were also scarred, and metal at a nearby construction site was mangled and melted. There were no casualties, but authorities said the fallout could have been bloody if the explosion had hit the Greek capital's busiest boulevard, an area teeming with bars, coffee shops and restaurants, during business hours. [VOA]

It was the first terrorist attack to mar the streets of Athens in five years, and Public Order Minister Michalis Chrysochoides said authorities are seriously concerned about the resurgence of terrorism. [VOA]

"The attack is very serious and has to do with a serious crime," government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis told Open TV broadcaster. [JPost]

(gc)

Greece promises extra aid for protesting farmers

The Greek government promised help with energy costs for farmers on February 2, including a one-year extension of a tax rebate for agricultural diesel, hoping to calm protests by farmers who are also seeking fast compensation for losses in flooding. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told parliament the diesel measure would cost the state 82 million euros ($89.31 million) in 2024 and announced additional steps to help farmers. [Reuters]

"Things will improve for our farmers... and solving their problems is in the heart of our government's priorities," he said. [Reuters]

Farmers have been setting up blockades in central and northern Greece, echoing protests by farmers in other parts of Europe, and have threatened to step up their action unless the government helps them cope with higher energy prices and the growing impact of climate change. [Reuters]

(gc)

Greek police remove students protesting private university plans

Greek police removed students occupying a law school during an exam period as a protest against government plans to allow private universities. A dozen people were arrested in northern Greek cities. [ABC]

A police statement said the operation followed a request for assistance from university authorities in Komotini. No clashes were reported. It said the protesters staging the occupation in the law school prevented about 400 students and university staff from entering the building due to taking exams. [ABC]

Leftist groups staged protests in Komotini and Thessaloniki against the police operation. The centre-right government wants to legalize privately-run universities in a bill due to go before parliament this month. It argues that the reform would prevent skilled people from leaving to study abroad and make higher education more relevant to the labour market. [ABC]

(gc)

Erdogan appoints new central bank governor

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has appointed a new central bank governor, hours after the abrupt resignation of his previous appointee, who said she was stepping down because of "a major reputation assassination campaign." [NYTimes]

The departing central bank chief, Hafize Gaye Erkan, was the fifth in five years, and the first woman to hold the post. Turkish Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek said Erkan's departure was a personal decision. In an apparent effort to reassure investors, senior officials said that Erkan's departure did not signal a policy change. [NYTimes]

The bank's deputy governor, Fatih Karahan, was swiftly promoted to take her place. Karahan' spent years at prominent American institutions and companies. He received a master's degree and doctorate in economics at the University of Pennsylvania. He spent nearly a decade as an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, worked as a part-time lecturer at Columbia University and New York University, and served as a senior economist at Amazon. [CNBC]

The 42-year-old economist's experience will serve him well as he heads the institution working to tackle the eye-watering inflation and cost-of-living crisis that has hit Turkey's population of 85 million. The country's currency, the lira, is down 38% against the dollar year to date and has lost more than 80% of its value against the greenback over the last five years. [CNBC]

"I know him as an . . . expert who is respected by the employees of the institution," Hakan Kara, a former Turkish central bank chief economist, said of Karahan. One local banker added that Karahan was a "credible" choice to lead the bank. [FT]

Interest rate hikes

Turkey's latest consumer price index showed a roughly 65% increase year on year for January. The central bank has made eight consecutive interest rate hikes since May 2023 — for a cumulative 3,650 basis points — to rein in soaring inflation. The latest rate increase, on January 25, raised Turkey's key interest rate by 250 basis points to 45%. [CNBC]

Karahan stressed in a statement on the central bank's website that "price stability" is his team's main priority, vowing to "ensure disinflation" and "maintain the necessary monetary tightness until inflation falls to levels consistent with our target." [CNBC]

Starting in 2018, Erdogan oversaw a policy of continually lowering interest rates, even as the value of Turkey's currency plummeted and inflation soared. That flew in the face of conventional economics, which calls for raising interest rates to thwart inflation. After winning re-election in May,

Erdogan signalled a shift in approach by appointing Erkan and Simsek, who brought Turkey back toward orthodox policies. [NYTimes]

Erkan's appointment was initially welcomed because her background, which included stints at Goldman Sachs and First Republic Bank in the United States, suggested that she would pursue conventional monetary policies. But she had been stalked by rumours since a Turkish newspaper reported that her father, who has no official role at the bank, had intervened in its operations, an accusation that the bank denied.

In a statement posted online. Erkan defended her record, saying that her approach had begun to bear fruit but that she was stepping down to protect her family and infant child. [NYTimes]

(gc)

Israeli football player arrested in Turkey after showing solidarity against Hamas

Turkish authorities briefly detained Israeli football player Sagiv Jehezkel after he demonstrated solidarity in a wrist message with the hostages taken on October 7 by Hamas. [TheGuardian]

Turkish investigations accused Jehezkel on January 14 of suspected "incitement to hate." The solidarity message was shown after he scored a goal for his team, Antalyaspor, on his left wrist, saying "100 days. 07/10". [TheGuardian]

Antalyaspor Deputy Chairman Alkan Evren said in a statement that a legal process is ongoing to terminate the contract of the 28-year-old Israeli footballer, according to Turkish state broadcaster TRT Haber. [CNN]

"I did not act to provoke anybody. I want the war to end. This is why I showed that sign," Jehezel previously said, according to a leaked Turkish police report widely cited across Turkish media. [CNN]

A club statement said: "Our Board of Directors will never allow behaviour against the sensitivities of our country, even if it results in a championship or a cup." [CNN]

Turkish Justice Minister Yılmaz Tunç also wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that Jehezkel performed an "ugly action supporting Israel's massacre in #Gaza" after scoring in Antalyaspor's 1-1 draw against Trabzonspor. [CNN]

Yehezkel, a right-winger, has scored six goals and recorded two assists in 13 matches for Antalyaspor this season. [CNN]

At first, Antalyaspor officials didn't notice the message on Yehezkel's wrist and posted a photo of his celebration on the club's social media accounts. However, the post was later removed.

After being released, Jehezkel landed back in Israel, greeted by cheering compatriots.

(vt/gc)

Turkey will mass-produce new missiles

The Turkish military has introduced three new torpedoes to its missile systems as the NATO member bolsters its naval forces. [Daily News]

The Turkish Defense Industry Agency (SSB) signed mass-production contracts with Roketsan for the AKYA heavy torpedo, ATMACA anti-ship missile, and SAPAN air defence missile as part of the “Naval Torpedo and Missile Systems” program. [Overtdefense]

The signing ceremony took place at the Defense Industry Agency headquarters in Ankara, attended by Minister of National Defense Yaşar Güler, President of Defense Industries Prof. Dr. Haluk Görgün, Naval Forces Commander Admiral Ercüment Tatlıoğlu, and defence industry representatives. [Overtdefense]

The Atmaca cruise missile can be used on assault boats, frigates, and corvettes. Its high hit precision draws attention with its 220-kilometre range and low radar signature. Akya is a new-generation heavy-class

torpedo capable of engaging various classes of submarines and surface targets from submarines.

The main targets of the Sapan air defence missile include fighter jets, UAVs, helicopters, and cruise missiles" [Daily News]

(st/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Abortion rights activist acquitted of defaming Andorra

A rights activist was on January 17 acquitted of defaming her country when she voiced concerns at the United Nations about Andorra's total abortion ban.

The verdict for Vanessa Mendoza Cortés, the head of women's rights organisation Stop Violence, came after legal proceedings that lasted four years. [Pressenza] [Big news network]

The Andorran authorities had claimed that her comments about the nation's abortion laws – which are the strictest in Europe – undermined the prestige and good name of the government. [Big news network]

Rights group Amnesty International said that Cortés shouldn't have been charged in the first place.

"According to international human rights standards, government and public officials should legitimately be subject to scrutiny or public criticism," Amnesty added

in a press release. “Laws that safeguard against attacks on reputation should not be designed to protect abstract values or state institutions.”

Cortés spoke up about Andorra’s abortion laws at a meeting of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2019.

She was charged by the public prosecutor in Andorra with three counts of criminal defamation but, following an international outcry, two of the charges that potentially carry prison sentences were dropped.

(mr/pk)

PM urged to ban neo-fascist groups as hundreds make straight-arm salutes

Opposition leaders have called on Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing government to ban neo-fascist groups after hundreds made fascist salutes at a rally in Rome.

Meloni’s ruling Brothers of Italy party has neo-fascist origins but during her campaign before she was elected last year, she tried to distance her grouping from its roots, saying it had consigned “fascism to history” decades ago. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The controversial gathering took place on January 7 in front of the former Italian Social Movement (MSI) headquarters in Rome to mark the anniversary of the deaths of three far-right activists in 1978.

MSI was a post-World War II neo-fascist organization that later transformed into the Brothers of Italy.

A crowd can be seen in a widely circulated video standing in rows, giving a stiff-armed salute, and yelling “present” three times. Then a militant shouts “For all fallen comrades!” – a common neo-fascist rallying cry.

The opposition Five Star Movement, a populist progressive party, said it would lodge a complaint with prosecutors, describing the rally as an “apology for fascism”.

The opposition has accused Meloni of failing to stop the spread of neo-fascism in Italy. [The Guardian] [Politico]

(tn/pk)

Italian gov't plans to scrap crime of abuse of office, drawing criticism

Italy's nationalist government, led by Giorgia Meloni, has launched a plan to remove the offence of abuse of office, drawing criticism from opposition parties and Brussels.

The Italian Senate's Justice Committee, dominated by Meloni's right-wing coalition, took an initial step to dismantle the offence on January 9. The coalition argued that the offence impeded effective decision-making by mayors and hindered legal processes. [Euractiv] [thelocal.it]

However, a majority of the opposition criticised Meloni's move.

The head of the National Association of Magistrates, Giuseppe Santalucia, said it would be "unacceptable" for the law to "remain indifferent to a civil servant who abuses his powers".

In Brussels, European Commission spokesperson Christian Wigand said that Meloni's plan "would decriminalise important forms of corruption" and make the detection and prevention of such offences more difficult. [Euractiv]

Supporters of Meloni's move dismissed such arguments, with Justice Minister Carlo Nordio telling a parliamentary session on January 9 that Italy had "a legislative arsenal against corruption".

While a parliamentary vote on the bill is pending, experts suggest it could be declared unconstitutional and non-compliant with EU law. The offence of abuse of office exists in 25 out of 27 EU countries, with Brussels aiming to extend this across the whole bloc. [thelocal.it]

The Italian government's move to abolish the offence comes shortly after the conviction of over 200 individuals, including officials and civil servants, in a major anti-mafia trial. [Europe Monthly December 2023].

(ao/pk)

Windfall tax on Italian energy companies may be unconstitutional, court finds

An administrative court in Italy has found validity in claims by energy companies that windfall taxes imposed on them last year were unconstitutional and has referred the case to the country's constitutional court.

The Italian government raised EUR 3.5 billion from 7,000 energy producers and distributors in a one-off tax on corporate incomes in 2023 that were up sharply due to higher prices for petrol, gas and electricity.

The administrative court found that the levy could have been a form of double taxation and that it contravened EU regulations on windfall charges.

A ruling against the tax by the constitutional court could hit Italy's strained public finances. Government debt is over 140% of the country's GDP, the highest level in the EU after Greece, while Italy's credit rating is just one notch above junk with international rating agencies. [Reuters] [FT] [IMF]

(ar/pk)

Farmer protests disrupt traffic across Italy

Italian farmers took to major streets and motorways across the country on January 29 in a protest against the hard-right government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, joining similar movements across Europe.

Farmers used tractors to block traffic in several Italian cities, including a major motorway in Rome and in Udine, north-eastern Italy. Smaller tractor protests also took place in the south, including in Sicily, in late January. [thelocal.it]

The opposition, farming unions and agricultural activists accused Meloni's government of raising taxes on the agricultural sector and criticised what they said was its lack of action in addressing a string of challenges faced by farmers.

Danilo Calvani, leader of the Betrayed Farmers, an activist group based in the central Abruzzo region, said: "We are exhausted – we risk a very serious food crisis unless we start eating locusts, worms and synthetic meat." [EFAnews]

The protests in Italy were part of a broader movement across Europe linked to the EU's Green Deal. Farmers

around the continent have protested against low incomes and high taxes. [The Telegraph]

(ao/pk)

Pro-Palestinian protesters clash with police

Ten police officers were injured in fierce clashes with anti-Israel protesters in the northern Italian city of Vicenza on January 20.

Violence broke out as a crowd was protesting at the presence of a single Israeli stand at the Vicenza jewellery fair, the largest event of its kind in the world. According to media reports, protesters attacked police, setting off flares and smoke bombs.

A week later, despite a ban, pro-Palestinian rallies were held in Milan and other cities in Italy, calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war.

Amid growing concerns of anti-semitism, Italian authorities had banned anti-Israel demonstrations from taking place on January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Nevertheless, thousands attended the rallies. [Reuters] [Jerusalem Post] [DPA]

(ar/pk)

Italian MPs approve heftier fines for 'eco-vandals'

Italy's parliament passed a law on January 18, with a vote of 138-92, to impose tougher fines on anyone who damages monuments and cultural sites. The move came in response to a series of climate protests in recent months. [Reuters] [ANSA.it]

In 2023, environmental activists from the Ultima Generazione group defaced monuments like Rome's famous Trevi Fountain and Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, and splattered mud on St. Mark's Basilica in Venice.

