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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.

With the war in Ukraine now in its third year, European nations are making an effort to step in and keep Kyiv equipped after vital US military support stalled. But the Europeans are facing an uphill battle, having invested far less in their militaries and defence industries than the Americans and Russians.

In one initiative, the Czech Republic is pushing Europe to look beyond its borders to source ammunition for Ukraine. Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron raised the taboo topic of direct Western intervention in the conflict, an idea that has been shot down by several European leaders.

US presidential hopeful Donald Trump drew flak for suggesting that America would not protect NATO allies failing to spend enough on defence. At the same time, his shock remarks sparked calls for more military spending in Europe.

Meanwhile, Sweden is set to join NATO as its 32nd member after Hungary's parliament approved the move. The long-delayed decision in Budapest cements a tectonic geopolitical shift that saw Finland entering the Western defensive alliance last April in response to Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In Russia, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, one of President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken opponents, has died in an Arctic detention facility. Some Western leaders laid the blame directly at the feet of Putin – a response the Kremlin denounced as "absolutely rabid."

In a string of European countries, farmers have been staging further – often highly disruptive – protests against EU agricultural policies. They are demanding measures to combat production cost hikes and what they claim is unfair competition from outside the bloc.

In other developments, Greece has agreed to take command of a European Union maritime operation in the Red Sea aiming to protect commercial shipping from attacks by Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen.

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

Ukraine switches commanders, withdraws from Avdiivka as shell hunger bites

European nations face an uphill battle to keep Kyiv equipped for an increasingly attritional fight as the war in Ukraine enters its third year.

Russia has been buoyed by munitions deliveries from allies Iran and North Korea and is making use of its much larger economy and population. At the same time, the United States is cutting off vital support for Ukraine.

The dynamics of the war, the largest conflict in Europe since World War II, have changed considerably. Whereas 2022 saw large-scale offensives and swathes of territory exchanged, the war in 2023 was a far more grinding experience for both sides.

Tens of thousands more casualties have been incurred for minor gains as Russia continues its onslaught against Ukrainian positions in the country's east. Ukraine, on the back foot after a slowdown in Western aid, has reshuffled its commanders to try to escape the costly positional fighting it finds itself mired in.

Top general replaced

After weeks of speculation, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky fired his commander-in-chief, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, on February 8.

Zaluzhnyi, a highly popular figure in Ukraine, played a key role in his nation successfully fending off Russian offensives. However, Ukrainian forces were unable to find a way through heavy Russian defences in the country's southern Zaporizhzhia region – leading to tensions between the general and the president. Zaluzhnyi's public statements referred to Kyiv's counteroffensive as having decayed into a "stalemate" – a less optimistic view than that put forward by Zelensky. Nevertheless, the two men were keen to part with positive optics, with Zaluzhnyi being named a Hero of Ukraine, the country's highest honour.

To little surprise, Zelensky replaced Zaluzhnyi with General Oleksandr Syrskyi. Although less popular than his predecessor, Syrskyi won plaudits for his role as the commander of Ukraine's ground forces and for their 2022 counter-offensives. However, he came under fire for his insistence on holding the embattled eastern city of Bakhmut. Syrskyi inherits a Ukrainian military far outgunned and outnumbered, with vital support from the West at its most constricted since the early days of the invasion. His immediate priority will be to stabilise the frontline and ensure Ukrainian troops do not lose further ground.

The overall vision articulated by Syrskyi doesn't differ much from that of his predecessor, with both men acknowledging Ukraine's disadvantages and advocating for the development of a technologically superior force. [Al Jazeera] [BBC News] [Bloomberg] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [Guardian] [NPR]

Avdiivka falls as Ukrainian gunners run low

Syrskyi's tenure in the top job got off to an inauspicious start as Russian forces overwhelmed and captured the eastern city of Avdiivka.

Avdiivka, which has sat on the frontline since hostilities broke out in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region in 2014, had been steadily razed by an intense five-month Russian campaign. Despite suffering some of the heaviest losses in manpower and material in the war to date, Russian forces steadily gained fire control over the town as Ukrainian artillery units began to suffer ammunition shortages.

During the second week of February, the situation quickly turned critical for Ukrainian defenders as Russian troops entered Avdiivka from the north, threatening to cut off Ukrainian units in the city's east. Lacking the resources to relieve the positions, the Ukrainians were forced to pull out of the city entirely.

Some sources say that Ukraine's relatively late withdrawal operation led to the alleged capture of hundreds of its soldiers – though Kyiv has denied this. Several Ukrainian prisoners of war were executed in the aftermath of the battle, with video of the events circulated on social media. While the Ukrainians managed to avoid a large-scale encirclement and a truly catastrophic defeat, they have been forced to withdraw to defensive lines to the city's west which, due to Kyiv's lack of combat engineering equipment, are suboptimal. Russian forces continue to assault these positions and the intensity of fighting in the area shows no sign of abating. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Reuters] [TIME]

The battle itself followed a similar pattern to that of Bakhmut.

For Ukraine, it was yet another grinding fight in which its forces were overwhelmed by Russia's superiority in numbers, firepower and combat aviation. Russian bombers played an important role in demolishing the city's buildings and depriving the defenders of cover. Lacking the ammunition to suppress Russian artillery, Ukrainian troops found themselves under withering fire – while the Russians were able to advance after their shelling softened Ukrainian positions. For Moscow, the battle exacted an eye-watering toll, with thousands of soldiers killed and hundreds of fighting vehicles destroyed, and only a shattered city as a prize.

While the capture of Avdiivka is of limited strategic importance for both sides, it has enormous symbolic value. The city briefly fell to Russian-backed separatists in the spring of 2014, only to be retaken by the Ukrainian military in the summer of that year. [Associated Press] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Washington Post]

While Avdiivka appears to remain the centre of gravity for Russian operations, Moscow's forces attacked from several directions on the frontline in February.

Robotyne and Verbove, liberated by Ukraine in its 2023 counteroffensive, are under renewed attack in the country's south. In the north-east, the town of Kupiansk remains under pressure from constant attacks and is a key objective for the Kremlin. Similarly, Chasiv Yar to the east of Bakhmut faces heavy shelling. [CBS] [Irish Times] [NBC] [Newsweek] [Telegraph]

US support tied up as Europe explores alternatives

Events at Avdiivka are directly linked to the United States' struggle to approve more military aid in

Washington.

On February 13, the US Senate passed a support package valued at around USD 60 billion, around USD 29 billion of which would go directly to the Ukrainian military. While hailed as a breakthrough by US President Joe Biden, the package needs to go through the House of Representatives. But Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson is refusing to consider Ukraine aid unless the Biden administration makes concessions on immigration policy.

While the package has the votes to pass in the house, Johnson must first bring it to a vote. He faces pressure from the right wing of his party, as well as from the likely Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump, to reject more aid for Ukraine.

Without American supplies, Ukraine's fight against Russia will become exponentially more difficult. Oleksii Danilov, the secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council, put this in stark terms in early February, when he said that "every day we have corpses that we would not have had if we had this assistance". [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Reuters]

The US disengagement from the conflict has left Europe as Ukraine's most important backer. European countries, which have invested far less in their militaries and in their defence industries than the Americans and Russians, face an uphill battle to keep Kyiv supplied.

With EU-led initiatives to aid Ukraine facing obstruction from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, some European countries are considering alternative paths.

The Czech Republic has emerged as a key advocate for Ukraine, and President Petr Pavel has been frequently speaking out on Kyiv's behalf. With EU nations falling short of their promise to deliver one million artillery shells to Ukraine – having provided only half the pledged amount – Czech leaders have been pushing the bloc to look beyond its own borders to source shells.

The Czechs claim nearly half a million shells can be obtained from Japanese, Turkish and South African sources. Several allies, including Denmark and Canada, have expressed support for the idea. Pavel claimed several hundred thousand shells could be delivered within weeks.

Even if the Czech plan succeeds, the struggle to secure ammunition highlights Europe's procurement problems. Amid the continent's largest conflict since World War II, European nations have been unable to significantly increase their production of military equipment, and remain considerably behind Russia in raw numbers of ammunition. [Barron's] [Bloomberg] [Financial Times] [Irish Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

Macron raises taboo topic: direct intervention

Tensions between Western allies were highlighted when French President Emmanuel Macron raised the taboo idea of direct intervention in the conflict.

Macron, speaking at a conference on February 27, refused to rule out the use of Western troops in Ukraine. While he may have intended to make Western nations feel the urgency of acting in support of Kyiv, the Kremlin will have delighted in the deluge of retractions and disagreements that followed the French leader's controversial comments. With polls showing Europeans increasingly losing interest in the war, Macron's remarks seem ill-timed. Russia reacted in the same fashion as it usually does – with nuclear threats.

Slovak populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, a staunch opponent of aid for Kyiv, accused unnamed European nations of planning to send troops to Ukraine. However, several European leaders have spoken out against Macron's statements, insisting they have no plans to enter the conflict directly. Kyiv has also dismissed the idea, using Macron's comments as an opportunity to suggest a course of action with proven results – supplying the Ukrainian military with equipment and ammunition. [CNN] [Guardian] [Reuters] [RTÉ]

Despite these challenges, Ukraine continues to hold out and fight on. Kyiv's resolve poses the greatest obstacle to the Kremlin's aims – even though Western hesitancy is increasingly becoming a key asset for Moscow.

(wb/pk)

Trump NATO comments anger Europe but spark calls for more defence spending

US presidential hopeful Donald Trump has suggested that America would not protect NATO allies failing to

spend enough on defence, triggering criticism from political and military leaders in Europe.

In comments on February 10 that caused shock, Trump – the clear favourite to be nominated as the Republican party's candidate for president – also said he would "encourage" Russia to attack any of America's allies whom he considers have not met their financial obligations. [The Guardian]

Speaking at a political rally in South Carolina, Trump recalled how during his term as president he told a NATO member, whom he didn't identify: "'You didn't pay? You're delinquent?... No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills.'" [AP News]

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg rebuked Trump for the remarks, which he said "put "American and European soldiers at increased risk." [The Guardian] [BBC]

NATO defence ministers in 2006 pledged to spend 2% of their GDP on defence yearly as a guideline. That commitment was reiterated in 2014. At the time, only three NATO members reached the 2% threshold. The target was supposed to be met by all members in 2024.

Stoltenberg said he expected 18 of the 31 NATO states to be spending 2% of the value of their economies on defence by the end of this year. [Euractiv]

Allies of Trump have discussed making Article 5 – which mandates NATO nations to come to the defence of a member under attack – applicable only to countries that have reached their defence spending targets, Bloomberg reported.

As well as being called out by US President Joe Biden, Trump's comments sparked outrage across Europe.

'In the interests of Russia'

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that a "relativization of NATO's guarantee of mutual assistance is irresponsible and dangerous and is solely in the interests of Russia." [Politico]

Germany has long been one of the alliance's lowest spenders. After indicating in 2019 it would not reach the 2% target before 2031, Berlin radically changed course after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and is expected to spend 2.01% of its GDP on its military this year. [The Guardian]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who was speaking with Scholz at a joint press conference in Germany, said that regardless of Trump's comments it was in Europe's common interest that all NATO member states "directly and clearly increase the funding of defence".

Poland, historically fearful of neighbouring Russia, allocates 3.9% of its GDP on military spending, the highest proportion in NATO.

"Europe must also invest in its own security," Tusk added, echoing French President Emmanuel Macron, who has called for "strategic autonomy" from the United States and has urged the continent to become a "security and defence power that is both complementary to NATO and a pillar of the Atlantic alliance." [Euronews]

However, Trump's comments were not so ill-received by everyone in Europe. Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said the Republican presidential contender's words could "wake up some of the allies who haven't done that much" to increase defence spending. [The Guardian]

With the exception of Norway and Turkey, European states bordering Ukraine or Russia all allocated more than 2% of their GDP on defence in 2023. Twenty other NATO allies across Western Europe and Canada did not meet that threshold. [BBC] [Washington Post]

(qv/pk)

Sweden set to join NATO as Hungary stops blocking accession

Sweden is set to join NATO as its 32nd member after Hungary's parliament on February 26 approved its accession to the defensive alliance following a long delay.

All NATO nations need to greenlight a new member's entry to the Western military club. Turkey's parliament backed Sweden's membership on January 23, leaving Hungary as the only holdout. [Europe Monthly February 2024] [AP News]

The Hungarian parliament approved Stockholm's bid after a visit to Budapest by Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson on February 23 during which the two countries signed a deal under which Hungary is to purchase four fighter jets from Sweden.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said that Sweden had taken steps to “rebuild trust” between the two countries. [Reuters]

Sweden applied to join NATO in 2022 alongside Finland in order to bolster its security in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In April 2023, Finland entered the military alliance as its 31st member in a tectonic geopolitical shift. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

In response to Hungary’s vote, Kristersson said: “Sweden is leaving 200 years of neutrality and military non-alignment behind.”

He added: “We are joining NATO in order to defend what we are and everything we believe in even better. We are defending our freedom, our democracy and our values, together with others.”

Writing on X, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the Hungarian parliament’s vote, saying: “Sweden’s membership will make us all stronger and safer.” [X] [Politico]

Stockholm has been one of the most critical voices in the European Union over Hungary’s problems with the rule of law. Orban had said in 2023 that some in his country were reluctant to admit nations to NATO that have been “spreading blatant lies about Hungary”.

(km/pk)

Russian oppositionist Navalny dies in Arctic gulag

Alexei Navalny- one of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government's most outspoken and persistent opponents- was reported dead on February 16.

According to an official statement from the Yamal-Nenets autonomous district prison service, the authority in charge of penal colony IK-3 where Navalny was carrying out his nearly two-decade-long sentence, "the inmate A.A. Navalny started to feel unwell after a walk and almost immediately lost consciousness at correctional facility No. 3 on February 16."

"Medical staff arrived immediately, and an ambulance was called. None of the resuscitation efforts yielded positive results," the prison said. [The Moscow Times]

The 47-year-old opposition leader and former lawyer was abruptly transferred to the IK-3 colony in December 2023. dubbed the "Polar Wolf," the detention facility lies north of the Arctic Circle in the town of Kharp, about 1,200 miles northeast of Moscow and roughly 60 miles from the infamous Vorkuta coal mines- one of the most notorious Soviet Gulags. [Europe in Review Monthly, January]

Navalny's 69-year-old mother, Lyudmila, visited the prison where she received an official death certificate attributing her son's demise to "sudden death syndrome" on February 16 at 2:17 p.m. local time, according to Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh, and director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation Ivan Zhdanov [Reuters]

A life of defiance

Navalny has long been hailed as President Putin's chief rival and Russia's most prominent opposition leader.

Navalny achieved notoriety as early as 2008 when he began to publicly expose the alleged ill-gotten wealth and corruption of Russian government officials and significant state-run oil and gas corporations Gazprom and Rosneft.

Since then, Navalny has continued to blow the whistle on the alleged wrongdoing of the "crooks and thieves" he said were at the very top of the Russian government- producing several widely viewed films in 2015 and 2017. Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow in 2013- a race he lost despite unprecedented grassroots financial support. [Reuters] [AP]

The late Kremlin critic sought elected office again, running against Vladimir Putin for president in 2018, before being barred from the ballot by the Russian courts, a decision the European Union subsequently condemned.

This did not, however, dissuade Navalny from involvement in electoral politics. In July 2019, he successfully advanced the "Smart Voting" strategy, encouraging Russians to turn out and vote for any candidate except those of the United Russian party. This move cost the Kremlin-backed party its majority the following year. [WSJ] [AP]

Suspicions mount

Navalny's transfer to the isolation of the "Polar Wolf" facility ahead of the March 17 Russian presidential elections intensified concerns for his well-being among many of his supporters and associates.

Navalny's spokeswoman Yarmysh, who previously voiced such fears on X, wrote: "This is all happening precisely because Alexei, even though he is in prison, is still the main opponent of Vladimir Putin ... It is not surprising that they began to transfer him to another colony right now so that he could not interfere with Putin's campaign."

She alleges Navalny's death- just a month before the election that could see Putin retain power until at least 2030- was not accidental. "Alexei didn't die- he was murdered," Yarmysh said. [AP] [Reuters]

Yulia Navalnaya, who first questioned news of her husband's death because "Putin and his government... lie incessantly," blamed the Russian president directly, telling the Munich Security Conference that "...if this is true, I want Putin, his entire entourage, Putin's friends, his government to know that they will bear responsibility for what they did to our country, to my family, to my husband." [Reuters]

Navalny survived a previous attempt on his life in August of 2020 after falling critically ill on a flight following a campaign event at Tomsk in Siberia. Navalny was hospitalised and treated in Germany for the next five months, where German, French, and Swedish experts discovered Navalny had been poisoned with Novichok- a military-grade nerve agent from the Soviet era. Navalny and his supporters have alleged the Kremlin was responsible. [WSJ]

In defiance, Navalny returned to Moscow upon his recovery in 2021, telling a German magazine, "I will not give Putin the gift of not returning to Russia." The opposition leader was promptly arrested upon arrival in the Russian capital. [WSJ]

Over the course of his imprisonment, human rights groups claim Navalny had been subjected to inhumane punishments, including detention in solitary confinement 27 times on purely punitive grounds. They also alleged he was being deprived of sleep by guards. In 2023, over 400 Russian physicians penned an open letter to President Putin calling for an end to the alleged abuse of Navalny. [WSJ] [AP]

Many Western leaders have since raised concern over the manner of Navalny's death- with some laying the blame directly at the feet of the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin- a response Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denounced as "unacceptable" and "absolutely rabid." [Reuters] [WSJ]

In a 2022 Oscar-winning documentary on his life and work, filmmaker Daniel Rohr asked Alexei Navalny if he

had any message to share in the event he died or was killed. "If they decide to kill me, we are incredibly strong," Navalny told his fellow Russian citizens. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing. So act." [Business Insider] [WSJ]

Amnesty International reports that around 400 individuals have been arrested across Russia attending memorials and gatherings in honour of Navalny since his death was announced, according to the OVD-Info protest monitor. [Amnesty International]

World reacts

Many Western politicians held the Russian government responsible for Navalny's death. US President Joe Biden said, "Putin is responsible." He said the incident may speed Congress' approval of a US aid package to Ukraine.

There have been memorials and meetings in Navalny's memory worldwide, including in many European capitals. [Reuters] [Reuters]

European leaders – Olaf Scholz and Emmanuel Macron - and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned Russia. In Germany, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said to reporters, "It is obvious: he was killed by Putin."

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has called responses from Western leaders "absolutely rabid".

(cqk-ik/gc)

Greece takes command of EU naval operation against Houthi attacks in Red Sea

Greece formally agreed on February 26 to take command of a European Union maritime security operation aiming to protect commercial shipping from attacks by Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen.

The Houthis have launched a series of attacks on Israeli and Western ships in the Red Sea in proclaimed solidarity with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli forces are carrying out military operations after a deadly Hamas attack on October 7. [Reuters]

In December, the US and other countries launched a mission amid fears that disruption in one of the world's top trading arteries could hit the global economy. Some European countries have raised

reservations about the plan, which has seen the US and Britain launch airstrikes on Houthi positions, and baulked at the idea of being under Washington's command.

