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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.

As Vladimir Putin celebrated a pre-ordained victory in Russia's presidential elections, his soldiers ground forward in Ukraine, where the guns of the country's defenders are running dry as Kyiv struggles to secure continued Western military aid. Nevertheless, Kyiv has targeted Russian oil refineries in response to Moscow stepping up attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure.

Putin's election win after capturing over 87% of the vote – a result unheard of in Western democracies – means that the former KGB lieutenant colonel will be ensconced in power for another six years. After the death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in an Arctic gulag, only three candidates were allowed to run against Putin – none of whom posed a serious challenge.

Days after the Russian leader cemented his grip on his nation, gunmen opened fire with automatic weapons

in a concert hall near Moscow, killing over 140 people in a massacre claimed by the Islamic State militant group. It was the bloodiest attack in Russia in two decades and marked a major security failure under Putin.

Meanwhile, Sweden has become the 32nd member of NATO after the Nordic nation ended 200 years of neutrality, delivering a military and strategic boost for the alliance in the face of a Russian threat.

In other news, European Union ambassadors have agreed to suspend the bloc's duties on food imports from Ukraine for another year in order to help the country in its fight against Moscow, but – after widespread protests by farmers – set new caps after some member states raised concerns about disruption to the EU's agricultural market.

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

Kind wishes,

Peter Kononczuk

Deputy Editor-in-Chief

Webpage: www.cpg-online.de, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/CPGTU

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Putin re-elected president in 'predetermined' vote

Russian President Vladimir Putin secured a fifth term as the nation's head of state on March 18, in what Russia's election commission heralded as a "record" victory that will see the former KGB lieutenant colonel ensconced in power for another six years.

The 71-year-old president will be the longest-serving Russian leader since Katherine the Great upon completion of this next term in 2030. Putin came to power in 1999. [France 24] [Foreign Policy]

Russian officials said Putin achieved his most significant margin of victory to date, capturing 87.8% of the total vote, with 77% of Russia's 114 million registered voters turning out for the election that lasted from March 15-17. [Foreign Policy] [Reuters]

Golos, an independent Russian election monitoring group, characterised this election as the least transparent vote yet, recording over 1,400 potential election violations. [Foreign Policy] [The Washington Post]

With the death of opposition leader and Putin's chief rival, Alexei Navalny, in an Arctic gulag, just a month prior, only three other candidates were allowed to run against Putin - none of whom posed a serious challenge.

Individuals in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine reported being "instructed to vote" in favour of the incumbent leader under the armed supervision of Russian forces. [Europe in Review Monthly, March] [Foreign Policy] [NYT]

International reaction

The French Foreign Ministry said "France does not recognise, and will never recognise, the holding and the results of these so-called elections and reaffirms its commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Ukraine." [Reuters]

US Security Council spokesman John Kirby referred to the election as "obviously not free nor fair given how Mr. Putin has imprisoned political opponents and prevented others from running against him."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said: "These days, the Russian dictator is simulating another election. It is clear to everyone in the world that this figure, as it has already often happened in the course of history, is simply sick for power and is doing everything to rule forever." [Foreign Policy]

Other world leaders, such as the Chinese President and Putin ally Xi Jinping, congratulated the Russian president, saying "Your reelection is a full demonstration of the support of the Russian people for you."

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader said. "I believe that under your leadership, Russia will certainly be able to achieve greater achievements in national development and construction." [Reuters]

As for Putin himself, the Russian leader- addressing a room flooded with chants of "Putin, Putin, Putin!"- championed his government's war efforts in Ukraine and warned of escalation and the possibility of a direct conflict with NATO- something Putin described as "one step away from a full-scale World War III," remarking that, "anything is possible in today's world." [Foreign Policy] [Reuters]

A tainted victory?

Despite Putin and his allies' projection of overwhelming support, many Russians used the opportunity to voice their opposition.

On March 17, thousands of individuals assembled outside polling precincts across Russia and elsewhere around the globe to protest as part of the "noon against Putin" movement. Others wrote in Alexei Navalny's name on their ballots as an act of defiance. [Reuters]

Putin asserted the integrity of the elections and told reporters that these acts of protest did not meaningfully impact the vote.

A spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, challenged the notion that the majority of Russian citizens voting at embassies abroad opposed President Putin, commenting: "Russian citizens did not come to the rallies and performances that unfriendly regimes and their paid information services are trying to present." [Reuters] [Reuters]

The Russian president also fired back at reporters from US broadcasting network NBC, who questioned whether his reelection was genuinely democratic.

Referencing the multiple criminal cases the US government has brought against President Joe Biden's chief 2024 electoral rival, Donald Trump, Putin replied, "Is it democratic to use administrative resources to attack one of the candidates for the presidency of the United States, using the judiciary among other things?" [Reuters]

Putin broke his silence regarding Navalny's death, calling it a "sad event" and indicated that his government had been considering a prisoner exchange. [Reuters]

At least 85 people were arrested nationwide during Sunday's demonstrations, according to the OVD-Info protest monitor. [Axios]

(cqk/gc)

Russia, Ukraine trade infrastructure strikes as fighting grinds on

As Vladimir Putin celebrated a pre-ordained victory in the Russian presidential elections, his soldiers ground forward in Ukraine. However, the pace of their advance remains glacial, though they face an adversary that increasingly lacks ammunition and air assets. Nevertheless, Kyiv has targeted Russian oil refineries in response to Moscow stepping up attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Meanwhile, the words of support offered by Kyiv's Western allies are not being matched by the military aid they are delivering.

Russia bombs dams as Ukraine targets refineries

Throughout March, Russia intensified its assault on Ukraine's civil infrastructure. Hundreds of missiles and drones rained down on power plants around the country, with one strike cutting off more than a million people from Ukraine's grid. The attacks come as the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants against Russian commanders for similar attacks.

Moscow's most important target in this recent round of strikes appeared to be the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station at Zaporizhzhia, near the southern front. The station's generators and turbines were taken offline by the attacks, with additional damage caused to the structure of the dam itself. It was a particularly reckless move by Russia, as the dam holds back a reservoir that stretches for 129 kilometres.

This is not the first time Moscow has taken aim at a Ukrainian dam. Russian forces are alleged to have been behind the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Station in June 2023. The incident caused enormous devastation to Russian-controlled areas of the southern Kherson region. Meanwhile, In the opening days of Moscow's invasion in February 2022, several missiles were downed en route to the Kyiv Hydroelectric Station.

Although the Kremlin has so far failed to replicate the success its energy strikes had in late 2022, when power was completely shut off amid a freezing winter in most major Ukrainian cities, the recent attacks demonstrate the Russian military's willingness and capacity to strike vulnerable energy infrastructure. Ukraine remains reliant on energy imports from EU nations, which also play a key role in supplying the transformers and generators needed to repair damaged power plants. The impact of these massive attacks is yet to be seen on the frontline. [ABC] [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Financial Times] [Irish Times] [Le Monde] [Reuters] [RFE/RL]

Ukraine, for its part, has responded by continuing its attacks against Russia's oil production infrastructure.

Russia is the world's second-largest exporter of crude oil, which it refines into usable fuel using a web of refineries. Although these vital facilities are spread out across the vast country, Ukraine has been able to evade Russian air defences and strike them at distances of up to 800 kilometres from its border.

These strikes have been steadily affecting Russia's production capacity since they began over a year ago. Attacks have taken between 10 and 15% of refining capacity offline. This reduction has led to Russia increasing imports from its ally Belarus. Supplies of Belarusian gasoline have more than quintupled, from 590 tons in February to 3,000 tons in March.

The rationale behind these attacks is obvious. As James Henderson, an expert on the Russian energy sector, explained in an interview with *Foreign Policy*, crude and fuel oil exports are the bedrock of Russia's economy. Any reduction in its production capacity means a

reduction in the funds at the Kremlin's disposal, as oil revenues alone make up 40% of Russia's budget. However, the campaign is unlikely to have an impact on the battlefield any time soon.

Attacks also mean a jolt to world fuel prices, and that may have brought an unlikely ally to Russia's side. According to multiple reports, the United States has complained to Kyiv about these attacks.

Several accounts emerged in March that US officials have attempted to dissuade Ukraine from attacking refineries. According to these reports, the US fears higher oil prices and potential retaliation by the Kremlin against what interests Western companies still have in Russian energy infrastructure, such as the CPC pipeline that, running through Russia, connects Kazakhstan's oil to the world.

Fuel prices in the US have historically been an important factor in presidential elections. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden is facing unfavourable polls. There are just seven months to run before election day and his administration is keen to avoid further discontent. The Ukrainian Security Service, the SBU, is alleged to be behind the attacks on Russian refineries. Ukrainian officials have described the strikes as legitimate and necessary, but have denied coming under pressure from the West to halt them. [Bloomberg] [CNBC] [Financial Times] [Forbes] [Foreign Policy] [Guardian] [New York Times] [Newsweek] [Reuters] [RFE/RL] [TIME]

Ukraine struggles to hold ground as guns run dry

Ukrainian troops remained on the defensive in several key sectors of the frontline in March, as the ammunition gap with Russia continued to grow. Since taking the city of Avdiivka in February, Russian forces have been advancing at a slow, expensive pace.

The centre of gravity for Russia's renewed offensive remains at Avdiivka. Since the capture of the ruined city, Moscow's forces have pressed on westward by around ten kilometres, taking a handful of villages. Although Ukrainian artillery remains outgunned, losses have been heavy for the Russians amid the large-scale use of explosive-laden drones.

To the south of Avdiivka, Russians continue to stage attacks from Marinka, though the pace of their advance is slower in that direction. Some of the nearby towns, like Novomykhailivka, have been under attack for months but with little success for Moscow. Fears that the loss of Avdiivka would lead to a rapid Russian advance have, for now, not been confirmed.

To the north, the city of Kharkiv came under extensive attack from Russian missiles and rockets. Aerial bombings have gained much greater prominence as Ukraine faces a shortage of air defence missiles. While Russia's willingness to push its air assets further forward has led to increased losses, this has also provided its forces on the ground with vital support.

Kharkiv remains a target for Moscow, but Russian troops must first cross the Oskil river, the site of several brutal failed attempts in 2022. The town of Kupiansk is a vital gateway for this, but although fighting in the forests to its north continues, Russia is yet to launch a large-scale assault in the area. To the south, Russia threatens to roll back Ukrainian advances made in the summer and autumn of 2023. The liberated village of Robotyne remains under heavy shelling and faces daily assaults. The loss of this hard-won settlement is a distinct possibility.

On the Russian border, Ukraine has continued attacks on the city of Belgorod. Just 25 kilometres from Ukraine, Belgorod is the nearest Russian city. It is in range of conventional Ukrainian artillery, which has fired on the city on several occasions over the last month. Kyiv has also used units composed of Russian defectors and dissidents to lead incursions into the region. Although they have been unable to hold territory, they have forced Russia to evacuate civilians from villages on the border and to divert resources to defend the areas.

While Moscow continues to pay an immense price in manpower and machinery for mere hundreds of square kilometres, it has the population and industrial base to keep doing so for years. Kyiv, without consistent aid from its Western partners, cannot match this. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Business Insider] [CEPA] [Financial Times] [Foreign Affairs] [Independent] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

EU progress on aid for Kyiv

There was good news for Kyiv in March, as EU member states agreed to help it with a EUR 5 billion package.

The fund will be used to resupply European nations that have given munitions and equipment to Ukraine. Negotiations between EU members hit a stumbling block over France's insistence on a "buy European" policy on weapons acquisition. Germany also caused a delay by insisting that member states' contributions to the fund be offset by previous donations to Ukraine. Ultimately, a compromise was reached as Kyiv's desperation became clear.

Unilateral initiatives are also being brought forward. Paris has announced a plan to keep Ukraine supplied with vehicles and missiles from its old stocks, with French Defence Minister Sébastien Lecornu putting the numbers in the hundreds. Western-supplied infantry fighting vehicles, like the Bradley from the US, have played a vital role for those Ukrainian units that operate them.

Efforts to solve Ukraine's ammunition crisis are continuing, with the Czech Republic laying the foundation for a large injection of shells set to come in June. [*See separate story in this issue*] [Al Jazeera] [CNN] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [PBS] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [RFE/RL]

US remains mired in politics

After months of disappointment, there were glimmers of hope for Ukraine in Washington, where US politicians continue to negotiate a USD 60 billion military support package for Kyiv. However, this aid is unlikely to come soon.

The Republicans, who control the House of Representatives, are internally divided and an influential right-wing minority has threatened to topple the party's lower chamber speaker, Mike Johnson, should he oppose them – the same fate that befell his predecessor. With the Republicans down to a single-seat majority in the house, Johnson needs the support of the opposition to pass laws. The situation has been described as dysfunctional by observers. The US has struggled to pass essential domestic legislation that would fund the federal government, with negotiations between Republicans and the opposition Democrats ongoing for several months.

A breakthrough was finally reached in March, but Johnson has come under severe pressure from his party's right, who viewed his endorsement of the funding bill as a capitulation. These members strongly oppose aid for Ukraine, leaving Johson with limited room to manoeuvre. One member has already filed a motion to remove Johnson from his position. This standoff has led to a situation where Ukraine aid, despite being backed by a majority of the US legislature, has not been brought to a vote. With the domestic funding bill passed, support for Ukraine is once again in the spotlight. Reports from several media outlets suggest that Johnson has been working on compromise legislation that would pair Ukraine aid with tighter US immigration policy.

Given the delays to date, and the increasing political pressure on Johnson from the right-wing of his party,

these reports may be optimistic. Former US President Donald Trump, the de facto leader of the Republican party, is a wild card in the debate. He intervened to collapse a similar deal in February. Trump and his media surrogates have given mixed signals on supporting Ukraine, most recently suggesting that aid should be structured as a loan. The US legislature returns from its Easter recess on April 9 and Republican representative Michael McCaul has said that he expects legislation for Ukraine aid to be put on the floor at that time – though his colleague Don Bacon expects a confrontation with his party's right.

American aid is vital to Kyiv's war effort and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has personally appealed to Republican representatives for support. Although the European Union can and has provided large financial support packages, EU member states do not have the range of equipment and ammunition reserves that the US has.

America delivered support worth USD 300 million to Ukraine in March, the first such package since December. Ammunition such as anti-aircraft missiles will be part of the aid. Crucially, more ATACMS ballistic missiles are likely to be sent. These were previously given to Ukraine in limited numbers but were used to great effect against Russian helicopters and bases in occupied Ukraine. Despite America running out of funds set aside for Ukraine aid, this resupply was made possible after accountants at the US department of defence were able to find cost savings in their procurement contracts. [Associated Press] [Atlantic Council] [Axios] [Business Post] [CBS] [CNN] [Guardian] [Hill] [MSNBC] [PBS] [POLITICO] [Reuters] [USA Today] [Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

Islamic State gunmen kill 144 in terror attack on Moscow concert hall

Islamist terrorists killed 144 people and wounded 551 at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, just 12 miles from the Kremlin, while attending a concert, according to Russia's Investigative Committee. [The Moscow Times] [ChinaDaily]

At around 8:15 pm local time on March 22, the terrorists dressed in camouflage and armed with automatic weapons opened fire on the sold-out 6,200-seat venue, transforming the concert hall into a scene of panic and chaos as patrons gathered for a

performance by the Russian rock band Piknik. [The Moscow Times]

ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) - an Afghanistan-based chapter of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist organisation - claimed responsibility for the massacre. The dead included five children while 10 other children were injured, said the Department of Emergency Situations of the Moscow Region on its website. [Reuters][ChinaDaily]

"Suddenly, there were bangs behind us - shots. A burst of firing - I do not know what," one witness told Reuters. "A stampede began. Everyone ran to the escalator. Everyone was screaming; everyone was running." [Reuters]

Baza, a Russian outlet closely connected with individuals in law enforcement, told Reuters that "Many mothers were found embracing their children," while 28 deceased individuals were discovered in one of the venue's restrooms and another 14 in a staircase. [Reuters]

In addition to multiple automatic weapons, the Moscow Times reports, based upon investigation from Agence France Presse, that the assailants also employed "flammable liquids," sparking a conflagration that consumed parts of the concert hall's roof and led many innocents to succumb to smoke inhalation. [The Moscow Times]

It was the worst terror attack in Russia since Islamic militants held more than 1,000 people hostage during the siege of the Beslan school in September 2004, ending with the deaths of over 330 innocents- around 160 of whom were children.