The incidents were part of protests against the hard-right government led by Giorgia Meloni, which activists have accused of failing to address climate issues. [Europe Monthly January 2023] [Reuters]

Italian Culture Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano, a key supporter of the new law, said after the measure was

approved by deputies: “It is good that it is no longer the Italians [as a whole] who pay but those who are responsible for the acts of damage.” [ANSA.it]

Dubbed the “eco-vandals” law, the new measures raise existing fines from EUR 1,500 - 15,000 to a maximum of EUR 40,000 for defacing monuments, and up to EUR 60,000 for destroying cultural heritage. The culture ministry is also authorised, under the new law, to use the proceeds of fines for the clean-up and restoration of damaged monuments. [Reuters]

(ao/pk)

Italy unveils EUR 950m fund to boost its electric car industry

The Italian government has unveiled a EUR 950 million fund for an electric car incentive scheme, amid tensions between Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the country’s major automotive manufacturer, Stellantis. [thelocal.it] [Reuters]

As part of the government initiative, low-income families could receive financial support, potentially up to EUR 13,750, for switching from old diesel cars to new electric vehicles. [Bloomberg]

Industry Minister Adolfo Urso announced on February 1 that Rome is open to investing in Stellantis as part of the initiative. He added that the car company had already committed to boosting vehicle production in Italy to a million by 2030.

However, Meloni, a nationalist, criticized Stellantis in late January, saying that some of its industrial decisions were “distant from Italian interests” and tended to prioritize France over Italy. [thelocal.it]

Established through a merger of Fiat Chrysler and France’s Peugeot-Citroen in 2021, Stellantis owns Italian brands including Fiat, Alfa Romeo, Maserati and Lancia. The French government is among its investors, holding a 6% stake. [Reuters]

(ao/pk)

Far-right Chega, poised to be kingmaker, wants role in new government

The far-right, populist Chega Party, poised to potentially be a kingmaker in Portugal’s upcoming snap

general election, has demanded a government role if it is to prop up the main opposition right-wing alliance.

Many analysts have predicted that the March 10 ballot could produce a deadlock which leaves Portugal without a majority government, as no party enjoys enough public support to gain over half of the seats in parliament.

Chega leader Andre Ventura, which is garnering around 16% support, told Reuters that his grouping wanted to be part of a rightist coalition administration in exchange for its parliamentary support.

Even though the centre-right Social Democrats, the main opposition grouping in Portugal, have sealed a pre-electoral pact – called the Democratic Alliance – with the right-wing CDS-People's Party, they have struggled to gain momentum in winning public support. [Reuters] [Samaa]

In fact, one poll conducted by Intercampus on January 23 suggests the new alliance has less support than the Social Democrats had alone. In the survey, the Democratic Alliance had 20.8% backing, falling short of the 22.5% support that the Social Democratic Party received in a previous poll conducted a month earlier. [Reuters]

The incumbent Socialist Party is the frontrunner in the election, with the same Intercampus poll finding that the grouping enjoys 26.4% support. This, however, is far from a parliamentary majority. [Reuters]

That means Chega could play the role of kingmaker, with enough clout to allow a right-wing bloc to take power.

However, Social Democrat leader Luis Montenegro has previously categorically rejected any form of alliance with Chega, deliberately excluding it from the new Democratic Alliance. [Portugal Resident]

As a result, there is a large degree of uncertainty about the outcome of the election.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa called a snap election after outgoing Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Costa was forced to resign following a corruption scandal in his government in November. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(jt/pk)

Water-use limits in Algarve amid severe drought

The Portuguese government is bringing in limits on water use by farmers and urban dwellers in the southern Algarve region, which is facing a severe drought.

Businesses such as hotels and golf courses in the tourism-dependent region are set to be ordered to lower their water consumption by 15%. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Environment Minister Duarte Cordeiro said on January 17 that agricultural irrigation will need to drop by around 25% from last year's levels, and that this may have to increase to 50% in areas around the worst-affected dam reservoirs. [Reuters]

Cordeiro said reservoirs in the Algarve were at their lowest levels ever, and warned that if no action to curb consumption was taken there would be no public supply of water by the end of 2024. [Reuters]

In response to the proposed quotas, José Apolinário, president of the Regional Coordination and Development Commission, estimated that the agriculture sector would need EUR 100 million in support due to projected losses in the next two years. [Portugal Resident]

The vice-president of the Portuguese Environment Agency, José Pimenta Machado, acknowledged that the plans would hit agriculture, but added that "the priority use is human use". [The Portugal News]

(jt/pk)

Inflow to investment funds expected to rise as Portugal revises 'golden visa' scheme

A rise in inflow to investment funds is expected after Portugal changed the rules for its "golden visa" scheme, which gave wealthy foreigners residency rights in return for buying property in the country.

Under the revised system, the only route for foreigners to secure the right to live in Portugal through the scheme is by ploughing money into domestic investment funds.

The government introduced the changes last year amid worries that its previous approach was inflating

property prices, exacerbating a housing crisis. [Foreign Policy]

The European Commission, the EU's executive, has called for such schemes to be scrapped, saying they pose security risks. [Reuters]

To be eligible for a Portuguese "golden visa", an applicant must now transfer EUR 500,000 into a qualifying fund. [The Portugal News]

However, investing EUR 250,000 in cultural projects, EUR 500,000 in scientific research, or creating 10 jobs in Portugal can also qualify individuals for such a visa. [Reuters]

In 2023, Portugal granted 352 visas to non-EU citizens through this route, bringing in EUR 125 million. [Portugal Resident]

Although interest in investing in "golden visa" funds is expected to grow, some predict that overall cash flows into Portugal will decrease after the elimination of the property purchase route. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Leader of Vox re-elected, calls for right-wingers to unite

Despite opposition from some within his party, Santiago Abascal, the head of Spain's far-right Vox grouping, was re-elected on January 27 for a fourth term in the post.

Abascal urged "resistance and unity" among right-wing parties against Spain's ruling leftists, who he said were "sinking the country." [Euractiv 1] [Euractiv 2] [El Mundo]

Recent anti-government protests brought together Vox and the conservative opposition People's Party (PP) against Spain's left-wing administration.

Vox is the third largest force in the national parliament, despite losing 19 seats in general elections last year, and is still in control in many Spanish regions jointly with the People's Party.

Conservatives gained the most votes in the national elections in July but failed to secure a parliamentary majority, giving Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez an opportunity to form a new government and continue as premier. [Europe Monthly August 2023]

(tn/pk)

Effigy of Socialist PM battered during rally in Madrid

Spain's ruling Socialist Party has filed a complaint after an effigy of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez was strung up in Madrid and battered.

The Socialists said the incident may be considered as incitement to hatred against the premier, and urged the prosecutor's office to identify the offenders.

Sanchez has faced anger and mass protests after he secured a new term in power late last year by offering an amnesty deal to Catalan separatists in exchange for their political support for his government. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

About 300 protesters gathered in front of the Socialist Party's offices in the Spanish capital on New Year's Eve, hung up a papier mâché effigy that was intended to look like Sánchez, and battered it until it broke.

The Socialists said that the beating of the effigy was the culmination of "harassment" of their party's headquarters that "has altered its normal functioning for months". [Politico] [El Pais]

The Socialists pointed the finger at the far-right Vox party, which has been fiercely critical of Sánchez's agreement with the Catalans. They claimed that Vox is the "common element" underlying all the "coordinated actions" against the Socialist Party in recent months.

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]

(tn/pk)

Environmental emergency declared after plastic pellets spill on Spanish coast

Local authorities declared an environmental emergency after millions of plastic pellets were found littering the shores of Spain's north-western Galicia region following a spillage from a container ship.

Amid a political blame game, hundreds of volunteers swept the Galicia coastline, sifting the sandy beaches to clear up the plastic. [Euronews]

Around 1,000 sacks of pellets are believed to have spilled from the Toconao, a Liberian-flagged vessel, some 50 miles west of Viana do Castelo in northern Portugal on December 8. [BBC]

The incident sparked a political dispute as the Galician regional authority, led by Alfonso Rueda of the conservative People's Party, faced criticism from environmental group Ecologistas en Accion for what it said was a two-week delay in responding to the spill, which was detected on December 20. [Reuters]

In response, Rueda shifted responsibility onto the central Socialist-led government, claiming that his administration had not been informed until January 4. However, these assertions are contested, with local media reports indicating that the regional government was aware of the incident by at least December 21. [Bloomberg]

Spanish Deputy Prime Minister Maria Jesus Montero said she was worried about the potentially "serious repercussions" of the plastic spill. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Hundreds of flights cancelled as airport workers strike in Spain

Ground staff at Spain's flagship air carrier Iberia staged a strike between January 5 and 8 at airports around the country, causing the cancellation of 444 flights.

The two main trade unions in Spain, CCOO and UGT, launched the strikes due to a disagreement over worker contracts being signed with new providers of ground staff services in September. [SUR]

Previously, such services at many Spanish airports were provided by Iberia itself. The change angered unions, despite the new providers pledging to retain staff and maintain their working conditions. [Reuters]

Iberia denounced the strike as "irresponsible". [Reuters]

The strikes, which coincided with the Spanish national holiday of Epiphany, impacted over 45,000 passengers who had bought tickets on the cancelled flights. [SUR] [Anadolu Ajansı]

However, in a statement Iberia claimed that the impact of the strikes was minimal, adding that over 90% of customers had “obtained a solution” to their cancelled flights. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

New criminal offence of femicide set to be introduced in Croatia

A new criminal offence of femicide – defined as the aggravated murder of a woman – is set to be introduced in Croatia, under amendments to the law submitted by the government to parliament. [Total Croatia News] [Cross Border Talks] [Index.hr]

Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, leader of the ruling centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party, said the amendments will also increase the penalties for rape, child sexual abuse and sexual harassment.

In accordance with the Istanbul Convention, the concept of gender-based violence against women is being introduced to Croatia’s penal code.

“By introducing femicide and the definition of gender-based violence, we’re sending out a very clear message to all segments of society that killing women and violence against women just because they are women is totally and utterly unacceptable under any circumstances,” said Plenković.

In a further measure, the statute of limitations for the prosecution of all serious crimes of sexual abuse and exploitation of children will be abolished.

(mr/pk)

Czech lawmakers back stricter firearms law after mass shooting

The lower house of the Czech parliament has agreed to toughen the country's firearm control measures after a gunman killed 14 people in a mass shooting at a Prague university.

In the 200-seat lower house, lawmakers on January 26 approved a change tightening firearm ownership with a 151-0 vote. [AP News]

The amendment has been sent for approval to the Senate, where the ruling coalition has a majority. The measure also needs the president's signature to become law.

The changes will allow the police to confiscate weapons from private owners if their actions pose a security risk. [AFP/Barron's] [BBC]

Meanwhile, firearms stores will be obliged to report purchases of weapons and ammunition they consider suspicious. [AP News]

Doctors, including psychiatrists, will have access to databases to check firearm ownership, and will be required to report any medical issues indicating their patients are unfit to own weapons. [BBC] [AP News] [Bloomberg]

Gun owners will have to undergo a mandatory medical check every five years instead of the current 10-year interval. [Bloomberg] [AP News]

The new legislation will not come into force until 2026 because institutions need time to revamp a digital gun registry. [Bloomberg]

While the change in the law was proposed months before the mass shooting in Prague, Interior Minister Vit Rakusan said it was hard to know whether the new regulations, if in effect earlier, would have prevented the tragedy. [AP News]

Unprecedented rampage

On December 21, a graduate student killed 14 people and wounded 25 before shooting himself dead at the Faculty of Arts building of Charles University, marking the country's deadliest assault in decades.

Before the campus bloodshed, the 24-year-old assailant also shot dead three other people – his father, a two-month-old baby and her father. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Police said the gunman, a high-achieving student of Polish history, had no record of violence or criminality and, therefore, did not attract the authorities' attention. However, he did have a history of mental illness.

Police found that the shooter legally owned eight weapons, including two long guns. [AP News 2] [DW]

Officers later revealed that he had obtained seven weapons in quick succession in the spring of 2023, but there was no central control mechanism to alert authorities of the rapid accumulation of an arsenal. [BBC]

While the Czech Republic may further tighten its firearms legislation, citizens' fundamental right to carry arms is expected to remain unchanged.

In 2021, the nation's constitution was amended to give people the right to bear arms to defend themselves or others. [DW] [TIME] [The Guardian]

The Czech Republic, an EU and NATO country of 10.9 million people, has one of the highest rates of private gun ownership in post-communist Europe. More than 300,000 people have a firearms licence and own more than a million weapons of various types. [DW] [The New York Times] [TIME]

(yl/pk)

Deputy PM criticised for hosting Christmas party after shooting rampage

The Czech labour minister has retained his post despite hosting a staff Christmas party hours after being informed of the country's deadliest mass shooting in decades.

Opposition politicians and members of the public demanded the immediate resignation of Marian Jurecka, who is also a deputy prime minister. [Politico]

A 24-year-old Czech graduate student shot dead 14 people and wounded another 25 on December 21 at Charles University in Prague. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Jurecka, who heads the centrist Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) – who are junior partners in the ruling coalition – said he would have ended the Christmas party for his ministry's staff earlier had he known about the full consequences of the mass shooting. [expats.cz]

Jurecka had at first said that he concluded the party prematurely as he headed for an emergency meeting. But he later admitted that he had returned to the party, which continued late into the night. [Politico] [Radio Prague]

The opposition argued that, with politicians across Europe aware of the attack by 7pm on December 21, it was impossible for Jurecka to have remained uninformed during the party. [Radio Prague]

Prime Minister Petr Fiala voiced support for Jurecka, saying: "It was a mistake... If I felt he should not be deputy prime minister, I would have taken the necessary steps already."

(yl/pk)

Hungary vows not to budge on LGBTQ+, asylum rights, amid EU cash freeze

The Hungarian government has insisted it will not change policies that European Union officials say violate the rights of LGBTQ+ people and asylum seekers. [AP News] [Euronews]

Reforming the policies would pave the way to the release of a further slice of EU funds which Brussels has not allowed Hungary to access as a result of rule-of-law concerns. [AP News] [Euronews]

However, officials in Budapest argue that such policy changes would go against the will of the Hungarian people.