France, Germany and Italy are among the countries that will participate in the EU mission named Aspides, meaning protector, which initially will see three vessels under EU command.

“We all understand that participation in this operation involves risks, significant risks,” Greek Defence Minister Nikos Dendias said while on a visit to the navy frigate Hydra at a naval base near Athens.

“Greece, as a maritime power with a leading role in global shipping, attaches great importance to the need to safeguard the freedom of navigation, as well as the life of Greek seafarers,” Dendias said.” [AP]

Greece, a major commercial shipping power, has been directly affected by the Houthi attacks. The port of Piraeus, near Athens, reported a 12.7% drop in activity at its container terminal in January, on an annual basis.

Germany sends frigate

Germany sent a powerful air defence frigate to join the EU mission in the Red Sea to protect merchant ships. [Reuters]

“Free sea trade routes are the basis of our industry and of our capability to defend ourselves,” the chief of the German navy, Vice Admiral Jan Christian Kaack, told reporters in Berlin. [Reuters]

“The current situation in the Red Sea has already caused bottlenecks in supply and forced some companies to stop their production,” he said, adding that more than 90% of all goods reached Europe and Germany by sea.

The French navy in February shot down two drones over the Red Sea, the defence ministry in Paris said. [Times of Israel]

France’s navy, which has two frigates deployed in the area, detected “multiple drone attacks originating in Yemen” before destroying two of the unmanned aircraft, the ministry said. The attack came a day after the European Union formally launched its naval mission to protect Red Sea shipping.

(js-st/gc)

Farmers protest against EU policies

Farmers blocked a border crossing between Poland and Germany, threw bottles at police in Brussels and gathered in Madrid to demand action on cheap supermarket prices and what they say is unfair competition from abroad. [MSN]

In Italy, Spain and Poland, farmers have demonstrated as part of ongoing protests against European Union farming policies. They are demanding measures to combat production cost hikes, reduced profits and unfair competition from non-EU countries.[AP]

Farmers complain that the 27-nation EU's policies on the environment and other matters are a financial burden and make their products more expensive than non-EU imports.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, has made some concessions over the last few weeks, including shelving plans to halve the use of pesticides and other dangerous substances. Nonetheless, the protests have spread. [AP]

But farmers are demanding more. [MSN]

"We're here again in Brussels today as farmers because the European Union is not listening to our demands. Our demands are for fair revenue," said Morgan Ody, general coordinator of farming organisation La Via Campesina. [MSN]

Italian protests

Various Italian farmers' groups have been protesting since the beginning of January. Over a thousand took to the streets of Rome on February 15 to criticise EU regulations for their industry.

Three rallies took place in Rome, at the offices of the European Union, in front of the offices of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and at the historic Circus Maximus. [euronews] [Reuters]

Farmers' organisation CRA complained that agricultural producers have little say in political decisions imposed from above and no contractual power regarding prices. The association has sent a letter to the EU Commission telling European institutions not to interfere in national affairs. [euronews]

Polish protestors block border crossings with Ukraine

In Poland, thousands of farmers marched through the centre of Warsaw to the parliament buildings on

February 27 to protest at EU climate policies and cheaper imported agricultural products.

Some demonstrators carried banners directed at Poland's eastern neighbour that read: "Take care of your family's health. Don't eat crap from Ukraine".

In a wave of protests that started earlier in the month, Polish farmers blocked roads around the country as well as border crossings with Ukraine. Kyiv has called on Poland to dismantle the blockades, threatening retaliation. [Notes From Poland]

The European Commission announced in late January that the EU would extend the suspension of tariffs on Ukrainian exports until mid-2025 to support the economy of the war-torn nation. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Slovenian farmers join protests

Farmers in Slovenia have staged small-scale protests across the country, joining their other EU member state counterparts. [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

The demonstrators have expressed a wide range of grievances related to both domestic and EU policies. [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

In messaging targeted at the Slovenian government, the farmers have expressed opposition to a proposal to build retention basins that would control flooding, stating that they are concerned that their land will be expropriated. [Dnevnik] [Slovenia Times]

Officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Natural Resources and Spatial Affairs met with farmers to talk about the retention basins, as well as a number of other issues. However, representatives of several major farmers' unions have said they have stood firm in their requests. [Dnevnik]

"We insisted on our demands and did not agree to half-hearted or vague solutions," said Farmers' Union President Anton Medved. [Dnevnik]

Meanwhile, Slovenians, along with other European farmers, have criticised the EU for importing cheap food from countries with fewer agricultural regulations, making it difficult for producers in member states to compete. [Slovenia Times] [CNN]

Spanish farmers join protests

Spanish farmers also joined the protests and blocked city streets with tractors on February 6. Disruption occurred in several regions of Spain, including in

Barcelona, where numerous tractors surrounded the regional parliament. [Reuters]

The protests, which were supported by the country's three main farmers' associations, were in response to inflated costs, European bureaucracy and the EU's failure to tackle cheap competition from outside the union. [BBC]

The financial struggles of Spain's farming industry have also been said to be exacerbated by severe droughts in the country. In Catalonia, a state of emergency has been declared. [BBC]

(jt-pk-evk-acn)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgian police arrest four for allegedly plotting terrorist attacks

Belgian police on March 3 arrested four youths over messages they exchanged allegedly plotting a terrorist attack deemed "imminent enough to intervene," a spokesman for the federal prosecutor's office told AFP. [Al Arabiya]

The four -- three minors in their "late teens" and an adult man aged 18 -- were arrested when police raided home addresses in the cities of Brussels, Ninove, Charleroi and Liege, the spokesman, Eric Van Der Sypt, said. Al Arabiy

No weapons or explosives were found. Police took away mobile phones and laptops for analysis, he said,

confirming reports from Belgian media RTBF and HLN. The messages the four exchanged on the internet about the alleged planned attack were “worrying enough to intervene, to do house searches,” Van Der Sypt said.

(gc)

Belgium becomes first in EU to recognise ecocide as international crime,

Belgium's Federal Parliament approved a completely renewed Penal Code, which – for the first time in Europe – includes recognition of the crime of ecocide at national and international levels, the Brussels Times reported.

From now on, ecocide is included in the criminal code, as are crimes against humanity and genocide. This ecocide law makes it possible to convict and punish serious, large-scale and irreversible crimes against nature with 20 years in prison and a fine of EUR 1.6 million – making Belgium the first EU Member State to bring domestic law in line with the European Union's revised Environmental Crimes Directive. [BrusselsTimes]

"A crime against nature is by definition a crime against all of us. The recognition of ecocide in criminal law is a milestone in the recognition of nature's rights," said Ruth-Marie Henckes, Biodiversity Campaigner at Greenpeace. [BrusselsTimes]

(gc)

France guarantees abortion access by adding a line to constitution

French lawmakers voted officially in favour of adding a line guaranteeing the "freedom" to have an abortion to the country's Constitution.

The symbolic vote needed three-fifths of both houses of parliament to vote to make the change official, with both MPs and Senators agreeing on the exact legislative text. [Euronews]

There were 780 votes in favour and 72 against, easily passing the threshold of 512 needed votes. [Euronews]

The vote was the final step to approve the constitutional change after France's Senate voted to

approve the government's proposed law, while the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, voted to approve the change in January. [Euronews]

Prime Minister Gabriel Attal told the joint session of Parliament on March 4 that he would remember the pride of having been present as "together, united, full of emotion, [we] change our fundamental right, our fundamental law to finally include women's freedom because we owe a moral debt to all these women." [Euronews]

Yael Braun-Pivet, president of the National Assembly, said: "To women in France, we say that we will never roll back (this freedom)." [Euronews]

“This historic vote makes France the first country ever to enshrine abortion in its constitution and is of huge significance given the rollback of this essential right around the world,” Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, said. “Protecting the freedom to access an abortion provides an important bulwark against these increasingly vociferous anti-rights movements. [Amnesty]

“The United States has shown how devastatingly, dangerous and retrogressive it is to undermine abortion as a right,” Callamard added. “ In Europe, there are still countries such as Poland and Andorra, where access to abortion is highly restricted and where those fighting for this right face prosecution. Today’s vote in France should pave the way for stronger protection of access to abortion elsewhere.” [Amnesty]

(gc)

France expels radical Tunisian imam calling for ‘destruction of Western society’

French authorities deported an imam residing in the south of France to his native Tunisia on February 2 after giving sermons that "conveyed a literal, backward, intolerant, and violent conception of Islam,” according to French officials and Agence France Presse (AFP). [France 24] [Reuters]

The “radical Imam Mahjoub Mahjoubi has just been expelled from the national territory, less than 12 hours after his arrest,” France’s Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, who issued the ministerial deportation order, said in a statement on X. “We will not let people get away with anything."

Darmanin added the remarks of the 52-year-old imam- who had been preaching at the city of Bagnols-sur-Ceze's Ettaoube mosque- were "unacceptable." [Reuters]

The official expulsion order stated that Mahjoubi's sermons, delivered earlier this February were, "likely to encourage behaviours contrary to the values of the Republic, discrimination against women, identity retreat, tensions with the Jewish community, and jihadist radicalization."[Reuters] [France 24]

The order goes on to cite the imam's alleged castigation of "the Jewish people as the enemy," his calls for "the destruction of Western society," and highlights a video Mahjoubi shared in which he appears to describe the "tricolour" (the common name for the French flag) as "satanic" and of "no value with Allah." [France 24]

'Slip of the tongue'?

Mahjoubi said these remarks were "a slip of the tongue," and that he was discussing football rivalries between various North African countries at the African Cup of Nations. He also referred to his deportation as "an arbitrary decision." [France 24]

Mahjoubi had been in France since the 1980s but did not hold French citizenship, though his five children do. Speaking to AFP in Soliman, Tunisia- where he now resides with his in-laws- Mahjoubi said his lawyer Samir Hamroun is "going to take legal action in France if the court does not grant me justice, I will appeal, and then I will appeal to the European Court of Human Rights." [rfi] [France 24]

Some see the imam's deportation due to these actions as a testament to France's recently adopted immigration bill. The legislation has been viewed as tougher in such instances and, according to Minister Darmanin, "makes France stronger." [rfi] [Europe in Review Monthly, December]

(cqk/gc)

Jewish man stabbed six times on the streets of Paris

A Jewish man was stabbed while walking through a Paris neighbourhood in an attack the public prosecutor's office is investigating as "attempted murder on the grounds of religion." [Le Parisien]

The alleged hate crime occurred around 6:30 pm on the evening of February 12, as the 35-year-old victim walked on the sidewalk along Rue de la Tombe-Issoire in Paris's 14th arrondissement.

The assailant allegedly yelled multiple anti-semitic slurs before plunging a knife into the victim's back a total of six times, after which he fled the scene. [Le Parisien] [The Jerusalem Post]

Le Parisien reported there were many witnesses to the brutal assault, some of whom helped tend to the man's wounds until firefighters and police arrived.

"There were a lot of people around the man who was stabbed, including a lady who seemed to be treating him," a gardienne for one of the buildings told the French newspaper. [Le Parisien]

The suspect- also 35 years of age- was arrested around three hours later at his residence in the city's 18th arrondissement. Both he and the victim were reportedly former childhood friends who had recently rekindled their friendship.

However, according to Le Parisien, the victim said his attacker became "obsessed with the Jewish faith" and had been sending him "several threats, malicious phone calls and anti-Semitic insults."

This hostility prompted the victim to file a complaint with French authorities and suspend contact with the suspect prior to the attack. [Le Parisien]

France has experienced an overwhelming 1500% increase in anti-semitic acts aimed at the nation's Jewish community over the past months, most notably since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. [Le Monde]

(cqk/gc)

Germany's Scholz breaks ground on new ammunition plant

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, broke ground on February 12 on a new factory that will produce ammunition, including artillery shells, as the war in Russia grinds on into its third year. [AP]

Defence company Rheinmetall will build the EUR 300 million plant at its existing site in Unterluess in northern Germany. The plant will produce around

200,000 artillery shells a year, along with explosives and possibly other components, including warheads. Rheinmetall will carry most of the facility costs. [AP]

Scholz said Rheinmetall was "laying the foundation for supplying the Bundeswehr and our partners in Europe with artillery ammunition independently and above all durably."

The war in Ukraine heightened anxiety in Germany about the preparedness of its own armed forces, prompting Scholz days after the Russian invasion to announce what he called a "turning point" in military spending.

Rheinmetall is the sole defence contractor capable of supplying the Ukrainian military with large amounts of new medium- and large-calibre ammunition, including 20mm for the Marder infantry fighting vehicle, 40mm ammunition, as well as 105mm for the Leopard 1 and 120mm tank ammunition for the Leopard 2. [Rheinmetall]

Rheinmetall is an essential strategic partner of Ukraine for the supply of 155mm of artillery ammunition - several tens of thousands of rounds have already been delivered, with tens of thousands more to follow in 2024. In December 2023, the German government also placed an order with Rheinmetall to supply several tens of thousands of rounds in 2025. [Rheinmetall]

"The new security situation has made it clear to everyone just how fragile peace and stability in Europe really are," Rheinmetall said on its website in a statement detailing a visit by the country's Defense Minister, Boris Pistorius, to a company facility in Unterlüß on February 20. [Rheinmetall]

During the visit, Pistorious pledged to embark on a new course in the realm of security policy and initiated a close dialogue with the German defence industry.

"Neither the German defence ministry nor the German government makes its own ammunition," Pistorius said in a concluding statement. "That's why we have to find new ways forward, which we're currently working on." [Rheinmetall]

Rheinmetall CEO Armin Papperger briefed the defence minister on topics such as the multilateral equipment exchange programme, support for Ukraine and the major expansion of capacity currently underway at Rheinmetall's largest factory, for example, in ammunition production. [Rheinmetall]

(js/gc)

Second British naval vessel pulls out of NATO exercise

A British Royal Navy aircraft carrier has failed to set sail for the largest military exercise in Europe since the Cold War with approximately 90,000 troops from all NATO allies. [BBC]

HMS Prince of Wales was due to replace HMS Queen Elizabeth in Exercise Steadfast Defender, which pulled out of the exercise because of a mechanical failure. The GBP3 billion HMS Prince of Wales remained in Portsmouth. [BBC]

The United Kingdom will deploy 20,000 military personnel for the NATO exercise Steadfast Defender amid concerns among US officials that the British military is no longer a top-level fighting force. The exercise is poised to test and refine NATO's defence plans for reinforcing European defences against a near-peer adversary. [Gov.Uk][NATO][BBC]

"Today, our adversaries are busily rebuilding their barriers. Old enemies are reanimated. Battle lines are being redrawn," British Defence Minister Grant Shapps said when announcing the UK's participation in the exercise. "The tanks are literally on Ukraine's lawn. And the foundations of the world order are being shaken to their core. We stand at a crossroads."

STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024 is designed to provide valuable insights for enhancing NATO's defence plans and improving interoperability, efficiency, and resilience. This effort aims to demonstrate NATO's commitment to collective defence and send a robust message about its readiness to protect all Allies in the face of emerging threats.

The exercise is strategically located in several key European countries, including Finland, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Events will take place from the end of January to May 31, 2024, and will be divided into two parts.

(js/gc)

British Labour Party suspends support for by-election candidate for Israel-Gaza comments

The British Labour Party has ended support for a Rochdale by-election candidate after leaked audio with comments on Israel and its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. [The Independent]

In the audio, Azhar Ali suggested that Netanyahu deliberately allowed the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, claiming the Israeli leader "took the security off" and "allowed the massacre" to occur. His comments also implied that such actions give Israel the "green light to do whatever they want" in Gaza, where more than 28,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Health officials. [The Independent] [NBC News]

The leaked recording, taken during a Lancashire Labour Party meeting, also captured Ali alleging that Labour's suspension of left-wing MP Andy McDonald was influenced by "people in the media from certain Jewish quarters." Ali has since backtracked on his comments and publicly apologised, acknowledging its cost in losing Labour's support for the Rochdale by-election. [The Independent]

He said that his remarks were "deeply offensive, ignorant, and false," extending apologies to the Jewish community. Ali clarified that the responsibility for the October 7 attack lay solely with Hamas and apologised for any harm caused. Labour's national campaign coordinator, Pat McFadden, stated Ali's comments were completely wrong. [BBC]

Despite being on the ballot on February 29 due to electoral rules preventing a candidate change, Labour is no longer endorsing Ali, and he will not sit as a Labour MP if elected. The contention surrounding Ali's comments has led to questions about his selection as a replacement for the late Sir Tony Lloyd, triggering the by-election.

Initially standing by Ali when the comments were first reported, Labour later blamed his suspension on "new information" from a Daily Mail report, alleging that he attributed another MP's suspension to "people in the media from certain Jewish quarters." The party's decision to withdraw support has raised questions about how antisemitism is handled within the Labour Party, with a review led by lawyer Martin Forde KC viewing the party's crisis management as "shambolic".

In tandem, the suspension of Ali sparks broader debate within the Labour Party about handling criticism related to Israel and accusations of antisemitism. The party has faced internal tensions, and some critics, such as Simon Pia, a former spin doctor for the Labour Party, argue that the accusations

of antisemitism are being weaponised to stifle dissenting voices, raising questions about the party's stance on Israeli state-related criticism [Al Jazeera].

Nonetheless, Forde claimed a perceived disparity in the treatment of allegations based on factional affiliations within the party. In response to the new information about Ali's comments, a Labour spokesman confirmed the withdrawal of support for Azhar Ali as the party's candidate in the Rochdale by-election [The Independent].

(ha/gc)

British MPs pass Northern Ireland power-sharing accord

British Members of Parliament approved the government's plan to revive the power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland.

The legislation, aimed at implementing changes to trade arrangements after Brexit, was passed in the Commons and will now proceed to the House of Lords for its final approval.

The government's deal, which includes removing routine checks on goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, is expected to lead to the re-establishment of the Stormont executive after a two-year hiatus. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson expressed optimism, confirming the conditions for the power-sharing executive's return and suggesting that the Assembly could convene.

Due to intense negotiations with the DUP, the deal also involves amending the Withdrawal Act to eliminate the automatic application of EU law in Northern Ireland. The fast-tracked domestic legislation in Parliament aligns with commitments outlined in the Safeguarding The Union command paper published by the government on Wednesday. [Sky News]

However, not all unionist politicians share the same enthusiasm. Former DUP leader Lord Dodds raised concerns in the House of Lords, emphasising worries about the continued existence of the Irish Sea border and the application of EU laws over various economic sectors in Northern Ireland. Despite assurances from some unionist politicians, including DUP MP Sammy Wilson, about potential issues with future arrangements, the plan passed in the Commons without a formal vote. [Sky News] [BBC]

SDLP leader Colum Eastwood expressed reservations about its impact on north-south cooperation. The debate in the Commons revealed divisions within the DUP, with some MPs, including Sammy Wilson, labelling the government as "spineless" and "Brexit-betraying".