Islamic State claims responsibility

ISIS-K released a statement via its Amaq agency's Telegram channel, saying its fighters targeted the large group of "Christians" outside of Moscow, "killing and wounding hundreds and causing great destruction to the place before they withdrew to their bases safely." [Reuters] [euronews]

The jihadist group released a photo of the four alleged attackers and 90 seconds of footage appearing to have been taken during the onslaught. [Reuters]

US intelligence officials confirmed that ISIS-K was responsible for the attack. US officials said they had warned Russian security officials of a possible attack in the weeks leading up to the Moscow attack. [Reuters]

"Earlier this month, the US government had information about a planned terrorist attack in Moscow – potentially targeting large gatherings, to include concerts – which prompted the State Department to issue a public advisory to Americans in Russia," White House National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson said in a subsequent statement. "The US government also shared this information with Russian authorities in accordance with its longstanding 'duty to warn' policy." [Reuters]

Despite the US Embassy in Russia stating it shared its concerns regarding the threat of "extremists" targeting large gatherings, Moscow denied having received any such warning that this "monstrous crime" was imminent. [The Moscow Times]

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, "If the United States had reliable information on this, it should have immediately transmitted it."

Russia's Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, was reported by the Russian state news outlet TASS that the embassy had received "No specific information, nothing was given to us." [The Moscow Times] [Reuters]

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), headed by Alexander Bortnikov, did announce the successful thwarting of an ISIS-K plot to attack a Moscow synagogue just hours before the US Embassy's warning to American citizens was issued.

This came after a March 3 report from Russian security officials that six IS militants were killed in a counterterrorism operation in the Muslim-dominated area of Ingushetia in the Caucasus. [Reuters] [The Moscow Times]

Ukrainian denial

The Kremlin has arrested 11 suspects and quickly pointed to a Ukrainian link, with the FSB claiming some of those detained were fleeing toward the Ukraine border where they had "appropriate contacts." [BBC]

Ukrainian officials have denied any involvement in the bloodshed. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry accused officials in Moscow of casting dispersion to cultivate further anti-Ukrainian sentiment, calling such assertions "a planned provocation by the Kremlin to further fuel anti-Ukrainian hysteria in Russian society." [The Moscow Times]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky denied the accusation. He called Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government "scum."

Russia has sent "hundreds of thousands of [its own] terrorists" to Ukraine since the invasion began, Zelensky said. [BBC]

Suspected perpetrators

On March 24, Reuters reported that TV editor Simonyan released interrogation footage of one of the suspected perpetrators of the terror attack. The video shows the man in custody claiming he arrived in Russia from Turkey on March 4 and received further instructions relating to the attack via a Telegram channel. [Reuters]

According to reporting from France 24, four alleged attackers- citizens of Tajikistan ranging from 19-32 years of age- were formally charged on March 24 with "committing a group terrorist attack resulting in the death of others."

The four men face a maximum sentence of life in prison, while seven additional individuals are being held on suspicion of involvement in the mass slaughter. [France 24]

Several high-profile Russian officials are calling for an end to the moratorium on the death penalty for crimes of terrorism, which, though legal, has not been implemented in Russia since 1996. [euronews]

Authorities in Moscow announced the cancellation of all significant gatherings for the weekend and the tightening of security around major transport hubs across the city. March 24 was declared a national day of mourning.

During an address on March 23, Putin vowed "We will identify and punish everyone who stands behind the terrorists, who prepared this atrocity, this strike against Russia, against our people."

The Russian Investigative Committee reports that as of March 24, 115 of the over 140 people injured in the terror attack remain hospitalised - many of whom are in critical condition. [euronews] [Reuters]

(cqk-al/gc)

Sweden joins NATO in military boost for alliance

Sweden formally became the 32nd member of NATO on March 7 as the Nordic nation ended 200 years of neutrality, delivering a military and strategic boost for the alliance in the face of a Russian threat.

Triggered by Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Sweden's move seals a landmark geopolitical shift. It comes after Hungary's parliament in February approved Sweden's accession, putting an end to a nearly two-year delay. All NATO nations need to greenlight a new member's entry to the Western military club. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

Ahead of a ceremony that saw the Swedish flag hoisted at NATO's headquarters in Brussels, the alliance's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said: "Sweden has taken its rightful place at NATO's table under the shield of Article 5 protection – the ultimate guarantee of our freedom and security." [Government Offices of Sweden] [NATO]

Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, NATO's founding charter, an attack against one member of the alliance is considered an attack on all allies.

Stoltenberg added: "Sweden's accession makes NATO stronger, Sweden safer, and the whole alliance more secure." [NATO]

With Sweden's neighbour Finland having joined the military club in April 2023, NATO has seen its biggest expansion since the 1990s. The two Nordic countries add nearly 300,000 troops to the alliance. [BBC] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

NATO nations now encircle the Baltic Sea, apart from the entry to Russia's St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. [Politico]

The Western alliance will be able to better monitor activity in the Baltic, overseeing critical pipelines and cables and adding to difficulties for Russia's Baltic Sea Fleet.

Neil Melvin from the London-based Royal United Services Institute think tank, said: "Sweden's membership of the alliance alongside Finland, which was triggered by Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine, is part of a transformation of northern Europe into a NATO bastion." [Politico]

US President Joe Biden congratulated Sweden on joining the alliance, adding that Russia's attack on Ukraine had united, rather than divided, NATO. [AP News]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: “This is a historic moment for Sweden. It’s historic for the alliance. It’s historic for the transatlantic relationship.”

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson vowed that his country “will live up to high expectations from all NATO allies.” He added: “United we stand.” [The Guardian]

(km/pk)

EU to extend tariff waiver for imported Ukrainian food, but with new caps

European Union ambassadors agreed on March 27 to suspend the bloc’s duties and quotas on food imports from Ukraine for another year in order to help the country in its fight against Russia, but set new caps after some member states raised concerns about disruption to the EU’s agricultural market.

The revised deal, which would run until June 2025, adds to the list of Ukrainian produce under restrictions, imposing tariffs on poultry, eggs, sugar, oats, maize, groats and honey imports to the bloc if they exceed the average levels of the second half of 2021, and the whole of 2022 and 2023. France and Hungary both pleaded in vain for wheat to be added to the list. [Aljazeera]

An earlier agreement, reached on March 20, did not cover the second half of 2021, a time period before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the extraordinary economic measures the EU implemented in response to support Kyiv. By including that duration within the arrangement, the ceiling for the application of tariffs has been lowered. [Reuters]

After the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022, the EU waived tariffs on Ukrainian food imports to the bloc. It also set up alternative export routes dubbed “solidarity lanes”, allowing Kyiv to send farm produce meant for non-EU markets via the bloc.

Those measures flooded Eastern European markets, notably those neighbouring the war-torn country, with agricultural produce that protesting local farmers said was creating unfair competition and driving down prices. Farmers also claimed that products marked for transit were being sold on local markets.

The protests led the governments of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria to introduce unilateral prohibitions on Ukrainian grain imports. The EU later recognized that markets in those countries as well as

Romania were being distorted by the inflow of Ukrainian goods, and imposed a ban on Ukrainian grain to those five countries. [Europe Monthly May 2023] [Europe Monthly September 2023]

The EU said market distortions in those nations had dissipated in September 2023 and subsequently lifted its ban. That prompted Poland, Hungary and Slovakia to reintroduce unilateral prohibitions to reduce the flow of Ukrainian grain. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Under the current proposed deal, the EU will be able to reintroduce restrictions on Ukrainian goods if certain conditions are met.

France and Poland have been the most vocal EU members calling for Ukrainian agricultural imports to be brought down to pre-war levels. Such calls have faced opposition from other nations, notably Germany, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands.

Compromise solution

The Belgian presidency of the EU proposed the compromise deal which member state representatives assembled in the European Council accepted on March 27 after a week of negotiations. The new agreement still needs to be approved by the European Commission and Parliament, which is expected to push for more restrictions.

Cheap imports from Ukraine are one of several issues that have angered farmers across the bloc, who have also been protesting against excessive red tape and rising production costs. [Aljazeera]

According to the European Commission, the compromise deal is expected to cost Ukraine EUR 331 million in lost trade revenue, instead of the EUR 1.2 billion projected loss should the EU have implemented a fuller list of measures demanded by Paris and Warsaw.

Ukraine, a candidate for accession to the European Union, is one of the world's largest agricultural exporters. Under current EU rules, it would be the single largest beneficiary of the bloc's farm subsidies if it joined the club of affluent European nations.

The recent turmoil over agricultural imports provides a foretaste of one of several likely pain points in Kyiv's potential future accession to the EU. [POLITICO]

(qv/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Demonstrators attack security personnel at Paris airport in anti-deportation protest

Violence erupted on March 27 when around 25 individuals physically assaulted civilians and Unité nationale d'éloignement (Unesi) security personnel at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport.

The assailants were part of a larger group of hundreds of demonstrators - many of whom were migrants to France- that had assembled at Europe's largest airport to protest the deportation of Kurdish activist Firaz Korkmaz.

According to reporting from Europe 1, the incident began at a local police station before further escalating at the Roissy airport (CDG). [Free Press Journal] [Europe 1]

Korkmaz's deportation under France's Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français (OQFT) measures were reportedly pursued after his role in a mass February 26 protest at the Council for Europe in Strasbourg, in support of a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan.

The PKK has been described as "a radical leftist group" and is a prescribed terror organisation in the European Union, the United States, Turkey, and elsewhere. [Le Figaro] [Breitbart]

Several French communist party officials, including Margate Marianne, Pierre Barros, and Raphaelle Primet, joined the protest, which eventually devolved into chaos. The politicians opposed Korkmaz's deportation and shared photos of the demonstration on X before the riot.

"Several of our elected representatives are currently demonstrating alongside us at Roissy airport to prevent the imminent deportation of Kurdish activist Firaz Korkmaz to Turkey," they wrote.[Breitbart][X]

In the same post, the officials went on to criticise the French government's move, saying Korkmaz "faces torture and imprisonment" upon his arrival in Turkey. However, according to Julien Adubeiro, the Unité SGP Police's central services's regional secretary, "The politicians who come and take part in this [have] responsibility." [Le Figaro]

"We're still on attack alert!" Adubeiro said, referring to the French government's March 25 decision to raise the nation's terror threat alert to its highest level following the March 22 ISIS-K terror attack in Moscow that left 137 people dead and around 180 injured. [Le Figaro]

The secretary went on to further highlight the danger presented by such actions as "only three or four members" of Unesi security accompany the transfer of each deportee- a number he warns is too low in light of the present situation.

Adubeiro also shared his concern that things could get worse, "What will it be like during the Olympic Games?" he commented, adding that the upcoming global competition will further preoccupy and stretch current French security personnel. [Le Figaro] [Europe 1]

France has seen several foreign nationals deported in the months following Hamas's October 7 terror attack on Israel- mainly due to these individual's support for, or links to, international terror organisations and Islamic extremism.

The Western European nation has also struggled to cope with increased immigration levels as a significant destination for hundreds of thousands of migrants from North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. [Europe in Review Monthly, December] [Free Press Journal]

(cqk/gc)

France raises terror threat level in the wake of Moscow attack

French authorities raised the nation's terror alert warning to its highest level following the ISIS-K attack in Moscow on March 22 that left 137 concert-goers dead and at least another 180 injured. [Fox News]

"Following the attack in Moscow, a Defense and National Security Council was convened this evening at the Elysée by the President of the Republic," French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal wrote on March 25 in a post on X.

"Given the Islamic State's claim of responsibility for the attack and the threats weighing on our country, we have decided to raise the Vigipirate posture to its highest level: attack emergency," Attal said. [Fox News] [France 24]

France's terror threat system includes three levels, the highest of which is employed when an attack occurs or appears imminent, either in France or abroad.

According to France 24, the heightened security advisory "allows for exceptional security measures such as stepped-up patrols by armed forces in public places like train stations, airports and religious sites." [France 24] [Reuters]

According to France's Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin- referring to the October of 2023 murder of a school teacher in Arras- France has been inundated by "an atmosphere of jihadism."

The nation has suffered a wave of terror attacks and jihadist violence following Hamas's massacre of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, including the murder of a German tourist in December 2023, which led to the interior minister's assessment that France has been "durably under threat from Islamist terrorism." [Fox News]

French security officials are similarly preparing to be on high alert for the opening ceremony of this year's Summer Olympic Games in Paris, which begins July 26 and have already seen authorities reduce the attendance capacity for the opening festivities. [France 24]

(cqk/gc)

Trials begin for accomplices in France's 2018 Christmas Market attack

The trial for the 2018 Strasbourg Christmas Market terror attack in France that left five dead and seriously injured 11 others started on February 29.

Audrey Mondjehi-Kpanhove, 42-year-old, and three other men in their 30s were brought before a special court in Paris to be tried for their alleged involvement in the market attack. Mondjehi - a friend of Chekatt's - is charged with "complicity in terrorist assassinations' " and faces a maximum sentence of life in prison. [Le Monde]

France experienced 30 different jihadist attacks resulting in the deaths of 251 people and many more wounded between 2015-2018 alone. This included the infamous attack at the world's "Christmas Capital" in Strasburg during the city's renowned Christmas market on December 11, 2018.

While the 29-year-old attacker, Cherif Chekatt, who shouted "Allahu Akbar," was ultimately killed by police, prosecutors maintain that responsibility for this atrocity is not solely limited to the man who physically pulled the trigger. [Le Monde] [rfi]

The three other individuals face up to 10 years each on conspiracy charges for allegedly providing Chekatt with weapons. A fifth defendant in his mid-80s may be brought to trial later as he was deemed physically unfit to stand trial. [Le Monde] [rfi]

Direct witnesses told authorities that Chekatt claimed the bloodshed was retribution for events in Syria and Iraq, and a video of Chekatt pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) was later discovered at his residence. Chekatt had previously been convicted of criminal offences, and he and Mondjehi were friends and cellmates.

Chekatt was on a security watchlist and, according to the criminal indictment, Mondjehi "could not have been unaware of, or may have even shared, all or part of Cherif Chekatt's radical convictions." There is no evidence that the other defendants knew about Chekatt's intentions. [rfi]

Mondjehi's lawyer, Michael Wacquez, commented, "Audrey Mondjehi should not be an outlet for the grief of the victims and should not be condemned because Cherif Chekatt is not there." [rfi]

In a March 7 report, France 24 highlighted the unique role the survivors and victims' loved ones will occupy in this trial, "It is interesting," correspondent Claire Paccalin observed, "the very prominent place these

civil parties [the victims and those affected] have in French criminal terrorism trials." [France 24]

Paccalin went on to discuss the particular challenge that can arise in attempting to criminally link defendants to the attacker's actions in these situations. Noting that this dilemma is shared among many other recent terrorism trials in France, "that's the issue we have here: how much of a lone wolf were these attackers, and that's what these trials are trying to establish." [France 24]

(cqk/gc)

France sues Muslim high school student for false accusations against principal

The French government has sued a high school student for falsely accusing her former principal of assaulting her after he made her remove her headscarf on school premises, the country's prime minister said. [CNN]

French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal said the government would "always stand with these officials, those who are on the front line faced with these breaches of secularism, these attempts of Islamist penetration in our education establishments." [CNN]

He made the comments in an interview with French broadcaster TF1. [CNN]

Secularism in France, particularly involving the country's Muslim population, Europe's largest, has long been a flashpoint. Last year, France banned the abaya – a long, robe-like garment often worn by Muslim women – despite warnings that its prohibition was discriminatory.