"The Hungarian government is willing to reach an agreement with the Commission, but in cases where people have expressed a clear opinion, it would be undemocratic and unacceptable," said Gergely Gulyas, chief of staff to right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban. [AP News] [Euronews]

In 2021, Hungary passed a law that banned displays of "homosexual activity" in the media and in public, as well as discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in schools, in a move heavily criticized by the EU and human rights groups. [AP News] [Euronews]

Budapest has also implemented a policy that turns away asylum seekers at the Hungarian border, forcing them to seek help at the Hungarian embassies in Ukraine and Serbia instead. The policy was declared illegal by the European Court of Justice in June 2023, but no reform efforts have been made. [Europe in Review July 2023] [AP News] [Euronews]

In December, the EU released EUR 10.2 billion in cohesion funds for Hungary after Budapest carried out judicial reforms to limit political interference in courts. [Europe in Review December 2023] [AP News] [Euronews]

(evk/pk)

Protest by students and teachers calls for better education, pay

Students and teachers have staged protests over the quality of education in Hungary and pay levels for educators.

The demonstrations, held on January 13 outside the interior ministry in Budapest, were led by the United Student Front, the Democratic Union of Teachers and other groups. [Magyar Nemzet] [Telex]

The organizations said that the government is still not paying teachers enough, even though educators' salaries rose by 32% from January 1.

They also expressed fears that the government will back away from its commitment to wage increases. [Magyar Nemzet] [Telex]

Alexandra Pal, a member of the Democratic Union of Teachers, said that the demonstrations were not only about pay, but also about improving the education system. According to her, the sector needs "radical transformations."

Meanwhile, government officials criticized the protesters. Bence Retvari, parliamentary secretary of the interior ministry, said that those behind the rallies "are not organizing demonstrations and strikes for a wage increase, but for political reasons." [Telex]

With the 32% salary increase, Hungarian teachers now make more than their counterparts in neighbouring Slovakia, but less than Romanian educators, the Telex news outlet reported.

(evk/pk)

Four border guards arrested on charges of bribery

Four Hungarian border guards have been arrested on charges of bribery, the country's Central Investigative Prosecutor's Office has announced. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

As well as detaining the suspects, police confiscated money, cars, property and other assets valued at HUF 52 million (EUR 134,000) in connection with the alleged crime. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

Authorities believe that the guards, who patrolled the Hungary-Romania border near the village of Artand, accepted bribes from people entering the country so they could pass through checkpoints more quickly. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

Corruption among border guards and other officers has been a recurring issue in recent years. In March and April 2023, 26 police officers from Biharkerestes, another town near the Hungary-Romania border, were detained for accepting bribes and engaging in a criminal conspiracy. Three civilians were also arrested, and HUF 290 million in assets was seized. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

(evk/pk)

Hungary orders supermarkets to warn consumers of 'shrinkflation'

The Hungarian government has announced large retailers will have to mark products that have been reduced in size as result of "deceptive" practices. [Budapest Times] [Reuters]

Amid rising inflation and declining purchasing power, many companies have decreased the size of products while keeping prices the same, a phenomenon known as "shrinkflation." [Budapest Times] [Reuters]

Hungary has struggled with the highest levels of inflation in the European Union, which peaked at 25% during the first quarter of 2023. Meanwhile, retail sales fell by an annual 8.7% between January and November 2023.

In a statement, the Hungarian Economy Ministry called shrinkflation a "deceptive practice" that "leads to

consumers getting less of the purchased product for their money." [Reuters]

Beginning in March, food retailers with revenues of over HUF 1 billion (EUR 2.6 million) a year will have to flag all products that have been reduced in weight or volume since January 1, 2020. Manufacturers and suppliers, in turn, will be required to notify retailers if they reduce the size of products. [Budapest Times] [Reuters]

Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government is trying to revive the economy ahead of municipal and European Parliament elections scheduled for June.

Recent surveys have shown that Orban's right-wing Fidesz party has decreased in popularity, possibly as a result of inflation and other economic woes. [Budapest Times] [Reuters]

(evk/pk)

Poland plunged into constitutional crisis as political tensions escalate

Both the premier and the leader of Poland's largest opposition party have raised the spectre of early elections – just months after nationalists were ejected from government following eight years in power – amid a constitutional crisis sparked by the arrest of two former ministers. [Wydarzenia] [Euractiv]

Since being sworn into government in December last year, the ruling coalition – made up of parties ranging from the centre-right to the left and headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk – has been in a near-constant state of political conflict with the opposition nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party and with President Andrzej Duda. [Bloomberg]

Tensions peaked when two politicians who were ministers in the former Law and Justice government were jailed.

Former Interior Minister Mariusz Kaminski and his deputy, Maciej Wasik, were convicted of abuse of power for actions dating back to 2007 and sentenced to two years in prison in January. [Notes From Poland] [Notes From Poland] [Barron's]

Drama in presidential palace

In a dramatic standoff, the pair holed up for hours at the presidential palace in Warsaw. Their arrest by

police who entered the building to detain them sparked a constitutional crisis, with two separate chambers of Poland's Supreme Court issuing contradictory rulings on the case. [Notes From Poland] [Notes From Poland]

President Duda – an ally of Law and Justice, which was ousted in October parliamentary elections – had issued presidential pardons for Kaminski and Wasik in 2015. [Notes From Poland]

However, the Supreme Court last year ruled that those pardons were invalid, leading Duda to issue fresh pardons last month, despite arguing that his 2015 decision was still in force. [Notes From Poland]

Amid legal chaos, leading members of Law and Justice decried the arrests of the two PiS politicians, with former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki saying: "For the first time since [the rule of 1980s communist leader Wojciech] Jaruzelski, we have political prisoners in Poland." [Notes From Poland]

Meanwhile, Beata Szydlo, who served as prime minister from 2015 to 2017, said: "Mariusz Kaminski and Maciej Wasik are the first political prisoners of Tusk's regime." [Notes From Poland]

Supporters of the government slammed such claims as inappropriate, pointing out that Kaminski and Wasik were legitimately convicted by a court.

Kaminski and Wasik won seats as lawmakers in last year's elections, but their convictions led the speaker of parliament, Szymon Holownia, to strip them of their mandates. [AFP/France 24] [Notes From Poland]

Kaminski said he viewed "the unlawful action to deprive me of my parliamentary mandate as an act of political revenge." [AFP/France 24]

Contradictory verdicts

The situation was thrown into further chaos when two separate chambers of Poland's Supreme Court issued contradictory verdicts just days apart. [Notes From Poland]

The extraordinary oversight and public affairs chamber upheld an appeal launched by Kaminski to prevent him from being stripped of his mandate. [Notes From Poland]

The chamber was created by the previous government and is staffed with judges nominated by Law and Justice loyalists. [Notes From Poland]

However, another body of the Supreme Court, the labour chamber, rejected Kaminski's appeal, with one of its judges saying that it was not the Supreme Court's role to decide whether or not to uphold his conviction. [Notes From Poland]

That verdict highlighted the conflict within Poland's judicial system, with the latter body calling into question the legality of the former, saying that the extraordinary oversight and public affairs chamber "does not have the status of an independent and impartial court previously established under the law." [Notes From Poland]

Tensions between Tusk's camp and the opposition continued to rise over the issue after the government passed its 2024 budget through parliament. [Notes From Poland]

Unlike in the case of other legislation, the president does not have the power to veto the budget. However, Duda referred the bill to Poland's Constitutional Tribunal – a body which critics say is also filled with Law and Justice-appointed loyalists. [Notes From Poland]

Warning by president

In addition, Duda's office warned that the president could refer all legislation accepted by parliament without the participation of Kaminski and Wasik to the Constitutional Tribunal. [Notes From Poland]

Duda argued that the budget's passing through the legislature was unconstitutional as Kaminski and Wasik were prevented from attending the vote. [Notes From Poland]

This prompted Prime Minister Tusk to say that if the budget was not approved, his government could call a snap election. [Bloomberg] [Notes From Poland]

Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski, too, called for early elections – albeit with the added stipulation that the current government be dissolved in the meantime. [Wydarzenia]

Kaczynski said: "The best solution is a transition period, of course with a new government, and then elections. Otherwise there is no way to resolve this." [Wydarzenia]

The nationalist opposition leader added: "It is my belief that parliament, if it does not recognise the extraordinary oversight and public affairs chamber, simply does not exist right now. If the parliament

claims that the chamber is not a court, then the elections have not been confirmed, and therefore there is no parliament." [Polska Agencja Prasowa]

Among the tasks of the extraordinary oversight chamber is confirming whether an election is valid. [rp.pl]

Since being sworn into government in December, the ruling coalition has begun taking steps to reverse sweeping changes to state institutions made by Law and Justice over the eight years it was in power, during which the party stacked key bodies with its own supporters. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

The government's moves aim to unblock billions in EU funds still being withheld from Warsaw as a result of what Brussels says was democratic backsliding and erosion in the rule of law in Poland across two terms of nationalist rule. [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

Poland's top court moves to protect central bank chief from prosecution

Poland's top court has ruled that the governor of the country's central bank can only be investigated by the State Tribunal following a parliamentary qualified majority vote in favour of such action. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

The Constitutional Tribunal's January 11 decision means that Adam Glapinski is protected from prosecution by the government, which only enjoys a simple majority in parliament. [Reuters]

The ruling coalition – made up of parties ranging from the centre-right to the left and led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Civic Platform – accuses Glapinski of compromising the central bank's independence while failing to effectively fight inflation. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

One of the governing coalition's election campaign promises was to investigate Glapinski for a slash in interest rates weeks before Poland's October 15 parliamentary elections.

Tusk's camp argues that was a move designed to bolster support for the then-ruling nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

Glapinski – who is a personal friend of Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski – denies that his actions were politically motivated. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

The Constitutional Tribunal, which issued the January ruling, is dominated by judges hand-picked by Law and Justice. The party had been accused of using the tribunal as a political tool during its eight years in power. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

Since being sworn into government in December, the new ruling coalition has begun taking steps to reverse changes to state institutions made by Law and Justice. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

The moves by the government aim to unblock billions in EU funds that are still being withheld by Brussels over what it says was democratic backsliding and erosion of the rule of law in Poland during two terms of nationalist rule. [Reuters]

The State Tribunal, a body separate from the Constitutional Tribunal, examines cases in which senior state officials are accused of infringing the constitution or committing crimes.

(ek/pk)

New gov't to examine work of team that probed presidential plane crash

Poland's new government has announced that a team of experts will probe contentious work by a commission under the previous nationalist administration which concluded Russia was responsible for bringing down a Polish presidential plane in 2010.

The jet carrying President Lech Kaczynski, his wife and 94 others, including top political and military figures, crashed near Smolensk, western Russia, killing all those on board. The crash scarred the Polish national psyche and is still a source of controversy and recriminations.

After the nationalist, Russia-hostile Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in Poland in 2015, it set up a commission which concluded that the jet's left wing was destroyed as a result of an explosion on board. It also claimed that Russian air traffic controllers deliberately misled Polish pilots about their location as they neared the runway.

Those findings were lambasted by critics in Poland, who said that the commission – despite almost eight years of investigations that cost the taxpayer PLN 36 million (EUR 8.25 million) – never produced convincing proof that Russia downed the presidential plane.

The commission was disbanded at the end of last year by Poland's new EU-friendly government – made up of parties ranging from the centre-right to the left – that came to power after voters ousted Law and Justice in October parliamentary elections. [Polish Radio] [Europe Monthly November 2023]

The work of the commission is to be probed by a team of 19 "apolitical" experts who were appointed on January 19, said the new defence minister, Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz. [Polish Press Agency]

'Big political scandal'

He added that the approach of the previous government's commission was a "big political scandal" and that it had tried to prove a pre-defined theory, rather than to "search for the truth".

As well as blaming Russia for the air crash, Law and Justice politicians have pointed the finger at their domestic opponents. PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski has even suggested that Polish political enemies of his twin brother, President Lech Kaczynski, colluded in his death.

Critics accused the commission of distorting facts and fomenting hate in order to build up voter support for the populist Law and Justice party.

Kosiniak-Kamysz said the new probe would not examine the cause of the 2010 air crash itself.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has denied suggestions that the crash was the result of a conspiracy by Moscow.

An earlier, official report into the causes of the disaster drawn up in Warsaw before Law and Justice came to power had cited a catalogue of errors on the Polish side, while also pointing to mistakes by Russian control tower staff.

A Russian report placed all the blame on the Poles.

(pk)

Thousands rally across Slovakia against PM's plan to revamp penal code

Thousands of demonstrators have rallied in major cities across Slovakia in fresh protests against a controversial judiciary overhaul proposed by the new government of populist Prime Minister Robert Fico.

In Bratislava alone, some 25,000 took to the streets of the capital on January 18. The protests were called by civil activists and opposition groupings, including the pro-Western liberal Progressive Slovakia party. [Bloomberg] [Reuters 1]

Fico, a polarising figure who returned to power for the fourth time in October on a pro-Russia and anti-America platform, has faced mounting pressure from domestic critics and the EU to scrap or reconsider his plans to reform criminal law and prosecution procedures. [AP News 1]

His coalition government aims to push through legislation in a fast-track procedure to disband the Special Prosecution Office (USP), which investigates corruption, extremism and organised crime. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

The measure means that the ongoing investigation of serious crimes would be handed over to regional offices, which have not handled such cases for the past two decades. [abc news/AP News]

If approved, the legislation would suspend investigations and trials of high-profile cases, some of which involve senior officials and businessmen tied to Fico's past governments. These could be reclassified as less severe offences. [Bloomberg]

The penal code revamp also includes limiting protection for whistleblowers and cutting sentences for economic crimes. [Reuters 2]

The legislation requires approval from both the parliament and the president.

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

However, Fico's three-party ruling coalition enjoys a majority in parliament, meaning it has the power to override an expected veto by Caputova through a simple majority. [AP News 2]

'Unpredictable' damage

Caputova urged lawmakers to allow a proper review of Fico's plans to fast-track judiciary reform, saying that his proposals could jeopardise the rule of law and cause "unpredictable" damage to society. [AP News 2]

"The absence of proper expert debate multiplies the risks connected with this amendment, because there is a lack of analysis of its all practical and technical consequences," Caputova told parliament on January 18. [Reuters 3]

Caputova also highlighted the European Parliament's concern over Slovakia's ability to combat corruption, amid fears that the proposed changes may result in insufficient punishment for the misuse of EU funds. [Reuters 3] [AP News 2]

The European Parliament has called for more scrutiny of Fico's overhaul, urging the European Commission in a resolution approved on January 17 "to safeguard the rule of law and judicial independence". [Reuters 2]

Fico denounced the resolution, saying it interfered with domestic politics. He accused Slovak opposition lawmakers in the European Parliament of pushing the resolution and spreading "nonsense and untruths" about Slovakia. [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3]

Fico has argued that the Special Prosecution Office he wants to disband has a bias against his leftist Smer party and that Slovak court sentences are harsher compared to those in other European countries.