The legislation's passage in the Commons sets the stage for the potential restoration of power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, with the Northern Ireland Assembly expected to resume activities. The developments mark a crucial step towards resolving the complexities of post-Brexit trade arrangements and restoring regional political stability. [BBC]

(ha/gc)

Former PM Truss unveils new 'Popular Conservatism' party

Former British Prime Minister Liz Truss has officially launched the "Popular Conservatism" movement, signalling a shift against more progressive politics within the Conservative Party.

Joined by former Business Secretary Jacob Rees-Mogg, Truss criticised her party for its perceived failure to confront left-wing extremism, urging a renewed commitment to conservative values. [Al Jazeera]

The movement's core objectives, outlined at the launch event held at Westminster's Emmanuel Centre, include countering "wokeism," challenging anti-capitalist sentiments, and restoring confidence in democratic principles. Truss and Rees-Mogg specifically targeted human rights legislation, the influence of the "international elite," and concerns about the environmental movement's impact on conservative policies. [Al Jazeera] [BBC]

While a controversial mini budget marked Truss's brief prime ministership, the Popular Conservatism movement distances itself from directly undermining current party leader Rishi Sunak, emphasising a focus on countering perceived obstacles to conservative goals, such as unelected bodies hindering policy implementation. [Al Jazeera] [BBC]

Despite Truss's lingering unpopularity, supporters argue that her ideas deserve consideration, and the movement asserts that its formation is not intended to sabotage Sunak's upcoming election campaign. [BBC]

As the Conservative Party faces internal divisions and trails in polls, the emergence of the Popular Conservatism movement adds a new dynamic to the political landscape, setting the stage for a potentially transformative period ahead of the general election.

The shift within the conservative party also comes amid as both major parties re-evaluate their green commitment. [BBC] [Financial Times]

Recent developments indicate a departure from the once-trendy green focus. Labour's decision to step back from its GBP 28 billion annual green spending commitment and the Conservatives rumoured to drop the "boiler tax" signal a noticeable change in political attitudes.

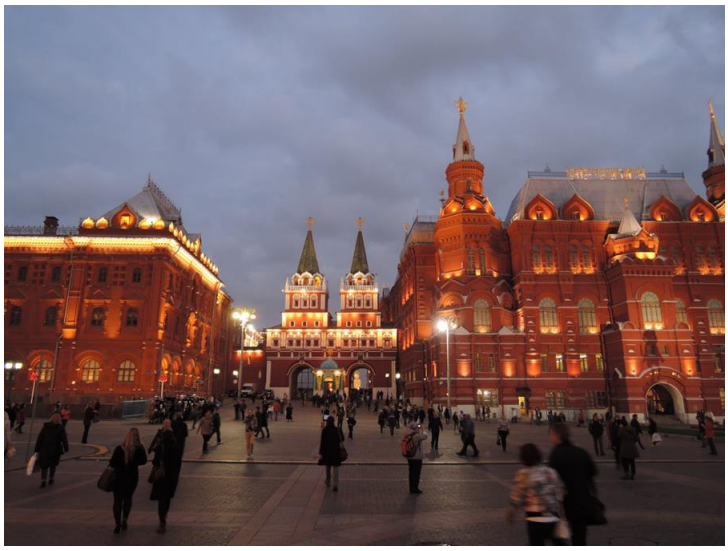
The shift began in September when Prime Minister Rishi Sunak slowed down existing green plans, triggering mixed reactions within the Conservative party. While some praised the move for addressing voters' concerns about the cost of going green, others criticised it for downplaying the importance of environmental issues. [BBC]

The Conservative party faces internal pressure to abandon its "boiler tax," with former cabinet minister Robert Jenrick warning against "dangerous green fantasy economics." Conversely, Labour's Sir Keir Starmer has been accused of being "economically illiterate and environmentally irresponsible" by party members.

Despite these political shifts, the legal obligations set by former Prime Minister Theresa May, requiring the UK to achieve net zero by 2050 and cut emissions by nearly 70% by 2030, remain unchanged. These commitments, embedded in law, continue to guide the government's actions, even as political attitudes fluctuate. [BBC]

(ha/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



Riga to rename several streets with Russia connections

Latvia has decided to rename several streets in Riga, including Maskavas Street, to remove references to Russia. [LSM]

The Riga City Council decided to rename Maskavas Street to Latgales Street, which is historically its original name. The existing Latgales Street will be renamed Jaņa Klidzeja Street, honouring Latvian writer and poet Janis Klidzejs. [LSM]

Other streets named after Russian figures like Pushkin, Turgenev, Lermontov, Gogol, and Lomonosov will adopt the names of Latvian cultural figures. For instance, Tipografijas Street will become Augusts Spariņs Street, honouring military officer Augusts Sparin. [LSM]

The move, costing approximately EUR 80,000, sparked heated debates. Latvian representatives argued for the renaming amid geopolitical tensions, while members of the Latvian Russians Union opposed the changes, emphasising the historical significance of streets like Maskavas.

The decision had support from the majority of Riga City Council's coalition and Progressives but faced opposition from the Latvian Russians Union, Harmony, and independent party members [Baltic News Network].

(ha/gc)

Russian economy expands by 3.6% in 2023 on military spending

The Russian economy expanded by 3.6% in 2023, compared with a retraction of 1.2% in 2022, according to the Statistics service Rosstat's GDP growth assessment. [Reuters]

The International Monetary Fund has forecast that Russia's economy will grow faster in 2024 than all G7 countries due to higher military spending for Moscow's war in Ukraine. Since the invasion in February 2022, Moscow has purchased large quantities of arms and ammunition, which has stimulated the economy. [Reuters]

The IMF revised upward its growth forecast for Russia, saying that the Russian economy has been enjoying a stronger-than-expected expansion since last year. The IMF released its latest projections at the end of January. The fund's analysts believe that Russia will log 2.6 percent growth in 2024, 1.5 percentage points higher than their projection in October. [NHK]

The IMF says the sustained growth reflects a high level of military spending and robust private consumption, supported by wage rises amid a tight labour market. The revision is in contrast to several downgrades the fund has given to advanced economies.

According to economists, the rise in the country's gross domestic product has yet to improve the lives of ordinary Russians, who are confronting high inflation and lower wages. Unemployment is at a record low of 2.9%, primarily due to Russians joining the military or leaving the country.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeking re-election in March, has said the economy is developing and has a safety margin sufficient to allow Russia to successfully transition away from the West amid sanctions imposed over the Ukraine war.

Russia-based economists say the economy is now showing serious signs of overheating as Moscow ploughs on with what it calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine and that for all the current optimism, stagnation or recession now looms. [Reuters]

Russia's Centre for Macroeconomic Analysis and Short-term Forecasting (CAMAC) attributes around 60-65% of increased industrial output in the last two years to the Ukraine conflict. [Reuters]

Other economists say Russia is pumping the economy with one-time, unproductive investments that yield limited future benefits. [Reuters]

"Production in the military-industrial complex is, to put it bluntly, throwing money out of the economy," said economist Alexandra Suslina. "Conventional tanks and bombs are something that are used once and give no splashback to the economy. [Reuters]

"It is impossible to create a high-tech machine that could further contribute to growth from the remains of a tank."

The IMF predicts Russia will log 1.1-percent growth in 2025. [NHK]

(lk/gc)

Putin gives wide-ranging interview to Tucker Carlson

In an exclusive interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, provided the reasons behind Moscow's military invasion, and expressed concerns over the expansion of NATO eastward.

The interview provided a rare glimpse into Putin's thinking on multiple issues, including his view of corruption in Ukraine and the historical context of strained relations with US-led Western powers.

Historical context and NATO expansion

Putin began by delving into the historical context of the Ukraine crisis, emphasising the deep-rooted historical, cultural, and economic ties between Russia and Ukraine. He argued that the West's expansion of NATO eastward had been a source of increasing concern for Russia, perceiving it as a threat to its security.

Putin expressed dissatisfaction with the West's disregard for Russia's apprehensions, stressing that NATO's eastward expansion had deteriorated relations between Moscow and the Western world.

Putin also criticised the arbitrary pressure within NATO and recounted the 2008 Bucharest Summit, when Ukraine and Georgia were invited to join despite opposition from Germany and France. He emphasised his concerns about the lack of democratic decision-making and the influence of the US in NATO.

Legitimacy of military intervention

Addressing the military intervention in Ukraine, Putin asserted that Russia had legitimate reasons to safeguard the interests of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations. He highlighted the alleged persecution and discrimination of Russian communities, arguing that Moscow had a duty to protect them.

Putin contended that Russia's military presence prevented a humanitarian crisis and ensured the local population's safety rather than seeking aggressive expansion. He also asserted that he had no intention of invading Poland or Latvia.

Dialogue and diplomacy

Putin expressed his willingness to engage in dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the war peacefully. He emphasised the importance of open communication and mutual understanding between Russia and the West, calling for a diplomatic solution to avoid further escalation.

"We're open to dialogue. It's crucial to understand each other's concerns and work towards a resolution through diplomatic channels. The path to peace lies in respectful communication and finding common ground."

Alleged corruption in Ukraine

Putin shifted the focus to internal Ukrainian affairs, discussing corruption after the 2014 ousting of the Yanukovych government. He linked this upheaval to economic instability and political unrest, which, in turn, fuelled Russia's involvement in the region.

Additionally, Putin discussed his perception of the rise of far-right ideologies in Ukraine, alleged connections to Nazi ideologies and their involvement in a coup d'etat against pro-Russian leaders in Ukraine.

Russian-US relations

Putin discussed the historical context of strained relations with the US, dating back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argued that the US had broken its promise that there would be no NATO expansion eastward after the Soviet Union's dissolution.

In response to his attempts to cooperate with the US, Putin recalled multiple instances where Washington rejected diplomatic efforts. He highlighted his efforts to join NATO, starting in 2000, which were initially positive but eventually rebuffed.

"We've tried to cooperate with the US on various occasions, only to face resistance and unwillingness to engage in a meaningful dialogue," Putin said.

(ha/gc)

Dutch-based owner sells stake $5.2b stake in Russia's Google, Yandex

The Dutch-based parent company of Yandex, often referred to as "Russia's Google," has sold the operation in Russia for $5.2 billion, much lower than its estimated market value. The sale to a consortium of investors means Yandex's Russian business is now a fully Russian-owned entity. [BBC]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has hurt Yandex's profits, with its delivery services in the West halted and almost a sixth of its employees fleeing the country. It is one of the most significant corporate exits since the beginning of the war with Ukraine. [New York Times]

The assets sold include an internet browser and Russia's primary app for delivery and taxi services. [BBC]

The firm has previously been accused of hiding information about the war in Ukraine from the Russian public. [BBC]

Moscow has welcomed the latest deal, which the company said was "the product of an extensive period of planning and negotiation over more than 18 months." [BBC]

"This is exactly what we wanted to achieve a few years ago when Yandex was under threat of being taken over by Western IT giants," said Anton Gorelkin, deputy head of the Russian parliament's committee on information policy. Yandex is more than a company; it is an asset of the entire Russian society," he added.

Set up in the dotcom boom in the late 1990s, Yandex developed its own search engine, mapping and advertising businesses. Other services include taxis and food delivery. [New York Times]

Yandex's co-founder, Arkady Volozh, is one of the very few top Russia-linked businessmen to have publicly spoken out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He left the firm in 2022. [BBC]

The company and Volozh have been hit with sanctions by the European Union, which in 2022 said Yandex is

"responsible for promoting [Russian] state media and narratives in its search results and deranking and removing content critical of the Kremlin, such as content related to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine."

(ik/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bulgaria court rejects far-right initiative to hold EU accession referendum

Bulgaria's Constitutional Court dismissed on February 8 an initiative to hold a national referendum to delay the country's accession to the eurozone.

The proposal for the referendum was first submitted to Parliament in April 2023 and aimed to keep the Bulgarian lev as the country's official currency until 2043. Parliament first rejected the proposal in July 2023 on the grounds that Bulgarian law prohibits referendums on international treaties. [BulgarianNews Agency (BTA)]

A few days later, members of the far-right Revival party and populist There Is Such a People party petitioned to declare parliament's refusal of the referendum as unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court voted in favour of declining this petition.

While the court was in session, the Revival party staged protests in front of the court building, burning an effigy

of a Constitutional Court judge and setting a car on fire.[BulgarianNews Agency (BTA)]

The leader of the party, Kostadin Kostadinov, called the ruling an "unprecedented crime." [Radio Bulgaria]

Bulgaria aims to join the eurozone and start using the euro instead of the lev as of January 1, 2025. Supporters of Bulgaria's move to join the eurozone see it as an opportunity to make its EU membership irreversible. [Euractiv]

(km/gc)

Bulgaria arrests state security officer for allegedly spying for Russia

Bulgaria's state security services arrested an employee at the country's interior ministry on February 5 on suspicion of espionage for Russia.

The employee was an officer at Bulgaria's General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and is believed to have leaked classified information to a former Russian embassy employee. [Politico]

"This individual was passing sensitive information for months, for a bit less than a year," General Secretary of the

Ministry of Interior, Zhivko Kotzev, said. "There's a possibility of more consequences and arrests." [Balkan Insight]

Authorities also made a second arrest at the security agency. Both individuals are suspected to have committed espionage.[Euractiv]

Bulgaria has expelled more than 100 alleged spies and arrested several Bulgarians accused of working with Russian intelligence services.

(km/gc)

Greece legalises same-sex marriage

Greece became the first Christian-Orthodox country to legalise same-sex marriage, a move that the Greek Orthodox Church opposed and sparked protests. The bill was voted into law on February 16. [The Guardian]

"We have waited years for this," prominent gay activist Stella Belia said. The legislation that "will not only allow same-sex couples to exchange vows in civil ceremonies but also to adopt children... It's a historic moment. A lot of us weren't sure it would ever come," she said." [The Guardian]

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis sees the new law as progressive. "Conservatism should not be conflated with antiquated views that were out of sync with modern society," he said. [The Guardian]

The bill aligns Greece with European values, making Greece the 16th European country to legalise same-sex marriage. The LGBTQA+ community has criticised the bill for being incomplete since it does not legalise adoption.

Only single women and heterosexual couples with reproductive issues are allowed to go through surrogacy. [The Guardian]

Criticism

The Orthodox Church has threatened to excommunicate political leaders supporting the bill. More than 1,500 protesters gathered in central Athens to oppose legislation that would legalise same-sex marriage in Greece before the bill was voted on in parliament in days. [AP News]

Organisers of the rally — religious groups — described the bill as a threat to the traditional family. Many of the protesters chanted, "Hands off our children." [AP News]

"Unfortunately, the woke agenda has also reached Greece, and that agenda includes the marriage of homosexuals," Dimitris Natsios, leader of the far-right and strongly religious Niki party, told the Associated Press.

"Greece is a Christian Orthodox country, and our tradition does not allow this. ... We know and respect one type of marriage: The Orthodox Christian wedding. Our Constitution also does not provide for this, so this bill is unconstitutional and runs counter to our faith in Christ," Natsios said.

(st/gc)

Terrorists attack Turkey's largest courthouse

Two assailants were killed, and six people, including three police officers, were injured after a "terrorist attack" at Istanbul's largest courthouse, according to Turkish Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya. [Yahoo]

The attackers belonged to the leftist extremist group DHKP-C, Yerlikaya announced on social media platform X, formerly Twitter. [Daily Sabbah][Yahoo]

The DHKP-C has been listed as a terrorist group by the US and the European Union. In 2013, the group carried out a suicide bombing of the US Embassy in Ankara.

It was also responsible for killing the Turkish prosecutor Mehmet Selim Kiraz and a Turkish tycoon in 1996. The group has been active since 1980 and has continuously targeted high-profile Turkish officials. [Daily Sabbah]

(st/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Hard-right PM Meloni suffers election blow in Sardinia

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has suffered her first major regional election setback since she came to power in 2022 after her right-wing bloc lost control of Sardinia.

The February 25 election on the Mediterranean island produced the first significant regional win in almost a decade for left-wing parties, which have struggled to build a viable opposition to the country's ruling

coalition, headed by Meloni's hard-right Brothers of Italy. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

In Sardinia, Alessandra Todde, supported by the opposition Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, narrowly defeated right-wing candidate Paolo Truzzu, who was backed by Meloni.

Todde becomes the first female president of the Italian island. She won 45.4% of the vote, while Truzzu received 45%. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Elly Schein, the head of the opposition Democratic Party, said: "The wind is changing, although some people would not have bet on it". [The Guardian]

The election underscored divisions within Italy's right-wing ruling coalition, with disagreements over candidate selection between Meloni and Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League party.

Salvini's preferred candidate, Christian Solinas, was sidelined in favour of Truzzu, leading to fractures within the coalition and raising questions about its cohesion moving forward, according to The Guardian.

At 52.4%, the turnout in Sardinia was lower than in the 2019 regional elections, when 53.8% of voters cast ballots. [FAZ]

Todde secured victories in the key cities of Cagliari, Sassari and Quartu, along with a resounding majority in her hometown of Nuoro. [L'Unione Sarda]

(acn/pk)

Anger as Italian riot police beat young pro-Palestinian protesters

Video footage of truncheon-wielding riot police beating young pro-Palestinian demonstrators in Italy has caused anger among politicians and the public.

Clashes broke out on February 23 in the cities of Florence and Pisa when officers blocked marches attended by students and school pupils. In Florence, 17 people were injured, at least 11 of whom were minors.

The incidents sparked arguments about the police's handling of demonstrations. [Reuters]

Italian President Sergio Mattarella reacted by telling right-wing Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi that "the authority of the forces of law and order is not

measured by the yardstick of truncheons, but by their ability to ensure security while protecting the freedom to publicly express one's opinions." [Le Monde]

Piantedosi said that a transparent investigation was needed, adding: "We all hope that public demonstrations take place peacefully and without incidents, and when it comes to physical contact with minors it is in any case a defeat." [AP News]

Elly Schlein, the leader of the centre-left opposition Democratic Party, said Italy's hard-right government, which came to power in 2022 pledging to uphold law and order, was creating a "climate of repression". [Reuters]

Public broadcaster accused of bias

Earlier in February, there were clashes between demonstrators and police in several cities at rallies that were directed against what protesters claimed was the biased, pro-Israel stance of Italy's public broadcaster RAI on the Gaza conflict.

Unrest broke out in Milan, Turin, Florence, Naples and Bologna between February 13 and 17. Hundreds also converged outside RAI's headquarters in Rome on February 17, with demonstrators accusing the broadcaster's managers of disregarding the plight of Palestinians.

The protests came after a presenter on a RAI programme on February 12 read out a letter written by the broadcaster's CEO, Roberto Sergio, in which he emphasized his "solidarity with the Israeli people and the Jewish community".

"Every day our news and our programmes tell, and will continue to do so, the tragedy of the hostages in the hands of Hamas, as well as recalling the massacre of children, women and men of October 7," the letter read.

Following the statement, Sergio received threats and was given police protection. [Euronews] [Italy24]

His comments came after Italian-Tunisian artist Ghali, during a performance at the Sanremo Music Festival hosted by RAI, called for "genocide in Palestine to be stopped".