(gc)

French public sector deficit widens in 2023

France's public sector budget deficit widened in 2023 by more than the government had planned, Euronews reported, citing data from the country's statistics agency INSEE. [Euronews]

France's Finance Minister, Bruno Le Maire, warned earlier that the country had overshot its deficit target, stressing that more funds must be found to meet the 4.4% of GDP limit for the coming year.

By 2027, France seeks to bring its deficit to under 3% of national output to stay aligned with EU goals. [Euronews]

Le Maire said tax revenue, which tends to track inflation, was a weaker-than-expected EUR 21 billion because inflation fell faster than planned. Meanwhile, spending on unemployment benefits and outlays by local governments was higher than expected, Le Maire added. [France24]

The deficit is largely explained by France's lower growth figures last year, which reduced tax revenue. Also, the rate of the increase in spending slowed only moderately the previous year, up by 3.7%, following a rate of 4% in 2022. [Euronews]

The gap between income and spending could harm Macron's reputation as a fiscally stable president. [Euronews]

The government has already flagged EUR 10 billion in extra budget cuts this year and said it might need to pass legislation mid-year to come up with additional savings, France 24 reported. [France24]

Le Maire said he remained committed to reducing the deficit to below an EU limit of 3% by 2027 and ruled out increasing taxes.

Rating agencies are due to update their ratings on French debt in April and May, weeks ahead of EU parliamentary elections, in which polls show the far right comfortably leading. [France24]

(gc)

Germany legalises limited amounts of marijuana

Germany has legalised limited amounts of marijuana from April with people aged 18 and over allowed to have 25g of cannabis and grow three plants of marijuana, Euronews reported. [Euronews]

Public possession of 25g of cannabis is decriminalised, and people will be allowed to possess up to 50g of cannabis at home and cultivate three plants. [Euronews]

The new law, however, bans advertising for marijuana and prohibits consumption by minors or in front of minors. Smoking will also be banned within 200 metres of schools, playgrounds, and sports fields. [Euronews]

(gc)

Germany initiates bidding for carbon contracts to promote eco-friendly industries

Germany has taken an additional step to combat climate change by launching a program worth up to EUR 4 billion to facilitate a transition towards more climate-friendly production processes over 15 years.

The initiative, termed "carbon contracts for difference," will support sectors like paper, glass, steel, and chemicals, which play a significant role in the country's emissions [AP].

Under this scheme, companies can bid for financial support to offset the additional costs of adopting climate-friendly production methods, enhancing their competitiveness in international markets.

German Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, who spearheaded the program, emphasises its efficiency, allowing companies to plan and calculate fixed, green energy prices over the long term [Clean Energy Wire] [AP].

The bidding process encourages innovative and sustainable industrial practices, such as utilising renewable energy sources, hydrogen, and carbon capture technologies, to lower industries' carbon footprint.

While welcomed by industry representatives as a crucial driver for transformation, environmental activists caution against rewarding projects that perpetuate greenhouse gas emissions, urging a focus on more impactful carbon-neutral solutions [Clean Energy Wire].

(ha/gc)

Tesla factory in Germany targeted in attack

Tesla's in Germany had to halt operations after power lines were sabotaged. Emergency services responded to a burning electricity pylon near the Brandenburg facility suspected of arson [France 24].

The far-left Vulkangruppe (Volcano Group) claimed responsibility for the outage, citing environmental concerns over the plant's impact and water supply. Elon Musk condemned the attack, deeming it "extremely dumb," foreseeing significant financial losses and production delays.

The incident exacerbates Tesla's challenges, including ongoing strikes in Sweden and slower volume growth. Authorities investigated the attack, highlighting the seriousness of targeting vital energy infrastructure [France 24] [Al Jazeera].

This assault underscores tensions over Tesla's expansion and the clash between environmental activism and industrial development. As the investigation unfolds, it raises questions about the balance between protests, dissent and criminality in pursuing ecological goals.

(ha/gc)

Irish PM in shock resignation

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, who shepherded in progressive social change during his term in office, resigned on March 20 in a shock move, citing "both personal and political" reasons.

Varadkar also confirmed he would step down as head of the Fine Gael party. He said he hoped a new leader would be elected by April 6. [The Journal] [Irish Times]

In an emotional statement, he said politicians are human beings who can only give so much before they have to "move on."

Simon Harris was officially appointed as leader of Fine Gael on March 24, with no additional individuals presenting themselves as candidates for the post.

Harris will undergo formal election as prime minister in April after the Easter recess. Harris met with outgoing Varadkar on March 25 in order to discuss the transition of power. [Irish Independent] [Breaking News]

Varadkar surprise

The prime minister surprised journalists, opposition lawmakers and even government members with his decision to step down for what he called "personal" but "mainly political" reasons. [CNN]

The 45-year-old had become a familiar face on the international stage, having made headlines in 2017 when, at 38, he became the youngest prime minister in Irish history.

Ireland's first gay, mixed-race leader soon became the face of a new and more liberal Ireland, shepherding progressive social change through a string of successful referendums. [CNN]

Varadkar, who was born in Dublin to an Indian immigrant father and Irish mother in 1979, first went public with his sexuality during a radio interview with Ireland's RTE Radio 1 in 2015 while serving as Irish health minister. [AlJazeera]

'No longer best person'

"After seven years in office, I am no longer the best person for that job," he said. [The Journal] [Irish Times]

Before his resignation, Varadkar had drawn praise for his solidarity with the people of Gaza, challenging President Joe Biden over sustained US support for Israel during a stateside visit.

Irish Times political correspondent Jennifer Bray told CNN that the resignation came as a "bolt from the blue for everyone." [CNN]

Gary Murphy, a professor of politics at Dublin City University, said Varadkar's speech had a "certain humility" not typically associated with a politician often perceived to be "aloof" and "lacking the common touch."

Bid to modernise references to family

Varadkar's attempt to modernise references to family and women in the country's 87-year-old constitution in a dual referendum earlier last month resulted in a humiliating and heavy defeat for the premier and his political allies.

The government's proposed changes to Article 41 of the Constitution were rejected in a resounding 'No-No' vote as per the 39th and 40th amendments referendum. The 39th amendment, regarding Articles 41.1.1 and 41.3.1, was rejected by 67% of voters.

The proposed amendment was to expand the definition of family in the Constitution to recognise "durable relationships" as well as relationships founded on marriage. The proposed 40th amendment, regarding Article 41.2, was rejected by almost 74% of voters.

The first question in the referendum asked Irish voters for permission to widen the definition of family by amending wording. Hence, it read that families can be established "on marriage or other durable relationships". [AlJazeera]

The second question asked citizens whether the clause "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" should be deleted and another – "The state recognises that the provision of care, by members of a family to one another because of the bonds that exist among them, gives to society a support without which the common good cannot be achieved, and shall strive to support such provision" – added. [AlJazeera]

Varadkar had described the polls, which deliberately fell on International Women's Day on March 8, as a chance to do away with "very old-fashioned, very sexist language about women". [AlJazeera]

In the end, however, the nation disagreed with him, and while Ireland's main political parties all campaigned for a "Yes, Yes" vote, Varadkar was particularly criticised for leading a "gimmicky" and "confusing" campaign.

(sr-al/gc)

Protesters in Dublin call on government to address treatment of asylum seekers

Protesters outside the International Protection Office (IPO) in Dublin urged the government to address the plight of homeless asylum seekers.

A makeshift camp has been created around the office on Mount Street in Dublin 2, where dozens of asylum seekers have been forced to sleep.

Protesters, including members of groups such as Social Rights Ireland, United Against Racism, and End Direct Provision, have all called upon Minister for Integration Roderic O'Gorman and the Government to take "emergency action" to house asylum seekers sleeping rough. [Breaking News] [The Journal]

Several speakers questioned why the Minister is still in Japan on St Patrick's Day Ministerial duties after the debacle.

One joked, "He's big in Japan," before adding, "What is he doing there?"

The Minister had been on a trip to Japan from March 14 until March 19, promoting Irish-Japanese relations.

Speaking from Japan, O'Gorman denied asylum seekers were moved away from the city centre because of St Patrick's Day.

(sr/gc)

Hard-right Dutch politician Wilders to forgo becoming PM

Geert Wilders, the hard-right politician who won a shocking victory in the last Dutch elections, will forgo becoming the prime minister of the Netherlands to increase the chances of forming a right-wing coalition. [NYTimes]

Wilders' far-right Freedom Party (PVV) sent shockwaves through Europe after coming first in Dutch parliamentary elections late last year, securing 23.5% of the vote and 37 seats out of 150 available in what observers dubbed the Netherlands' "Trump moment." [CNN]

Wilders has been at the centre of coalition negotiations since his decisive election victory in November. While it is now doubtful that he will be the next prime minister, other parties have broken a taboo that was in place since 2012: they will have to find a way to govern with Wilders's Party for Freedom.

After weeks of negotiations, Wilders disagreed with other parties and announced he would not lead the next government. [CNN]

Wilders had hoped to form a coalition with the centre-right Freedom and Democracy Party (VVD) of outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte, which came third with 24 seats, and the newly formed New Social Contract Party, which came fourth with 20 seats. The conservative coalition would have commanded 81 seats – enough for a majority in the Dutch parliament.

(gc)

Dutch government tries to stop ASML from moving out

The Dutch government will spend EUR 2.5 billion to improve transport and other infrastructure in the

Eindhoven region to ensure the Netherlands' largest company ASML remains in the country. [Reuters]

ASML, Europe's largest tech firm and the biggest supplier of equipment to computer chip makers globally, welcomed the government plan but said it is still in the process of deciding where it will grow in the future. ASML CEO Peter Wennick, as reported by The Guardian, said: "Ultimately, we can only grow this company if there are enough qualified people." [Euronews]

ASML "prefers to do that here, but if we cannot get those people here, we will get those people in Eastern Europe or in Asia or in the United States." [Euronews]

Economic Affairs Minister Micky Adriaansens confirmed the EUR 2.5 billion figure to reporters as part of a wider plan to retain ASML dubbed "Operation Beethoven."

The funding over several years will go to improve housing, education, transportation and the electric grid in the booming Eindhoven technology hub where ASML is based.

ASML is the country's biggest company, as well as being one of Europe's largest. However, it also relies heavily on foreign employees, with about 40% of its 23,000 strong Netherlands' labour force being of a different nationality. [Reuters] [Euronews]

Recent laws to tax share buybacks and reduce tax benefits for expatriates — alongside a bill that would cap the number of foreign students allowed to study in the country — have set off alarms at firms that rely on international talent. Those concerns have been supercharged as it becomes clear that a country that has long prided itself on its liberal consensus is preparing to clamp down on immigration. [Fortune]

The resounding victory of Geert Wilders in last November's election illustrates how far public opinion has shifted among Dutch voters since 2022, when the influx of migrants into the country increased by 60%.

Wilders recently abandoned his bid to become prime minister, but still has the power to be a political kingmaker, and all three of the parties likely to have seats in the next government campaigned on anti-migrant platforms.

The backlash in the Netherlands, home to companies like ASML, Boskalis and NXP Semiconductors NV, highlights a developing threat to businesses across Europe: that rising populist sentiment could endanger

access to the overseas labour on which they have come to rely. [Fortune]

“What I’m hearing from business leaders that have bigger operations here is that they are not going to be able to get people — or many won’t be interested in coming,” said Marjella Lecourt-Alma, chief executive officer of Datamaran, a software analytics company that focuses on ESG risks. [Fortune]

(gc)

UK raises minimum wage

Millions of workers throughout the United Kingdom received a wage increase starting in April, as the minimum wage increased by 9.8%. [AlArabiya]

The minimum wage, or the National Living Wage (NLW), will rise from GBP 10.42 to GBP 11.44 per hour. Effective April 1, this adjustment applies to individuals aged 21 and above instead of the previous threshold of 23. [AlArabiya]

According to an estimate from the Department for Business and Trade, the NLW boost worth GBP 1,800 a year for full-time workers will benefit 2.7 million people. [Reuters] [AlArabiya]

The move is part of a 2019 Conservative Party pledge to raise the NLW to two-thirds of average earnings. In 2022, the OECD estimated that the UK's minimum wage was equivalent to 58% of the median salary. [Reuters] [AlArabiya]

The Conservatives, who have been in power since 2010, rebranded the statutory minimum wage as the NLW in 2015. Initially, it only applied to Britons over the age of 25. Since then, the age limit for those earning the NLW was lowered to 23. [AlJazeera]

Now, eligibility will be extended to 21-year-olds. Minimum wage rates for younger workers will also increase, with those aged between 18-20 receiving an uplift of GBP 1.11 an hour. For those aged 16-17, pay will rise by GBP 1.12. [AlJazeera]

The independent Low Pay Commission – a body set up to advise ministers on the minimum wage – produces NLW recommendations yearly. This hike represents an acceptance, in total, of last year's proposal. [AlJazeera]

Speaking last November, the UK's Treasury Secretary Jeremy Hunt said that the wage boost "will end low-

pay in this country" and that "the national living wage has helped halve the number of people on low pay since 2010, making sure work always pays." [AlJazeera]

Trade unions have welcomed the move. But many feel the NLW needs to rise by more to keep up with inflation. [AlJazeera]

Afzal Rahman, a policy officer for the Trade Union Congress, told Al Jazeera, "Don't get me wrong, today's move was badly needed." [AlJazeera]

"But we can't lose sight of the bigger picture. We're calling for a minimum wage of GBP 15 as soon as possible," he said, stressing that average pay packets have flatlined in real terms over the past 15 years by failing to keep up with consumer prices.

The Department for Business and Trade said in a statement that this met a political commitment by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party and that for 2025 the minimum wage should rise in line with median earnings. [Reuters]

The Low Pay Commission, the panel of experts which advises the government on minimum wage increases, said the most likely increase needed for the National Living Wage in 2025 would be a 3.9% rise to GBP 11.89 an hour. [Reuters]

(gc)

UK Conservatives polling below 100 seats, survey shows

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party is on track to win fewer than 100 seats in the next election, with Labour likely to score a landslide victory, a new poll suggests, Politico reported. [Politico]

A seat-by-seat analysis based on a survey of 15,000 voters sees Sunak's governing party winning in just 98 constituencies compared to Labour's 468, the Sunday Times reports. [Politico]

The poll, conducted by agency Survation on behalf of the Best for Britain campaign group, puts Keir Starmer's Labour Party at 45% of the overall vote, a 19-point lead over the Tories. [Politico]

Reform UK, the right-wing populist party set up by Nigel Farage, would score 8.5% and win seven seats, with the Liberal Democrats getting 22 seats, according to the survey.

According to the report, the Conservatives would see a complete wipeout in Wales and Scotland, winning no seats. The analysis gives the Scottish National Party 41 seats and Plaid Cymru two seats.

(gc)

British House of Lords scrutinises Rwanda Bill

The British House of Lords examined on March 7 the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, a critical component of the government's strategy to curb small boat crossings across the English Channel.

Peers in the House of Lords advocated for amendments that would enhance judicial oversight of the bill's provisions. Specifically, they supported changes that would require judges to have more authority in challenging Rwanda's designation as a safe country for asylum seekers. (UK Parliament)

Additionally, they insisted that flights to Rwanda should only commence after the full implementation of the deportation treaty, a move aimed at ensuring the protection of individuals' rights.