Meanwhile, the European Public Prosecutor's Office said in December that Fico's proposed legislation threatens the protection of the EU's financial interests. [AP News 2] [Bloomberg] [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Caputova has said she is willing to challenge the legislation in Slovakia's Constitutional Court. [AP News 1] [AP News 2]

(yl/pk)

Next Slovak president could consolidate populist PM's power, pro-Western contender warns

Slovakia's presidential election in March will determine whether the state's power is concentrated in the hands

of one man, pro-Western presidential candidate Ivan Korcok has said.

Korcok, who pledges to uphold Slovakia's trans-Atlantic trajectory, said at a press conference on January 8 that populist Prime Minister Robert Fico could tighten his grip on power if – as looks likely – a close ally of the premier becomes president.

Fico last year came to power for the fourth time after heavily campaigning on a pledge to halt military aid for Ukraine.

Korcok, a former foreign minister, has highlighted the president's role as a counterweight to the government.

"I want to be a president who is fair but strict... and decisively stands up to what the government is doing that is not in line with the interests of the Slovak Republic," said Korcok. [tasr]

Korcok, who launched an independent presidential bid last September, is supported by the liberal SaS party and the pro-Western opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party. [Slovak Spectator]

In Slovakia, an EU and NATO member state of 5.4 million, the president can veto laws passed by the government or challenge them in the constitutional courts.

The first round of the presidential election will be held on March 23. If no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the ballot, a runoff will take place on April 6. [AFP/Barron's] [Slovak Spectator]

Korcok served as foreign minister in 2020 but resigned amid disagreements with former Prime Minister Igor Matovic, who unilaterally decided to purchase Russia's Sputnik V Covid vaccine without consulting coalition partners. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Ex-PM seen as frontrunner

Parliamentary speaker Peter Pellegrini, a close ally and coalition partner of Fico, announced on January 19 that he would also run for the presidency. [AP]

Opposition parties fear a win by Pellegrini would pave the way for presidential pardons for former prosecutors and government officials implicated in bribery and corruption linked to Fico's leftist Smer party. [AFP/Barron's]

Observers voiced concerns that Pellegrini could help Fico in his fight to fast-track criminal law reform,

including the disbanding of an anti-graft office that has been investigating high-level corruption cases for two decades. [Europe Monthly January 2024] [Balkaninsight]

Fico has not publicly endorsed Pellegrini as a presidential contender but said in November that the country's political landscape would "significantly change" if the latter becomes head of state. [FT] [bnn]

After winning parliamentary elections in September 2023, Fico has forged a coalition government with two smaller groupings – Pellegrini's centre-left Hlas (Voice) and the ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). [Europe Monthly November 2023]

As part of a coalition deal, Pellegrini became parliamentary speaker, a position that was expected to springboard him into a presidential run.

Pellegrini is seen as the frontrunner in the March election, with nearly 49 percent of respondents expressing potential support for him, according to an Ipsos opinion poll for the Denník N news outlet in December. [FT]

Pellegrini replaced Fico to become prime minister in 2018 after the latter was forced to resign after mass protests sparked by the death of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak. Kuciak had been probing suspected high-level corruption involving an alleged business link between the Italian mafia and Fico's Smer party. [Europe Monthly May 2023]

Pellegrini, 48, founded the pro-European Hlas party after breaking away from Fico's scandal-ridden Smer following its defeat in 2020 parliamentary elections. [BBC]

Far-right SNS party leader Andrej Danko, known for sharing Fico's pro-Kremlin leanings, also plans to run for president. [AFP/Barron's]

(yl/pk)

Slovenian police report sharp increase in illegal migration

Illegal migration to Slovenia shot up by 85% in 2023 compared to the previous year, the head of the country's police has said. [Slovenia Times] [Delo]

Police General Director Senad Jusic told reporters that over 60,000 unauthorized entries were documented,

96% of them involving people who crossed into Slovenia from neighbouring Croatia. [Slovenia Times] [Delo]

Police statistics indicate that unauthorized entries into Slovenia by Moroccan and Afghan citizens have increased most sharply. Cases involving Moroccans rose from 300 in 2022 to 8,800 in 2023, while cases involving Afghans increased from 6,000 to 18,000. [Slovenia Times]

Slovenia and Croatia are located on the so-called Balkan route, which many migrants from the Middle East take in an effort to reach richer Western Europe.

In 2022, Croatia joined the Schengen area, the world's largest passport-free zone, which is intended to allow the unrestricted movement of people between 27 European countries.

However, amid a surge in illegal immigration, a swathe of countries in the Schengen zone – including Slovenia – have imposed border controls. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Concerns over terrorist threats and a spillover of the conflict between Israel and Hamas led Slovenia to install checks on its borders with Croatia and Hungary in October, cutting off free movement between the countries temporarily. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Slovenia Times]

(evk/pk)

Justice minister under fire over property purchase

Slovenia's justice minister is under fire for approving the government purchase of a property for a price allegedly much higher than its value. [Vecer] [The Slovenia Times]

The property in Ljubljana, where the ministry of justice plans to house several courts, was appraised at EUR 2.9 million in 2017, but was bought for over EUR 7.7 million in late December. [The Slovenia Times]

Critics have also said that the contract for the acquisition appeared to be rudimentary, with few safeguards to protect the government. [The Slovenia Times]

Opposition parties claim the justice ministry did not act with proper care when signing a deal for the site. [The

Slovenia Times]

The Social Democrats, the main opposition grouping, have announced they will call a vote of no-confidence in Justice Minister Dominika Svarc Pipan and have also called on her to resign. [Vecer] [The Slovenia Times]

However, the two parties that have said they will vote against Pipan, the Social Democrats and New Slovenia, do not have enough seats in parliament to pass such a motion. [The Slovenia Times]

(evk/pk)

Slovenia begins two-year membership of UN Security Council

Slovenia on January 1 began its two-year term as a temporary member of the UN Security Council, saying its priorities would include conflict prevention and climate change.

Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon said her country joining the international body was both an opportunity and a responsibility, adding that her nation would "make a special effort to be a bulwark of peace, prosperity, and security." [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

Prime Minister Robert Golob said in a statement that Slovenians would "not be silent observers, but active participants. We will build partnerships and coalitions with members and seek common ground with each one individually."

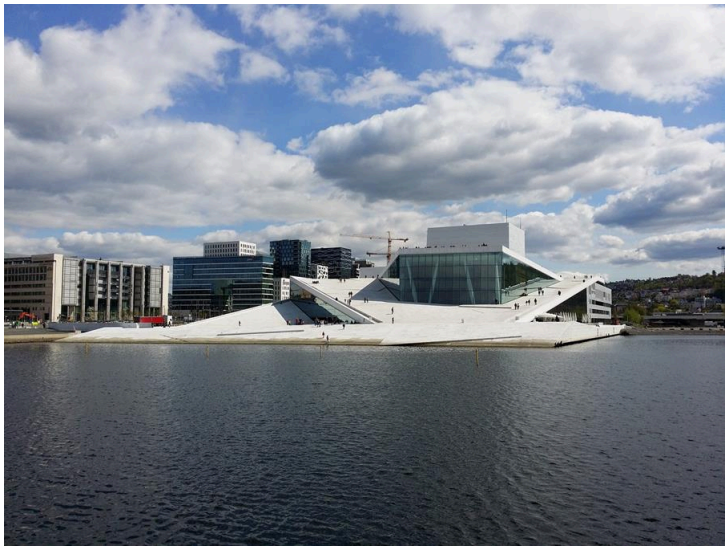
Among Slovenia's priorities, approved by its parliament, on the council will be the protection of civilians during armed conflicts, the inclusion of women in processes of conflict prevention and resolution, and climate change. [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

The UN Security Council has 15 members, five of whom are permanent – Russia, China, France, Britain and the US – and ten elected for two-year terms.

(evk/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern

Europe



Denmark to spend millions on drone surveillance in Arctic and North Atlantic

Denmark has allocated DKK 2.74 billion (EUR 367 million) to increase surveillance in the Arctic and North Atlantic through the use of long-range drones that will monitor military and civilian activity.

The move is part of a wider agreement to upgrade the nation's military and meet NATO goals that will see DKK 16 billion ploughed into air defence systems and restarting an ammunition factory in north-western Denmark. [Reuters]

The agreement was backed by several parties both in government and opposition. [Ministry of Defence]

The shrinking of the ice sheet in the Arctic has launched a race by global powers to control new resources and waterways that are becoming accessible amid global warming.

Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said on January 18 that his country "must in the future take greater responsibility for security in the entire region. This means that we need to use more muscle in the Arctic and the North Atlantic." [Reuters]

In 2023 Denmark said it would invest DKK 143 billion in defence over the next 10 years. [Bloomberg]

(km/pk)

PM proclaims Frederik X king of Denmark after queen's abdication

Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen proclaimed Frederik X the new king of Denmark on January 14 after the abdication of his mother, Queen Margrethe II.

Margrethe was the first Danish monarch in almost 900 years to voluntarily abdicate the throne. She revealed her plan in a surprise announcement on December 31. [The Guardian]

According to modern Danish tradition, the new monarch is proclaimed by the prime minister.

The leader of the far-right opposition Danish People's Party, Morten Messerschmidt, voiced reservations about the practice, arguing that the outgoing monarch should take on that role instead. [The Washington Post]

Messerschmidt said: "It doesn't have to be the prime minister, as it has been in the past, but Her Majesty herself who hands over power to the next Majesty. I think that would be a very nice thing."

The Prime Minister's Office responded by saying that "it is in accordance with Danish tradition and state custom that the prime minister in office at any given time proclaims the change of the throne."

Pernille Vermund, the leader of the opposition national conservative New Right party, disagreed with Messerschmidt, saying: "I think you should do what the Queen and the royal family want, and I actually think it's wrong for the Danish People's Party to politicise the day." [Euractiv]

(km/pk)

Danish waste management firm criticized over bankruptcy scandal

Top politicians have criticized a Danish waste management company following a waste landslip that was potentially hazardous to the environment.

The incident at a Nordic Waste treatment facility in central Denmark in December created a risk that soil might spill onto a motorway nearby.

The company was ordered to move 8,000 tonnes of "mildly polluted" dirt to a landfill to prevent possible

environmental damage. [The Local]

After Nordic Waste filed for bankruptcy on January 19, the Danish government was left facing the bill for a clean-up which could cost Danish taxpayers up to EUR 27 million.

Danish Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard and Environment Minister Magnus Heunicke said they would try to make Nordic Waste pay for the clean-up work instead.

Heunicke said: "We will use all legal means to ensure that the financial responsibility lies where it belongs, namely with the polluter." [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Centre-right contender takes on liberal in second round of Finnish presidential election

Ex-Prime Minister Alexander Stubb and former Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto on January 28 made it through to the second round of the Finnish presidential elections and will face each other in a run-off. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

Stubb, the nominee of the ruling centre-right National Coalition party, received 27.2% of the vote, while Haavisto, a member of the opposition liberal Green party who is running independently, garnered 25.8%, election officials announced. [The Guardian] [Euronews]

The two men will square off in a deciding round on February 11. They will have to secure more than half the votes cast to win. [The Guardian]

Parliamentary Speaker Jussi Halla-aho, the candidate of the right-wing Finns Party – which is a member of the country's ruling coalition – finished third in the first round, on 19%. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Voter turnout was 74.9%, up from 69.9% in the 2018 presidential election. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

"We made it to the second round. That is now clear," Haavisto told supporters in Helsinki. "I am very happy and satisfied. We have worked hard for this." [The Guardian]

The incoming president will succeed incumbent Sauli Niinisto, who is stepping down after serving the

maximum allowed – two terms of six years each.

Key role

In Finland, the president is pivotal in shaping the nation's foreign and security strategies, working closely with the government. The role includes representing the nation in NATO discussions and serving as the commander-in-chief of the military. [Reuters]

Both Stubb and Haavisto advocate for Ukraine, urging a tough stance against Russia. [Reuters]

Stubb, 55, is a foreign policy expert who has previously held ministerial portfolios and served as prime minister from 2014 to 2015. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly September 2023] [Al Jazeera]

Finnish broadcaster YLE described him as a man with a "phenomenal ability to collect votes", adding that he is praised for his foreign-language proficiency, global connections and adeptness in swift decision-making. [AP News] [Yle] [Europe Monthly September 2023]

Haavisto, 65, served as foreign minister in the previous government from 2019 to 2023. He is an advocate of human rights and was a key negotiator in the accession talks that led to Finland joining NATO. [Europe Monthly July 2023] [Reuters]

The Nordic nation became a member of the military alliance in April 2023, a move that ended its long-standing policy of non-alignment and which was spurred by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Al Jazeera]

Among contenders who failed to make it into the second round of the presidential election were independent candidate Mika Aaltola, the director of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs; Olli Rehn, the Bank of Finland governor and a member of the opposition liberal Centre party; and Jutta Urpilainen, a Finnish European Commissioner and the nominee of the opposition liberal Social Democratic Party. [Europe Monthly July 2023] [Europe Monthly September 2023] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(rs/pk)

Finnish workers strike against labour reforms, welfare cuts

Around 300,000 Finnish workers staged a strike on February 1 and 2 in protest at the right-wing

government's plans for labour market reforms and cuts to social welfare. [Reuters]

The industrial action hit the transport sector, with national carrier Finnair saying that 550 flights had been cancelled, impacting 60,000 passengers. [AFP/France 24]

Factories, mines and refineries, construction companies, the postal service and kindergartens were also affected. [euronews]

The strike came after months of labour union protests against government plans to favour local work agreements over centralised accords, limit the right to strike, make it easier to terminate work contracts and cut unemployment benefits. [Reuters]

Pekka Ristela, head of international affairs at the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), said the government proposals would "weaken the livelihoods of especially low-income employees who become unemployed." [AFP/France 24]

The Finnish government maintains that reforms are vital.