His words triggered criticism, particularly from the Israeli ambassador to Italy, Alon Bar. He accused Ghali of using the festival stage to spread hatred, and called this "shameful". [Die Presse]

In an attack from the Gaza Strip on October 7, Palestinian militant group Hamas killed 1,200 people in Israel and seized about 250 hostages. Israel responded with a systematic aerial bombardment and a ground invasion that have laid waste to Gaza. [Reuters]

Israel's offensive has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. [AP News]

According to a survey released in January, 58% of Italians opposed Israel's bombing campaign. [Reuters]

(acn/pk)

Top Italian court says sending boat migrants back to Libya is illegal

Italy's highest court of appeal has ruled that returning boat migrants to Libya violates international law.

The judgement by the Court of Cassation on February 1 upheld the conviction of an Italian ship captain who in 2018 rescued 101 migrants, including pregnant women and children, from a rubber dinghy in international waters off the Libyan coast, and then returned them to Libya.

The captain was sentenced to a year in prison for the abandonment of persons.

The crossing from Libya to Italy is a key route used by migrants seeking a better life in Europe. [Reuters]

The Italian court judgement said that Libya was not a suitable "safe harbour". It added that returning boat migrants to that country violated Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which stipulates that all signatory states are obliged to protect the rights and freedoms of every individual, regardless of origin or nationality. [FAZ]

Italian NGO Mediterranea Saving Humans welcomed the ruling, saying that it "confirms what we have been saying for years: Libya is not a safe country."

Italy's hard-right prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, recently unveiled a EUR 5.5 billion plan to invest in Africa, seeking in return efforts by Africa to curb migration. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

(acn/pk)

Police car attacked as anarchists demonstrate against deportation

Anarchists protesting against the deportation of an immigrant attacked a police car during clashes with law enforcement officers in the northern Italian city of Turin on February 28.

Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi said he was "outraged by the very serious attack", which took place in front of Turin's police headquarters. [Ansa]

Officers were called to watch over a group of anarchists who were marching with a banner that said: "Burn the prison and the CPR", referring to an immigration centre. [Folha Press]

The protesters were demonstrating against the transfer of a man with Moroccan origins to a repatriation centre ahead of eventual expulsion from the country.

(nbnc/pk)

Italy poised to launch EUR 5bn drive for combat vehicles

Italy is set to launch a EUR 5 billion procurement programme for 1,000 combat vehicles as part of a drive to replace its ageing fleet.

Funding for the initiative was included in Italy's 2023 defence budget amid the Russia-Ukraine war.

The operational requirements for the new vehicles have been approved by the Italian defence ministry. Army spokesman Major General Francesco Olla said that "procurement activities will begin in the next few months."

Rome wants Italian workers to benefit but envisions the programme being delivered in a multinational context with "solid European firms that are already working with Italian companies." [Defense News]

German defence firm Rheinmetall and French-German company KNDS are potential partners in the project. In December, under the auspices of the defence ministry in Rome, Italy's defence and aerospace conglomerate Leonardo and KNDS signed a strategic alliance.

(ar/pk)

Portuguese election may produce hung parliament, with far-right as kingmaker

Portugal's two main parties are neck and neck ahead of a March 10 early general election that polls predict could result in a hung parliament, with no single grouping able to form a majority.

At the same time, the far-right Chega party is on the rise and set to become Portugal's third largest grouping, positioning it as a potential kingmaker with enough clout to allow a right-wing bloc to take power.

A strong showing for Chega could add momentum to a drift to the right across Europe. [AP News]

However, Portugal's centre-right opposition Social Democrats have ruled out any alliance with Chega. As a result, there is a large degree of uncertainty about the outcome of the ballot. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

According to an aggregate poll published by Politico on February 21, the Social Democratic Party was backed by 32% of voters and the incumbent Socialist Party by 29%, with Chega on 17% support.

In the election campaign, perceptions of corruption have plagued both main groupings.

The snap election was called after Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Costa was forced to resign following a corruption scandal in his government in November. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Meanwhile, a Lisbon court recently decided that former Socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates should stand trial for alleged fraud and money laundering. [AP News]

At the same time, two Social Democrat officials have resigned in recent weeks amid a graft investigation. [AP News]

Chega's campaign has focused on the alleged corruption of both its bigger rivals. One of Chega's billboards says: "Portugal needs cleaning out". [The Guardian]

(jt/pk)

Portugal offers farming aid package in bid to defuse protests

The Portuguese government has approved a EUR 320 million aid package for the agriculture sector, aiming to alleviate discontent among farmers amid a wave of protests across Europe.

The Confederation of Portuguese Farmers (CAP), which represents 280,000 members, has criticised the package, claiming it is a "political manoeuvre" before a March 10 parliamentary election, and emphasising that only EUR 60 million has been approved to be paid this year. [BNN]

However, the CAP has committed to halting protests in Portugal until a new government is in place, in order "to safeguard national stability". [Reuters]

Smaller farmers' associations that do not share the CAP's position have continued to stage protests and block roads with tractors. [The Portugal News/Reuters]

The aid package includes a 55% reduction in tax on agriculture diesel, EUR 120 million to support mixed farming and organic agriculture, and EUR 200 million to mitigate the effects of persistent drought on farmers' incomes. [Reuters]

Protests by agricultural workers have erupted across much of Europe over the impact of the EU's environmental policies on the sector and cheap competition from outside the bloc. [BBC]

(jt/pk)

Portugal could face fines over alleged failures in environmental protection

The EU's executive began legal proceedings at the bloc's top court on February 7 against Portugal, alleging that the country has failed to comply with an environmental conservation ruling.

The European Court of Justice could now impose financial penalties on Portugal.

The court, the highest in the European Union, on December 5 ordered Portugal to designate 61 sites "of community importance" as "special places of conservation". [Euractiv]

In response, Portugal designated 61 sites by enacting a specific decree. [Portugal Resident]

However, the European Commission, the EU's executive, claims that despite this step, Portugal has

not adopted sufficient conservation measures for those sites. [European Commission]

The commission has also announced that Portugal, along with a number of other European countries, has been taken to the European Court of Justice for failing to revise river basin management plans. [Euractiv]

The commission claims that Portuguese efforts have been insufficient to ensure "good qualitative and quantitative health of European water bodies as well as guaranteeing the availability of sufficient water to simultaneously satisfy human and wildlife needs". [The Portugal News]

(jt/pk)

Conservatives retain majority in Galicia, in blow for PM's Socialists

Spain's main opposition grouping, the conservative People's Party, secured an outright majority in the parliament of the north-western Galicia region in a February 18 local election.

The Socialist party, which is in government at the national level, fared poorly in the vote – its first major electoral test since its leader, Pedro Sanchez, secured another term as prime minister last year.

Observers said the result strengthens People's Party chief Alberto Núñez Feijóo as the country's main opposition leader. [Reuters]

The People's Party won 40 seats in the 75-seat regional parliament after garnering 47.5% of the vote. This is the fifth consecutive victory for the party in Galicia's local elections. [France 24]

Feijóo had appeared to jeopardise his grouping's prospects when he indicated, a week before the election, that he was not against pardoning Catalan separatists. This was widely seen as a U-turn after the People's Party previously opposed an amnesty, a hot-potato issue in Spanish politics.

Some observers had said that the race in Galicia would be close and that the Socialists and the left-wing Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG) could join forces to secure a majority and remove the People's Party from power in the region. However, the People's Party defied the predictions. [The Guardian]

The BNG won 25 seats while the Socialists secured nine, five fewer than in the last regional election four years ago. [Reuters]

The rising support for the BNG, which improved its result by six seats, has elevated the party to the position of the primary opposition force in the region. [The Guardian]

(jt/pk)

Water-use limits imposed in Catalonia amid record drought

The authorities have declared a “state of emergency” in Catalonia, imposing water-use limits for farmers and private individuals, as the north-eastern region of Spain experiences its most severe drought on record.

There has been no rainfall in the area for months, resulting in reservoir levels plummeting to 16% below their usual capacity. [Al Jazeera] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

In the first stage of restrictions that have been enacted amid the state of emergency, washing cars, watering public gardens, and public showers have been banned. [BBC]

Additionally, restrictions have been imposed to substantially reduce water consumption for agricultural irrigation and livestock farming in Catalonia. [BBC]

Limits on individual water use have also been introduced, cutting the permitted quantity from 210 litres per person per day to 200. [Al Jazeera]

The restrictions will impact around 6 million people living in Catalonia, including in the regional capital, Barcelona. This accounts for 80% of the area’s population. [BBC]

If there continues to be no rain before spring, a second round of restrictions will be put in place, limiting personal water consumption to 180 litres and then 160 litres a day.

Furthermore, agricultural irrigation will be reduced by 80%, water use for livestock farming by 50%, and consumption in the leisure and industrial sectors will have to decrease by 25%. [Al Jazeera]

Experts have pointed the finger at climate change as increasing global temperatures reduce moisture in the environment, worsening drought conditions.

(jt/pk)

Spain to ban short domestic flights in move to cut emissions

In an effort to reduce planet-warming CO2 emissions, Spain plans to ban domestic flights that have a journey time of less than two-and-a-half hours by train.

The only exception to the restriction will be connections through a hub airport on international routes. [Euronews]

Environmental groups have criticised the government for watering down an initial proposal that would have banned flights on routes which take less than four hours by train. The Ecologistas en Acción organisation described the government's move as "purely symbolic". [Euronews]

Meanwhile, the opposition conservative People's Party has claimed that the plans will make the country less competitive economically while having a limited impact. [National World]

A report by Ecologistas en Acción estimated the initial, tougher proposal would have stopped up to 300,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide being emitted per year, cutting Spain's CO2 emissions by almost 10%. [Euronews]

According to the College of Aircraft Engineers, the new restriction will lead only to a 0.06% reduction in emissions. [National World]

France last year implemented a similar ban on short-haul flights lasting two-and-a-half hours by train. However, this has affected only three routes. [The Independent]

A bill introducing the new restrictions is going through the Spanish parliament and it is unclear when they could come into force or how many air routes would be affected.

(jt/pk)

Vatican urges dialogue with protesting farmers

The Vatican's top diplomat has said that farmers protesting across Europe "must be listened to."

"There must be a dialogue, an openness to dialogue with a view to the sustainability of small and medium-sized businesses and a future for rural areas", said Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State.

His comments on February 8 came in response to questions from the press about ongoing protests across the European Union. In Italy, farmers have been demonstrating since early January. The gatherings have been growing, with a thousand people converging in Rome on February 15.

Protesters' grievances include rising taxes, the high cost of diesel, cheap imports and low supermarket prices. The EU's Green Deal, which is targeting climate neutrality across the bloc by 2050, is at the core of the farmers' concerns. The plan's targets for agriculture include halving pesticide use by 2030, cutting fertiliser use by 20%, devoting more land to non-agricultural use and doubling organic production to 25% of all EU farmland.

Parolin's comments were made on the sidelines of an Italy-Vatican conference held on the 40th anniversary of a concordat signed in 1984 by the Holy See and the government in Rome. [Vatican News] [The Guardian] [Yahoo News]

(ar/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria to buy 225 armoured vehicles as it upgrades military

Austria's defence ministry has announced the country will buy 225 Pandur armoured vehicles for a total of EUR 1.8 billion as part of a military modernisation drive.

The vehicles will be supplied by Spain-based multinational arms manufacturer General Dynamics European Land Systems – Steyr (GDELS) in the biggest such deal in two decades.

The purchase was announced by Austrian Defence Minister Klaudia Tanner on February 19. The order includes conversion kits allowing the vehicles to be used for medical, command-and-control and anti-tank missions.

Austria will also buy 36 Skyranger gun turrets from German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall to allow Pandur vehicles to be converted into air defence systems. The Düsseldorf-based supplier will serve as subcontractor as part of the larger contract with GDELS. [army-technology.com]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted Austria to reassess its military spending, with plans to increase this to 1% of its GDP, up from the current 0.74%. However, this still lags behind neighbouring countries like Germany, which has committed to reaching a NATO defence expenditure goal of 2% of GDP. [GDELS] [army-technology.com] [msn.com]

(mr/pk)

Anti-government protesters demand immediate elections in Croatia

Thousands rallied in Zagreb on February 17 in an anti-government protest organised by 11 opposition parties demanding elections as soon as possible. [Balkan Insight] [AP]

The demonstrators accused the ruling centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) party of corruption.

Croatia is scheduled to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024, as well as those for the European Parliament in early June. The dates for the domestic votes have not yet been set.

A scandal erupted in Croatia after former judge Ivan Turudic was recently appointed as the new state Attorney General, despite reports that he had dealings with people suspected of corruption. Turudic was proposed for the post by the HDZ. [Balkan Insight] [AP]

"The state Attorney General is the most important person to protect the legal order, and now the HDZ is giving that power to a man connected to the criminal milieu," said Dalija Oreskovic from the Party with Name and Surname, one of the groupings that took part in the protest in the capital.

(mr/pk)

Czechs to assess benefits of entering euro 'waiting room' amid coalition squabbles

The centre-right Czech government has agreed to assess the benefits of moving forward towards adopting the single European currency amid pressure to do so from partners in the country's ruling coalition.

Four out of the five parties in the coalition support a switch to the euro, urging Prime Minister Petr Fiala's right-wing Civic Democrats to set a target date for adoption. [AFP/Barron's]

The Civic Democrats, the largest party in the coalition, have been hesitant.

To ease tensions within the government, Fiala said his administration would seek expert advice on the merits of entering the EU's Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM-2), also known as the "euro waiting room". [Euractiv] [Reuters]

"The government will decide how to proceed further based on these analyses and on the economic results of 2024," Fiala said in a post on social media platform X

on February 6, adding that the assessments would be ready by October.

His move followed a dispute sparked by the unexpected appointment of a new Czech official to oversee efforts to adopt the euro. Europe Minister Martin Dvorak from the centrist STAN party appointed the envoy on February 5 without consulting coalition partners. [AFP/Barron's] [Euractiv]

The STAN party saw the government's decision to seek advice on joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism as a win for progressing the euro adoption debate, despite the new envoy's post being promptly revoked under an agreement reached by the ruling coalition. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

The popularity of Fiala's Civic Democrats party is declining, while the largest opposition ANO party, which opposes euro adoption, is enjoying a wide lead in opinion polls. [Politico]

Most Czechs remain sceptical about replacing the domestic koruna currency with the euro. More than 70% believe that their country is not ready to adopt the single currency, according to a pan-European survey by pollster Eurobarometer.

A promise to adopt the euro at some point was a condition for the Czech Republic joining the EU in 2004. However, the nation of 10.5 million has yet to offer a firm timetable for the switch. [Bloomberg]

A country aspiring to adopt the single currency must first spend two years in the ERM-2 mechanism to demonstrate its ability to keep its currency stable and its budget deficit under control. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The Czech Republic is poised to meet the conditions for a currency switch as it boasts one of the EU's lowest debts relative to the size of its economy while meeting the inflation and deficit requirements. [Bloomberg]

(yl/pk)

Hungarian president resigns after outcry at paedophilia scandal

Hungary's president, Katalin Novak, has quit after an outcry at her decision to pardon a former deputy director of a children's home who was convicted of helping cover up sexual abuse.

Despite Novak's resignation, thousands took to the streets in protest at the scandal, calling for better protection of children and changes in Hungarian political culture. [Telex] [AP News] [RFE/RL]

A report by Hungarian news site 444.hu in early February that Novak had issued the pardon triggered one of the biggest political scandals in conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orban's 14-year rule. [Reuters] [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

Opposition parties demanded that Novak, an ally of Orban, should go, beginning impeachment proceedings in parliament and holding rallies outside her residence. [Telex]

Facing growing public pressure, Novak quit on February 10. [Telex] [Magyar Nemzet]

"I was wrong," she said. "The pardon and the lack of reasoning were apt to raise doubts." She added: "Protecting children is our shared responsibility. I apologise to those I have offended and to any victims who may have felt that I was not standing up for them." [Telex]

Novak said she had believed that the man she pardoned "did not abuse the vulnerability of children whom he had overseen." [Reuters]

Protests in Budapest

However, public anger continued. Protests organised by social media influencers, as well as by the National Common Will group and the United Student Front, were held in Budapest on February 16. The demonstrations were peaceful, with the organisers asking opposition political parties not to display their insignias in order for the message to reach a broader audience. [Telex] [AP News]

The organisers insisted that the ruling nationalist Fidesz party should be held responsible for the pardon and called on it to "do what they have been promoting for years: protect children!" That referred to the governing party's rhetoric that children and traditional family models need to be protected. [Telex]

The demonstrations and public outcry appeared to be one of the largest ever challenges to Fidesz, which has been in power for 14 years. [AP News]

The Hungarian parliament on February 26 elected Tamas Sulyok, a former head of the Constitutional Court, as the country's new president.

Some opposition lawmakers abstained from voting, saying Sulyok would act as a "party soldier" for Fidesz and Orban. [The Independent]

(evk/pk)

Survey slammed as propaganda indicates wide support for PM's hardline views

The results of a controversial survey of citizens by the Hungarian government appear to indicate that a vast majority support nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban in his opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, migration and financial aid for Ukraine. [Telex] [Budapest Times]

According to the government, around 99% of Hungarians agreed with Orban and his ruling right-wing Fidesz party on such issues and on the need for the country to uphold its sovereignty. [Telex] [Budapest Times]

The questionnaire, which the government called a "national consultation", has been labelled by many as propaganda designed to manipulate citizens through biased questions into supporting Fidesz's stance while villainizing opposition perspectives and the EU. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Around 1.5 million people – 18% of Hungary's electorate – responded to the survey. The poll was launched in November and its findings were released in February. [Telex]

Balasz Flachner, writing for news outlet Telex, said: "The answers flashed up two options: to agree with the government and everything will be fine, or to agree with Brussels and destroy everything that was once important to us."

Budapest has been locked in a long-running dispute with Brussels, which has withheld EU funds for Hungary over concerns about the country's rule-of-law and human rights records.

The Hungarian government has accused the European Union of staging a pro-LGBTQ+ "offensive" while Orban has frequently criticized the bloc's immigration policies as too liberal.

EU leaders at the start of February approved a EUR 50 billion aid package for Ukraine after Orban, Russia's closest ally in the EU, rescinded his threats to veto the funding. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

(evk/pk)

EU starts unblocking billions as Poland moves to restore rule of law

The European Union has made moves to begin releasing EUR 137 billion for Poland that had been frozen over rule-of-law disputes between Brussels and the previous government in Warsaw. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland] [Politico] [ABC News]

The decision by Brussels comes as a result of planned changes by the current Polish government – elected in October 2023 – to address long-standing concerns from the European Commission over the erosion of judicial independence in Poland. [Euronews]

Speaking during a trip to Warsaw on February 23, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "We are impressed by your efforts and those of the Polish people to restore the rule of law as the backbone of your society. A society where everyone plays by the rules. A society where people and businesses can trust the institutions and can hold authorities to account." [Euronews]

The former ruling nationalist populist Law and Justice (PiS) party had long been in conflict with Brussels over controversial changes made to Poland's judiciary during its eight years in power – changes which the European Commission said had politicised the courts. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

After two terms in office, Law and Justice was ejected by voters in last October's parliamentary elections. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Poland's current governing coalition – which was sworn in in December and includes parties ranging from the centre-right to the left – had run its election campaign pledging to reverse the judicial changes made by the eurosceptic Law and Justice and restore democratic norms. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

In February, the government, led by former European Council President Donald Tusk, presented the European Commission with an action plan of how it would fulfil its campaign promises and undo the changes by Law and Justice.