The proposed legislation seeks to revive a scheme previously ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court, which aimed to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda.

The government aims to streamline deportation processes by categorising Rwanda as a safe destination for migration and limiting judicial intervention on human rights grounds. Critics within the House of Lords argued that such measures could endanger individuals and erode the independence of the judiciary. (UK Parliament)

During the session, several amendments were approved to address concerns raised by opposition members. These amendments include provisions enabling courts to consider credible evidence challenging Rwanda's safety status and ensuring compliance with domestic and international law standards.

Despite the government's insistence that a new treaty with Rwanda resolves previous legal objections, some remain sceptical, emphasising the need to prevent undue delays in deportation processes (BBC).

Tensions surrounding its efficacy and adherence to legal standards are likely to escalate. While the

government is buoyed by its majority in the House of Commons and may overturn contentious amendments, the robust parliamentary scrutiny underscores the importance of careful deliberation in shaping immigration policies. (UK Parliament)

Upper Chamber

Following the House of Lords' deliberations, the bill returned to the upper chamber for consideration of Commons amendments on March 20, 2024, in a process known as 'ping pong.' (UK Parliament)

During this stage, members reviewed amendments made by MPs, addressing various aspects, including domestic and international law, implementation of the Rwanda Treaty, decisions on individual claims and appeals, and exemptions for UK armed forces personnel overseas. (UK Parliament)

This iterative process reflects the ongoing debate and careful consideration surrounding the bill's provisions, highlighting the complexities and sensitivities involved in immigration policy. The bill will now return to the House of Commons for MPs to consider the amendments made by the Lords, continuing the legislative process towards its final form.

The engagement of both chambers in refining the bill underscores the significance of parliamentary scrutiny in shaping immigration policies and ensuring their effectiveness, legality, and adherence to human rights standards. Further updates on the bill's progress and subsequent developments will continue to be monitored as it moves through the legislative process.

(ha/gc)

Sunak defends writer J.K. Rowling

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak defended writer J.K. Rowling after she dared Scottish police to arrest her under Scotland's new hate crime laws. [KFOXTV]

The author of "Harry Potter" went on a lengthy social media rant over Scotland's new Hate Crime Act, a measure that took effect on April 1. The rule outlaws "stirring up hatred" and makes it a criminal offence to act in a way that "a reasonable person would consider to be threatening, abusive or insulting." [KFOXTV]

Rowling, an outspoken critic of transgender ideology, challenged the rule and dared local authorities to arrest her. [KFOXTV]

"The new legislation is wide open to abuse by activists who wish to silence those of us speaking out about the dangers of eliminating women's and girls' single-sex spaces, the nonsense made of crime data if violent and sexual assaults committed by men are recorded as female crimes, the grotesque unfairness of allowing males to compete in female sports, the injustice of women's jobs, honours and opportunities being taken by trans-identified men, and the reality and immutability of biological sex," Rowling wrote. [KFOXTV]

The author concluded: "I'm currently out of the country, but if what I've written here qualifies as an offence under the terms of the new act, I look forward to being arrested when I return to the birthplace of the Scottish Enlightenment."

In an interview with Sky News, Sunak responded to the bold challenge by backing Rowling. We should not be criminalising people saying common sense things about biological sex," Sunak said. "Clearly that isn't right. We have a proud tradition of free speech." [KFOXTV]

"These are the wrong set of priorities for the country," Sunak added.

Sunak has made similar claims in the past, noting at the U.K.'s annual Conservative Party Conference in 2023 that "we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be."

(gc)

British government introduces updated definition of extremism

British ministers have introduced a new extremism definition aimed at curbing ideologies based on violence, hatred, or intolerance. (BBC)

Under the new definition, certain groups could be restricted from government funding and engagements with officials. (BBC)

Civil liberties advocates and community groups have criticised the move, expressing concerns about potential unfair targeting and suppression of legitimate dissent.

The revised definition, effective immediately, categorises extremism as the promotion of ideologies

that undermine fundamental rights and democratic systems or create environments conducive to violence.

While the government asserts the need for clarity in identifying and combating extremist threats, critics warn of the risks of overreach and legal challenges. (BBC)

Communities Secretary Michael Gove plans to implement a pilot scheme to enforce the new definition. The scheme would exclude individuals and groups deemed extremists from participating in public life.

The initiative has raised further legal concerns and prompted calls for greater transparency and consultation in the government's approach to tackling extremism.

Leaked documents suggest the proposed definition could target behaviours threatening individual rights or enabling extremism's spread, potentially affecting a broad spectrum of groups.

Despite the government's intentions to address perceived threats to democratic values, the lack of public consultation and concerns about potential legal challenges have sparked debate and criticism.

As the government presses forward with its plans to implement the new extremism definition, questions remain about its impact on freedom of speech and its effectiveness in combating extremist ideologies.

Amidst legal concerns and calls for transparency, the government faces the challenge of balancing safeguarding democratic values and protecting individual rights. (The Guardian)

(ha/gc)

British special forces block Afghan troops from relocating to UK

UK special forces blocked Afghan troops they had fought alongside from relocating to the UK after the Taliban seized power, the BBC's Panorama news programme has reported. [BBC]

Leaked documents show special forces rejected applications despite some containing compelling evidence of service alongside the British military. [BBC]

Afghan commandos accompanied British special forces on some of the most dangerous missions of the conflict. The Ministry of Defence said it was conducting an independent review. [BBC]

A veto gave special forces decision-making power over applications at a time when a public inquiry in the UK was investigating allegations that SAS soldiers had committed war crimes on operations in Afghanistan. [BBC]

The Armed Forces Minister, James Heappey, has now announced a review of about 2,000 applications after admitting that the decision-making process behind some rejections was "not robust".

Only those residing in the UK could submit evidence to the enquiry, which would make those Afghan soldiers ineligible to give evidence.

One former special forces officer who spoke to the BBC, "At best, it's not appropriate; at worst, it looks like they're trying to cover their tracks." [BBC]

(js/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Lithuanian Defence Minister resigns

Lithuanian Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas resigned amid reported disagreements with Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte about advancing the Baltic country's defence policies.

Anusauskas cited an offer to swap positions with another politician, which he declined. While reasons for his resignation remain undisclosed, both sides affirm it's not linked to any sudden security concerns or deficiencies in the Defence Ministry's operations. (LRT)

Following Anusauskas' resignation, Prime Minister Simonyte nominated Laurynas Kasciunas, an MP from the conservative Homeland Union party, as Defence Minister. Kasciunas highlighted priorities such as implementing universal defence principles, conscription reform, securing additional defence funding, and advancing Lithuania's military drone program.

His nomination follows Simonyte's assertion that Anusauskas was insufficiently active in advancing key defence policies. Kasciunas' appointment has garnered support and criticism from various segments of Lithuanian society. (TVP World)

(ha/gc)

Russia invests in railway links with Asia to bypass Western sanctions

As part of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to bypass Western sanctions, Moscow is making significant investments in railway lines connecting Russia to China, India and the Persian Gulf.

There are plans for a 100-mile railway line connecting Russia with Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, opening up trade in Mumbai. It will cost USD 1.7 billion, with a loan from Russia to Iran. There are plans to restore an old Soviet railway that provided access to Turkey and Iran via Armenia and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic (an exclave of Azerbaijan). [New York Times]

The new railway will link two Iranian cities, Astara and Rasht, connecting tracks between Iran and Azerbaijan to the north and then to the Russian railway grid. The new link is expected to be completed in 2028 — the resulting “North-South Transport Corridor” will stretch unbroken for more than 4,300 miles, out of reach of Western sanctions.

Putin has said that the new route will cut cargo travel time to Mumbai from St. Petersburg to only ten days, from 30 to 45 days. Russian officials call it a “breakthrough revolutionary project” that competes with the Suez Canal. [New York Times]

It will also complement Russia's trading routes toward China, currently its largest trading partner, as those reach overcapacity. Since 2021, just before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia's trade with China has soared about 63%, to more than USD 240 billion in 2023, according to Chinese figures. [New York Times]

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, trade with Europe was hit hard; traditionally Russia's largest market for import and export.

Since then, Putin has steered trade in the direction of Asia and the global south, where alternative markets with fewer sanctions have helped keep the Russian economy afloat. The new trade routes will be used to export Russia's vast oil and gas resources and import goods that would have previously come from Europe. [Business Insider]

(ik/gc)

Hundreds of Russian businesses are going bankrupt

Over 1,200 Russian companies went bankrupt during the first two months of 2024. 571

About 570 Russian companies reported bankruptcy in January and 771 in February, a significant increase from the respective months in 2023. [Коммерсантъ]

Pressure on the private sector is partly due to high-interest rates. The Bank of Russia has raised interest rates to 16% to curtail inflation and prevent the wartime economy from overheating.

Though industries providing military services and goods are booming (mainly due to increased government spending), those working in other sectors have suffered from Western sanctions.

The bankruptcy moratorium imposed in April 2022 (after introducing Western sanctions) has also expired in late 2022, meaning creditors are entitled to initiate bankruptcy proceedings. [Business Insider]

(ik/gc)

Ukraine lowers minimum conscription age

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has signed a law that will lower the country's minimum conscription age from 27 to 25, potentially boosting the number of men available to fight Russia's invasion as the country struggles with force mobilisation in a nation exhausted by more than two years of war with Russia, which has seen huge military losses. [CNN][France24]

The Ukrainian Parliament passed the measure in May 2023, but Zelensky signed it into law in April. It is unclear how many men will be impacted by the move. [CNN][France24]

A statement published by the Parliament upon passing the law in 2023 said it was "inappropriate" that "a significant number of citizens" who were fit for military service could not be called up, despite the present need, under martial law.

Calling men up to fight under Ukraine's martial law, which is currently in effect, is a two-stage process. First, men are drafted into military service. Then, once serving in the military, they can later be mobilised—or called up to fight—by the government.

The mobilisation law comes after the Parliament backed a February bill to draft more soldiers into the army. [France24]

Russia has been throwing more manpower into its Ukraine offensive, with little major movement on the front for either side in the last year. Zelensky said in December that the army wanted to mobilise up to half a million people to battle Moscow's forces in Ukraine. [France24]

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bulgarian prime minister resigns

Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov, from the centrist We Continue to Change (PP) party, resigned on March 5, paving the way for the centre-right GERB party, another governing coalition member, to lead the government. [AP News]

The political shakeup is part of a GERB power-sharing agreement signed in 2023 and a pro-Western bloc led by the PP party. Under the agreement to rotate leadership within the governing coalition, Foreign Minister and ex-European Commissioner Mariya Gabriel was set to take over as the country's prime minister after Denkov's nine-month term. [AP News]

Denkov became prime minister in June 2023. During his time in office, Denkov prioritised Bulgaria's entry into Schengen and the Eurozone as its primary goals.

"This is not a political game but keeping one's word, an expression of continuity, political fair play and respect for citizens," Denkov said about his resignation. "I am now honouring the commitment that we assumed by the joint declaration on June 6, 2023." [BTA]

After agreeing to form a new government in early March, Gabriel announced on March 24 that she would withdraw from the candidacy for prime minister. She will not assume her nine-month term as planned.

"There were three days of talks," Gabriel said. "We say no to permanent new conditions."

Gabriel said: "GERB will not participate in negotiations for a second time."

She added that a "coordinated refusal and unwillingness to participate in a cabinet" was the main reason for the failure of the talks. [BalkanInsight]

In response to the withdrawal, Kiril Petkov, leader of the PP party, criticised Gabriel: "To be prime minister, you must have basic integrity. You must have courage and leadership skills and not bend. I feel sorry for her." [Politico]

If the two parties cannot find a second candidate for prime minister to form a government, President Rumen Radev will have to name a third party to propose a candidate, paving the way for snap elections.[Reuters]

The government rotation is taking place as the two blocs of the coalition experience tensions and increasing speculations that the coalition government won't hold. The coalition consists of the GERB and the centre-right UDF parties on one side, the We Continue to Change party on the other, and the centre-right Democratic Bulgaria party on the other.

On March 6, Kornelia Ninova of the centre-left opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party described the governing coalition as "conceived in sin",[Balkan Insight]

(km/gc)

Bulgaria launches first Bulgarian-language AI model

Bulgaria's Institute for Computer Science, Artificial Intelligence and Technology (INSAIT) has launched BgGPT, the first Bulgarian-language artificial intelligence (AI) model.

Bulgaria's Education Ministry announced the new AI model on March 4.

INSAIT received thousands of requests to access BgGPT shortly after announcing the language model in January. In late February, INSAIT made BgGPT available free of charge. [Novinite]

The new model allows Bulgarian companies to utilise AI for free, compared to the costs of closed AI models like OpenAI.

Additional advantages of the AI model are that it can be used within a business' internal system, preventing confidential data from being shared with third parties.

The system is built on the open-source Mistral-7B.

Allowing public access to the BgGPT model is part of INSAIT's AI development and implementation strategy in Bulgaria. [BTA]

(km/gc)

Greece approves landmark educational reform

Greece approved on March 9 broad reforms that promote the privatisation of university education despite protests against the initiative.

The sweeping reforms will end the state monopoly on university education, breaking what powerful left-wing student groups have long regarded as a major taboo. Overseas universities would be allowed to open branches in

Greece, charging tuition fees whilst holding a non-profit status. (Euronews)

Although some private higher education is already legal in Greece, the new law would make degrees from vetted private institutions equivalent to public universities. (Euronews)

Lawmakers in the 300-seat parliament voted 159-129 in favour of the bill. Announcement of the result was delayed until after midnight by three lawmakers from a small left-wing party, who remained seated and studied a printout of the draft law for over two hours after everyone else had cast their ballots and left. The party had earlier said it would vote against the bill. (Euronews)

Around 18,000 left-wing and student protesters demonstrated in Athens in advance of the vote, with some protesters carrying out petrol bombs and firecracker attacks on the police outside parliament the night prior.

The police stated that nine citizens and seven officers were injured, while three suspected rioters were arrested. The police and tear gas charges and some demonstrators were fired. (Athens News Agency - Macedonian Press Agency (AMNA-MPA)

Despite weeks of protests preceding the vote, opinion polls showed that most of the population supported the reforms. Prime Minister Kyrirakos Mitsotakis said the reforms guaranteed "greater freedom and greater access to knowledge for all Greek students."

Opposition parties argued that it violates the constitution and could create a two-tier system for students. Stefanos Kasselakis, leader of left-wing SYRIZA and the government's main opposition, maintained that the bill would turn universities into supermarkets. (Euronews)

Education reforms in Greece are often politically charged. University activism is historically linked to pro-democracy movements but also later used as a refuge for violent protest groups.

The change in legislation follows other sweeping reforms in recent weeks of Mitsotakis' New Democracy (ND) government, including legalising same-sex marriage and introducing a postal vote for the approaching European Parliament election.

(al/gc)

Tucker Carlson plans visit to Serbia, PM says

Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic announced that US media personality Tucker Carlson would visit the country in the middle of 2024. His trip comes after Carlson visited Russia to interview Vladimir Putin.[Politico]

"He knows a lot about Serbia and said he is planning to come to Serbia in mid-2024 and that he extremely respects [Serbian] President Aleksandar Vučić," Brnabic said. "And I told him I look forward to seeing him."

The Serbian PM added that she had "congratulated" Carlson on "his courage to do a really phenomenal interview" with Russian President Vladimir Putin in defiance of "censorship."