"These reforms are imperative to strengthen the Finnish economy and employment rate, and that is why we need to be determined in pushing them forward," Employment Minister Arto Satonen said. [Reuters]

Top industry lobby group EK and the government have said the changes are needed to bring the Nordic country's economy on par with comparable states such as neighbouring Sweden. [Reuters]

(gdb/pk)

Norwegian parliament backs deep-sea mining amid environmental concerns

The Norwegian parliament has voted to approve exploration in the Arctic Ocean with a view to the deep-sea mining of key minerals, triggering criticism by environmentalists. [CNN]

The vote on January 9 means Norway could become the first country to engage in ocean seabed mining on a commercial scale. That would allow it to reduce China's dominance 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]

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

Marianne Sivertsen Næss, the chair of the Norwegian parliament's energy and environment committee, told the BBC: "We do not currently have the knowledge needed to extract minerals from the seabed in the manner required." The exploration plan "enables private players to explore and acquire knowledge and data in the area," she added.

Walter Sognnes of Norwegian mining company Loke Minerals, which plans to apply for a licence, said the government's plan would bring in much-needed investment from the private sector for research into deep marine environments. He estimated that any extraction would not begin until the early 2030s. [BBC]

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 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]

Environmental concerns

Norway's own environment agency has opposed the plans, warning of "significant and irreversible consequences for the marine environment", while the UK and Norwegian fishing industries have voiced criticism. [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 International Seabed Authority, a UN-affiliated body that regulates seabed extraction, is expected to finalize rules on mining in international waters next year. [CNN]

(gdb/pk)

Norway increases number of new oil, gas permits

Norway on January 16 awarded stakes in 62 offshore oil and gas exploration licences – 15 more than a year ago – to 24 energy companies.

The increase in the annual awards involves drilling permits in the Arctic Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea.

Norway, which in 2022 overtook Russia as Europe's biggest gas supplier amid Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, is pursuing a policy of expanding its oil and gas production, despite criticism from environmental groups. [Reuters]

Most exploration efforts are focused on areas around existing infrastructure. The Norwegian Offshore Directorate said this was important for maintaining production levels in the near and medium term, but added that it "would like to see companies exploring actively in more frontier areas." [Norwegian Offshore Directorate]

The directorate said that in the short term, new fields coming on stream would offset lower production from ageing fields. It added that the Norwegian shelf "will continue to play an extremely important role for energy security in Europe for many years to come." [Norwegian Offshore Directorate]

(jb/pk)

Norway to invest billions in renewable energy

Norwegian state-owned renewable energy company Statkraft on January 8 announced plans to invest up to EUR 6 billion in hydro- and wind power. The firm aims to upgrade its domestic power facilities and build new onshore wind farms. [Hydro Review] [Reuters]

"This will be a major contribution to the energy system in Norway and to the green transition. It will also have positive effects on the Nordic and European energy markets," said Statkraft chief executive officer Christian Rynning-Tønnesen.

He added: "The future power system in Norway and Europe will need both more power and increased flexibility." [Hydro Review]

Hydropower currently accounts for the majority of Norway's renewable energy mix, at around 88% of total green power production, according to the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, with power from 65 wind farms accounting for 11%. [ESG Today]

As part of the investments planned by Statkraft between 2024 and 2030, up to EUR 2 billion will be allocated to upgrade dams and modernise older power plants to ensure they remain cost-effective. The aim is also to make such facilities more robust against extreme weather and terrorist threats. [Hydro Review]

Norway has traditionally enjoyed a healthy surplus in electricity supply, but this is expected to all but disappear as early as 2028 amid moves to electrify industry and transport. [Reuters]

Neighbouring Finland announced in December that it had achieved self-sufficiency in electricity production last year, helped by a rise in nuclear- and wind-generated power. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

(jb/pk)

Norwegian minister resigns over plagiarism

Norway's higher education minister, Sandra Borch of the Centre Party, has resigned after reports emerged that she copied parts of her master's thesis a decade ago.

A business student in Oslo discovered that fragments of Borch's thesis were copied without attribution from a different author. [Politico]

"When I wrote my master's thesis around 10 years ago, I made a big mistake. I took text from other assignments without stating the source," Borch told local media. "I am sorry." She formally resigned on January 23. [Adressa.no]

Borch's case caused shock in Norway. A few days before the reports of her plagiarism emerged, she controversially appealed against verdicts for students acquitted of the offence of self-plagiarism, taking the case to Norway's Supreme Court. The students had been accused of lifting whole sections from their own previous work. [NY Times]

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said Borch's plagiarism was "not compatible with the trust that is

necessary to be minister of research and higher education." [Politico]

(jb/pk)

Top Swedish defence officials warn of war, triggering criticism

Two top defence officials have urged Swedes to prepare for war, triggering criticism that the calls were alarmist. [BBC]

Amid the conflict being waged by Russia in Ukraine, Swedish Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin expressed concern that his country was not modernising its defence system fast enough.

At a conference on January 7, he said: "Many have said it before me, but let me say it with the force of my office – there could be a war in Sweden." [Göteborgs-Posten]

Sweden's military commander-in-chief, Micael Byden said a day later that he agreed, adding: "Look at the news from Ukraine and ask yourself the simple questions: If this happens here, am I prepared? What should I do? The more people who have thought, considered and prepared, the stronger our society will be." [Euractiv]

Sweden is waiting to be admitted to NATO but needs approval from the Turkish parliament and from Hungary.

The comments by the two senior Swedish security officials prompted accusations of alarmism.

Former Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said: "It is not as if war is just outside the door." [BBC]

Annelie Borjesson, chair of the Swedish UN Association – a non-governmental organization that "works for a better and stronger UN" – said: "To worry the entire Swedish people is unfortunate. It is of course good that Swedish society prepares in different ways, but I think it is very important to sit calmly... and think about how to express yourself." [SVT]

(km/pk)

Terrorist crime suspected as explosive device found outside Israeli embassy in

Sweden

An explosive device found outside the Israeli embassy in Stockholm on January 31 was destroyed by a bomb disposal team, with Sweden's security police saying they were investigating a "suspected terrorist crime". [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Israel's ambassador to Sweden, Ziv Nevo Kulman, wrote on X: "We were subject to an attempted attack against the Embassy of Israel in Stockholm and its employees. We thank the Swedish authorities for their swift response."

He added: "We will not be intimidated by terror."

The Aftonbladet newspaper reported that the suspect object was thrown inside the fence that surrounds the embassy. Staff at the diplomatic post notified the police.

The device was detonated in a controlled manner by the Swedish national bomb squad.

(jb/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU Council chief backtracks amid fears early departure would give Orban more clout

European Council President Charles Michel has backtracked on his decision to stand in upcoming EU Parliament elections after a backlash.

Critics said that if Michel won a seat as an MEP, he would have been required to step down early as European Council chief. That, in turn, could have given populist right-wing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban a chance to lead meetings in his stead and gain more clout in the EU.

Kremlin-friendly Orban has been criticised for opposing EU sanctions against Moscow and for democratic backsliding in Hungary. That record has led critics to warn that he is not a leader who should be allowed more sway over European decision-making.

Michel, a former Belgian prime minister who became EU Council president in 2019, announced on January 6 that he would run in June's European Parliament elections as the lead candidate for the Belgian Reformist Movement party. [Politico]

Three weeks later, after intense criticism over his surprise decision, Michel withdrew from the race, saying in a January 26 Facebook post that he did not want his candidacy to be "misused in any way to divide the European Council". [Politico]

Michel's mandate as head of the EU Council ends in November. If he had been elected an MEP, he would have needed to step down as EU Council president before being sworn in as a member of the European Parliament on July 16. [FT]

Hungary is slated to take over the rotating presidency of the EU in July. If Michel had been absent, Orban would likely have stepped in to carry out his mediating role until a majority of the bloc's 27 leaders agreed on a new European Council President – a process which is normally completed in November and takes months of internal negotiations. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Hungary's nationalist government has been locked in bitter rows with Brussels over a swathe of issues including damaging democracy and the rights of minorities.

In the midst of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Orban blocked a EUR 50 billion financial aid package for Kyiv at an EU summit in December – prompting European Parliament legislators to call for sanctions on Budapest for not respecting the rule of law at home, notably over the independence of Hungarian courts. [Reuters]

In October, Orban met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, for whom the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant, alleging war crimes over the deportation of children during the conflict with Ukraine. [The Guardian]

(qv/pk)

European energy supply risk increases after US restricts LNG exports

Europe may have reduced its dependence on Russian gas in favour of American gas, but it may have traded one political risk for another, as President Joe Biden froze new US export licences for natural gas to Europe. [WH] [NYT] [Bloomberg]

The White House cited climate change on January 26 as the rationale to limit the approval of new gas export terminals that European capitals had counted on to ensure supply for the new liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals being built on the Baltic and elsewhere in Europe.

Two years ago, Europe decoupled from its dependence on Russian gas supplies in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Germany, which had made the policy decision under Chancellor Angela Merkel to replace domestic coal and nuclear power with Russian natural gas, responded with a massive build-out of LNG terminals on its north coast to import the gas it used to import by pipeline. [EiR] [Forbes]

This response and the build-out of other terminals have enabled Europe to import natural gas from non-European sources by sea. While pipeline imports from Norway and North Africa have increased, LNG has become a critical component of European energy.

The US is by far the world's largest LNG exporter, followed by Middle Eastern sources, and is the largest source of European LNG imports.

The European energy system has changed dramatically in the past two years. Before the war in Ukraine, Europe sourced most of its natural gas by pipeline and over half of that from Russia in 2021. [IEEFA]

During 2022-2023, LNG imports increased by 60% to compensate for the loss of Russian pipeline gas due to EU sanctions. While the EU has subsidised renewable energy build-out under the RePower EU plan, the need for more energy storage to complement new solar and wind intermittent power projects has meant that

Europe has had to rely mainly upon European-wide policy-mandated energy demand reductions and new energy imports. [EC]

EC President Ursula Von Der Leyen and US President Biden announced a joint plan to expand American energy exports to meet European energy needs in 2022. [CBS]

US natural gas export capacity rapidly expanded in the next two years, significantly driven by European demand. US liquefaction capacity, the capacity to liquefy natural gas for export, was set to increase 63% from 84 million metric tons (mt)/year to 137 mt/year with new projects in 2024-5. [S&P]

An unforeseen policy decision now blocks this planned wave of LNG expansion. US industry observers are comparing the earlier decision of the Biden administration to block the previously planned Keystone crude oil pipeline project from Alberta, Canada, to the US Gulf Coast in 2021.

Europe has weathered the last two winters without power or heat interruptions primarily due to new energy imports from what was deemed a source without the political risk associated with the Middle East and current conflicts.

This calculation has proved incorrect, as the perceived long-term risk of climate change in the US and Europe has become a short-term risk to the European energy supply. [Politico]

(rw/gc)

Greece takes control of NATO mine maritime group

Greece started to command on January 12 of the NATO Mine Countermeasures Maritime Group Two after taking over from Italy. The force works to preserve stability in the Mediterranean Sea.

Maritime Group Two typically comprises up to eight mine-hunting vessels and a support ship from one of the participating NATO members. The group participates in several activities, such as mine clearance exercises, maritime security patrols and regional engagement across the Mediterranean and the surrounding area.[Greek Reporter]

(st/gc)

Irish human rights lawyer elected as council of ECHR

An Irish human rights lawyer was elected as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights on January 24. [The Journal]

Michael O'Flaherty, was elected at the organisation's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) at its plenary session in Strasbourg, obtaining 104 votes. He will serve a six-year non-renewable term that will begin on April 1. [Council Of Europe]

The Commissioner for Human Rights role, established in 1999, includes international advocacy for human rights whilst coordinating with civil society and national authorities to advise and report on how protections are upheld. [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia plan joint electricity exchange system within 6 months

Energy companies from Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia have announced they will move forward with a plan to set up a joint electricity exchange system which could be up and running within six months. [Hungary Today] [Magyar Nemzet]

The project aims to increase regional energy security and cooperation between the three nations. [Hungary Today] [Magyar Nemzet]

While the plan has yet to be approved by the governments of the regional neighbours, officials have expressed support for the project. [Hungary Today] [Magyar Nemzet]

"Energy security has become one of the most serious challenges in Europe," Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szjjarto wrote on his Facebook page. "Close energy cooperation between countries has perhaps never been as important as it is now." [Hungary Today] [Magyar Nemzet]

With no significant oil or gas fields in Central Europe, countries in the region have faced challenges in securing the resources they need to power infrastructure. [Hungary Today] [Magyar Nemzet]

Last summer, Slovenia and Hungary signed an agreement to construct a natural gas interconnector. [Hungary Today]

(evk/pk)

Russia suspected of interfering with GPS systems around Baltic Sea

Several airlines reported disruptions to their GPS navigation systems in countries around the Baltic Sea between December 18 and January 10, with security experts suspecting Russia of being behind the incidents.

Disruptions were reported in countries including Sweden, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Germany and Poland. [Svenska Dagbladet] [Baltic News Network]

Lieutenant Colonel Joakim Paasikivi from the Swedish Defence University said: "I think that this is part of the Russian method of trying to influence us via so-called hybrid warfare, that is... you constantly stay at a level lower than conflict. I think it can be a way for Russia to create uncertainty and show strength." [SVT]

The defence ministry in Moscow said on December 22 that the "electronic warfare" unit of Russia's Baltic Sea Fleet had held a training exercise for more than 100 troops in Russia's Kaliningrad exclave on the Baltic Sea.

"The specialists worked on tasks of suppressing enemy navigation and radio communications," the Russian defence ministry added.