The plan, presented by Polish Justice Minister Adam Bodnar, comprised 10 bills pertaining to Poland's judicial institutions, including the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Tribunal.

Independence of courts

One of the bills – approved by the Polish government later the same month – amends Law and Justice-era legislation on appointments to the National Council of the Judiciary, the influential institution which nominates judges. [Notes From Poland]

Under reforms enacted by Law and Justice, members of the council were appointed by parliament, resulting in both the Polish Supreme Court and the European Court of Human Rights ruling that the body was no longer politically independent.

The current government's new bill stipulates that members of the National Council of the Judiciary will instead be appointed by judges via a secret vote. [Notes From Poland]

Warsaw also announced plans for an overhaul of the country's Constitutional Tribunal. These call for three judges selected under the former government to be declared illegitimate, as well as changes to how judges are appointed to the body – which would require constitutional amendments. [Notes From Poland]

The money that the European Commission has paved the way for Poland to begin receiving comes from the EU's cohesion and recovery funds. [Euronews]

The bloc's Recovery and Resilience fund, of which Poland's frozen share consists of EUR 34.5 billion in loans and EUR 25.3 billion in grants, was designed to help member states recover from the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

The cohesion funds, meanwhile, are a part of the bloc's common budget and are aimed at supporting infrastructure development. [Euronews] [ABC News]

Poland had been the largest recipient of the EU's cohesion funds prior to the freezing of EUR 76 billion. [Euronews] [Notes From Poland]

Aid for Polish farmers

The first payment to be released, according to von der Leyen, will include EUR 1.4 billion in aid for Polish farmers "to help them improve and modernise and reach new markets". [Notes From Poland]

Poland is one of a string of European nations that have seen large demonstrations by the agricultural sector in recent months. Polish farmers repeatedly blocked key crossings along the border with Ukraine in protest

against the import of cheap grain to the country from its eastern neighbour. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk praised the European Commission's decision to release frozen funds, saying: "It is really a lot of money that we will put to good use and that we will also use to defuse everything that is causing such tension and anxiety today." [Notes From Poland]

However, EU officials pointed out that some aspects of Poland's action plan could be vetoed by its president, Andrzej Duda, an ally of Law and Justice, and that the European Commission could reinstate restrictions if Warsaw's planned changes are not implemented. [ABC News]

(ek/pk)

Slovak PM scraps anti-graft office, despite EU and opposition warnings

Slovakia's populist prime minister has pushed controversial judicial overhauls through parliament to eliminate the country's anti-graft office, which deals with major crimes – despite EU and opposition warnings of potential damage to the rule of law.

Robert Fico, who last year came to power for the fourth time, used his parliamentary majority to approve the penal code reform on February 8.

Slovakia's opposition has denounced the changes, which have sparked mass protests, as a move to grant indemnity to corrupt politicians and wealthy benefactors with links to Fico's inner circle. [Reuters 1] [Bloomberg 1]

In the 150-seat parliament, 78 ruling coalition lawmakers backed the changes, while the liberal opposition boycotted the vote. [FT] [AP 1] [AFP/Barron's 1]

The governing coalition approved the changes using a fast-track legislative procedure that allows bills to bypass the review by experts and parliamentary debate usually involved in the process. [AP 2]

Under the judicial revamp, Slovakia's Special Prosecutor's Office will be disbanded after handling more than 100 high-profile crimes and corruption cases related to Fico's political and business allies. [Reuters 1] [Guardian] [AP 1] [Bloomberg 1] [Politico] [Guardian] [Slovak Spectator] [FT]

Ongoing probes into serious crime will be taken over by prosecutors in regional offices, which have not dealt with such cases for the past two decades. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Other changes introduced by the overhaul include limiting protection for whistleblowers and softening punishment for white-collar crimes such as misuse of EU funds, tax fraud, corruption and manipulation of public tenders.

Fico's three-party coalition is also set to shorten the statute of limitations from 20 years to 10 years for certain offences, including rape. [Politico] [AFP/Barron's 1] [AP 1]

The government has argued that ending what it calls "excesses" at the Special Prosecutor's Office is necessary to end bias against the prime minister's leftist ruling Smer party. [Guardian] [Reuters 1]

'Mafia package'

Slovak opposition politicians have criticised the changes as a "mafia package" designed to create a protective umbrella for influential allies of Fico. [Reuters 2] [Bloomberg 1]

"This law endangers the property and the safety of all Slovaks, and is benevolent to criminals, thieves and rapists," said Michal Simecka, the leader of the pro-Western opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party. [Politico]

Fico's plans have triggered a wave of anti-government rallies across the country, with tens of thousands repeatedly taking to the streets in the past two months to condemn the government's reforms. [AP 1] [AFP/Barron's 1] [Reuters 3] [Guardian]

'Irreparable harm'

On the day the amendment was approved, EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders wrote to Slovak Justice Minister Boris Susko, urging the government in Bratislava to refrain from fast-tracking the legislation through parliament.

Reynders said the changes "appear to have a direct and significant negative impact on EU law" and could cause "irreparable harm" to the EU's financial interests.

The European Parliament has voiced fears that the reforms may result in insufficient punishment for the misuse of EU funds, and dent Slovakia's ability to combat corruption. [AP 1]

The European Public Prosecutor's Office, which probes corruption involving EU funds, said in December that Fico's proposed legislation threatened the bloc's financial interests. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

President Zuzana Caputova challenged the judicial revamp at Slovakia's Constitutional Court, which ruled on February 29 that some of the changes should be suspended, including reduced punishments for crimes such as misuse of EU funds, tax fraud and corruption. The court also suspended provisions that shorten the statute of limitations for certain offences like rape.

However, the court confirmed that the Special Prosecutor's Office would be abolished on March 20. [Politico 2] [Slovak Spectator 2]

The European Commission could suspend payments of funds to Bratislava if it determines that the protection of EU money is insufficient. [Reuters 2]

(yl/pk)

Slovak top court dismisses Czech ex-PM's bid to prove he wasn't secret police agent

Slovakia's top court has rejected a bid by former Czech populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis to clear his name after he was listed as a collaborator with the communist-era secret police.

The ruling came on February 1, with Slovakia's Constitutional Court upholding decisions by lower courts. [AP News]

Babis, a Czech billionaire of Slovak origin who served as prime minister between 2017 and 2021, had sued the Slovak National Memory Institute, claiming he was wrongfully listed in its archives as a collaborator with the secret police (StB) in what was then Czechoslovakia. [Radio Prague]

Despite some files being destroyed, the institute said existing evidence showed that Babis had worked as an agent under the code name "Bures" for the totalitarian communist regime from 1982. [AP News] [The Wall Street Journal]

Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

Babis has vehemently denied any wrongdoing, though he admitted meeting with secret police officers in the 1980s. He maintained that the meetings were about

the country's economic interests as he was a member of the Communist Party working in foreign trade. [Reuters] [DW]

The ruling by Slovakia's Constitutional Court concludes a long legal battle initiated by Babis in 2012. He won initial legal proceedings in 2014, but the verdict was later overturned when the Constitutional Court ruled in 2017 that his witnesses were unreliable. [Slovak Spectator] [Reuters] [The Guardian]

The top court also ruled that Babis's lawsuit against the Slovak National Memory Institute was misplaced as the body merely held files that were compiled by the secret police.

Babis – who established the Czech Republic's largest food, chemical and agricultural company – is the leader of the centrist ANO, the country's biggest opposition party, which lost parliamentary elections in 2021.

(yl/pk)

Slovenia's justice minister quits over misconduct allegations

Slovenia's minister of justice, Dominika Svarc Pipan, has resigned following allegations of misconduct. [Slovenia Times] [Vecer]

Svarc Pipan came under fire in late January when it was found that she helped facilitate the purchase of a building for a price well above its actual value. The justice ministry had planned to house several courts at the site. [Slovenia Times] [Europ January 2024]

In response to the allegations, Svarc Pipan pointed the finger at several justice ministry officials and members of the Social Democrat party, which is part of the ruling coalition, saying they had concealed details about the building and its purchase from her. [Slovenia Times] [Vecer]

Prime Minister Robert Golob did not ask Svarc Pipan to resign, but she announced nevertheless she was stepping down amid accusations that she had attempted to destroy evidence surrounding the case – claims that she strongly denied. [Slovenia Times]

Golob nominated Andreja Katic, who previously held the role of justice minister from 2018 to 2020, to replace Svarc Pipan. [Delo] [BNN Breaking]

(evk/pk)

Slovenian NGO releases tool to identify conflicts of interest in government

A Slovenian investigative journalism organisation has released an interactive tool designed to promote transparency by allowing the public to see connections between people working in government.

Using the visualisation tool, called Zvezoskop, users can look at the career paths of ministers and other government officials, as well as statistics on political party membership and interest groups.

Investigative journalism group Ostro, which developed the tool, says the aim is to help citizens make more informed decisions when voting, and to provide a database for researchers interested in political connections.

Given that Slovenia has a population of only around 2 million, individuals in power are more likely to know each other than in larger nations, creating more potential conflicts of interest. [Slovenia Times]

(evk/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Danish plan for tax on agriculture emissions triggers criticism

Critics have warned that a proposed new tax on carbon emissions from Danish agriculture could lead to farms being closed and food production falling.

Denmark may become the first country in the world to impose such a tax as it strives to cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 70% by 2030, with the long-term goal of achieving climate neutrality. [Reuters]

Without intervention, agriculture will account for 46% of Denmark's CO2 emissions by 2030, according to estimates by Denmark's Energy Agency.

A Danish government-appointed group of experts on February 21 offered three tax models that recommend a levy on greenhouse gas emissions from farming of between DKK 250 (EUR 33) and DKK 750 (EUR 100) per tonne of CO2.

These models are expected to reduce emissions by 2.4 to 3.2 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030. [Ministry of Taxation]

The report considered emissions from livestock, fertilisers, forestry and the disturbance of carbon-rich soil.

Hans Kristian Skibby, agriculture spokesperson for the opposition right-wing populist Danish Democrats party, called for dialogue with farmers rather than "coercion." [Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR)]

Agriculture sectors across Europe have staged protests in recent weeks as the EU strives to meet its climate goals and reach net zero emissions by 2050. [Bloomberg]

(km/pk)

Denmark delays enforcing new EU cyber security rules

The defence ministry in Copenhagen has said that the implementation of new EU directives on cyber security will be delayed in Denmark.

The European Union aims to boost the resilience of critical companies and authorities across the bloc in the face of cyber threats.

The EU has set an October 17 deadline for its member countries to implement the changes but Denmark has hit unexpected delays. The Danish parliament is

expected to finalize bills on cyber security at the end of the year.

Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said: “The legislative work has taken longer than expected. I can only regret that.” [Ministry of Defence]

His ministry added that the deadline for when businesses and authorities must comply with the new rules will be delayed until the legislative proposals have been processed. [Berlingske]

(km/pk)

Denmark proposes automatically listing all citizens as organ donors

Danish Health Minister Sophie Lohde, backed by the centrist governing coalition, has proposed introducing an automatic system for organ donation in Denmark. [Euro Topics]

Under the plan, all citizens would be automatically registered as donors when they turn 18 and would be required to opt out if they do not want to remain on a list of potential donors. [Politiken]

Under the current system, Danes must opt in to become an organ donor.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, of the centre-left Social Democrats, said: “When we propose this, it is because we have more than 400 Danes on the waiting list for a new organ.” [Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR)]

The proposal has been met with some controversy.

In recommendations on organ donation issued in January 2023, the Council of Ethics – which advises the Danish parliament and public authorities on ethical issues – argued that the current system should not be changed.

The council’s chairman, Leif Vestergaard, said: “The right to decide over oneself and one’s own body is an important principle for the healthcare system. Therefore, our recommendation is that we stick to the principles that are in place today.” [Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR)]

(km/pk)

Centre-right ex-PM with tough stance on Russia becomes Finnish president

Former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, a centre-right pro-European who has taken a tough stance on Russia, won Finland's presidential election on February 11, defeating Pekka Haavisto of the opposition Green Party in a close-fought second round. [Reuters] [Politico]

Stubb, the candidate of the National Coalition Party, a partner in the coalition government, secured 51.6% of the ballots cast against 48.4% for Haavisto, according to data from the justice ministry. Haavisto conceded defeat. [Al Jazeera]

Stubb said his win was "the greatest honour" of his life. He added: "We are facing a new era in foreign policy where rules are being challenged, and there is a war next door." [Financial Times]

The newly elected head of state will navigate the relationship with Russia, a country with which Finland shares a long border. [Reuters]

The role of president assumes added importance following Finland's accession to NATO last year. Stubb will be instrumental in determining his nation's approach within the Western military alliance, leading the development of foreign and security policy in close coordination with the government, and acting as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera] [Europe Monthly February 2024]

"We must remember that one of the president's main tasks is to ensure Finland promotes peace, and I will do that," Stubb said. [Politico]

Stubb has also previously served as Finland's foreign, finance and trade minister, and is an expert in EU and foreign policy. In recent years, he has led the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute. [Financial Times] [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Stubb emerged as the frontrunner in the first round of the presidential election on January 28, securing 27.2% of the vote compared to Haavisto's 25.8%. Leading up to the ballot, opinion polls had consistently shown Stubb ahead of Haavisto by 6 to 8 percentage points. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera] [The Guardian] [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Haavisto offered his congratulations to Stubb, saying: "I believe Finland now gets a good president for the

republic. Alexander Stubb is an experienced, competent person for the job." [Reuters]

Turning point

The election signifies a turning point for Finland, a country that has traditionally chosen presidents with a focus on diplomatic engagement, especially with neighbouring Russia. For many years, it refrained from joining military alliances as a strategy to mitigate tensions between Moscow and NATO. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

However, sentiment in Finland shifted dramatically following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. A swift change in perspective resulted in Finland becoming a member of NATO in April 2023. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Stubb succeeds Sauli Niinisto, who is stepping down after serving two six-year terms as president, the maximum allowed. Niinisto was colloquially known as "the Putin Whisperer" due to his past close relationship with the Russian leader. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

Stubb advocates robust cooperation within NATO, endorsing the transit of nuclear weapons through his country and the permanent stationing of NATO forces on Finnish territory. However, he opposes the idea of his nation storing nuclear arms. [Reuters] [The Guardian]

Speaking to Reuters in January, he said: "Politically, there will be no relations with the president of Russia or with the Russian political leadership until they stop the war in Ukraine."

Finland in November temporarily closed its border with Russia following a rise in the number of asylum seekers from that country. [The Guardian]

(rs/pk)

Finnish unions strike against reforms restricting worker rights

Trade unions paralyzed public transport and ports in Finland between February 14 and 16 amid a wave of industrial action against the right-wing government's moves to restrict workers' rights and cut social welfare. [Yle]

The Transport Workers' Union, which includes drivers and maintenance staff, initiated a walkout on February 14 that brought most local and long-distance bus

services to a halt. The impact was felt across major Finnish cities, including Helsinki, Turku and Tampere, where almost all public transport services were suspended. [Yle]

Strikes also closed the nation's ports as dock workers showed their discontent. [Yle]

Over 60,000 members of Teollisuusliitto (Industrial Union), the country's largest blue-collar organisation, took part in the protests. They were joined by more than 7,000 office workers affiliated with the Ammattiliitto Pro union. [Green Left]

On February 15, the strikes extended into the energy sector, with members of the Electrical Workers' Union halting work at nuclear and hydroelectric power facilities throughout Finland. [Green Left] [Yle]

The president of the Electrical Workers' Union, Sauli Vantti, told Reuters: "This political industrial action is meant to be a clear warning to the Finnish government that now is the time to begin negotiations."

The strikes were the latest in a series of protests triggered by the government's July 2023 announcement of planned reforms to prioritise local labour agreements over centralised deals, restrict strike rights, simplify the process of terminating employment contracts, and reduce unemployment benefits. [Reuters] [Yle] [Green Left]

After industrial action on February 1 and 2, national carrier Finnair said that 550 flights had been cancelled, impacting 60,000 passengers. Strikes also affected factories, refineries, mines, construction companies, postal services and kindergartens. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

The Finnish government and businesses have argued that boosting productivity and reducing the fiscal deficit are needed to preserve the country's welfare system. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Environmental permit for Finnish-Chinese battery plant sparks protests

A decision to grant an environmental permit for a battery plant in a coastal town, allowing it to discharge wastewater into the Baltic Sea, has ignited protests and a social movement in Finland. [Helsinki Times] [Yle]

The EUR 500 million factory, which will produce components for batteries used in electric vehicles, is a joint venture between the Finnish Minerals Group and China's CNGR Advanced Material company.

The permit decision has sparked fears among local communities and environmental groups about the potential degradation of the Gulf of Finland's ecosystem. [Helsinki Times] [Pledge Times]

Southern Finland's Regional Administrative Agency on February 12 authorised the plant in the south-eastern town of Hamina to produce around 60,000 tonnes of chemicals annually.

While setting limits on air and water emissions, the permit allows the discharge of partially treated wastewater into the sea. [Yle]

The regional administrative agency decided that sulphate levels in the wastewater would not significantly harm the environment nor pose a risk of such harm, provided the plant adheres to operational guidelines stipulated in the permit. [Yle]

Critics launch petition

Critics including NGOs launched a petition calling for a partial revocation of the permit, insisting that the facility in Hamina should treat all its wastewater. The campaign amassed over 40,000 signatures within a week. [Helsinki Times] [Pledge Times]

Raija Seppala, a deputy chairperson of the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation in south-east Finland, called the decision to award the permit "incomprehensible" and from a "different era". [Helsinki Times] [Pledge Times]

Comparisons have been drawn to the environmental impact of sulphate emissions from the Talvivaara nickel mine in central Finland, amid fears that the Hamina plant could lead to significantly greater pollution levels. [Helsinki Times]

However, Jouni Lehtoranta, a senior researcher at the Finnish Environment Institute (Syke), said the impact on the Gulf of Finland should be viewed in context, noting the existing levels of sulphate in seawater. [Helsinki Times]

The CEO of CNGR Finland, Thorsten Lahrs, said the company was committed to employing state-of-the-art technology.

According to CNGR Finland, the battery plant will bolster the region's economy. [CNGR Finland] [Pledge

Times]

(rs/pk)

Far-right mass murderer Breivik loses human rights case against Norway

Far-right mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik has lost a legal battle against being kept in isolation in a Norwegian jail after a court ruled that his human rights had not been violated.

Breivik, who killed 77 people in a bombing and shooting rampage in 2011, will appeal against the ruling made by an Oslo district court on February 15, his lawyer said. [Reuters] [Euro News]

Breivik claimed that being kept in isolation amounted to inhumane punishment under the European Convention on Human Rights. [AP News]

In court, he wept and claimed he suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts due to the impossibility of forming meaningful relations.