Carlson's two-hour sit-down with Putin was the first interview the Russian president granted to a Western journalist since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Politico]

(js/gc)

Turkish opposition wins local elections in Istanbul, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan suffered a huge loss in local elections across the country, with Turkey's main opposition party claiming election

victories in Istanbul and Ankara, the BBC reported. [BBC]

Erdogan had hoped to regain control of the cities less than a year after he claimed a third term as president. He led the campaign to win in Istanbul, where he grew up and became mayor. However, Ekrem Imamoglu, who first won the city in 2019, scored a second victory for the secular opposition CHP. [BBC]

Erdogan had vowed a new era in Turkey's megacity of almost 16 million people, but the incumbent mayor of Istanbul secured more than 50% of the vote, defeating the president's AK Party candidate by more than 11 points and almost one million votes. [BBC]

This was also the first time since Erdogan came to power 21 years ago that his party was defeated at the ballot box across the country. Persistent economic woes for Turkish citizens underscore a major reason for the massive losses sustained by Erdogan's party in nationwide.[BBC][MSN]

Inflation woes

Turkey's annual inflation rate climbed to 68.5% in March, data showed. Monthly inflation was 3.16%, the Turkish Statistical Institute said, easing from 4.53% and 6.7% in the previous two months as fallout from wage hikes and other administered price rises at the start of the year faded. [MSN]

The CHP blamed the nearly 70% inflation rate, sluggish development, and the vigorous monetary tightening policy that has increased borrowing rates as factors that damaged the AKP's performance. Voters punished Erdogan and his party largely over the cost-of-living crisis, AKP officials and analysts said.[MSN][MSN]

"We knew that this election was going to be harder than others because we are applying a very strict fiscal policy that may taste bitter today but we know that it will help in the future," said Harun Armagan, an AKP central decision board member and vice chair of foreign relations. [MSN]

Erdogan, 70, acknowledged the election had not gone as he had hoped, but he told supporters in Ankara it would mark "not an end for us but rather a turning point." He has always relied on the "people's will" for his authority, and he told supporters that he would respect the electorate now, too. [BBC]

Opposition mayor

In the capital, Ankara, opposition mayor Mansur Yavas was so far ahead of his rival by 60% that he declared victory when fewer than half the votes were in. Supporters blocked all the main roads in the city, waving flags and sounding their car horns. [BBC]

Turkey's pro-Kurdish DEM Party called for authorities to reverse a block on one of its mayors taking office after local elections, and said it was also challenging other results over what it called "illegal voters" that prevented it winning.

The challenges by DEM - parliament's third largest party, which performed well in the mainly Kurdish southeast - mark the biggest dispute over the results of the nationwide local vote.

Abdullah Zeydan, DEM candidate in the city of Van, won 55.5 % of votes versus 27.2 % for the candidate from Erdogan's AKP. DEM said the justice ministry had sent a letter five minutes before offices closed, two days before the vote, objecting to Zeydan's candidacy, and a court had then ruled that he did not have the right to stand. [AlArabiya]

Protests

Police used tear gas and water cannons to break up a demonstration in the eastern Turkish city of Van. Demonstrations were also held in economic hub Istanbul. [AFP]

Clashes between two groups in Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast during the local elections left one dead and 12 people wounded, a local official told AFP. The incident that took place in Agaclidere village 30 kilometres (18 miles) from the city of Diyarbakir turned violent and included guns, the official said. One bullet hit the car of a local journalist. [AlArabiya]

The brother of an opposition candidate was also killed and four other people injured in clashes between opponents and supporters of the newly elected ruling-party mayor of a city district in a predominantly Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey.

Supporters of Erdogan's AKP clashed with backers of the opposition DEVA (Remedy) Party in the Pervari district of the city of Siirt. [Malaymail]

(gc)

Turkish police detain 75 accused of spreading propaganda

Turkish police detained at least 75 people during a Nevruz celebration in Istanbul for spreading terrorist propaganda associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Green Left Party (YSP), associated with the PKK, organised the event. Suspects were arrested on suspicion of rolling out posters of the PKK's jailed ringleader Abdullah Ocalan. For shouting illegal slogans, resisting the police and causing chaos. (Daily Sabah)

The rise of the PKK began in the 1980s and has led to the deaths of over 40,000 people in Turkey. The display of any symbols or images of Ocalan is banned in Turkey and some other EU member states. Ocalan has been imprisoned near Istanbul since 1999, spending much of that time in isolation.

Meral Danis Besta, the YSP's mayoral candidate, reiterated the party's call for the release of Ocalan, addressing the crowd, "Ocalan must be free. Nevruz is freedom." (Daily Sabah)

Turkish officials claim that the group is losing popularity in Turkey, with allegedly less than 200 terrorists remaining in Turkish territories.

(al/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Italian PM seeks damages over deepfake porn videos

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is seeking EUR 100,000 in damages from two men she claims were involved in creating deepfake pornographic videos of her and posting them online.

Meloni has been asked to testify at a trial in the Sardinian city of Sassari on July 2. [BBC] [POLITICO] [Independent] [Organiser.org]

She has promised to hand any damages she wins to a fund supporting female victims of domestic violence, according to her lawyer.

The legal case aims to "send a message to women who are victims of this kind of abuse of power not to be afraid to press charges," the lawyer added.

Two men accused of making the videos, a father and son aged 74 and 40, have been accused of defamation, which in Italy can be punished with jail time. [Independent]

The videos date back to before Meloni was appointed prime minister in 2022.

Deepfake images, where the face of one person has been digitally superimposed onto the body of another, are not illegal in Europe under new EU rules on artificial intelligence, but content creators must be transparent about their origins. [POLITICO]

(pk)

Italy to set up EUR 1 bn AI fund

Italy is planning to create a EUR 1 billion investment fund backed by state lender CDP to support artificial intelligence projects. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni emphasised the need for an "Italian way" in AI development. She announced at an artificial intelligence conference in Rome on March 12 that her government was working on a draft law to regulate the sector. According to Meloni, the law is intended to supplement the European Union's AI Act. [Handelsblatt]

Agostino Scornajenchi, chief executive of CDP Venture Capital, a unit of CDP, said the AI fund could receive a further EUR 3 billion from the private sector.

Italy plans to use its presidency of the Group of Seven major democracies this year to focus on the impact of artificial intelligence on jobs and inequality, while

defining safeguards for the development of the technology. [Handelsblatt]

(acn/pk)

Tens of thousands rally to remember Mafia victims

Tens of thousands took to the streets of Rome on March 21 to remember victims of the Mafia and protest against organized crime.

The names of all 1,081 people killed by mobsters in Italy since 1861 were read out during the Day of Remembrance and Commitment for Innocent Victims of Mafia, which was held for the 29th time.

Among those at the rally were the families of victims, students, political leaders, trade unions and priests. [Ansa]

Italian President Sergio Matarella, whose brother was murdered by the Sicilian Mafia in 1980, said the day underlined "the commitment to free the population and territories from mafia organization, and to overcome the indifference and resignation that will always benefit criminal groups. Mafia organizations are a heavy burden for Italy." [Xinhua]

Crime syndicates such as the Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta last year generated a profit estimated at EUR 40 billion, equivalent to 2% of Italy's GDP, according to a report by the Italian Association of Artisans (CGIA). [Euronews]

In November, an Italian court sentenced over 200 mafia members, politicians, businessmen and local officials associated with the 'Ndrangheta to a total of 2,200 years in prison. The trial was the result of a drive to curb the group's corrupt influence on Italy's economy, public institutions and healthcare. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(pk)

EU launches infringement process against Italy over air quality

The European Commission announced on March 13 that it had started an infringement procedure against Italy over its failure to meet air quality obligations

established under a ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

According to Brussels, pollution levels in Italy in 2022 exceeded daily limits in 24 zones. Rome has been given two months to tackle the issue and deliver a response. If this is judged as unsatisfactory, the Commission, the EU's executive, could refer Italy back to the CJEU.

In 2020, the court ruled that Italy had breached European law due to high levels of smog registered in many parts of the country. [Ansa.It] [EuroNews] [European Commission]

(nbnc/pk)

Italy to stop sending speed camera photos to homes amid privacy concerns

Italy's ministry of transport has said that, for data protection reasons, it will no longer send photos from traffic cameras to the homes of drivers who have breached speed limits. [Deutsche Welle]

The move, announced on March 9, comes amid a spate of cases in which people's relationships, marriages or business ventures have faltered after the partners of speeding drivers saw unexpected companions in such photos. [Spiegel]

Meanwhile, far-right Deputy Prime Minister and Transport Minister Matteo Salvini has criticized the use of speed cameras to detect traffic offences. He says that local authorities mainly use the devices to generate revenue, and has hit out at what he called "speed camera anarchy". [Deutsche Welle]

The government is planning new rules under which speed cameras would be set up only to ensure safety and traffic flow, but not to generate revenue for city councils. [Deutsche Welle]

Italy has more than 11,000 speed cameras – more than any other European country. [Zeit]

(acn/pk)

Poverty in Italy hits new high despite economic recovery

Despite an economic recovery in Italy since the easing of COVID-related restrictions, the number of people

living in “absolute poverty” last year rose to the highest level in around a decade, according to researchers. [Reuters]

ISTAT, the National Institute for Statistics, said 5.75 million people, or 9.8% of the population, were unable to buy the goods and services required for an “acceptable standard of living”. [The Financial Express]

Despite some regional variations, poverty in Italy has risen steadily since 2014. The right-wing government’s move last year to start phasing out a poverty-relief subsidy – which was introduced in 2019 – has contributed to the increase. [Reuters]

(acn/pk)

Post-election uncertainty in Portugal as far-right pushes for government role

The centre-right Democratic Alliance has claimed victory in Portugal’s closely contested snap general election on March 10, but has ruled out a coalition with the far-right, without which a new government lacks a parliamentary majority.

Amid uncertainty and the prospect of a repeat election, Portugal looks likely to have a minority administration in the short term after the Democratic Alliance won 79 seats in the 230-member parliament. The previously ruling Socialist Party garnered 77, after the two main groupings each took around 28% of the vote.

The surgent far-right Chega party, set up five years ago, won 48 seats, with 18% of the vote. The grouping garnered just 1.3% of the vote in 2019, followed by 7.2% in the 2022 general elections. [The Guardian] [The Economist]

After the results of the March ballot came in, Chega leader André Ventura claimed in a speech: “This is the night that the two-party system in Portugal ended”.

He called Chega the “centrepiece” of parliament, and threatened to withhold support for a Democratic Alliance national budget bill unless negotiations take place on forming a governing coalition. [The Economist] [NPR]

However, reiterating his position, Democratic Alliance chief Luis Montenegro ruled out any partnership with Chega, saying: “No is no.” [The Economist]

If the Democratic Alliance cannot pass a budget, another parliamentary election is likely, meaning the country faces a period of political instability.

The March ballot 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]

Chega focused its election campaign on immigration and corruption. Both Portugal's main parties have recently been mired in corruption scandals. [The Economist] [Europe Monthly March 2024]

(jt/pk)

Journalists in Portugal strike for first time in 40 years

The Portuguese Union of Journalists held a nationwide strike on March 14, calling for better wages and working conditions. It was the first such protest by media professionals in Portugal since 1982.

Journalists staged demonstrations across the country after union members unanimously voted for the strike. [The Portugal News] [Portugal Resident]

At midnight on March 13, state-owned radio broadcaster Antena 1 and privately owned radio station TSF stopped issuing news reports for a day. [Portugal Resident]

Disruptions also impacted television news, with many scheduled programmes cancelled on prominent broadcasters such as CNN Portugal and RTP Lisboa.

(jt/pk)

Portuguese police conduct raids in EU fund fraud probe

Portuguese police conducted 78 raids on March 19 in a crackdown on suspected fraudsters believed to have netted EUR 39 million from projects co-financed by EU funds.

The 14 projects received money from the European Regional Development Fund between 2015 and 2023. [Euractiv]

The suspects include prominent Portuguese journalist Julio Magalhaes, according to reports cited by news outlet Portugal Resident.

The authorities are investigating suspected crimes including fiscal fraud, money laundering and abuse of power, according to the Portuguese judicial police. [Portugal Resident]

(jt/pk)

Spanish gov't strikes amnesty deal with separatists, allowing PM to remain in power

Spain's ruling Socialists have agreed a deal that secures them parliamentary support from Catalan pro-independence parties, allowing the government to remain in power in exchange for pardoning separatist leaders.

The agreement follows a general election last July in which no party won an outright majority. The Socialists need the backing of Catalan groupings to give Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez a parliamentary majority. [Europe in Review August 2023]

Under an amnesty bill passed by the lower house of the Spanish parliament on March 14, the government aims to pardon Catalan separatists who were charged with terrorism and sedition offences as a result of their involvement in an illegal 2017 independence referendum and protests which followed. [Euractiv]

The bill must now be debated by the country's upper house, the Senate, and is not likely to be fully approved until May. [POLITICO]

The amnesty agreement was complicated by the Spanish Supreme Court opening a terrorism investigation into former Catalonia regional president Carles Puigdemont over protests linked to the failed referendum. Puigdemont has been living in exile in Belgium since the referendum. [POLITICO] [FT]

As part of the amnesty deal, the government has agreed to bring in a bill that uses a narrow EU definition of terrorism to ensure that the amnesty covers Puigdemont. [FT]

Puigdemont's separatist Junts party is now expected to approve the government's delayed 2024 budget. [FT]

Sanchez argued that the amnesty deal, which he previously opposed, is necessary for Spain to move on from past public divisions and to ease tensions. [The Guardian]

However, critics have argued that the move is a cynical tactic by Sanchez to ensure that he stays in power, with the leader of the conservative opposition People's Party, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, calling the deal a "scandal". [The Guardian] [Euractiv]

Another independence referendum?

Meanwhile, after the amnesty bill was approved by the lower house of the national parliament, Puigdemont announced that he would run for the leadership of Catalonia once again in a snap regional election on May 12. [POLITICO]

Puigdemont's potential success at the polls, though not guaranteed, would likely stir further controversy and political tensions. If victorious, the former Catalan president has pledged to return to Spain – even if an arrest warrant issued for him is still active. He said he would seek another independence referendum, not ruling out unilateral action if negotiations with the central government fail. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Prison staff blockade Spanish jails after inmate kills cook

Spanish prison staff demanding safer working conditions have blockaded detention centres after a cook was murdered by an inmate at a facility in Catalonia.

Protesters on March 18 mounted barricades and set fire to tyres at the entrances of jails across the north-eastern region. [Voice of Europe]

More than 4,000 detainees were stuck in their cells while the entry and exit of officials and inmates, as well as food and other services, were hampered. [Anadolu Agency] [Euronews] [Voice of Europe]

The protests erupted after a 48-year-old female prison cook was fatally stabbed by an inmate the week before. [Anadolu Agency]

Riot police were sent to some jails to allow goods and staff to get in. [Euronews]

(pk)

Political row over plan to scrap late-night eating and drinking in Spain

A proposal by the Socialist-led government to curb Spain's late-night eating and drinking culture has been criticised by the conservative opposition and by business groups.

The plan could see eateries and bars being ordered to shut by 1am and a limit enforced on how many hours tourism and hospitality staff can work. [LBC]

Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz claimed that working past 10pm can pose a risk to mental health.

In an address to lawmakers, Diaz said that having restaurants still open at 1am is "not reasonable". She added that it is "madness" for restaurants to continue extending their opening times. [Time Out]

The proposals have prompted strong criticism from Spain's conservative opposition People's Party, even though it has previously pushed for shortening the working day. [The Guardian]

Further opposition has arisen from business groups, with Spain by Night, a federation representing leisure and entertainment firms, saying it would reject any proposal that questions Spanish tradition. The federation also argued that the proposal would be detrimental to Spain's tourist trade, as nightlife is a huge draw for the country. [The Guardian]

In response to the criticism, Diaz said that the sole purpose of the proposals was to safeguard workers. [LBC]

(jt/pk)

Spanish court suspends messaging service Telegram, then rescinds ban

The Spanish High Court ordered messaging service Telegram to be suspended in the country after complaints from media companies, then rescinded its decision pending a report on the potential repercussions of a ban.