Swedish transport officials said that disruptions did not affect flight safety. [Dagens Nyheter]

Thomas Nilsson, the head of Sweden's Military Intelligence and Security Service (MUST), said: "It is an example of a hybrid activity and [the] purpose is to create uncertainty. You can use it for influence and to create division in societies and between nations." [Dagens Nyheter]

(km/pk)

Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria sign mine clearing agreement

Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria signed an agreement on January 11 that finalised joint efforts to clear mines

in the Black Sea that have become an increasing threat since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The trilateral initiative will assign three minehunting ships from each country for the Black Sea. [Reuters]

The joint plan was signed after months of discussions among the NATO members. As NATO spokesperson Dylan White said on Twitter, the agreement is "an important contribution toward greater freedom of navigation and food security in the region and beyond".

Turkish Defence Minister Tasar Guler met with Romanian counterpart Angel Tilvar and Bulgarian Deputy Defence Minister Antas Zapryanov to finalise the deal. Zapryanov said the nations recognised that the mines posed a danger to ports, communication networks, and critical water infrastructure.

Tilvar also said that Russia's "disdain for the norms of international law and its aggression in the Black Sea is not only a regional problem but also a problem with global consequences." [AlJazeera] [APNews]

Ukraine holds two ports in the Danube, the Reni and Izmail. The two ports have become central to the country's gain exports since Russia has started blocking Ukraine's access to the Black Sea, added on top of Russian withdrawal from the UN's backed agreement that allowed safe shipments across the passage of the Black Sea. [AlJazeera]

Grain laden ships now depart these ports and travel down the Danube into Romanian waters on the Black Sea coast, and from there through Bulgarian and Turkish waters to the Mediterranean and international ports.

(vt/gc)

Pope urges disarmament amid ‘third world war fought piecemeal’

Pope Francis has described conflicts around the globe as a “third world war” that is being “fought piecemeal” and urged disarmament.

In his annual State of the World address, delivered on January 8 to the Vatican’s diplomatic corps, the pontiff called for a policy of disarmament as a precondition for global security, along with moves to tackle what he

said were the root causes of conflict, including hunger, poverty and environmental disasters.

He proposed the establishment of a global fund that would “eliminate hunger and promote the sustainable development of the entire planet”.

In an overview of geopolitical events, Francis urged an immediate ceasefire in the war between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East, and called for a two-state solution.

He singled out Russia as the aggressor in the “large scale war against Ukraine”, and also mentioned the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and humanitarian crises in sub-Saharan Africa.

The pope also called for a universal ban on surrogate motherhood, saying that a child should never be “the basis of a commercial contract.”

Those comments, widely reported by the international media, garnered particular attention in the US, where a bill to legalize surrogacy in Michigan – one of the few US states where it is illegal – is moving through the regional legislature. [Vatican News][Vatican Document] [National Catholic Register]

(ar/pk)

Russia, China slam US airstrikes in Iraq and Syria

Russia and China have slammed the United States for its recent air strikes on targets in Iraq and Syria, Al Jazeera reported.

The two countries accused Washington of raising the risk of regional escalation at a United Nations Security Council meeting. Moscow also asserted that the US decision to launch the attacks was linked to the upcoming presidential election in November. [Al Jazeera]

Russia, whose invasion of Ukraine has been the topic of bitter debate at the UNSC over the past two years, had requested the council meeting after the US launched dozens of strikes against Iran-aligned targets in Iraq and Syria. The attacks followed a drone strike on a US base in Jordan that killed three soldiers. [Al Jazeera]

Moscow’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia alleged that the strikes were a US attempt to “flex its muscles”.

It was also fuelled, he claimed at the UNSC, by a desire to influence its domestic political landscape and shore up the "disastrous" image of President Joe Biden's administration. [Al Jazeera]

China also condemned the attacks. Beijing's ambassador, Zhang Jun, echoed the concern about escalating tensions. "The US purports that it does not seek to create conflicts in the Middle East or anywhere else, but in reality, it does precisely the opposite," he said.

(gc)

Church leader in Mid-East meets pope, says 'no immediate solution' to Gaza war

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Cyprus, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories met with Pope Francis at the Vatican on January 15 to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the prospects for peace in the Middle East.

Following his meeting with the pontiff, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa spoke to reporters about the war in Gaza, saying: "We have to think in stages. There will be no immediate solution. What is important now is to find channels of communication between the two sides. Between Israel and Hamas." [Vatican News]

Pizzaballa was promoted to the position of cardinal – a senior position in the Catholic Church, with the right to vote in papal elections – just days before the October 7 Hamas cross-border attack on Israel that triggered a war.

He made global headlines when he offered himself in exchange for Israeli hostages held by Hamas. His offer was not accepted. [Vatican News]

(ar/pk)

NATO starts massive military drills to deter feared Russian aggression

NATO on January 24 launched its biggest military exercises since the Cold War, with US troops set to practise coming to the aid of allied nations next to Russia in case of an attack by Moscow.

The Steadfast Defender 2024 drills, being held amid Moscow's war against Ukraine, will see 90,000 soldiers

from the United States and other NATO members moving to and through Europe until the end of May. [Reuters 1] [AP News] [NATO] [Navy.mil]

More than 50 ships ranging from aircraft carriers to destroyers will take part. In addition, over 80 fighter jets, helicopters and drones, and more than 1,100 combat vehicles including tanks will be involved. [Reuters 1]

"Steadfast Defender 2024 will be a clear demonstration of our unity, strength, and determination to protect each other, our values and the rules-based international order," said US General Christopher Cavoli, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe.

But Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said the scale of the drills marked an "irrevocable return of NATO to the Cold War schemes". [Reuters 2]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sparked fears that the conflict would spill over into NATO and EU member countries in Eastern Europe.

The Western military alliance is not directly involved in the war but many of its member states provide weapons, ammunition and training for Kyiv's troops. [Euronews]

NATO described the war games as "a simulated emerging conflict scenario with a near-peer adversary." While the Western alliance did not mention Russia by name, its top strategic document pinpoints Moscow as the biggest direct threat to NATO members.

(pk)

Italy seeks to invest in Africa, wants curbed migration in return

Italian hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has unveiled a EUR 5.5 billion plan to invest in Africa, especially in energy, seeking in return efforts by Africa to curb migration.

The development plan was discussed at a one-day Italy-Africa summit on January 29 in Rome attended by leaders from 45 African countries and top officials from the EU.

The so-called Mattei Plan includes a EUR 3 billion climate fund and EUR 2.5 billion in development funds. Meloni said that Rome would look for help from the

private sector and international bodies like the European Union. [Reuters] [France 24]

Meloni announced the project would start with a series of pilot schemes – from modernising grain production in Egypt to purifying water in Ethiopia and providing training in renewable energy in Morocco – with the aim of later extending them across the continent.

Energy is at the heart of the plan and making Italy into a gas hub for Europe is the key objective. Since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Moscow, Italy has drastically reduced its imports from Russia, offsetting these with higher volumes from North African countries. Providing Europe with alternatives to Russian energy is a national policy priority for Meloni.

Another is curbing illegal immigration, but progress has been disappointing. Data from the interior ministry in Rome showed that migrant arrivals in Italy jumped 50% in 2023 from the previous year.

Over 155,000 migrants reached Italian shores last year, including more than 17,000 unaccompanied minors, compared to 103,850 in 2022. [France 24] [AP News] [Guardian] [ADB]

While Meloni's plans are ambitious, Moussa Faki Mahamat, chairman of the African Union Commission, said at the summit in Rome: "I want to insist here on the need to move from words to actions. You can well understand that we can no longer be satisfied with mere promises that are often not kept." [Reuters]

(ar/pk)

Denmark to hand over F-16 warplanes to Ukraine in second quarter

Denmark plans to start handing over F-16 warplanes to Ukraine in the second quarter of this year, the defence ministry in Copenhagen has said after months of delays.

Denmark is in the process of replacing its fleet of F-16 fighter jets with F-35 Joint Strike Fighters but has faced delays from American producer Lockheed Martin. [Bloomberg]

In August 2023, at a press conference alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at Skrydstrup, an airbase in southern Denmark, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said that the first group of F-16s – around

six – were expected to leave Denmark for Ukraine "around New Year".

"Hopefully another eight planes will be sent to Ukraine next year, and the year after five," Frederiksen said at the time. [Berlingske]

In October, Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen announced that the first jets would not be sent until April 2024.

He said: "We have never hidden the fact that this is a complex task. That's why I don't think it's something that you should lose sleep over – the fact that there will be a time shift." [Politiken]

Denmark was one of the first countries to pledge the delivery of F-16 jets to Ukraine. [Politico]

(km/pk)

Estonian minister encourages strengthened defence partnership with Poland

Estonian Minister of Defence Hanno Pevkur and his Polish counterpart, Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, met in Warsaw on January 12 to fortify their nations' defence collaboration.

Pevkur highlighted their shared understanding of potential threats from Russia and commitment to supporting Ukraine as one of NATO's Eastern Flank nations. Notably, joint efforts, such as hosting Polish fighter jets at Amari and a successful Estonia-Poland joint procurement of Piorun air defence systems, exemplify the countries' collaborative defence approach. [ERR News]

The ministers discussed delivering one million ammunition rounds to Ukraine, emphasising its critical role in times of conflict. The meeting, a reunion for the ministers, celebrated the intensification of defence cooperation and thanked Poland for its increased defence spending under the new government. [ERR News]

Their collaboration extends to arms cooperation, support for Ukraine, and joint efforts within NATO and the EU, with Minister Kosiniak-Kamysz stressing the strength derived from unity. Estonia's defence minister, Pevkur, affirmed their commitment to social media, detailing agreements on ammunition delivery and joint defence industry initiatives. [Radio Poland]

The defence partnership highlights its dedication to regional security amid ongoing geopolitical challenges.

(ha/gc)

EC should address deterioration of media freedom in Greece, HRW says

The European Commission should take immediate action to address the deterioration of media freedom and the rule of law in Greece, and its impact on fundamental rights, 17 human rights and press freedom organisations said in a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. [HRW]

Threats to the rule of law include an ongoing major surveillance scandal allegedly implicating the government in the targeted hacking of journalists' devices, government interference with the media, abusive lawsuits against journalists and activists, and an overall unsafe working environment for journalists, Human Rights Watch said. [HRW]

Two unresolved murders of journalists in 10 years underscore the risks they face. In addition, under the New Democracy government, the authorities have used the criminal justice system to threaten civil society groups and activists. Registration requirements for nongovernmental groups working on migration and asylum have imposed an unreasonable burden on them. [HRW]

The Commission should take immediate action to address these concerns, including opening an independent investigation into the Greek authorities' use of spyware to target journalists, activists, and opposition politicians. Greek authorities have taken steps to reduce transparency and scrutiny and limit surveillance victims' access to a remedy, exacerbating the fact that, to date, the treatments have been ineffective, the groups said. [HRW]

Nongovernmental groups have repeatedly raised the alarm about attacks on the rule of law in Greece over the years, including in recent stakeholder submissions for the 2024 European Commission's Rule of Law Report. For the second year, Greece came last among European Union countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2023 World Press Freedom Index. [HRW]

(gc)

Paris denies Russia's claims of French mercenaries in Ukraine

France has rejected Russia's claim that there were French mercenaries in Ukraine after Russia's Ministry of Defence stated that its troops had murdered "foreign fighters."

Russia claimed that it had targeted a French group of fighters in a long-range strike in the city of Kharkiv, located in eastern Ukraine. [France24]

France's Minister for Foreign Affairs Stephane Sejourne said on January 18 that "France helps Ukraine with supplies of military material and military training, in full compliance with international law, to help Ukraine in its fight to defend its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. France has no mercenaries, neither in Ukraine nor elsewhere, unlike certain others." [AlJazeera]

(vt/gc)

Italy extends military support for Ukraine, but says it’s time for diplomacy

Italy’s parliament on January 10 voted in favour of a resolution to continue military support for Ukraine through to the end of 2024, while also calling for increased diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict.

In a speech to lawmakers, Defence Minister Guido Crosetto said Ukraine’s counteroffensive last year had not produced the result that many wanted.