However, the director of the high-security prison in which he is being kept said Breivik was being treated well. The prison psychiatrist questioned the sincerity behind his tears.

Breivik has access to amenities including a kitchen and dining room, an Xbox games console and a fitness room with a treadmill, rowing machine and weights. [The Independent] [AP News]

Lawyers representing the Norwegian justice ministry pushed for his isolation regime to be maintained, pointing out that Breivik has continuous contact with guards, a priest, health professionals and two inmates for an hour every other week.

The lawyers also pointed out the danger of Breivik establishing contact with others with far-right connections. [Al Jazeera]

On July 22, 2011, Breivik detonated a fertiliser bomb in downtown Oslo, killing eight people. Later that day, on Utoya island, 38 km north-west of Oslo city centre, he opened fire in a shooting attack at a summer camp organised by the youth section of Norway's centre-left Labour Party, where he killed 69 people, most of them teenagers.

Breivik considered the attacks part of a strategy against what he believed to be a Muslim invasion of Europe which was leading to the disintegration of Norway's culture. [The New York Times]

(nnc/pk)

Norway's King Harald returns home after being hospitalised in Malaysia

Norway's King Harald on March 3 returned home on a medical evacuation plane after he was hospitalised in Malaysia with an infection and given a temporary pacemaker.

The 87-year-old monarch had been on a private trip to the resort island of Langkawi. He had a temporary pacemaker fitted to help with his low heart rate and to ensure a safe flight home. [Reuters]

The Norwegian royal household issued a statement announcing the king would be on sick leave for two weeks and that Crown Prince Haakon would assume his constitutional duties during his absence. [BBC]

Harald became king in 1991 and is the oldest living monarch in Europe. He has been hospitalised on repeated occasions and underwent surgery in 2020 to replace a heart valve. [Reuters]

(nnc/pk)

Sweden and Denmark drop probes into 2022 Nord Stream pipeline blasts

Sweden and Denmark have dropped their investigations into the 2022 explosions that damaged the Nord Stream pipelines under the Baltic Sea.

The Nord Stream I and the Nord Stream II links carrying gas from Russia to Germany suffered catastrophic damage in the Swedish and Danish economic zones from the blasts in September 2022, which have been described by NATO as sabotage.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the West of targeting the pipelines, a charge that the United States and its allies have strongly denied. [Europe Monthly October 2022]

Some Western officials have said that Russian military vessels were in the area at the time of the blasts, but

others say there is no hard evidence to implicate Moscow.

Beyond the geopolitical impact, the explosions also caused an environmental disaster, with the large volume of methane released into the Baltic Sea affecting wildlife. Some analysts believe it could have been the largest-ever release of methane from human activity. [AP News]

According to Swedish Public Prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist, there is no indication that his country's territory was used or that Swedish citizens were involved in the explosions. [Dagens Nyheter]

He said that after a "systematic and thorough" investigation "we have a picture of what has happened, and what that picture consists of we cannot go into more detail, but it leads to the conclusion that we do not have jurisdiction." [Politico]

He added: "There is nothing in this case that poses any risk to Sweden's security now that we have seen how things stand."

Although those responsible for the explosions have not been identified, Denmark said that it has also closed its investigation into the blasts.

Danish authorities said that after a "complicated and extensive" probe, they had concluded that the Nord Stream pipelines were sabotaged but that there was no basis for pursuing a criminal case.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov criticised the Danish authorities, saying: "On the one hand, they recognise that deliberate sabotage took place, but on the other hand they are not moving forward." [BBC]

Peskov added that Russia would now watch what Germany would do to investigate the explosions.

He said: "Of course, now we need to see how Germany itself reacts to this, as a country that has lost a lot in relation to this terrorist attack." [Reuters] [France 24]

(km/pk)

Swedish security agency HQ evacuated over mystery incident

Around 500 people were evacuated from the Stockholm headquarters of Sweden's Security Service

on February 23 after workers reported an unusual smell.

A gas leak was initially suspected but security services later said that no gas was detected inside or outside the building. Swedish police have launched a preliminary investigation. [BBC]

Emergency services launched a major operation after a call from the headquarters of the security service, known as Sapo, with local authorities closing the exit of a nearby motorway.

Six people were taken to hospital with reported breathing problems and two others admitted themselves but no serious injuries were reported. [BBC]

Local residents were asked to close their windows and stay indoors while those living closest to the site were temporarily denied access to their homes. [AP News] [BBC] [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Sweden aims to quadruple capacity of jails amid overcrowding

Sweden's Prison and Probation Service has announced plans to quadruple the capacity of the country's jails by 2033 and double the capacity of detention centres amid a shortage of cells. [SVT]

The correctional service has long struggled with a lack of space but the situation has worsened in the last year, public broadcaster Sveriges Radio reported.

According to the latest figures, the occupancy rate in detention centres is 116%.

The Director General of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, Martin Holmgren, said that a special management team would be established, operating until May 31, to deal with the problem. [Göteborgs-Posten]

The prison service announced it was also looking for alternative sites like old schools or hospitals to create more detention facilities. [Göteborgs-Posten]

Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer said: "There is no doubt that the pressure on the Correctional Service is severe." [Dagens Nyheter]

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU migration pact approved by most member states amid rights concerns

Most ambassadors for the European Union's 27 member states have voted in favour of a package of migration reforms which have alarmed human rights organisations and civil society groups, notably over the treatment of children.

Dubbed the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the measures include more thorough checks on migrants and aim to ensure a quicker return of unsuccessful asylum seekers to their countries of origin.

The rules also enforce "solidarity" across the bloc, requiring all member states to help overburdened frontline countries by accepting relocated migrants or providing financial or material support. [Euractiv]

The pact will now need to be approved by the European Parliament. The EU expects the package to be fully adopted by April.

The relocation of migrants has been strongly opposed by Warsaw, which voted against the migration pact and claimed that the reforms did not address the situation of countries bordering Russia and Belarus, which have

artificially spawned migration fluxes in attempts to destabilize the EU. [Notes from Poland]

Nonetheless, a qualified majority of member state representatives voted in favour of the reforms. The EU did not specify how each member state ambassador voted, but the Czech Republic revealed it had abstained. [Euractiv]

'Cruel system'

Amid rocketing asylum requests, the EU member states' representatives approved a provisional deal between the European Council and European Parliament struck at a marathon EU summit in December. At the time, a group of more than 50 migrant rights organisations signed an open letter slamming the pact as a non-solution that would enable and worsen a "cruel system". [Europe Monthly January 2024]

The reforms have been particularly criticised over the treatment of children. Under the new rules, unaccompanied minors deemed to be a security risk can be detained, and in certain cases some migrants can be locked up for up to six months. The rules also allow the use of "coercion" against children who refuse to have their biometric data taken.

These measures prompted Gehad Madi, a United Nations special rapporteur on migration, to label the pact as contrary to the UN convention on the rights of the child in a letter to the presidents of the EU's three main institutions.

French refugee rights NGO Cimade, one of many organisations that have criticised the EU deal, said: "Every time we think we've reached the bottom of inhumanity, but in fact we've sunk even lower." [euobserver]

The new restrictions will not apply to Ukrainian refugees, who are exempt under a temporary protection directive introduced by the bloc shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine. [Politico]

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola previously said that a migration deal was necessary to ward off rising right-wing populism ahead of European Parliament elections in June. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

(qv/pk)

Von der Leyen bids for second term as EU Commission chief

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has announced she will seek a second five-year term as the head of the EU's executive branch, vowing to defend democracy and the rule of law, which she claimed were imperilled by Russia and far-right political forces in Europe. [Reuters]

After months of speculation surrounding her intentions, von der Leyen declared her candidacy at a press conference in Berlin on February 19, after winning the backing of her German centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. [Politico]

Von der Leyen also pledged to harness artificial intelligence technology within a social market economy, boost the EU's competitiveness, and implement a migration pact across the bloc.

A few days before confirming her candidacy, von der Leyen, a former German defence minister, said at the Munich Security Conference that she would increase military spending and install an EU defence commissioner should she remain in power. [Politico]

The European Commission's first female chief has navigated the bloc through the coronavirus pandemic and the continent's largest conflict since World War II, but has been criticised for her leadership style and for not consulting member states on sensitive issues such as her support for Israel in its war against Hamas and her China policy. [Politico]

To remain at the helm of the European Commission, von der Leyen would need to be chosen as the candidate of the European People's Party (EPP), which is the larger political grouping under which centre-right national parties like Germany's CDU unite in the European Parliament.

Should the EPP decide in March to back von der Leyen at the group's congress in Bucharest, she will then need a majority of members from the new European Parliament – which will be elected in June – to vote in her favour to secure a second term. [Euronews]

Candidates to lead the EU's executive are conventionally chosen from the grouping that comes first in the European Parliament elections. Surveys currently place the EPP strongly ahead of its rivals.

(qv/pk)

EU fails to adopt supply chain audit law amid opposition

The EU has failed to adopt a law that aims to hold large companies accountable for violations of labour and human rights and environmental offences in their supply chains, after countries including Germany and Italy refused to endorse the move.

For the directive to be adopted, a so-called qualified majority of 15 EU countries representing at least 65% of the bloc's population is needed. [Council of the European Union]

Thirteen EU member nations including Germany and Italy abstained while one voted against the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive on February 28, Reuters cited an EU diplomat as saying.

Belgium, which holds the rotating EU presidency, said it would assess whether member states' concerns could be addressed. [Reuters]

The economically liberal FDP party, which is part of Germany's ruling coalition, said the planned EU directive "weakens our competitiveness and overburdens European companies with unnecessary bureaucracy". [Focus]

Italian industry association Confindustria was among groups that spoke out against the supply chain law, arguing that it would impose "enormous bureaucratic burdens" on business and harm European competitiveness. [eunews]

International food companies Mars Wrigley, Mondelez and Ferrero had called for the directive to be implemented promptly. [euractiv]

(acn/pk)

Deep rifts among central European nations on Ukraine war

A meeting between the prime ministers of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic has underlined the deep rifts between the countries over support for Ukraine.

The leaders of the four central European nations, which are also torn over methods to resolve the Russia-Ukraine war, held talks in Prague on February 27 at a meeting of the Visegrad Four (V4).

The group is a regional platform that brings together four former communist Soviet satellites that are now members of the EU and NATO.

While Warsaw and Prague have called for increased arms deliveries to Ukraine, Bratislava and Budapest remain sceptical about providing ammunition for the war-torn country. [Euronews] [rfi/AFP]

“I won’t keep it secret, it wouldn’t make sense, that we differ in [our] views on the cause of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the ways of solving it,” said Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, who hosted the get-together in Prague. [AP News] [DW] [Euronews]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who called Russian President Vladimir Putin a “war criminal”, pledges to contribute to a Czech plan to buy ammunition for Kyiv from countries outside the EU. [AP News] [Euronews] [DW] [rfi/AFP]

“If all EU countries were committed to helping Ukraine like Poland and the Czech Republic, then it would not be necessary to discuss other forms of support for Ukraine,” Tusk added. [rfi/AFP]

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated tensions within the V4 group, though all four of its leaders have agreed that none will deploy their own troops to Ukraine. [rfi/AFP]

Slovakia’s populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, who opposes EU sanctions on Russia, has intensified his condemnation of military aid for Kyiv, saying that the West’s collective approach to the conflict is “an absolute failure”. [Euronews] [AP News]

“I don’t believe in a military solution to the conflict in Ukraine,” said Fico, who opposes the country’s ambitions to join NATO. [Euronews] [AP News] [DW]

Fico, who has previously parroted Kremlin propaganda by blaming “Ukrainian Nazis and fascists” for initiating the war, said the EU should promote a peace plan, aligning himself with his Hungarian nationalist counterpart Viktor Orban.

Orban, who has close ties with Putin and who blocked the latest EU aid package for Ukraine for over a month, also called for peace talks, adding “the sooner, the better”.

(yl/pk)

EU urges members to support Energy Treaty Abrogation

The European Union is attempting to abrogate the 1998 Energy Charter Treaty that enables companies that have invested in European energy projects to sue member states if they cancel their projects after making investments. [Reuters]

The European Commission has stated that breaking the treaty is necessary to support climate change policies and halt the operation of coal power plants and oil and gas projects. Companies have argued that they were encouraged to invest when the treaty was signed and based their investment decisions on the legal assurances provided in its terms. Euronews] [EC]

Some European states have taken the side of companies that have invested in their countries and have been attempting to block EU withdrawal from the treaty. The United Kingdom withdrew from the treaty on February 28, joining Germany, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. [Guardian] [Euronews] [EC]

(rw/gc)

Gas flush European traders look to store gas in Ukraine

European energy traders and utilities with excess natural gas supplies to meet EU capacity requirements and stave off a winter crisis are considering Ukraine as an option for storage.

Many companies are reportedly looking to store gas instead of selling it into the market to prevent a price downturn after a mild winter. European gas storage utilisation is currently at a record 62% for this time of year, and many energy companies and traders understand that planned 2024 gas imports will exceed continental storage capacity. [Bloomberg]

Ukraine has offered itself as an option to take additional storage. The war-torn country has significant storage capacity, which was used to store Russian gas before Moscow's invasion in February 2022.

Ukraine touted 10 billion cubic metres (bcm) of storage in 2023, and the government hopes to expand capacity to 13 bcm this year. Analysts have noted that Ukraine can increase European storage capacity by 10%, and most storage terminals are in the western part of the country, away from the front line.

This storage may now be used not simply as safety reserve capacity but also as a trade resource to prevent market saturation.

Russia's effort to pressure Europe by withholding energy supplies after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine has been unsuccessful. Instead, Europe has primarily replaced Russian pipeline gas with seaborne imports of liquified natural gas and alternative pipeline gas sources.

New capacity

Over USD 290 billion in new natural gas projects are currently underway worldwide to expand global annual natural gas production capacity by nearly 300 million tons of LNG, equivalent to over 400 bcm of pipeline natural gas, a 70% increase over current levels, representing over 80% of current European gas demandThat is enough annual gas capacity to power half a billion homes and ensure natural gas's relevance — and emissions — for decades to come. [IEA] [Bloomberg]

EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson announced that the EU could withstand a complete cutoff of Russian gas at the end of 2024 and did not encourage Ukraine to negotiate with Russia to extend the current five year supply agreement expiring in December. [SP]

Russia supplied 40% of European energy imports before the war. Russia supplied 155 bcm to Europe in 2021 but will supply 90% less in 2024 through one remaining pipeline, the Urengoy–Pomary–Uzhhorod Pipeline, otherwise known as the Brotherhood Pipeline, which runs through Ukraine. [Reuters] [Columbia U.]

(rw/gc)

France accuses Russia of disinformation campaign

France condemned "hostile" disinformation manoeuvres after the country's authorities accused Russia of operating a long-running online manipulation campaign against Ukraine's Western backers in the lead-up to the second anniversary of Moscow's military invasion of its neighbour. [MSN]

"No manipulation attempt will distract France from its support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's war of aggression," the French foreign ministry said in a statement.

A network of "at least 193" websites had been set up "to spread Russian disinformation," French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne said alongside his German and Polish counterparts after a meeting near Paris involving Ukraine-related talks and other issues. [MSN]

Russia has denied the claim. (VOA)

"These are attacks on our democracy," said German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, adding that the European Union could not undermine people's confidence. (VOA)

The French agency responsible for fighting foreign digital interference, Viginum, released a report describing the network codenamed "Portal Kombat" that it analysed between September and December in 2023. Viginum said it involves websites using the name "Pravda" targeting countries including France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Viginum found that between June 23 and September 19, 2023, the sites published over 150,000 content that Russian or pro-Russian personalities or media members usually reported.

"Very ideologically oriented, this content repeatedly presents inaccurate or misleading narratives," the report said.

Viginum remains confident in its ability to mitigate the impact of this disinformation network and prevent the spread of false information to European citizens. [Economist]

Potential risks include creating disruption around the Olympic Games or undermining people's confidence in multiple upcoming elections. (VOA)

(eh/gc)

Poland, France, Germany to reinvigorate Weimar Triangle group, strengthen defence

The leaders of Poland, France and Germany have vowed to strengthen European defence and reinvigorate their Weimar Triangle cooperation group amid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. [Polskie Radio] [Politico] [AP] [Reuters] [France24]

The pledge came days after US presidential candidate Donald Trump suggested America should not protect

NATO allies failing to spend enough on defence – remarks which shook faith among member states that the military alliance's most powerful nation would come to their aid in the event of a Russian attack. [Reuters]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk met with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin on February 12 to discuss strengthening ties between the three countries. [France24] [Polskie Radio]

With Moscow's war showing no signs of slowing down and an aid package for Kyiv facing political hurdles in the US congress, the three leaders emphasised the importance of increased EU funds for Ukraine. [Reuters]

Speaking at a press conference with Scholz, Tusk said: "We will be respected in all the capitals of the world if we believe that the European Union can be a power not only of civilisation, economy and science, but also a military power." [Politico]

'New impetus'

Meanwhile, his German counterpart said: "The close cooperation between our three countries – Germany, Poland and France – is very important to all of us. That is why I am also proposing that the Weimar Triangle be given new momentum at the level of the heads of state and government in order to develop new impetus for the European Union." [Politico]

The foreign ministers of all three countries also met and held talks about the Weimar Triangle. [Politico] [AP]

The Weimar Triangle group, established in 1991, was designed to foster political cooperation between Poland, France and Germany, but fell into a period of dormancy during eight years of rule by a nationalist, eurosceptic Polish government. [Reuters] [France24] [Politico] [AP]

Observers say that a Weimar Triangle revival became more likely after Tusk, who heads a pro-European coalition government, was appointed prime minister late last year. He previously held the office from 2007 to 2014. [Reuters]

During his trip to Paris and Berlin, Tusk, who also served as president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019, said he wanted to "revitalise" Poland's relations with key European partners. [France24]

He argued that the EU must increase defence spending, saying: “There is no reason why we should be so clearly militarily weaker than Russia, and therefore increasing production and intensifying our cooperation are absolutely indisputable priorities.” [France24]

Macron said that, with Tusk now heading Poland’s government, France has “partners who we can trust, are pro-European and clear on European security and the major challenges we face.” [Reuters]

Scholz added: “Good cooperation between Poland, France and Germany is good for Europe… so we are going to capitalise on [the Weimar Triangle] format as much as we can.” [Reuters]

Tusk was also asked about remarks by former US president Donald Trump on NATO’s mutual defence clause just days earlier. [France24]

Speaking at a rally as part of his 2024 election campaign, Trump said that, if chosen as president again, he would “encourage” Russia to invade countries which were not spending 2% of their GDP on defence as stipulated by NATO membership agreements. [France24]

‘Cold shower’

Tusk responded by saying that Trump’s words “should act like a cold shower for all those who continue to underestimate this increasingly real threat which Europe is facing.” [France24]

Scholz, while not mentioning Trump by name, said: “NATO’s promise of protection is unrestricted – all for one and one for all.” [France24]

“Any relativisation of NATO’s support guarantee… is irresponsible and dangerous, and is solely in the interests of Russia. No one can play… with Europe’s security,” he added. [France24] [Politico]

Prior to Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland was one of the few NATO countries that met the target of spending 2% of its GDP on defence. [France24]

Several countries have since ramped up military spending, and Germany is expected to reach the 2% target this year, with France having also met the requirement in recent years. [Reuters] [France24]

(ek/pk)

New centre in Poland to help Ukrainians train with NATO troops

A new centre that aims to help Ukraine's armed forces achieve interoperability with NATO troops is to be set up in northern Poland, the government in Warsaw has said.