The suspension order followed complaints from Spain's four main media groups – Atresmedia, Egeda,

Mediaset and Movistar – that Telegram was allowing users to publish their content without permission. [Reuters]

A judge added that the court's decision came after a lack of cooperation from Telegram in the proceedings. [Euronews]

However, the day the suspension order was due to come into effect – March 25 – the High Court put it on hold and instead commissioned a police report into the impact a ban would have on the app's users. [Reuters]

Consumer advocacy group Facua had warned that a suspension would cause "enormous damage" to millions of people. [DW]

Telegram is Spain's fourth most-used messaging application, with almost a fifth of Spaniards active on it.

(jt/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Former PM under fire for plan to dig up dirt on Czech foreign minister

Former populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis has faced a public backlash for instructing an aide to gather sensitive information on Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky.

Babis, who was premier from 2017 to 2021 and is now the opposition leader, mistakenly emailed instructions intended for his advisor Jan Rovensky to an ecological activist of the same name, according to a report by Czech news outlet Novinky.cz published on March 11. [Radio Prague] [Brno Daily]

“Give me some topics and some background on this motherfucker”, Babis said, referring to Lipavsky. Babis specifically asked for information about the foreign minister’s wife and children.

Green campaigner Jan Rovensky posted on Facebook saying he had previously ignored several emails that Babis sent him by mistake, but added that “to drag your opponents’ children and wives into this is totally over the line”. [Politico]

Members of the ruling coalition have accused Babis of compiling sensitive files against political rivals using methods similar to those of the communist-era secret police to discredit opponents. [Radio Prague]

In the face of growing criticism, Babis apologised on X for the derogatory expletive in his email but argued that he was gathering information to “respond to Lipavsky’s lies”.

“Everyone here is talking about war and sending our soldiers to Ukraine”, Babis said, claiming that he had wanted to know if Lipavsky had children and if he would be ready to send them to war. [BRNO Daily] [expat.cz]

The government in Prague has never suggested deploying Czech troops to help Ukraine in its fight against Russia’s invasion.

“Talking about some sort of compromising materials is ridiculous, seeing as these are things that can be publicly found on the internet,” Babis added.

On a March 10 TV talk show, Lipavsky had called Babis, the leader of the main opposition ANO party, “a security risk”.

Babis, who is of Slovak origin, sued Slovakia’s National Memory Institute for listing him as a collaborator with the former communist secret police, but his bid was rejected by that country’s top court in February. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

(yl/pk)

Protests in Hungary as corruption claims shake government

Thousands demonstrated in Budapest on March 26 calling on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to resign after a former government insider accused top officials of conspiring to cover up corruption.

The allegations triggered a political crisis in Orban's right-wing government, which has ruled since 2010 and under which, critics say, Hungary moved towards a corruption-riddled autocracy.

Crowds took to the streets in protest after Peter Magyar, the former husband of ex-Justice Minister Judit Varga, released an audio tape in which Varga appears to say that government officials caused evidence to be removed from court records to cover up their roles in corrupt business dealings. [Euronews] [AP News]

Magyar, a lawyer once close to the government, has announced plans to form a new political grouping to challenge Orban's ruling Fidesz party while creating an alternative to Hungary's fragmented opposition. [Euronews/AP]

Magyar told protesters: "Hungarians thank you... for coming in the thousands tonight... to tell those in power that we have had enough."

Prosecutors said they would analyse Magyar's tape, which he said he recorded in January 2023. [Reuters]

Varga, his ex-wife, confirmed the voice on the recording was hers, but accused Magyar of being violent when they were married and claimed she had been speaking under duress. Magyar denied her claims. [Euronews/AP]

Varga in February resigned from the Hungarian parliament, while Katalin Novak, another political ally of Orban, quit as president after it emerged that the latter had controversially decided to pardon a man implicated in a child sex-abuse scandal. [POLITICO] [Europe Monthly March 2024] [Hungarian conservative]

The pardon triggered Hungary's largest protests in years.

(pk)

Polish ruling coalition partners clash over abortion law

Poland's governing coalition has been tested by its first major internal clash, amid public disagreements over a proposed loosening of the country's strict abortion legislation. [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

Factions from the centre-right and left within the ruling camp came to loggerheads after the speaker of parliament, Szymon Holownia, postponed debates on liberalising Poland's strict abortion laws until local elections conclude in April. [Notes From Poland]

Holownia said his decision aimed to ensure that the "fierce and hot" election campaign did not destroy the proposed abortion bills. [Notes From Poland]

He added: "There will be space to talk a little more calmly" after the ballot. [Notes From Poland]

Poland's ruling coalition – which ousted the former nationalist government in parliamentary elections last October – is made up of a broad mix of parties ranging from the left to the centre-right. The clash over abortion laws demonstrates the compromises that the ideologically varied partners will have to make.

Under the previous populist government led by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, abortion legislation was tightened to among the strictest in Europe, essentially banning terminations except if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or if the health or life of the mother is endangered. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Critics argued that the tough abortion rules made doctors hesitant to perform such procedures for fear of being prosecuted. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

All partners within the current ruling coalition want to roll back some aspects of the law, but disagree over how much to change. [Euractiv]

Holownia is a member of the conservative Poland 2050 party, which – along with the agrarian Polish People's Party – wants abortion to be permitted only under special circumstances, including when a foetus is malformed. [Euractiv]

The centrist Civic Coalition, meanwhile, which is led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, wants to allow on-demand abortion until the 12th week of pregnancy. [Euractiv] [Notes From Poland]

The Left coalition wants to add the decriminalisation of assistance in abortion to any new laws passed by parliament. [Euractiv]

Election emotions

The disagreements have led to four separate bills on abortion being put forward to parliament. Holownia said he feared all four could be voted down in the heat of election campaign battles. [Euractiv]

"I feel responsible (for ensuring) that certain important things do not happen during this political (pre-election) mayhem," the parliamentary speaker said. [Euractiv]

Members of The Left argued that Holownia was simply delaying holding a vote on the issue as long as possible – a move which Deputy Justice Minister Krzysztof Smiszek called "cowardice". [Notes From Poland] [Euractiv]

Meanwhile, Equality Minister Katarzyna Kotula said: "If Szymon Holownia thought that by postponing the processing of these bills he would make the local elections not about abortion, he was very wrong. These local elections will be about abortion and women's rights." [Notes From Poland]

"Speaker Holownia is afraid that if the bills to liberalise the abortion law fail due to the votes of the Third Way, they will have to face the anger of women and their votes at the ballot box," she added. [Notes From Poland]

The Third Way is a conservative coalition comprising Holownia's Poland 2050 and the Polish People's Party, and is part of the broader ruling coalition.

(ek/pk)

Poland's governing coalition launches attempt to oust central bank chief

Lawmakers from Poland's ruling coalition have launched a bid to put the country's central bank governor before a special court, accusing him of compromising the institution's independence.

The pro-EU government in Warsaw that came to power after October parliamentary elections has begun a drive to purge public institutions of figures it accuses of political bias and a slew of anti-democratic abuses during eight years of rule by the previous nationalist administration.

Central bank chief Adam Glapinski, whose mandate is due to expire in 2028, denies wrongdoing. If convicted by Poland's state tribunal, he could be ousted from his

post and barred from holding managerial positions or running for public office. [Reuters]

The tribunal is a rarely-convened body that rules on the constitutional liability of people holding the highest offices of state. [RMF24] [Money.pl]

However, the move aiming to bring Glapinski to trial could put the current Polish government on a collision course with the European Central Bank (ECB). [POLITICO]

ECB head Christine Lagarde has told Glapinski in a letter that he could refer any such move to the European Union's top court as it could affect the independence of the Polish central bank. [Reuters]

A motion against Glapinski signed by lawmakers from the ruling coalition says he was the prime mover in the Polish bank's decision last September and October to cut interest rates, aiming to benefit the government of the time – led by the nationalist Law and Justice party – just ahead of the general election.

The cut was "directly linked to the election campaign and led to the weakening of the Polish currency," the motion said, arguing that this violated the nation's constitution. [POLITICO]

Glapinski was also criticised by many over rocketing inflation in Poland, which hit a 26-year high of 18.4% in February 2023. Inflation has sharply fallen since then, standing at a mere 1.9% in March this year.

The central bank has previously warned that putting Glapinski, whose ties to Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski go back decades, before a tribunal would damage the economy. [Reuters 2]

If Glapinski is to face trial, the Polish parliament will need to approve the move.

(pk)

Five held amid probe into alleged misuse of funds by former ruling party

Investigators have detained five people including current and former justice ministry officials amid a probe into alleged misuse of funds under Poland's previous nationalist government.

Investigators also forced their way into the home of former Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro as part of an

inquiry into the distribution of money from the Justice Fund, which was set up to help victims of crime. [Polish Radio]

Ziobro denied wrongdoing and claimed the probe was illegal and politically motivated. [wiadomosci.wp]

Przemyslaw Nowak, a spokesman for the state prosecutor's office, said the investigation was "a serious criminal matter" and had "no political undertones." [Polish Radio]

Poland's pro-EU government has launched a series of probes into what it says were widespread abuses during the eight years the country was ruled by a nationalist coalition, which was ousted by voters in parliamentary elections last October.

Critics have accused Ziobro of using the Justice Fund for political purposes. Polish media have claimed that former justice ministry officials misused public money to buy favour among voters, for example by providing fire engines or equipment for village halls. [Reuters]

Nowak said that Ziobro, who is being treated for cancer, was not present at the time of the raid on his home and that prosecutors had contacted his family, asking them to open the premises, but without avail.

Ziobro was the architect of sweeping judicial changes which, according to critics, were designed to make judges follow political orders from the nationalists who formerly ruled Poland. The reforms brought the previous right-wing government in Warsaw into conflict with Brussels.

(pk)

Poland plans military helicopter base near border with Ukraine

Poland plans to set up a military helicopter base near the border with Ukraine amid a drive to beef up its defences against a potential attack by Russia.

The base will be located at Lublin Airport and aims to bolster the military presence in eastern Poland, officials said.

Defence Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz announced the move on March 25, saying he hoped the base would also serve as a training facility for helicopter pilots and potentially host new, advanced choppers in the future. [Polish Radio]

Warsaw embarked on a military spending spree after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, buying hardware from countries including the US and South Korea.

Historically fearful of neighbouring Russia, Poland allocates 3.9% of its GDP on defence, the highest proportion in NATO. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

(pk)

Warsaw plans to plough EUR 27m into civil defences and bomb shelters

The mayor of Warsaw has announced a EUR 27 million plan to improve the Polish capital's civil defences, including shelters for use in emergencies such as bombing raids, amid the war in neighbouring Ukraine.

Warsaw authorities also want all schools to be equipped with independent electricity and water supplies, and all new buildings to have a reinforced shelter.

Warsaw mayor Rafal Trzaskowski said: "Of course, Poland is safe... But we must be prepared for every eventuality." [Polish Radio] [tvn24] [rmf24]

A recent report by the country's central audit office, a state body, found that less than 4% of Poles would be able to find refuge in shelters, many of which are in poor technical condition. [Notes From Poland]

(pk)

Pro-Western diplomat beats populist PM's ally in first round of presidential vote

A former top diplomat has defeated a close ally of populist Prime Minister Robert Fico in the first round of Slovakia's presidential election, emerging as a potential liberal force to counter the country's increasingly anti-Western trajectory.

Ex-Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok, a strong supporter of his country's membership of both the EU and NATO, secured a surprise victory with 42% of the vote, ahead of parliamentary speaker Peter Pellegrini, who represented the Russia-friendly ruling camp, on 37%. [Euronews] [AP News 1] [POLITICO] [Slovak Spectator] [volbysr.sk] [France 24/AFP 1] [DW 1] [Aljazeera]

The two top contenders will battle it out in a run-off ballot on April 6, after neither won the outright majority needed to clinch a first-round victory on March 23. [POLITICO] [The New York Times] [The New York Times] [Reuters 1] [AP News 1]

The election is being closely watched by foreign observers as a win by Pellegrini may bolster the Kremlin-friendly prime minister's moves to halt critical military aid for Ukraine. [DW 2] [Bloomberg 1] [The New York Times] [The Guardian 1] [Reuters 2] [Aljazeera] [FT]

Blow for premier

Korcok's strong first-round result delivered a blow to Fico, as pre-election opinion polls had indicated that Pellegrini – who shares the premier's opposition to Western support for Ukraine – was the forerunner for the largely ceremonial though influential presidential post.

Korcok, who pledges to realign Slovakia with trans-Atlantic interests, called the result "promising", adding that he planned to reach out to voters across the political spectrum before the second round. [euronews] [AP News 1]

"I certainly have to speak to the tens of thousands of voters of the ruling coalition who disagree with where the government is pulling Slovakia," said Korcok, who decided to run on an independent ticket with the support of the liberal opposition. [Bloomberg 1] [The Guardian 1] [France 24/AFP 1]

In Korcok, opposition parties see a counterweight to the three-party coalition government that holds most executive power. They fear that a win by Pellegrini could pave the way to presidential pardons for former prosecutors and government officials implicated in bribery and corruption linked to Fico's leftist Smer party. [Europe Monthly February 2024] [AP News 2]

Korcok served as foreign minister between 2020 and 2022 but resigned amid disagreements with former Prime Minister Igor Matovic, who decided to purchase Russia's Sputnik V Covid vaccine without consulting his coalition partners. Korcok has also served as Slovakia's envoy to the United States, Switzerland and Germany. [Europe Monthly October 2023] [AP News 1] [POLITICO]

Pellegrini, a former prime minister and the head of the centre-left Hlas party, said that voters wanted a president who "will defend Slovakia's national

interests" and "will not drag Slovakia into a war". [The Guardian 1] [France 24/AFP 1] [AP News 1]

Call for Ukraine to cede territory

Despite vowing to keep his country firmly anchored in the EU and NATO, Pellegrini has supported Fico's stance that the only way to end the conflict in Ukraine is for Moscow and Kyiv to engage in peace talks. Korcok, meanwhile, has urged Russia to withdraw its troops, rejecting Fico's call in January for Ukraine to cede some of its territory in exchange for a ceasefire. [France 24/AFP 1] [AP News 1] [DW 1] [POLITICO 2] [Reuters 1]

Pellegrini's Hlas, along with the ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), joined a ruling coalition led by Fico's leftist Smer grouping after Slovakia's parliamentary elections last September. [Europe Monthly October 2023]

Meanwhile, in the first round of the presidential ballot, anti-NATO and pro-Russian former supreme court chief Stefan Harabin finished a distant third with 11%. He campaigned on vows to protect traditional Slovak values from immigrants and homosexuals. [AP News 1] [The Guardian 1] [Aljazeera]

Pellegrini said that, in the second round, he would pick up votes from supporters of defeated nationalist candidates. [Bloomberg 1]

However, Harabin – who criticised both Korcok and Pellegrini for being liberals – declared he would not vote for the latter, a decision that may result in many of his voters abstaining in the second round. [Slovak Spectator] [The New York Times]

Elected for a five-year term, Slovakia's head of state does not wield much executive power but has a strong role in vetoing laws, appointing government officials, and setting the tone for the country's foreign policy.

The outgoing president, Zuzana Caputova – Slovakia's first female head of state and a standard bearer for liberal politics – has denounced Fico for his outreach to Russia and also accused him of undermining the rule of law at home.