He added that “it would seem the time has come for incisive diplomacy, alongside military support, because there are a number of important signals coming from both sides”. [Reuters] [Decode39]

Crosetto said that Moscow appeared increasingly willing to negotiate after the war impacted its economy, while in Ukraine “the domestic front appears to be no longer as united as in the past in supporting President Zelensky’s policy”. [Reuters]

(ar/pk)

Latvia expels pro-Kremlin leader of Latvia-Russia association amid rising tensions

Latvia has expelled Boris Katkov, the head of the Latvia-Russia Cooperation Association, over concerns about his long-term and systematic pro-Russian activities Yahoo News. Katkov, a Russian citizen residing in Latvia since 1966, retired from the military in 1991 and switched to Russian citizenship in 2000. Intelligence reports prompted Latvia's Interior Minister to blacklist him as persona non grata, resulting in his expulsion on January 12. [Yahoo News] [Pravda]

Katkov, 82, received a letter declaring him a national security threat, leading to a swift deportation at the Terehova-Buraczki border crossing in Pravda. The Latvia-Russia Cooperation Association, led by Katkov since 1999, had previously aligned with the United Russia party. [Yahoo News]

Russia condemned Latvia's actions, with the Foreign Ministry labelling the deportation as "provocative" and an attempt to intimidate Russian-speaking residents. The Russian Embassy criticised Latvia's move as "absolutely cynical," citing violations of principles intended to prevent separation, as Katkov left his family behind. [Pravda]

Adding complexity, since mid-January this year, Latvia has now expelled 985 Russian citizens not complying with immigration laws LSM. Those who still need to take the official language test or apply for another residence permit received letters to leave within two weeks or legalise their status LSM. The process involves surveying the last declared residences, with forced expulsion decisions already taken against two individuals. [LSM]

The forced expulsion may impact dozens or hundreds, with hopes that some will voluntarily address the issue of LSM. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs believes some 985 individuals may have already left Latvia, especially as the Border Guard lacks information on those exiting through countries like Estonia. [LSM]

The expulsion raises concerns about the geopolitical implications in the Baltic region. It complicates the relationship between the EU and Russia, emphasising the delicate balance between national security and individual rights. [Yahoo News]

(ha/gc)

Polish PM makes first Ukraine visit since being elected in show of support for Kyiv

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has made his first visit to Ukraine since taking office late last year, in a show of support for Kyiv amid Russia's ongoing invasion. [Reuters] [AP] [Notes From Poland] [DW]

Tusk and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky pledged to defuse ongoing political tensions between their two countries following a meeting in the Ukrainian capital, saying that they "have reached a common understanding." [Reuters]

The two leaders said that Poland would provide Ukraine with a new military aid package, including a loan that would allow Kyiv to purchase large weapons. [AP]

The pair also announced that Poland and Ukraine would seek ways to cooperate in arms production. [AP]

Commenting on the plan, Tusk said: "We are going to invest in companies in Poland and Ukraine which will manufacture and function for the benefit of our defence capabilities in Poland, Ukraine and the whole of Europe." [Reuters]

"Poland will do everything to increase Ukraine's chances of victory in this war," added Tusk, who returned to power after parliamentary elections in October. [Reuters]

Warsaw has been one of Kyiv's staunchest allies since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine in 2022, but relations had soured between the two in recent months as a result of disputes over grain shipments and trucking. [Reuters]

Polish hauliers and farmers, protesting at what they say is unregulated Ukrainian competition, began blocking several key crossings on the border with Ukraine last year, leaving thousands of vehicles stranded in kilometres-long queues. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The hauliers' protests were in response to Ukraine-registered trucks being exempted from permits needed to transport goods into Poland and the rest of the EU. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The demonstrations followed protests by Polish farmers against the import of cheap Ukrainian grain to Poland. The Poles say that lower priced Ukrainian goods are undercutting and hurting their business. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Acknowledging the tensions, Zelensky said: "We understand the depth of the reasons that led to this

kind of situation, but draw attention first and foremost to the depth of the threat that stands before our peoples." [Reuters]

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU waived a requirement for Ukrainian hauliers to obtain entry permits before bringing goods into the bloc, in a show of economic support for Kyiv. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Organisers of the truck drivers' protests reached a temporary deal with the Polish government in January and agreed to pause their border blockades until March 1, while a long-term solution is negotiated. [Reuters]

During his visit to Ukraine, Tusk also met with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, who said Kyiv would make a "maximum effort" to prevent damage to Polish economic interests. [Reuters]

Tusk, meanwhile, said: "I am sure we will find a solution that will benefit Polish farmers and producers and will be safe for the Ukrainian side." [Reuters]

"An honest conversation between friends can work wonders," he added. [Reuters]

(ek/pk)

Putin plans to visit Turkey in February

Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit Turkey in February. The exact date of Putin's visit has not been announced yet, but he plans to discuss the ongoing conflict in Ukraine with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

They will also discuss economic cooperation and the situation in Syria. Ankara and Moscow have been at odds in Syria, where Russia has supported Bashar Assad's regime while Turkey has backed the opposition in the decade-long civil war. [Daily Sabbah]

(st/gc)

In U-turn, Slovak PM supports Ukraine's EU bid after Kremlin-style rhetoric

Slovakia's populist prime minister has performed a surprise U-turn on his Russia-friendly stance, pledging

to back Ukraine's EU membership on his first trip to the conflict-ridden country.

Robert Fico, who in October came to power for the fourth time after strong pledges to sever military support for Kyiv, met his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal in the western city of Uzhhorod on January 24. Just a day earlier, he had claimed there was "no war" in Kyiv. [DW] [Euractiv] [Reuters 1]

While Fico confirmed support for Ukraine's efforts to join the European Union, he has vowed to veto its NATO membership bid, a move he has referred to as "a basis for World War III". [Politico 2] [CNN] [Euractiv]

The Slovak strongman also reiterated that he did not believe a military solution could end the Russia-Ukraine war. [Reuters 1]

Shmyhal, meanwhile, said Fico had promised to allow Slovakia's defence manufacturers to continue exporting munitions to Kyiv. [Reuters 2] [DW] [FT]

Provocative comments

Fico's unexpected friendliness to Ukraine stands in stark contrast to recent provocative comments he made that echoed Kremlin narratives.

Before the bilateral talks in Uzhhorod, Fico denied that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was underway, and asserted that life in Kyiv was "absolutely normal". His unfounded claims came on January 23, hours after a wave of Russian missile attacks that killed 18 and injured dozens in the Ukrainian capital and other cities. [Politico 1] [FT] [Reuters 2]

On January 21, Fico suggested that the war could end only if Kyiv compromised by ceding part of its territory, adding that it was "unrealistic" to expect Russia to leave Crimea, Donbas and Luhansk. [Politico 2] [DW]

Slovakia's culture ministry announced on January 20 that it would resume ties with Russia and Belarus. Cooperation was suspended in March 2022 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [Radio Free Europe]

(yl/pk)

Spain recognises passports issued by Kosovo, but not its independence

Madrid on January 1 lifted visa requirements for people travelling with a Kosovo passport, as Spain became the final EU member state to accept such a document. [Euractiv]

However, José Manuel Albares, the Spanish foreign minister, made clear that Madrid still does not recognise the independence that Kosovo declared from Serbia in 2008. Spain does "not recognise unilateral declarations of independence," Albares said. [Financial Times]

Among European Union member states, only four others – Greece, Slovakia, Cyprus and Romania – have also chosen not to acknowledge Kosovo's sovereignty. [Aljazeera]

Pro-independence Catalan parties in Spain, whose support Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez needs for a parliamentary majority, have been long-standing supporters of recognising Kosovo's sovereignty.

Sanchez's government refutes allegations that the decision to recognise Kosovo passports is a concession to Catalan groupings. [Financial Times]

In the wake of a general election, 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]

Kosovo passport holders can now move across the whole of Europe's free-travel Schengen area, which includes Spain, without the need for a visa for up to 90 days in any 180-day period.

(jt/pk)

Sweden to send troops to Latvia in support of NATO battlegroup

The Swedish government plans to send around 800 soldiers to support a Canadian-led NATO battlegroup stationed in Latvia to deter potential Russian aggression.

The Swedish troops, from a mechanized battalion, will be accompanied by armoured vehicles and possibly Leopard tanks. They are expected to arrive early next year. [Dagens Nyheter] [Swedish Government]

The move was announced on January 8 by Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, as his country waits to be admitted to NATO.

The Swedes will be part of a brigade based outside the Latvian capital, Riga, and will rotate every six months with a Danish battalion. [Defense Industry]

The Swedish soldiers will contribute to NATO's so-called Enhanced Forward Presence, as part of which multinational battle groups have been stationed in eight Eastern European countries, aiming to ward off any aggression by Moscow. [Defense Industry]

Latvian Defence Minister Andris Spruds thanked Kristersson in a post on social media platform X. "We are pleased with this important decision, which, together with the upcoming admission of Sweden to NATO, will become a significant investment in strengthening regional security and the defence of Latvia," Spruds said. [X.com]

(jb/pk)

Danish court upholds jail terms for Iranian separatists convicted of terror charges

A Danish court of appeal on January 12 upheld the sentences of three Iranian separatists convicted of terror charges. [AP News] [Danish Broadcasting Corporation]

The three men, Habib Yabor Kobi, Tamim Farouk Beck and Jacob Mohamed, were arrested in 2020 in south-western Denmark. They were found guilty of promoting terror for their role in an attack on a military parade in the south-western Iranian city of Ahvaz in 2018.

The Danish Eastern High Court found that the men belonged to the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz.

The group has said it was not involved in the attack in the city, which killed at least 25 people. [AP News]

In 2022, a lower court convicted the three men to six, seven and eight years in prison for financing and attempting to finance terrorism and gathering information on Danish individuals and foreigners for an unnamed Saudi intelligence service.

One of the convicted individuals had their Danish citizenship revoked and all three were set to be expelled from Denmark but will serve their sentences in the Nordic country in the meantime. [AP News]

However, there has been speculation about whether the separatists will ever be expelled from Denmark due to the risk of them being executed in Iran.

Beck's defence lawyer, Peter Trudso, said: "It is quite obvious that he will be executed if he goes to Iran." [Politiken]

(km/pk)

Houthi Red Sea attacks must be stopped without triggering new war: Italy's defence minister

Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto said on January 10 that Yemen's Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping must be stopped without triggering a new war.

In a reference to the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas conflict, Crosetto added that he "would not like to open a third front of war at this time". [Reuters 1]

Italy deployed a naval frigate to the Red Sea in December, but has not joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, the US-led multinational initiative announced by Washington on December 18 in an effort to protect one of the world's most important shipping routes.

A government source cited by Reuters said Italy declined to take part in the US-led operation because any Italian involvement would have needed parliamentary approval, which would have taken time, and because Rome preferred to pursue a "calming" policy in the Red Sea.

Italy, along with Spain and France, did not sign a joint statement issued on January 11 by Washington and nine other allies. The statement, released by the White House, said that strikes conducted by the US, UK and allies on January 11 against targets in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen "demonstrated a shared commitment to freedom of navigation, international commerce, and defending the lives of mariners from illegal and unjustified attacks." [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3] [Hellenic Shipping News]

(ar/pk)

Swedish national arrested in Iran amid bilateral tensions

A Swedish national in his 20s was arrested in Iran in early January and is being held in custody, the Swedish foreign ministry has said amid tensions between Stockholm and Tehran. [Reuters]

The foreign ministry said on January 15 that the man lived in central Sweden, but added it could not disclose more details because of "consular confidentiality." [The National News]

Relations between Tehran and Stockholm increased in 2019, when a former Iranian official was arrested in Sweden for his role in the mass execution of political prisoners in Iran in the 1980s.

On December 19, a Swedish appeals court upheld the life sentence for the former official, Hamid Noury. Tehran vowed to seek Noury's release, and summoned Sweden's chargé d'affaires to protest against the sentence. [Iran Wire]

Also in December, Iran began the trial of Swedish national Johan Floderus, a European Union employee, who has been imprisoned since April 2022. Floderus is charged with spying for Israel and "corruption on earth," a crime that is punishable by the death penalty. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

There is a history of Swedish nationals being put on trial in Iran. In 2016, Iranian-Swedish academic Ahmadreza Djalali was arrested in Iran in 2016 on suspicion of espionage. He remains under threat of execution. [Iran Wire]

Sweden's foreign ministry said it had summoned Iran's chargé d'affaires, calling for the release of citizens "arbitrarily detained" in Iran and has advised Swedes against travelling to that country. [The Local]

(jb/pk)

Turkey takes limited economic measures against Israel

Turkey is taking direct economic actions against Israel as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan explicitly criticises Tel Aviv for the war in Gaza.

Turkey has removed Israel from its list of export destinations. The outcome of this decision will affect trade and business-related activities, where Turkey will discontinue trading systems and withdraw from business operations connected to Israel. [TheJerusalemPost]

Official data from the Turkish Transport Ministry showed that between October 7, when the Hamas attack took place, and December 2023, about eight ships each day travelled from Turkish ports to Israelis.

The relevance of this new measure signals that Turkish business owners who decide to continue engaging in trade with Israel will not receive state assistance.

Erdogan has been under pressure from some ultra-Islamist groups who have been calling for a total trade ban to altogether boycott Israeli stakeholders. [PATurkey]

(vt/gc)

Turkey arrests suspected Israeli spies

Turkish authorities have detained 33 people suspected of spying on behalf of Israel, Turkey's state-run news agency reported. Authorities were still searching for 13 other people believed to have links to Israel's Mossad security service, the Anadolu Agency reported. [Euronews]

The suspects were detained in raids in Istanbul and seven other provinces for allegedly planning to carry out activities that included "reconnaissance" and "pursuing, assaulting and kidnapping" foreign nationals living in Turkey, the agency reported. [Euronews]

The alleged spies are believed to be targeting foreign nationals, though specific nationalities are not publicly declared. President Erdogan has warned Israel of possible serious repercussions if Hamas officials are being attacked on Turkish soil. [Al Jazeera]

Anadolu did not provide information on the suspects or the foreigners who were allegedly targeted. The report comes weeks after the head of Israel's domestic security agency, Shin Bet, said in an audio recording that his organisation is prepared to destroy Hamas "in every place," including in Lebanon, Turkey and Qatar.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned Israel of "serious consequences" if it pressed ahead with its

threat to attack Hamas officials on Turkish soil.

In 2022, Turkey and Israel took a step towards normalising their relations by reappointing ambassadors after years of tension. But those ties quickly deteriorated after the Israel-Hamas war, with Ankara becoming one of the strongest critics of Israel's military actions in Gaza.

(st/gc)

Turkey carries air attacks on northern Iraq and Syria

Turkey's military has carried out air raids against Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq and Syria, Al Jazeera reported on January 16. [AlJazeera

The air raids destroyed 23 targets, the Turkish Ministry of National Defence said, and the operation extended a recent escalation in violence across Turkey's southern border.[AlJazeera]

The upswing in the conflict began when nine Turkish soldiers were killed in clashes with Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters in northern Iraq. Ankara responded with air attacks and military operations in the area, as well as in the north of Syria.[AlJazeera]

The latest air raids were carried out in the Metina, Gara, Hakurk, and Qandil regions of northern Iraq, close to the city of Erbil and north of Syria. The ministry said the action will ensure border security and prevent attacks.

"Twenty-three targets were destroyed, including caves, shelters, tunnels, ammunition warehouses, supply materials and facilities used by the terrorist organisation," the ministry said in a statement on social media platform X.

(st/gc)

Turkish president holds talks with Blinken on Mid-East

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met senior Turkish officials in Istanbul before his trip to Greece as Washington tried to prevent tension from escalating since the beginning of Israel's war on Gaza in October 2023.