Polish Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz said the centre, focusing on education, analysis and training, would be the first of its kind. [Polish Radio]

According to NATO, the Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre (JATEC) aims to "share lessons learned from Russia's war and create a structure for Ukrainian forces to learn and train alongside their Allied counterparts."

The Polish government said on its website that the facility, to be set up in the northern Polish city of Bydgoszcz, is a NATO-Ukraine initiative whose mission is "to assist Ukrainian Armed Forces in achieving full interoperability with NATO forces."

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said it is "inevitable" that Ukraine will become a member of the Western military alliance, but not until Kyiv's war with Russia ends. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has asked for his country to be admitted as soon as possible afterwards. [BBC]

(pk)

Serbia should be next to join EU, not Ukraine, Hungarian leader says

The European Union "will lose" Serbia to China unless it lets the country join the bloc soon, and should do so before admitting Ukraine, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said in a wide-ranging interview. [Politico]

"We have to finish the old enlargement task before we start the new enlargement with Ukraine," Orban said in a conversation with former Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel for European Voices, a magazine published by Die Presse. "If we do not integrate Serbia as soon as possible, we will lose it." [Politico]

Ukraine should be a neutral buffer between the West and Russia, Orban added. [Politico]

Orban explained that China was increasing its influence in the Balkan country with a trade deal

concluded last October [Politico].

China represents Serbia's second-largest trading partner and is a major investor in the Balkan nation's infrastructure through its Belt and Road initiative. Beijing is an important defence partner for Serbia, providing it with anti-aircraft systems and drones [AP].

China also agreed in January to invest EUR 2 billion in Serbia to build wind and solar power plants and a hydrogen production facility, the biggest investment in renewable energy in the Balkan country to date, Serbia's mining and energy ministry said in a statement.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the ministry and China's Shanghai Fengling Renewable Co Ltd and Serbia Zijin Copper, a local subsidiary of Zijin Mining, was signed in January. [Reuters]

Serbia's own bid to become a European Union member state has halted over concerns of democratic backsliding and its strong ties with authoritarian Russia and China.

(js/gc)

UK, Latvia plan to deliver thousands of drones to Ukraine

The United Kingdom and Latvia plan to supply Ukraine with thousands of drones, including first-person view (FPV) models, crucial for countering Russia's invasion, with Germany and the Netherlands, according to a joint initiative announced by both countries. [ERR] [GOV]

The British government said that the collaboration among this coalition of nations would "scale up and streamline" drone supplies, providing Ukrainian forces with enhanced situational awareness for targeting enemy positions, armoured vehicles, and ships with explosive ordnance. [ERR] [GOV]

The coalition, launched at a NATO defence ministers' meeting in Brussels, includes Germany and the Netherlands, with plans for additional member states. The UK's Defence Minister, Grant Shapps, discussed the importance of drones on the battlefield and declared the UK's commitment to leading the international coalition. [ERR] [GOV]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy announced plans to produce one million drones in 2024,

reinforcing the nation's drone industry as a pivotal element in its counter-offensive against Russia. [ERR] [GOV]

The coalition's announcement coincides with NATO's ongoing efforts to support Ukraine's defence, boost production capacity, and prepare for the upcoming summit in Washington.

(ha/gc)

Individual EU countries set to impose travel bans on Israeli settlers

Individual European Union countries will enforce travel restrictions on Israeli settlers after member states failed to reach a consensus on sanctions.

Ireland's Deputy Prime Minister Micheal Martin has emphasised his concerns for children in Gaza, where 17,000 have been left without families, advocating for an urgent humanitarian ceasefire during an EU foreign ministers meeting in Brussels [Irish Examiner]

During a press conference in Dublin on February 20, Martin, who also serves as Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, mentioned that the Irish government is actively working on putting a ban into effect. Martin did not specify when it would be enforced. [The Journal]

On February 19, all countries except Hungary appealed for a ceasefire in Gaza and implored Israel to reconsider its intended attack on Rafah. After an EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Martin expressed frustration regarding Hungary's stance.

Martin clarified that taking action at the EU level would be more impactful than actions by individual states. This broader approach could encompass not only travel bans but also asset freezing. While individual member states lack the authority to impose asset freezes on Israeli settlers, some, such as Ireland, retain the ability to implement travel bans. [The Journal]

(sr/gc)

Estonia halts UNRWA funding amid alleged collaboration with Hamas

Estonia has officially suspended its funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)

following allegations of collaboration with Hamas members involved in the October 7 terror attacks.

Estonia's decision comes after Israel privately submitted information to UNRWA, accusing 12 of its members of actively aiding Hamas.

Estonian Foreign Affairs Minister Margus Tsahkna stated at the end of January that Estonia will halt its funding of the organisation until a thorough investigation of the allegations is conducted.

Estonia joins several other countries, including Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Finland, that have expressed concerns over the allegations. UNRWA's Commissioner-General, Philippe Lazzarini, responded to the accusations by immediately firing nine staff members, one confirmed dead, and placing an additional dozen under investigation.

The UN, while urging donor nations not to suspend funding, highlighted that two million civilians in Gaza depend on UNRWA's critical aid for daily survival. [ERR]

Amid Estonia's funding cuts, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has expressed concern about the loss of life in Gaza. The ICJ ordered provisional measures on January 26 in a "state-to-state" case brought by South Africa, alleging that Israel is violating the Genocide Convention. [Al Jazeera]

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that the ICJ's measures include requiring Israel to prevent genocide against Palestinians, enable the provision of essential services, and prevent incitement to commit genocide. [Al Jazeera]

The UN agency, which provides education, healthcare, and food aid, will face a severe financial setback.

Michael Fakhri, a UN-appointed expert on the right to food, warned that the funding cuts make famine "inevitable" in Gaza. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, stated that the 27-member bloc will assess further steps based on a complete and comprehensive investigation outcome.

The agency operates in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and relief to Palestinian refugees. [Al Jazeera]

(ha/gc)

Ireland, Spain call for 'urgent review' of EU-Israel cooperation agreement

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and his Spanish counterpart Pedro Sanchez requested an "urgent review of whether Israel is complying with its human rights obligations under the European Union/Israel Association Agreement." [The Journal]

In a letter sent to the European Commission president, they also called on the commission to propose "appropriate measures" that can be implemented if it is found that Israel is in breach of the obligations in the association agreement. [Irish Times]

The agreement, which began in 2000, establishes a legal and institutional structure to facilitate political discourse and foster economic collaboration between the EU and Israel. Article 2 of the agreement affirms that it "shall be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles." [The Journal]

Varadkar and Sanchez said in the letter that they are "deeply concerned at the deteriorating situation in Israel and Gaza, especially the impact the ongoing conflict is having on innocent Palestinians, especially children and women." [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Estonian PM says Trump's NATO warning is 'wake-up' call for underspenders

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas has said US presidential hopeful Donald Trump's suggestion that America would not protect NATO allies failing to spend enough on defence is a "wake-up" call for members of the alliance who haven't met their expenditure pledges.

Answering questions during a press conference on February 12, Kallas emphasised Estonia's support for increased defence efforts by NATO members. [ERR]

"Hopefully, we will all do more, and collectively we are stronger together," she said. [ERR]

Accompanied by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, Kallas said that European countries need to boost defence spending and send a clear message of strength regardless of who comes to power in the US.

Metsola pointed to the importance of European self-reliance in defence.

Kallas also urged Western nations to seize Russia's frozen assets before the US election, highlighting European concerns about the potential impact of a second Trump presidency on Western policy toward Russia and support for Ukraine, the Financial Times reported.

Kallas said that seizing these funds, alongside military aid for Ukraine and the political isolation of Russia, could exert economic pressure to hasten the end of the conflict.

Kallas' proposal drew cautious reactions from some European leaders concerned about the legal and financial implications of such a move.

Kallas condemned Russia's recent decision to place her on a most-wanted list. She described this as an attempt by Russian President Vladimir Putin to assert jurisdiction over Estonia and intimidate Western leaders. Kallas connected the move with the death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, saying that such actions were part of the playbook of authoritarian regimes. [Financial Times]

(ha/gc)

Austrian plan to transport oil from Russia through Slovakia shelved

Austria's oil and gas concern OMV and Slovak company Transpetrol have stopped working on a pipeline plan by Vienna to transport oil from Russia through Slovakia. [ORF]

OMV had planned and negotiated for 20 years with Bratislava to connect the Druzhba pipeline that originates in Russia to the Schwechat refinery near the Austrian capital, via a link that was to run through Slovakia.

Austria stopped importing Russian oil a year after Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

OMV said that a new link was now unnecessary, adding that the energy sector in Europe was on the verge of transformation, with a transition to green power as the main focus.

Druzhba, also known as the Friendship Pipeline, is one of the world's longest oil conduits. It has been in

operation since 1964 and plays a key role in transporting Russian and Kazakh oil across Europe. [The New Voice of Ukraine/MSN] [The gaze] [EU Today] [Spectator.sme.sk]

(mr/pk)

Azerbaijan excludes French election monitors

Azerbaijan authorities prevented French observers from monitoring the presidential elections on February 7 as tensions simmered amid accusations from Baku that Paris, a historic ally of Armenia, wants a new war in the Caucasus. [France24]

Azerbaijani authorities have deliberately excluded French nationals from observing the election and have rejected the candidacy of an independent French journalist. The diplomatic spats and accusations, along with the expulsion of French diplomats and escalating rhetoric, have widened the gulf between the two nations.

Azerbaijan's presidential election, which handed President Ilham Aliyev an unsurprising and unopposed victory with 92% of the vote and a fifth term in office, provided the backdrop for the latest illustration of deteriorating Franco-Azerbaijani relations. [France24]

Azerbaijan has repeatedly hit out at France for criticising Baku's Karabakh offensive last year and for plans by Paris officials to help arm neighbouring Armenia. Baku has urged severing economic ties with Paris in response to a French Senate resolution that "condemned the violation" of Armenian territory.

In January, an Azerbaijan parliamentary commission called for the expulsion of French companies from the oil-rich country, including energy giant TotalEnergies, in the latest deterioration of relations between Baku and Paris. [Barrons]

"The committee believes it is important to impose sanctions on France," the committee for international relations of Azerbaijan's parliament said in a statement.

"All French companies, including Total, should withdraw from Azerbaijan, and French companies should not be allowed to participate in any projects carried out by the Azerbaijani state," it said.

In January, the French Senate adopted a resolution calling for the right of ethnic Armenians to return to Nagorno-Karabakh and for a UNESCO mission to ensure the protection of historic Armenian churches in Karabakh. Almost the entire ethnic-Armenian population -– more than 100,000 people -- fled Karabakh for Armenia in the wake of Baku's takeover.

(eh/gc)

Lukashenko visits Tashkent to strengthen bilateral trade partnership

Belarus President Alexander visited Tashkent in early February to speak with President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, and the trip solidified the trade relationship between the two post-Soviet nations.

The two leaders said that bilateral relations were positive, with trade increasing 15% in 2023. They said political dialogue and support between Belarus and Uzbekistan will continue through the framework of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN, the SCO and the CIS. [nuz.uz]

The parties agreed to develop conditions for cargo transportation, provide training for international road carriers, and effectively utilise corridors to the markets of South Asia.

The Second Forum of the Regions of Belarus and Uzbekistan took place on February 7 – the day prior to the presidents' discussions – resulting in the signing of contracts and agreements worth over $1 billion. [nuz.uz]

(ik/gc)

Croatia, Azerbaijan hold talks to strengthen ties

Azerbaijan and Croatia held a round of political consultations aiming to strengthen bilateral ties in Baku on February 19.

The meeting was jointly chaired by Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Fariz Rzayev and Frano Matušić, a senior official at Croatia's foreign ministry.

The meeting saw discussions on the state of a strategic partnership between the two countries and future cooperation in international organisations. It also

explored collaboration on political, economic and humanitarian projects. [axar.az] [azvision.az][The Gulf Observer]

(mr/pk)

Czech Republic in talks with Germany for Leopard tanks

The Czech Republic is negotiating with Berlin to secure 15 Leopard 2A4 tanks in return for Prague's military aid for Ukraine, while exploring the possibility of buying 15 more from German arms manufacturers.

The Czech defence ministry said on February 21 that acquiring the additional machines would enhance the country's capabilities amid a transition from Soviet-era equipment to modern hardware.

The ministry added that the cost of the extra 15 tanks that would be bought would be in the low hundreds of millions of euros. [Reuters]

The German government has developed a swap scheme called "Ringtausch" to re-equip allied countries that have supplied weaponry to Kyiv. Under the programme, Prague has already received 14 Leopard 2A4 tanks from Berlin. [CZ Defense] [Radio Prague] [Defense News] [Politico]

The Czech Republic has provided Kyiv with 62 T-72 tanks, 16 air defence systems, six helicopters and 131 infantry fighting vehicles since the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine two years ago, Prime Minister Petr Fiala was quoted by news agency CTK as saying. [Reuters]

(yl/pk)

Denmark to send its 'entire artillery' to Ukraine

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced on February 17 that her country would send its "entire artillery" to Ukraine – the first nation to take such a step – to help Kyiv in its struggle against Russia's invasion.

At the international Munich Security Conference in Germany, Frederiksen said: "We have weapons, we have ammunition, we have air defence systems that

we don't have to use ourselves at the moment, that must be handed over to Ukraine." [Euractiv]

The announcement came after the EU acknowledged it would not be able to fulfil its promise to deliver 1 million artillery shells to Ukraine by a March deadline that the bloc has set itself.

The EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, told reporters in January that only 524,000 shells would be handed over by the deadline – 52% of what was pledged. [Kyiv Independent]

Denmark has urged other European countries to do more to aid Ukraine, which is outgunned and outnumbered by Russian forces.

Frederiksen said: "They are asking us for ammunition now. Artillery now. From the Danish side, we decided to donate our entire artillery." [The Guardian]

(km/pk)

Estonia's security forces disrupt Russian hybrid operation

Estonian security forces have thwarted Russian hybrid attacks involving a coordinated campaign of vandalism, targeting property and defacing monuments in Estonia, the country's Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said.

The thwarted operation included an attack on the car of Interior Minister Lauri Laanemets and a vehicle belonging to a news website editor. Security forces arrested ten individuals, a mix of Russian nationals and dual citizens, with six in custody, according to the Estonian Internal Security Service (ISS).

The ISS emphasised the suspects' ties to Russian special services and willingness to jeopardise Estonia's security [Politico EU].

Kallas stressed the importance of countering Russia's effort to target democratic societies. The ISS Director, Margo Palloson, urged public vigilance against recruitment through social media for such activities.

Russia disputed Estonia's claims, while Latvia's security service detained an Estonian-Russian citizen for defacing a WWII memorial. [Express]

(ha/gc)

Brussels takes action against Hungary's contested 'sovereignty' law

The European Commission has announced it is starting infringement proceedings against Hungary over a controversial law that critics say could be used as a political weapon to muzzle critics of the right-wing government in Budapest.

The law on "protecting national sovereignty", passed in December, set up a special office to monitor foreign interference in Hungary. It contains provisions that could punish election candidates who receive funds from abroad with up to three years in prison.

Human rights organizations have criticized the legislation. Meanwhile, the European Commission, the EU's executive, said the measures violate fundamental rights protected by the bloc's law, including the freedom of association and privacy. [Politico] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly January 2024]

After receiving notice of infringement proceedings, Budapest will have two months to respond before Brussels sends a formal request for Hungary to comply with EU law.

Hungary's ruling right-wing Fidesz party and its leader, Viktor Orban, have repeatedly clashed with Brussels over rule-of-law violations. [Politico] [Reuters] [AP News]

The EU is withholding billions of euros in funds from Budapest for failing to implement democratic reforms. [AP News]

(evk/pk)

European Parliament calls on Serbia to investigate alleged election fraud

The European Parliament adopted a strong resolution on Serbia on February 8, calling for an investigation into the election held in December and threatening to stop EU funding if Serbia doesn't implement key conditions. [Politico]

The Parliament called for an ad hoc independent international investigation into the "irregularities of the parliamentary, provincial and municipal elections," the resolution states. The measure was adopted with 461 votes in favour and 52 votes against.

Serbian opposition parties have accused the current government, headed by President Aleksandar Vucic, of engaging in widespread voting fraud in the election.

"I think we have finally managed to explain that this is a decisive battle," said Marinika Tepic from the party Serbia Against Violence, who travelled to Strasbourg to address the MEPs together with other members of the Serbian opposition prior to the voting. [Politico] [European Parliament]

"If something doesn't change now, we will completely slide into a dictatorship," Tepic said. [Politico]

The resolution calls on the European Commission to send experts to assess the situation and expresses concerns over vote buying, media bias and voter migration.

It calls out Vucic, who "despite not being a candidate for these elections, assumed a central role" by campaigning for the ruling party. [Politico] [European Parliament]

Radomir Lazovic, co-president of the Serbian Green–Left Front party, doubts that the ruling party will accept any of the EU's demands. "We had tens of thousands of people on the streets; there was a huge demand to repeat the election," he told POLITICO. [Politico]

Since the election on December 17, tens of thousands of opposition supporters have frequently gathered in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, to protest against the government.

Local and international observers have condemned election fraud, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is set to publish a report on the parliamentary election by the end of February, OSCE spokesperson Katya Andrusz said.

(js/gc)

Finland extends closure of border with Russia amid security fears

The Finnish government has announced it will keep its border with Russia closed until April 14, citing what it said was Moscow's ongoing "hybrid operation" to direct migrants towards the Nordic country's frontier. [Associated Press] [Reuters]

Finland closed its 1,340-kilometre border with Russia in November 2023 following a spike in illegal migration after the Nordic nation joined the NATO alliance. [Associated Press] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Helsinki accused Moscow of orchestrating the movement of the migrants, a charge that the Kremlin has refuted. The majority of the migrants come from the Middle East and Africa, with most seeking asylum in Finland. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

According to the interior ministry in Helsinki, Finnish authorities have evidence suggesting that more migrants will arrive from Russia if the government lifts the border closure.

"There are at least hundreds but probably thousands of migrants near the Russian side of the border waiting for an opportunity to continue their journey to Finland," Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said. [Reuters]

'Serious threat'

In a statement issued on February 8, the government in Helsinki said that "instrumentalized migration" from Russia could create "a serious threat to Finland's national security and public order." [Associated Press]

Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry, accused the Finnish government of being unwilling to engage in dialogue about the border issue.