Caputova said that Foreign Minister Juraj Blanar's meeting in early March with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov – at a time when the European Union has sought to isolate Moscow – had "created more distance between Slovakia and our partners and allies". [FT]

Caputova has been repeatedly criticised by Fico over her staunch support for Ukraine. She said she had decided not to seek a second term in office as she felt "completely exhausted" after five different governments in Slovakia in as many years. [DW 1] [DW 2] [AP News 2] [FT]

Caputova has taken legal action against Fico for accusing her of being an "American agent". She announced the move after she and her family received a death threat that used the same language. [Europe Monthly June 2023] [DW 1]

Since Fico returned to power last September, he has become the most pro-Russia leader in the EU, alongside Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

(yl/pk)

Protests erupt amid fears public broadcaster will beam out government propaganda

Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets of major cities across Slovakia after the culture minister unveiled plans to bring the country's public broadcaster to heel and turn it into what critics say will be a government propaganda machine.

Two liberal opposition parties, Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Freedom and Solidarity (SAS), organised rallies in Bratislava and Kosice on March 15, saying the changes would violate the freedom of the press. [DW]

Critics have warned that the overhaul is the latest step by Slovakia's populist prime minister, Robert Fico, to tighten his grip on the EU and NATO member state of 5.4 million.

PS lawmaker Zora Jaurova warned that the revamp would transform public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) into "a trumpet for government propaganda". She told demonstrators: "We must not allow that to happen." [AP News]

Culture Minister Martina Simkovicova unveiled a bill on March 14 under which the public broadcaster would be disbanded and replaced by a new organisation called Slovak Television and Radio (STaR). [Reuters] [AP News] [DW]

Simkovicova, a member of the pro-Russia ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), claimed the changes were necessary because mainstream media,

including RTVS, was biased and only allowed views in favour of the liberal opposition. [Slovak Spectator]

Under the proposed law, the current RTVS board would be replaced by a new seven-member council appointed by parliament and the ruling coalition. The new council would have the right to select the broadcaster's director general, and to dismiss him or her at any time without a reason. Up to now, only parliament could dismiss the director general. [DW] [Balkan Insight] [Reuters] [RSF] [Slovak Spectator] [Euractiv]

"The law has, in my view, a single aim: to seize an independent public medium and subject it to government power," said the current RTVS director general, Lubos Machaj, who has a parliamentary mandate until 2027 but could be removed from his position once the bill is adopted.

'Dangerous step backwards for democracy'

The head of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), Noel Curran, said in a statement published on March 13 that the changes would be "a dangerous step backwards for democracy and for freedom of expression".

The EBU said that the Slovak plans run against the EU's forthcoming Media Freedom Act (MFA), which was adopted by the European Parliament in March to protect journalists from political interference and to ensure the independence and plurality of media outlets. [Euractiv 2]

Fico's government fended off the criticism, claiming that the planned changes in Slovakia comply with the guidelines of the MFA to ensure balanced reporting.

Since Fico's return to power last year, thousands of demonstrators have repeatedly rallied against his Kremlin-friendly stance and other policies, including a judicial overhaul that dismantles an anti-graft office and softens punishment for economic crimes. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Fico, who pledges to end military aid for Ukraine, has long railed against free media. He has suspended all communication with four press outlets critical of him and his leftist ruling Smer party and labelled them as his enemies. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Fico's government said the bill on the public broadcaster was expected to be approved by parliament no later than the summer. [RSF]

(yl/pk)

Flagship defence summit moves out of Slovakia amid anti-liberal stance of gov't

A high-level annual defence summit will for the first time in almost two decades be held outside Bratislava amid what organisers say is the hostility of Slovakia's Russia-friendly prime minister towards NGOs.

The Globsec think tank, known for holding security forums attended by bigwigs such as European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, announced on March 5 that it would relocate its August gathering to Prague.

The meeting has been held in the Slovak capital for the past 18 years. [AFP/Barron's] [Radio Prague] [Globsec]

"We have been thinking of moving the conference for a long time due to logistics and capacity reasons, but this sped up the process," Globsec's communications director Henrieta Kunova told POLITICO, referring to Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's criticism of non-governmental organisations.

Fico, who last year won a fourth term in power after pledging to halt military aid to Kyiv, has blasted Globsec for spreading "Western propaganda". The Bratislava-based think tank is a staunch backer of Western military assistance for Ukraine amid its war with Russia. [bne]

Fico, a populist in the mould of strongman Viktor Orban in neighbouring Hungary, has vowed to end the era of "NGO supremacy". He announced in December that his government would stop financing Globsec. [POLITICO] [bne] [FT]

Fico has also suggested he could introduce a law that would result in NGOs funded from abroad being labelled as "foreign agents". [POLITICO]

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark ups military spending, plans to conscript women

Denmark plans to increase spending on defence to meet NATO targets and to conscript women for military service amid fears of Russian aggression.

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said: “We are not rearming in Denmark because we want war, destruction, or suffering. We are rearming right now to avoid war and in a world where the international order is being challenged.” [Politico] [BBC]

The new moves, announced on March 13, make Denmark the third country in Europe to introduce female conscription. Norway brought in such a measure in 2015 and Sweden in 2017.

Danish Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen said: “Protecting your country is one of the most honourable things you can do. That is why the government today proposes that we expand conscription, make the responsibility greater and the tasks more numerous. And we propose full gender equality.” [DR]

Registering for military service is compulsory for Danish men over the age of 18. However, due to the amount of people volunteering for the army, not all men are required to serve.

Denmark also plans to boost its military spending by EUR 5.4 billion over the next five years to meet a NATO target of allocating 2% of gross domestic product on defence. The country spent around 1.4% of its GDP on defence last year. [Politiken] [Politico]

Amid increased tensions in Europe following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Denmark’s defence department has said the nation’s armed forces needed a “historic strengthening”. [The Guardian]

Frederiksen said Denmark would extend military service from four to 11 months for both men and women, and would invest in land-based air defence systems and a brigade of up to 6,000 soldiers by 2028.

(km/pk)

Intelligence agency warns of heightened terrorism threat in Denmark

Denmark's Security Intelligence Service (PET) on March 21 warned of an increased terrorism threat after a series of Koran burnings in the country last year and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza.

In an annual security assessment, the intelligence agency rated the national threat level at four out of five.

The Hamas militant group on October 7 launched an attack against Israel, killing more than 1,200 people. Israel responded with an offensive that, according to Gaza authorities, has killed over 32,000 Palestinians. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

The Danish agency said the conflict contains "a significant potential for radicalisation and mobilisation, which can potentially activate actors for spontaneous or planned reactions in Denmark, including terrorist attacks." [Reuters]

A series of anti-Islamic Koran burnings in Denmark and Sweden last year heightened tensions with Muslim nations, raising concerns in the Nordic countries over an increased threat from jihadists. [Europe Monthly August 2023] [Politiken] [Euractiv]

In December 2023, Denmark passed a law banning the "inappropriate treatment" of religious texts. [Europe Monthly January 2024]

(km/pk)

Danish right-wingers want foreigners applying for citizenship to recognize Israel

A right-wing opposition populist party has called for new rules that would, amid what it described as an "Islamic revival" and anti-Israeli sentiment in Europe, require foreigners applying for Danish citizenship to recognize the state of Israel.

The leader of the Danish Democrats party, Inger Stojberg, said: “There is no doubt that it is part of belonging in Denmark that you accept and respect Israel as a state and thus as a democratic country.”

Stojberg added: “We are seeing an Islamic revival in these years and months. Not just in Denmark, but also in many other European countries. We can see people walking around the streets shouting ‘From the river to the sea’, which after all means that the state of Israel must be erased from the face of the earth.” [Berlingske] [Jyllands Posten] [Kristeligt Dagblad]

Martin Lidegaard, the head of the centre-left Danish Social Liberal Party, described the call by the Danish Democrats as a “fake proposal that tries to whip up a mood”.

He added: “To start awarding citizenship on the basis of the political views people may or may not have, that is both crooked and crazy.” [DR]

“From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” is a chant often used at pro-Palestinian demonstrations amid the Israel-Hamas war. Critics say the phrase is an antisemitic call for Israel’s eradication. Other groups dispute that interpretation. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Danish court rules against Europe’s largest pork producer in ‘greenwashing’ case

Denmark’s High Court has ruled against Europe’s largest pork producer in a landmark climate case.

The court decided that the Danish producer’s use of the phrase “climate-controlled pig” on its labels in 2020 was “greenwashing”. [CPH Post]

Judges found that the labelling claim violated Denmark’s marketing laws and could “significantly distort” the economic behaviour of consumers.

The company, Danish Crown, stopped using the label in question in 2021. The firm also ran a marketing campaign claiming that its pork was “more climate-friendly than you think.”

The greenwashing case, brought by the Vegetarian Society of Denmark and the Climate Movement, is the first of its kind in the Nordic nation. [Bloomberg]

Greenwashing is a phrase used to describe practices such as conveying a false impression that a company's products are environmentally friendly.

The general secretary of the Vegetarian Society of Denmark, Rune-Christoffer Dragsdahl, said the verdict "sends a resounding message, not only within Denmark but throughout Europe, that misleading marketing tactics cannot hide behind the shield of freedom of speech." [The Guardian]

Frederik Roland Sandby from the Climate Movement said its victory "is David v Goliath in action, acting as a timely reminder to meat giants: no entity is above accountability." [The Guardian]

Denmark is Europe's pork-producing capital, according to the Danish Agriculture and Food Council.

The High Court ordered Danish Crown to pay for some of the legal costs of the case, which were valued at around EUR 40,000.

(km/pk)

Hedge fund trader on trial in Denmark, charged with massive fraud

A British hedge fund trader has gone on trial charged with defrauding Danish tax authorities of DKK 9 billion (EUR 1.2 billion).

Sanjay Shah was arrested in 2022 in Dubai, where he was living, and accused of running a massive scam from 2012 to 2015.

He was extradited to Denmark from the United Arab Emirates in December 2023 following years of negotiations and after an extradition treaty was signed between the two countries.

Shah's case began on March 11 at a district court in Copenhagen. He pleaded not guilty, saying that he did not violate Danish law. If convicted, he faces up to 12 years in prison.

According to prosecutors, Shah "used a well-designed and organised fraud scheme to submit more than 3,000 applications to unlawfully receive more than nine billion kroner in dividend tax refunds from the Treasury." [AFP/The Guardian] [Reuters] [Politiken]

Kare Pihlmann, one of Shah's defence lawyers, told AFP his client was worried that his trial in Denmark may not

be fair.

“The problem is that some government representatives, in particular cabinet ministers, have over the years made comments about the case, giving the impression that he is guilty of fraud,” Pihlmann said. “That is a possible violation of the presumption of innocence.”

(km/pk)

Finland grapples with extended strikes amid labour reform disputes

Trade unions have escalated strikes against the Finnish government’s controversial labour market reforms, with the protests hitting the nation’s key industrial sectors. [Reuters] [Helsinki Times]

The strikes, which started last year, have been extended to April 7. Tensions erupted after the newly elected right-wing coalition government unveiled plans to prioritize local work agreements over centralized negotiations, restrict political strikes, reduce social welfare benefits, and simplify the process of terminating employment contracts. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly March 2023]

The latest wave of protests was started by industrial, logistics and electrical sector workers on March 11. [Helsinki Times]

The strikes have disrupted Finland’s rail system and ports and have affected exports and imports. Many of Finland’s major companies have said the industrial action is hurting their operations. [Reuters]

In a statement, employers’ association EK said that the SAK trade union group had failed to offer viable alternatives to the proposed reforms. EK estimated the strikes have cost the economy around EUR 300 million. [Reuters]

Jarkko Eloranta, head of SAK, said: “We are trying to negotiate and compromise with the government but unfortunately there has been no response to these efforts.” [Reuters] [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

One child dead, two wounded in Finland school shooting

A child was killed and two others were severely wounded by a 12-year-old who opened fire at a secondary school in southern Finland on April 2, police said. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

All three victims were aged 12. The shooting occurred at the Viertola School in Vantaa, a suburban city near Helsinki. [Helsinki Times]

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo expressed shock and urged parents to reassure their children. [Reuters]

"I want to tell children and young people all over Finland that the Finnish authorities and school staff are doing everything they can every day to prevent something like this from happening," he said in a statement. [Reuters]

Police said the suspect would be placed under the supervision of social services while an investigation is carried out. Children under the age of 15 are not criminally liable in Finland. [BBC]

The motive for the murder is not yet clear. The permit for the weapon used in the shooting belonged to a relative of the suspect, according to police. [Helsinki Times]

In 2010, Finland revised its firearms regulations following two school shootings in 2007 and 2008, implementing an aptitude test for anyone applying for a gun licence and raising the minimum age for applicants from 18 to 20. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Finland joins NATO defence innovation project

Finland has joined NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) network, an initiative to facilitate collaboration among NATO countries and partners and develop cutting-edge technologies to address emerging security challenges. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Ministry of Defence]

As part of the project, a business accelerator and two technology research centres will be set up in Finland. The goal is to help companies develop dual-use technologies and innovations that can be used in both civilian life and defence. [Defence Online]

This initiative is part of Finland's broader efforts to strengthen its defence capabilities in response to rising

cyber threats. [Defence Online]

The accelerator will be established in Otaniemi, near Helsinki. Meanwhile, testing centres will be set up at the University of Oulu in western Finland and the VTT Technical Research Centre in Otaniemi. [Finnish Ministry of Defence]

The accelerator, aimed specifically at startups and small and medium businesses new to the defence and security industry, will offer extensive training in commercial and defence-focused technology development. It will focus on quantum technology and next-generation communication. Additionally, it will provide insights into business prospects within the defence sector. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Ministry of Defence]

The testing facilities will focus on cyber-secure communication, as well as quantum, space and 6G network technologies. These centres will enable businesses to improve their technological prowess and competitive edge by offering access to a wide range of research infrastructure and specialized knowledge. [Helsinki Times] [Finnish Ministry of Defense]

Finnish Defence Minister Antti Hakkanen said that the new accelerator and testing centres would not only generate business prospects for local tech companies but also enhance Finland's standing among its NATO allies. Finland became a member of the military alliance in April 2023. [Defense News] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

NATO's DIANA programme was launched in 2021 to pinpoint challenges in the defence sector. [Defense News]

(rs/pk)

Norwegian ex-justice minister accused of racism and sexism

A former justice minister from Norway's opposition right-wing populist Progress Party is being investigated by police amid accusations of racism and sexism.

Per-Willy Amundsen resigned as head of parliament's justice committee after a backlash over a string of offensive comments he made on Facebook, but he remains a member of parliament. [News In English.no]

In a rant, Amundsen stated he supported Israel in its war against Hamas, and said: "Islam has a whole gang

of psychopaths who murder. Let's count all of you, and send you out (of Norway)."

Additionally, on the eve of International Women's Day, which is marked on March 8, he wrote:
"Congratulations to all boring women who want to hold men back... You have succeeded. We're all paying the price. Young men are failing to succeed, schools and day care centres are hit by radical gender theory that we can't understand, created by radical female people who don't know the up or down of a penis."

Amundsen refused to apologise for his remarks, which he said he made after drinking. He added that he could not remember publishing his posts.

Progress Party leader Sylvi Listhaug publicly apologised for Amundsen on behalf of her grouping, adding: "We expect much better behaviour from our members of parliament."

(nbnc/pk)

Terrorism trial starts over shootings at LGBTQ festival in Norway

A man charged with aggravated terrorism has gone on trial over the murder of two people in a gun attack at an LGBTQ+ festival in Oslo.