During his meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on January 6, Blinken stressed the "need to prevent the conflict from spreading, secure the release of hostages, expand humanitarian assistance and reduce civilian casualties." Blinken also called for greater regional peace, securing Israel, and creating a free Palestinian state. [Al Jazeera][France24]

Erdogan did not meet Blinken during his visit in November 2023. The Turkish president has held a solid anti-Israel stance since the beginning of the conflict and has opposed many American decisions. [AlJazeera]

Blinken and Erdogan also discussed European security issues, including the war in Ukraine, Sweden's entrance into the North Atlantic Treaty Organizations, and US-Turkish trade and investments. [U.S.Government]

Blinken's trip had "three main messages," said Mahjoob Zweiri, a professor of Gulf studies at Qatar University. They were the de-escalation of the conflict, the humanitarian crisis, and "what happens the day after the war ends," he said. [Al Jazeera]

(vt-st/gc)

British PM defends strikes to deter Houthi maritime attacks

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak defended on January 15 the United Kingdom and its allies' strikes in response to escalating Houthi attacks off the coast of Yemen.

The research briefing provided background on the Houthi group, their ties with Iran, and the recent sanctions imposed by the US and UK in response to their actions. On January 17, the US designated the Houthis as a global terrorist group.

Beginning in November 2023, the Houthis initiated a series of attacks on ships in the Red Sea, claiming connections to Israel. These actions, purportedly in support of Hamas, diverted shipping away from the region, causing a significant impact on trade and freedom of navigation. The Kiel Institute reported a substantial decrease in container shipments from 500,000 per day in November to 200,000 in December. [BBC News]

The US announced Operation Prosperity Guardian to counter the Houthi threat, an international maritime coalition joined by the UK and over twenty other

countries. Additional plans include a separate EU naval mission.

According to reports from BBC News, the US executed deliberate strikes on over 60 targets at 16 Iranian-backed Houthi militant locations. The targets included radar systems, drone storage, launch sites, missile storage, launch facilities, and Houthi command and control nodes. The strikes aimed to deter further attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea. [BBC News]

The US and UK emphasised the defensive nature of their actions, with US President Joe Biden stating that the strikes were a "direct response" to Houthi attacks endangering US personnel, civilian mariners, and global trade. Sunak of the UK stressed that the strikes were "limited, necessary, and proportionate in self-defence," conducted to uphold freedom of navigation. The use of precision-guided munitions aimed to minimise collateral damage. [BBC News]

The parliamentary response included debates on January 24, where concerns were raised about the need for prior consultation. Opposition parties, including Labour and the Liberal Democrats, criticised the government for bypassing MPs and called for greater transparency regarding the UK's military actions in Yemen. [The Guardian]

The parliamentary discussions addressed concerns about the need for prior consultation. The defence minister justified the government's actions based on military and operational requirements. [GOV.UK]

The UN Security Council, through Resolution 2722, condemned the Houthi attacks, emphasising the right to freedom of navigation. In January, the UK Defence Secretary's prior warnings and the UN Security Council Resolution set the stage for the UK and US strikes.

Sunak stated that the strikes were "limited, necessary, and proportionate in self-defence," emphasising consistency with the UN Charter and the goal of upholding freedom of navigation, with measures taken to avoid civilian casualties.

(ha/gc)

Massive EU defence fund mooted amid jitters at Trump's stance on NATO

The EU's Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton wants to set up a EUR 100 billion military fund for the

bloc, amid concerns that a new Trump presidency in the United States would pull Washington out of its defence commitments in Europe.

Breton plans to present a European Defence Investment Programme, aimed at boosting joint weapons procurement and domestic arms and ammunition production, on February 27.

With Donald Trump the clear favourite to be nominated as the Republican party's candidate for the White House, Breton recounted at a private event held in Brussels on January 9 how the former US president told top EU officials that Washington would not come to Europe's aid if it were under attack. [Politico]

"If Europe is under attack we will never come to help you and to support you," then-president Trump told European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen in 2020 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, according to Breton.

Breton, who was present at the meeting, added that Trump said "NATO is dead" and that the US "will quit NATO", also telling von der Leyen that Germany owed America USD 400 billion in defence payments. [Politico]

Breton recounted the remarks days before Trump on January 15 clinched an overwhelming victory in the opening contest of his bid to win the Republican nomination for the presidency.

After Trump won some 51% of the vote in the Iowa primary, his rivals Florida governor Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy dropped out of the race. [The Guardian] [BBC]

(qv/pk)

US asks Greece to send weapons to Ukraine

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has asked Greece to send excess weapons to Ukraine following the deal to sell Athens the fifth-generation F-35 jets, according to the Greek Reporter. [Greek Reporter]

In a letter addressed to Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Blinken expressed interest in Greece's defence capabilities that could be useful to Ukraine, contingent upon Ukraine's interest and a subsequent assessment of the condition and approximate cost of the proposed assets. [Greek Reporter]

Greece currently has Soviet air defence systems such as Tor, Osa, S-300, and ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft systems that are no longer in use and could be transferred to Ukraine.Washington is considering providing $200 million additional aid to Athens, in exchange for their shipping to Kiev legacy Soviet equipment which Ukrainian soldiers have training to operate.

“We continue to be interested in Greece’s defence potential to transfer or sell to Ukraine. If these opportunities are of interest to Ukraine and before the US government assesses their condition and approximate cost, we can explore opportunities for the potential allocation of additional foreign military financing in the amount of up to US$200 million for Greece,” Blinken said. [Greek Reporter]

Since the beginning of the war, Greece has already sent lots of military artillery, tanks, Kalashnikov rifles, and other military equipment to Ukraine. In addition, Ukrainian soldiers will be participating in combat training in Greece. [Greek Reporter]

(st/gc)

Danish report finds ‘systematic illegal behaviour’ in adoptions from South Korea

A report by an agency overseen by the Danish government has said that adoptions from South Korea to Denmark were “characterized by systematic illegal behaviour” in the 1970s and 1980s.

The report, published on January 25, found that there were violations of the adoption process that made it “possible to change information about a child’s background and adopt a child without the knowledge of the biological parents.” [Euronews]

In 2013, the South Korean government began requiring foreign adoptions to go through family courts, ending the former practice of allowing private agencies to deal with such cases, including transfer of custody and emigration.

The report by the Danish Appeals Board in January said that some adoption agencies in Denmark were aware of the practice of altering children’s background information. According to the board, this “deprived the adopted of the opportunity to learn about their own identity and history”. [Politiken] [AP News]

(km/pk)

EU aims to boost economic security, protect sensitive tech from China

The European Commission on January 24 unveiled plans to examine and possibly ban foreign investment by geopolitical rivals such as China in strategic sectors, in an effort to boost the bloc's economic security.

Inflows from authoritarian regimes like China, Russia and Belarus would be considered cause for inspection. [Euronews]

"Europe cannot just be the playground for bigger players. We need to be able to play ourselves," said the EU's most senior competition official, Margrethe Vestager.

"By doing what we are proposing to do, we can de-risk our economic interdependencies," she told reporters in Brussels as the so-called Economic Security Package was unveiled. [AFP/VoA News]

Military gear, 6G networks, quantum technology, cloud computing, robots, virtual reality, nuclear fusion, batteries and space surveillance would fall under the rules. [Euronews]

Since 2020, EU governments have been required to inform Brussels of foreign direct investment that could pose a risk to security. But EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis said that a broad definition of sensitive sectors meant too many non-risky deals had to be scrutinised. The European Commission, the bloc's executive, now wants a tighter definition. [FT]

As well as increased screening of FDI and more coordination among member states to identify potential risks involved in such inflows, the new package also calls for more effective control of exports from the EU that can be used both for civilian and military purposes.

It comes as part of a wider initiative announced by European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen in March 2023 to "de-risk" the bloc from China. [Euractiv]

(pk)

China's Premier Li Qiang visits Ireland for first time

China's Premier Li Qiang travelled to Dublin on January 16 for a two-day state visit, where he held bilateral talks with Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and attended a reception with President Michael Higgins. [The Journal]

In a statement, President Higgins said before he met with Li Qiang that human rights issues would be a topic of discussion between the two. Varadkar also said he spoke to Li Qiang about his concerns regarding China's human rights abuses. [BBC]

During the visit, the countries announced that Ireland could export beef to China after Beijing lifted a two-month suspension of beef exports. [Reuters] Chinese press reports focused on the Irish tradition of neutrality and "openness" as China appears intent on winning Ireland as an ally to form a possible bridge for Chinese trade into an increasingly protectionist EU. Irish Times

(sr/gc)

Turkey's foreign minister travels to Kyrgyzstan

Turkey's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met with his counterpart Zheenbek Kulubaev on January 9 in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek, where they discussed bilateral relations and regional and global developments. [TurkishFM]

The officials also discussed Turkey's healthcare investment in Kyrgyzstan, the conflict in Gaza, and Kyrgyzstan's external borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Fidan stressed the need for peace, collaboration between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and restoring border security. [Daily Sabbah]

"Turkey was the first country to recognise Kyrgyzstan's independence after the Soviet Union dissolved. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on January 29, 1992. [Daily Sabbah]

Turkey is one of the leading foreign investors in Kyrgyzstan, behind China, Russia, and Kazakhstan. There are at least 300 Turkish companies presently operating in the country. The two foreign ministers signed a 2024-2026 cooperation agreement emphasising the need to establish a permanent way to improve commerce and offer passport-free travel between the two countries. [Daily Sabbah]

Turkish President Erdogan has openly aspired to diplomatic leadership of the Turkic speaking belt of countries spanning Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan and launched multiple regional initiatives in this regard. [Politico]

(st/gc)

British Minister of State visits India for trade and clean energy talks

The British Minister of State, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, travelled to India on January 8-10 to attend the Tamil Nadu Global Investors Meeting and the Vibrant Gujarat, an innovation-focused summit. [UK GOV]

During the trip, Lord Ahmad launched two new British-funded sustainability projects: a heat mitigation project, which will address extreme heat-related deaths and the loss of vital ecosystems, and the Electronic and Battery Waste Management project, which will develop a plan to reduce battery waste.

While in India, Lord Ahmad met with national and local government representatives to discuss the United Kingdom-India trade partnership, progress towards a trade deal, and new opportunities in clean energy.

“Strengthening the UK-India relationship is a key pillar of the UK’s long-term foreign policy, as part of its enduring engagement in the Indo-Pacific set out in the Integrated Review Refresh,” the foreign office said.

Negotiations on the UK-India Free Trade Agreement entered the concluding round on January 10. [India Briefing]

(ar/gc)

Vatican, Beijing agree on bishops and new diocese

Three new Catholic bishops have been appointed in China, along with the creation of a new diocese, in less than a week. All the appointments, announced by the Vatican media between January 25 and 31, were made under a provisional agreement between the Holy See and the Chinese government.

The moves were seen by observers as marking a rapprochement in bilateral relations after two bishops were unilaterally appointed by the Chinese government in 2023, in flagrant violation of the agreement.

The Vatican has had no official diplomatic relations with China since 1949 amid tensions over issues including what was Beijing's state-controlled system of appointing bishops, which is not accepted by the Roman Catholic Church.

Pope Francis in 2018 signed a deal with Beijing that provides for bishops to be appointed based on a common decision by China and the Vatican. [CNA] [The Pillar] [Vatican News 1] [Vatican News 2] [Vatican News 3]

(ar/pk)

Namibia challenges Germany's position on Israel in ICJ genocide hearing

Namibia has strongly criticised Germany for its support of Israel in the ongoing genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) filed by South Africa.

Namibian President Hage Geingob expressed deep concern over Germany's decision, calling it "shocking" and accusing Germany of ignoring Israel's actions in Gaza. Geingob appealed to the German government to reconsider its intervention in defence of what he described as "genocidal acts" by Israel. [Al Jazeera]

The Namibian presidency pointedly referred to Germany's history, citing the genocide committed by German colonial forces against the Indigenous Herero and Nama peoples in Namibia between 1904 and 1908. The statement highlighted the perceived hypocrisy of Germany supporting Israel while still addressing its historical atrocities.

The president urged Germany to acknowledge its past actions and align with the United Nations Convention against Genocide. [Al Jazeera]

Namibian-German relations, already fragile, face a potential turning point following Germany's public support for Israel on the 120th anniversary of what Namibians term the "German-Namibian war".

Historian Henning Melber noted the unexpected nature of Namibia's strong stance, emphasising that Germany's denial of the Namibian genocide until 2015

remains a contentious issue in their diplomatic discussions. [Al Jazeera]

In response, Germany defended its position, stating that the accusation of genocide against Israel is unfounded and a "political instrumentalisation" of the UN genocide convention.

The German government emphasised its commitment to the genocide convention in light of its history, including the Holocaust [BBC]. Germany argued that Israel's actions are in self-defence against Hamas, which it accuses of seeking to destroy Israel. [BBC]

The ICJ is expected to present provisional measures soon, but a final verdict may take years. South Africa has urged the court to order an immediate halt to Israel's military offensive in Gaza, highlighting the potential for escalating international conflict.

The case, filed by South Africa on December 19, 2023, accuses Israel of genocidal acts in Gaza and has garnered support from various countries and international organisations. Meanwhile, Israel has received backing from the United States, its primary weapons supplier and close ally, further complicating the situation. [Al Jazeera]

(ha/gc)

Spain's Supreme Court says gov't broke law in deporting Moroccan minors

Spain's Supreme Court ruled on January 22 that the mass expulsion of 700 unaccompanied Moroccan minors in 2021 was illegal.

The illegal deportation followed a mass border crossing in May 2021 during which some 10,000 individuals forced their way into Ceuta, a Spanish enclave in North Africa, from Morocco. [Associated Press]

In defence of the government, lawyers claimed that a 2007 agreement between Madrid and Rabat allowed for assisted returns of migrants to Morocco in "exceptional circumstances". [VOA News]

However, the Supreme Court ruled that this agreement did not supersede Spain's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, which require Madrid to care for unaccompanied and underage migrants until family members can be located or until they turn 18. [Associated Press]

The court mandated the government in Madrid to take measures to facilitate the return of these deported minors back to Spain.

A spokesman for the interior ministry responded to the ruling by saying that the government respects the judiciary and its decisions, but did not comment on the practical implications of the verdict or the authorities' intended response. [Reuters/Straits Times]

(jt/pk)

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