"Helsinki stubbornly refuses to discuss with us the threats allegedly posed to Finland's security from Russia's side of the border," Zakharova said, as quoted by Russian news agency RIA Novosti. [Associated Press]

According to the Finnish border authority, a total of 1,323 asylum seekers arrived in Finland from Russia between August and December last year. [Reuters]

Since December 15, all eight border crossing points between Finland and Russia have been shut to individuals. In January, the government in Helsinki decided to extend the closure of these until February 11. However, a cargo train checkpoint in Vainikkala to the south-east remains open. [Reuters] [Associated Press] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Finland's border with Russia is also the northern external frontier of the European Union and constitutes a major portion of NATO's north-eastern flank. Finland joined the military alliance last April after

a landmark decision prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(rs/pk)

Scholz calls for more US, European aid to Ukraine in Washington

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Washington on February 8, calling for more US and European aid for Ukraine, adding that their current commitments were insufficient. [AP] [Euractiv]

Germany has planned for more than EUR 7 billion in aid for military weapons to Ukraine this year. Scholz emphasised the need for transatlantic unity in countering Russian aggression. [AP] [Euractiv]

The European Union, led by Germany, recently pledged EUR 50 billion in economic support for Ukraine. While Europe displays solidarity, challenges persist in the US, where Republican opposition hampers a USD 60 billion aid request. [AP] [Euractiv]

The US Senate on February 13 passed a USD 95 billion foreign aid bill that included $60 billion for Ukraine, as well as funds for Israel and other allies. Still, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson has so far refused to put it to a vote in his chamber. [KyivIndependent]

Months of delays in US assistance have put a significant strain on Ukraine's efforts to resist Russian aggression, causing ammunition shortages and contributing to the loss of a key front-line city of Avdiivka. [KyivIndependent]

Ukraine, German security deal

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Scholz signed a security agreement between Germany and Ukraine on February 16 in Berlin. [France24]

The details of the deal are currently unknown, but Scholz has called it 'a historic step', and wrote on X that "Germany will continue to support Ukraine against Russia's war." [France24]

The bilateral agreement comes as the Russia/Ukraine war enters its third year, and funding from Ukraine's Western allies has become less reliable. Zelensky asked for sustained support at the Munich Security Conference, amid delays in Washington's proposed aid package, and only a fraction of the artillery shells

promised by the European Union have arrived. [France24]

(ik-ha/gc)

Ireland provides Ukraine with anti-mining equipment

Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar confirmed during a summit in Paris on February 26 that Dublin was training Ukraine to use Irish demining equipment. [RTE]

Ireland was looking at other ways to aid Ukraine, "particularly around things like air defence," Varadkar said on arrival in Paris at a summit organised at short notice by French President Emmanuel Macron designed to boost support for Ukraine.[Irish Examiner] [RTE]

"We're here in Paris today to say that we stand by Ukraine for as long as it takes, to send a very clear message to the Kremlin that Russia cannot win this war," Varadkar said. Due to Ireland's status of neutrality, Dublin would only provide non-lethal aid to Ukraine, he said. [Irish Times]

(sr/gc)

Kosovo, Serbia tensions flare over Pristina's decision to ban use of dinar

Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia escalated in February after the former Serbian province banned banks and other financial institutions in the Serb-populated areas from using the dinar in local transactions, starting Feb. 1, and imposed the euro. [AP]

The dinar was widely used in ethnic Serbian-dominated areas, especially in Kosovo's north, to pay pensions and salaries to staff in Serbian parallel institutions, including schools and hospitals. Serbia has said it would seek an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council over the issue. [AP]

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic told the council that abolishing the dinar was a push to make living conditions unbearable for the minority Serb community with the goal of expelling them. [AP]

He said it was “nothing more than another in a series of facts of persecution, and a systematic and widespread attack on the Serbian population — in one word, a crime against humanity.” [AP]

Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti retorted that claims his country is conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign against the Serbs are “a lie,” and said that abolishing the dinar will prevent criminal groups in Kosovo from receiving illegal cash. [AP]

The European Union called on Kosovo to postpone its decision to block the use of the Serbian dinar.

An EU statement expressed concern “about the consequences … on the daily lives of Kosovo Serbs and other communities throughout Kosovo due to absence of prior consultation, in particular on its impact on schools and hospitals, given the apparent absence of alternatives at this moment.” [AP]

The US embassy in Pristina also expressed “concerns and reservations,” fearing that the move would “potentially escalate ethnic tensions and prove problematic for the daily life of a number of citizens of Kosovo.”

(js/gc)

Latvia expands Russian travel limits, minister addresses Russian citizen expulsion

Latvia will extend restrictions on Russian citizens entering the country until spring, citing ongoing security concerns regarding Russia. [LSM]

The decision, outlined in a draft order by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aligns with the agreement reached at an EU Council meeting in Prague in August 2022, allowing member states to enforce measures restricting entry into the EU individually.

The collaborative efforts of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland led to legislation changes restricting the entry of Russian citizens supporting Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions. These restrictions, initiated on September 9, 2022, include visa limitations, with only exceptional cases considered. The current order, effective until March 4, prevents potential threats to Latvia's internal security. [LSM]

Latvia's Minister of the Interior, Rihards Kozlovskis, downplayed the likelihood of a mass expulsion of

Russian citizens. Kozlovskis emphasised the Constitutional Court's ruling, requiring Russian citizens to know Latvian for residence permits, as a legal basis for controlled expulsions.

The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs reportedly contacted 985 Russian citizens at risk of expulsion following non-compliance with immigration laws, as confirmed by PMLP Chief Maira Roze [Baltic News Network].

(ha/gc)

Latvia enforces ban on Russian agricultural imports

Latvia is the first European Union (EU) member state to enforce a ban on the import of agricultural products from Russia and Belarus, with the prohibition set to last until at least July 2025. [Euromaidan] [Euractiv].

The move, approved by the Latvian parliament, comes in response to widespread farmer protests demanding restrictions on food imports from Russia and Belarus. The ban will apply to agricultural and livestock products staying in Latvia, excluding those bound for other EU member states. [Euromaidan] [Euractiv].

The decision follows the rejection of an initial proposal by the opposition National Alliance deputies. [Euromaidan] [Euractiv].

The approved amendments prohibit the importation of agricultural and feed products from Russia and Belarus, as well as products from other third countries if originating from these nations.

Latvia, the EU's second-largest importer of Russian agricultural products, will assess the ban's economic impact by March 2025 and propose any necessary regulatory changes. [Euromaidan] [Euractiv].

In 2023, Russian agricultural imports amounted to EUR 280 million, constituting 12% of the EU's total imports from Russia. The ban is not retroactive, allowing existing transit products to reach other EU countries after customs clearance. [Euromaidan] [Euractiv].

(ha/gc)

Latvia holds moment of solidarity with Ukraine

Latvia held on February 19 a moment of solidarity with Ukraine to mark the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

President Edgars Rinkevics, parliament Chairwoman Daiga Mieriņa, Prime Minister Evika Silina, and Foreign Minister Krisjanis Karins called on Latvian residents to unite in this moment of reflection, honouring Ukraine's resilience against Russian attacks. [LSM]

In a joint statement, the officials expressed unwavering support for Ukraine and condemned Russia's acts, including attacks on civilians and abductions of Ukrainian children. They emphasised Latvia's commitment to assisting Ukraine in achieving "full victory" and urged participation in events across Latvia, demonstrating solidarity. [LSM]

Latvian public service media, comprising Latvian Television, Latvian Radio, and LSM.lv, launched a donation drive during this 'Ukraine Support Week' that will be directed towards supporting Ukraine's urgent needs in the face of the ongoing conflict.

Throughout the week, Latvian public media broadcasted special Ukrainian-themed content, including interviews, reports from the war zone, documentaries, and coverage of support events [LSM] [LSM].

(ha/gc)

Lithuania closes two border crossings as tensions escalate with Belarus

Lithuania has sealed off another two of its six checkpoints with Belarus amid growing tensions with its eastern neighbour, an ally of Russia. [AP] [LRT]

The decision brings the total closed border crossings to four out of six. The Lavoriskes and Raigardas checkpoints will cease operations, diverting all traffic to the remaining Medininkai and Salcininkai checkpoints. [AP] [LRT]

Lithuania cited increased activities of Belarusian intelligence and security services against the country and its citizens as the primary reason for the border closures. [AP] [LRT]

Interior Minister Agne Bilotaite stated that significant resources are required to control flows, prevent smuggling, enforce international sanctions, and reduce traffic safety risks. [AP] [LRT]

The number of permits issued to Belarusian and Lithuanian carriers operating regular international bus passenger services will also be gradually reduced, according to an interior ministry statement. The move also suspends pedestrian and cyclist movement through the last remaining checkpoints. [AP] [LRT]

The decision reportedly follows Belarus taking in Russian military mercenaries and accusations of pushing migrants into Europe. Belarus, reacting to the closures, claimed Lithuania's move was politically motivated, part of an "election campaign," and threatened retaliation. [AP] [LRT]

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry described Lithuania's reasons as "ridiculous" and accused Vilnius of "imitating behaviour" during election campaigns that are seeking to make an enemy of Belarus. The closure affected 3.9 million people who crossed the border last year, 66% of whom were Belarusian citizens. [AP] [LRT]

(ha/gc)

Poland holds naval exercises in Baltic Sea

Poland on February 29 launched its largest naval exercises in the Baltic Sea this year, testing its ability to protect maritime routes crucial for the supply of strategic raw materials.

The manoeuvres, called “Ostrobok 24,” were set to run until March 8, aiming to bolster the capabilities of the Polish navy and its allies in the Baltic.

The exercises, which included Poland’s two biggest frigates and a frigate sent by ally Italy, also saw search-and-rescue operations being practised with aerial support from F-16 jets and reconnaissance helicopters. [Polish Radio] [wojsko-polskie.pl]

(pk)

Sweden to donate EUR 637m in military aid to Ukraine

Sweden’s defence ministry announced on February 20 that it would donate SEK 7.1 billion (EUR 636.7 million) in additional military aid to Ukraine.

The package will be Sweden’s 15th and largest for Ukraine since Russia’s full-scale invasion of the country in 2022. The announcement came just before the war

in Ukraine entered its third year on February 24. [Bloomberg]

The Ukrainian military has said that it is critically short of ammunition and shells amid delays to a USD 60 billion US aid package. [Reuters]

Sweden's package will include SEK 2 billion in artillery ammunition along with various weapons and funds. [Goteborgs-Posten]

Swedish Defence Minister Pal Jonson said: "The reason we are continuing to support Ukraine is a matter of humanity and decency. Russia started an illegal, unprovoked and indefensible war." [AFP/France 24]

Jonson added: "We will continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes."

(km/pk)

Iran suspected of murder plot against Jews in Sweden: report

An Iranian couple who were believed to be on a mission for Iranian intelligence were deported after being suspected of a plot to kill Jews in Sweden, a Swedish national radio broadcaster has reported.

The couple, Mahdi Ramezani and Fereshteh Sanaeifarid, were granted temporary residence permits in Sweden in 2017, posing as Afghan citizens, according to an investigative report by Sveriges Radio published on February 6. [SVT 2]

In April 2021, the couple were arrested in the Stockholm area on suspicion of conspiracy to commit a terrorist crime but were never charged due to lack of evidence, Sveriges Radio said.

In 2022, the pair were deported because they were judged to pose a security risk.

Sweden's deputy chief prosecutor Hans Ihrman said: "We have strong belief that they were here on a mission on behalf of Iran. They were seen here in Sweden as a very severe security threat. And that's the reason why they were expelled, even if we couldn't prosecute them."[AFP/Barron's]

According to the investigative report by Sveriges Radio, the couple identified three targets including Aron Verstandig, chairman of Sweden's Jewish Central Council. [SVT]

The Iranian couple have denied the allegations. [Sveriges Radio]

Migration Minister Maria Malmer said that the government was working to strengthen security in connection to the asylum process, including improved cooperation among the authorities. She said: “I think the exchange of information is absolutely crucial.” [Dagens Nyheter]

(km/pk)

Turkey’s Erdogan visits Egypt, UAE

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his first visit to Egypt in more than a decade as the two Middle Eastern powers looked past years of acrimony and pledged to work together on economic and security issues, Bloomberg reported.

Erdogan met his Egyptian counterpart Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo for talks they said focused on the need for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and the entry of more humanitarian aid to the besieged Palestinian territory. They also discussed greater cooperation in the energy-rich eastern Mediterranean and war-torn Libya. [Bloomberg]

The visit means “together we can open a new page between our countries” and set relations “on their right track,” El-Sisi said in televised comments, flanked by Erdogan. The two signed a joint declaration to formally resume cooperation in diplomacy in banking, energy, tourism, and defence.

UAE visit

Erdogan also visited the United Arab Emirates as a guest of honour at the World Governments Summit (WGS) 2024 in Dubai, where he urged world governments to unite in a world where crises, tensions and conflicts are triggering one another.

Erdogan noted that one of the milestone visions that Turkey has adopted is establishing justice and peace in the region. The government of Turkey has lived up to this responsibility, he said. He pointed to the successive crises that have pushed the world into a “stressful and concerning landscape”, referring to the Russia-Ukraine war that broke out as the world was reeling from the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the war dragged the global economy and energy sector into turmoil, Turkey played an active role in trying to de-escalate the situation by staging talks between both parties in Istanbul and establishing the Black Sea deal that mitigated the impact of the global food crisis.

Erdogan's visit is also aimed at boosting ties with the UAE. The two countries have signed over 40 agreements in the past few years and established a high-level strategic council in 2023. Ankara sees the UAE as an essential partner in tackling the current Middle East crisis, as well as in terms of trade. The annual trade volume between the two countries has reached USD 20 billion. [Daily News]

(st/gc)

EU fines Apple EUR 1.8b for limiting competition

The European UInions has fined Apple EUR 1.8 billion after an investigation found the US tech company had limited competition from music streaming services such as Spotify. [TheGuardian]

The fine is nearly four times higher than expected as the European Commission attempts to show it will act decisively on tech companies who abuse their dominant position in the market for online services. [TheGuardian]

A smaller fine would have been nothing more than the equivalent of a parking fine, the European competition commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, said. The amount was designed to deter against a repetition of such practices by Apple or others, Vestager. [TheGuardian]

"I think it is important to see that if you are a company who is dominant and you do something illegal, it will be punished," Vestager said. "We want to show our resolve that we will go into these cases."

(gc)

Greece joins NASA's Artemis Accord for space exploration

Greece became the 35th country to sign NASA's Artemis Accord, a practical set of principles to guide space exploration cooperation among nations." [NASA]

The Artemis Accord was established in 2020 by the United States and seven other original signatories.

“The Artemis Accords reinforce and implement key obligations in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty. They also strengthen the commitment by the United States and signatory nations to the Registration Convention, the Rescue and Return Agreement, and best practices NASA and its partners support, including the public release of scientific data.” [NASA]

(st/gc)

Polish PM, president to hold talks with Biden amid jitters at NATO’s future

Poland's prime minister and president will hold talks with Joe Biden in Washington on March 12 to underline the two nations’ “ironclad commitment” to NATO, the White House has said, amid jitters in Europe about the future of the alliance.

Biden, Polish premier Donald Tusk and President Andrzej Duda “will reaffirm their unwavering support for Ukraine’s defence against Russia’s brutal war of conquest,” White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

She added: “They will also discuss the strong U.S.-Polish strategic energy security partnership, [their] robust economic relationship, and the United States’ and Poland’s shared commitment to democratic values.”

The visit by the Polish leaders to the White House will come as their country marks 25 years since it joined NATO. Poland, long fearful of its giant eastern neighbour Russia, is one of America’s staunchest allies and looks to the US as the key guarantor of its security.

However, Donald Trump, the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for US president, caused shock and anger in Europe when he said on February 10 that if re-elected he would “not protect” any NATO nations that had failed to meet a target of spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence, adding that he would even encourage Russia to attack them. [The Guardian] [BBC]

The Polish president said on X that his and Tusk’s joint visit to Washington “on the anniversary of Poland’s accession to NATO shows that the Polish-US alliance is and will remain strong, no matter who is in power in both countries.”

Duda added that Poland's level of military spending makes the country "a credible ally and a role model for other NATO members."

Polish officials on February 29 signed a USD 2.53 billion deal with the United States for the delivery of an integrated air and missile defence command system. [Polish Radio]

Poland's outlays on defence have jumped from 1.9% of the value of its economy in 2014 to 3.9% last year, making it the top spender in relation to GDP among the 31 members of NATO. [Politico]

(pk)

Moving past insults, Vatican hails 'cordial' talks with Argentina's president

Pope Francis has held his first official meeting with maverick right-wing Argentinian President Javier Milei, who recently referred to the pontiff, a compatriot, as an "imbecile who defends social justice."

An audience for Milei at the Vatican on February 12 appeared to go smoothly, despite the insults that he levelled at the pope during his 2023 presidential campaign.

The Vatican said in a statement: "During the cordial discussions, which took place at the Secretariat of State, appreciation was expressed for the good relations between the Holy See and the Argentine Republic, and the will to strengthen them further."

Milei won Argentina's presidential elections in November by a wide margin, running on a libertarian and far-right policy platform, including plans to dollarize the economy and push through major privatizations.

Milei has changed his tone about the pope as he seeks support among conservative Catholic voters amid domestic troubles. Argentina is battling its worst economic problems in decades, with triple-digit inflation, a currency crisis and an IMF loan package at risk of going off track.

Francis has not been to his native Argentina since he became pontiff in 2013. Following his election win, Milei invited the pope to visit the country in 2024. [Vatican News] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

(ar/pk)

Chinese bank halts business with Russia

China's Chouzhou Commercial Bank has halted all business with Russia and Belarus, in a major blow to Russian importers. [Moscow Times], [Vedomosti]

The Chinese bank reportedly told clients that it would terminate all settlements with the two countries, which would lead to a "logistics collapse". Transactions on major payment systems – international, Russian, and Chinese – have been halted, according to Russian business paper *Vedomosti.* [Moscow Times], [Vedomosti]

The bank has relied upon Russian importers since the invasion of Ukraine, as Beijing has not joined Western sanctions against Russia. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has said, "We have a close dialogue with our Chinese friends and, of course, we will solve all the problems that arise." [Moscow Times], [Vedomosti]

(ik/gc)

Pope urges peace after killings in Burkina Faso

Pope Francis has called for peace after 15 people were killed at a Catholic church in Burkina Faso on February 25 in what Vatican media described as a terrorist attack.

The killings took place as jihadist groups linked to al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State "continue to extend their range of action in the vast Sahel region" of Africa, the Vatican News website reported.

The pope sent a telegraph to the bishop of Burkina Faso expressing condolences after the attack, which took place during a Sunday Mass in the north-eastern village of Essakane.

The Sahel is an epicentre of terrorism, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace, which said that killings there have rocketed. [GTI]

Jihadist insurgencies have plagued the region since the 2011 civil war in Libya. In Burkina Faso, Catholic parishes, as well as priests, missionaries and other members of religious communities are often targeted by jihadist groups that want to impose Islam on the whole country. [Vatican News] [Vatican News] [AlJazeera]

(ar/pk)

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