Prosecutors said 44-year-old Zaniar Matapour, a Norwegian citizen originally from Iran, fired a machine gun and a handgun into a crowd outside bars during Pride celebrations in the Norwegian capital's nightlife district in 2022. [AP News] [BBC]

The suspect, who according to prosecutors had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State group, pleaded not guilty as his trial started in Norway on March 12. Police believe the gun attack was prompted by extremist motives.

If convicted, Matapour faces 30 years in prison or confinement in a secure psychiatric unit if declared insane. [BBC]

On June 25, 2022, two men aged 54 and 60 were killed, ten people were severely wounded, and 11 suffered minor injuries after Matapour allegedly shot at three bars, including a popular gay bar. Bystanders eventually wrestled the gunman to the ground. [AP News] [BBC]

At his trial, Matapour asked why the case was being heard during Ramadan, the holiest month in the Muslim calendar, though the court did not sit during the Christian holiday of Easter. The judge replied that he had "not perceived a conflict between the conduct of this trial and Ramadan". [BBC]

Matapour was born in Iran to parents of Kurdish background and moved to Norway at the age of 12.

Prosecutors said that he had been in trouble with the police as a teenager and had received psychiatric treatment at the time. They added he was reported to Norway's police security service in 2016 due to concerns that he was becoming radicalised. [BBC]

(nbnc/pk)

Activists for Sami rights face trial over protest against wind farm

Eighteen activists are facing trial after blocking entrances to Norwegian government offices in protest at a wind farm they say obstructs traditional reindeer herding practices by the indigenous Sami people.

The activists claimed that a transition to eco-friendly energy should not limit the rights of the Sami. They were charged after failing to pay fines for allegedly disobeying police orders to leave the government premises during the protest last October. [Euronews]

In 2021, the Supreme Court of Norway ruled that the construction of turbines for the wind farm in the Fosen region, around 450 kilometres north of Oslo, had violated the rights of the Sami, who have for centuries used the land for reindeer herding. [AP News]

The facility is Europe's largest onshore wind farm.

The court said that under the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Sami people had a right to use the land for cultural purposes. [Jurist] [Al Jazeera]

Despite this, the wind farm remained open as the government allowed it to continue operations. While Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre acknowledged "ongoing human rights violations", Energy Minister Terje Aasland has said that the demolition of the turbines is inappropriate and now unlikely. [Jurist]

Meanwhile, protests by activists led to negotiations between the turbine operators and the Sami to find a

settlement. Sami people were given financial compensation and new grazing areas for reindeer herding were set up. [AP News] [News In English.No]

Lawyers defending the activists have said that the punishment of the protesters breached their freedom of speech and right to demonstrate. [News In English.No] [The Guardian]

(nbnc/pk)

Climate activists block entrances to Swedish parliament

Activists including Greta Thunberg blocked entrances to Sweden's parliament on March 11 in protest at what they said was political inaction in the face of climate change.

Around 40 demonstrators gathered in front of two entrances, accusing fossil fuel companies of deliberately slowing the global green energy transition for profit. [AP News] [AFP/The Local]

Among them was Thunberg, 21, who has become the face of a global youth climate movement.

She said: "We are a group of young people who are blocking entrances to the Swedish Parliament, the Riksdag, to protest against the ongoing destruction of our life-supporting systems and of people already being killed as a result of the climate crisis."

She added that politicians "have not been acting. We are still moving in the wrong direction, the emissions are still increasing." [Reuters]

Thunberg has been staging climate protests since 2018. Last year, she was detained by police in several countries. A British court in February acquitted her of a public order offence. [Euronews]

(km/pk)

Man charged with mapping military installations in Sweden

A man has been charged in Sweden with mapping out military installations and possessing unauthorised secret information. [SVT]

According to prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist, the 66-year-old suspect, who has not been identified, gathered information on Swedish military centres for “a long time.”

Ljungqvist said in a statement that the case “involves a large number of facilities that are important for Sweden’s ability to defend the country in the event of war.” [AP News] [Sveriges Radio]

Sweden formally became the 32nd member of NATO on March 7, sealing a landmark geopolitical shift. *(See separate story in this issue)*

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

EU Parliament approves rules to combat dangers of AI

European Union lawmakers on March 13 gave final approval for a set of world-leading regulations designed to place guardrails around the development of artificial intelligence.

The measures, known as the AI Act, classify artificial intelligence products based on their perceived risk to society, with corresponding levels of scrutiny.

The EU expects most AI systems to fall under the low-risk and least regulated category, for instance spam filters or content recommendation engines.

"High-risk" uses of AI, such as in medical devices or critical infrastructure, will face stricter requirements. Risk assessments and human supervision will be required, while users will have to be provided with clear explanations about decisions affecting them made by these AI products.

Total ban for some uses

Under the laws, which were first proposed five years ago, AI applications deemed to pose an unacceptable risk would face a flat-out ban. This includes social scoring systems, some forms of predictive policing, and emotion recognition software in workplaces and schools.

Police use of facial recognition software in public and biometric identification systems would also be prohibited, except in the case of serious offences like terrorism or kidnapping. [AP] [BBC]

The regulations also impact general-purpose tools powered by generative AI, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, requiring such platforms to be transparent about materials used to train their models and clearly label any deepfake content produced by artificial intelligence.

Each EU country is expected to set up its own AI watchdog, and an artificial intelligence office will be established in Brussels to supervise general-purpose AI systems.

The AI Act must still be approved by EU member states before coming into effect by May or June. It will enter into force in a staggered process, with the rules to fully apply in mid-2026. Violators of the AI Act could face fines of up to EUR 35 million, or 7% of a company's annual global revenue.

New rules criticised

The bill has received its fair share of criticism. Tech safety advocates have rung the alarm bell over exemptions for military, defence or national security uses. Meanwhile, some of the largest tech and AI companies, including Meta, have voiced concerns about over-regulation. [The Guardian] [Bloomberg]

The rules would be some of the first in the world to cover AI in such depth, and could pave the way for others internationally to follow in the EU's footsteps. [CNBC]

China unveiled its own legislation in April 2023, while US President Joe Biden imposed restrictions via an

executive order in October, expecting legislation to follow. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(qv/pk)

MEPs back law to make buildings more energy-efficient

European Parliament lawmakers have voted through a law that aims to make buildings more energy-efficient and cut pollution amid global warming.

A total of 370 deputies backed the new Energy Performance of Buildings Directive on March 12 while 199 opposed it.

Buildings consume a third of the EU's energy and emit almost 40% of the bloc's carbon emissions. [Euractiv]

The directive means that the EU's 27 member states will have to apply new efficiency standards to non-residential buildings. However, individual owners will not be obliged to upgrade their homes. [Reuters]

The new law will ban subsidies for heating systems using fossil fuels from 2025, and will make solar panels on the roofs of houses – both newly built and renovated – mandatory, provided they are economical. [Euractiv]

Several countries opposed the new rules including Italy, which said it could not afford to carry out the renovations needed. [Euronews]

(pk)

Czechs hope to deliver shells for Ukraine 'within months'

The Czech foreign minister has said his country hopes "within months" to deliver the first tranche of artillery shells acquired internationally for Ukraine under a Prague-led initiative.

NATO member states consider the drive headed by the Czech Republic as an interim measure to plug a gap in international aid for Kyiv, amid stalled US military help and a delayed EU delivery of a million shells. [FT] [Bloomberg 1] [Bloomberg 2]

Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky said his nation's plan to procure some 800,000 rounds from non-EU

sources is bearing fruit, though shipping them to the Ukrainian front may take some time.

“As we see, it already helps Ukraine to fight better, because they know that they will have a supply of fresh ammunition, which changed their perspective on usage of the current stockpiles,” Lipavsky said on March 22. [Bloomberg 1]

Czech President Petr Pavel, a retired NATO general, announced on March 7 that Prague had initiated the purchase of 800,000 shells from worldwide suppliers with the help of 19 countries. [Slovak Spectator] [Reuters] [The Wall Street Journal] [The Guardian]

Prague said it was open to negotiating with most third-party suppliers regardless of their political stances, with only a few exceptions like North Korea, which has provided Russia with millions of munitions since last September in exchange for food and raw materials for weaponry production. [The Wall Street Journal] [Defense News] [Aljazeera]

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on March 8 that the initiative to help Ukraine had secured enough funding for some 300,000 rounds. [Bloomberg 2] [POLITICO] [Barron's/AFP]

The first tranche of deliveries is expected to reach Kyiv no later than June, according to The Guardian.

Ukraine is increasingly outgunned as it runs low on ammunition, while the Kremlin is ramping up its domestic production and international procurement. According to London-based think tank Chatham House, Russia’s firepower has surpassed Ukraine’s by a five-to-one ratio as Western military aid for Kyiv wanes.

(yl/pk)

Estonia set to attain full membership status in CERN

The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) voted on March 22 to grant Estonia full membership status.

Following its initial association in 2021, Estonia's ascension to full membership underscored its growing influence in cutting-edge research and development.

Minister of Economic Affairs Tiit Riisalo hailed this decision as a gateway to unlocking new skills, products,

and technologies, crucial for marrying scientific achievements with business opportunities. [ERR News]

Full membership offers Estonia a seat at the decision-making table within CERN's key bodies, empowering its participation in critical processes such as procurement and policy formulation.

With unrestricted access to international industrial tenders, Estonian companies are primed for global collaboration, amplifying their impact on the world stage. [Estonia World]

Estonia's burgeoning involvement in CERN is already evident, with a notable surge in the number of Estonian companies registered for procurement opportunities.

This growth exemplifies Estonia's capacity to deliver solutions that meet CERN's rigorous standards. As Estonia awaits final approval, this impending membership signals a new chapter in its scientific journey, promising mutual benefits for the nation and the broader scientific community. [Estonia World]

(ha/gc)

EU plans tariffs to restrict grain imports from Russia and Belarus

The European Commission is planning to impose tariffs on grain imports from Russia and Belarus to prevent the two countries from distorting EU markets and placating farmers who have protested for months over cheap imports. [Aljazeera]

The tariffs are also designed to limit Russia’s ability to fund its war in Ukraine and sell grain stolen from Ukraine, the commission said. [Aljazeera]

The proposed tariffs, targeting cereals, oilseeds, and grain products from Russia and Belarus, aim to ban their import into the EU. EU Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis emphasised that these measures would render importing Russian and Belarusian grain commercially unviable, aligning with the EU's efforts to protect agricultural markets and alleviate geopolitical tensions (LRT).

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the move would prevent Russia from destabilising the European Union market with its exports as leaders from the 27-nation bloc prepared to close a two-day summit. [Aljazeera]

“We propose the imposition of tariffs on these Russian imports to mitigate the growing risk to our markets and our farmers,” von der Leyen said. “They will reduce Russia’s capacity to exploit the EU for the benefit of its war machine. And we maintain our commitment to preserving global food security, especially for developing countries.”

The Kremlin warned the EU against imposing duties on its grain exports. [Aljazeera]

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda has endorsed the European Commission's proposal to impose maximum tariffs on EU imports of Russian and Belarusian grain. Nauseda emphasised the necessity for further action, urging the Commission to extend tariffs to other agricultural products (LRT).

Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte has announced tightened controls on grain imports from Russia and other heightened-risk countries. Simonyte said that while these measures may not significantly impact current grain imports, they symbolise unity (The Baltic Times).

These proposals, pending approval from the European Council, reflect the EU's response to regional security concerns and trade dynamics. The outcome of these deliberations will have significant implications for EU-Russian relations and agricultural trade within the bloc (LRT).

(ik-ha/gc)

EC recommends EU abrogate Energy Charter Treaty

The European Commission agreed on March 7 during a meeting to recommend that the European Union abrogate the Energy Charter Treaty that 56 European and foreign nations signed in 1994 to promote energy investment in Europe, as initially proposed in July 2023. [Reuters]

Since the treaty entered force in 1998, it has enabled private companies to sue European governments that broke energy purchase contracts and tax agreements or reversed permitting approvals in an international court convened at the World Bank. [EC]

Supporters of abrogation are concerned that continued treaty adherence will stymie EU plans to force a reduction in oil and gas refining and

production, as well as coal power, in favour of renewable energy projects.

The European Parliament continued to push ahead to advance EU clean energy policies and approved the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive on March 12, which mandates new EU-wide building energy efficiency standards. [EU]

(rw/gc)

Germany in talks with UK to swap missiles for Ukraine

The British are offering a swap deal in which they would receive German Taurus missiles in return for sending more British storm shadow missiles to Ukraine.

The deal may allay German fears of escalation and backfill depleted British stocks of long-range missiles. [Politico]

British Foreign Secretary and former Prime Minister David Cameron insisted while in Berlin that providing long-range missiles would not be escalatory as NATO troops would not be killing Russians.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government has publicly refused to send the Taurus missiles.

"What is being done in the way of target control and accompanying target control on the part of the British and the French can't be done in Germany," Scholz said,

His statement implied that British and French forces were on the ground in Ukraine, helping to launch ordinances against Russian targets and that German soldiers would not do the same. [AP]

(js/gc)

NATO holds Nordic drills to bolster defence of new territory

NATO exercises involving over 20,000 troops from 13 nations have been held across northern Norway, Sweden and Finland as the alliance signalled to Russia its readiness to defend its newly expanded Nordic territory.

The drills, held from March 3 to 14, were named Nordic Response, acknowledging Finland's accession to the Western military alliance in April 2023. Sweden, meanwhile, officially became NATO's 32nd member on March 7, as the manoeuvres were underway. *(See separate story in this issue)* [The Guardian] [Associated Press] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The war games were part of broader ongoing NATO drills known as Steadfast Defender, which are set to continue until May. Those exercises are one of the alliance's largest to date and involve up to 90,000 troops. [The Hill] [Reuters]

Nordic Response, which spanned air, land, and sea, included soldiers from the UK, the US, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada. [Associated Press]

Ships, planes and tanks

The drills involved more than 50 submarines, frigates, corvettes, aircraft carriers, and amphibious vessels at sea. Additionally, over 100 aircraft took part including combat, maritime surveillance and transport planes, alongside thousands of ground soldiers using artillery systems, tanks and tracked vehicles. [The Guardian]

The Norway-led manoeuvres included more than 4,000 Finnish troops and marked Finland's largest participation in international manoeuvres to date, according to the country's military. [Associated Press]

Brigadier Tron Strand, commander of the Norwegian Air Operations Centre, said: "We need to be able to fight back and stop anyone who tries to challenge our borders, values and democracy." He added: "With the current security situation in Europe, the exercise is extremely relevant and more important than ever before." [Associated Press]

NATO said on its website: "The High North represents an important and strategically located area" for the alliance. It added that the exercise "increases Nordic preparedness and the capability to conduct large-scale joint operations in challenging weather and climate." [NATO]

According to newly-elected Finnish President Alexander Stubb, the drills conveyed a message to Moscow about the Western alliance's ability to respond if a member country is attacked. [YLE]

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on March 13 that his country would deploy troops and systems near the

Finnish border in the wake of Finland and Sweden joining NATO. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Russian and Belarusian athletes barred from participating in opening ceremonies of Paris Olympics

The International Olympic Committee barred athletes from Russia and Belarus from participating in opening ceremonies in Paris as organisers target countries that are "responsible for the war" in Ukraine. Athletes from those nations, though no teams, would be allowed to compete in individual events as "Individual Neutral Athletes" or "AINs." [NBC News]

"AINs will not participate in the parade of delegations (teams) during the Opening Ceremony since they are individual athletes," according to an IOC statement. However, any Russian or Belarusian athletes associated with "military and national security agencies will not be eligible to be entered or to compete," the IOC said. [IOC]

Though athletes can compete in the games as "Individual Neutral Athletes," their national flags and anthems will not be displayed or sung, and they will be barred from the opening ceremony. [NBC News]

(ik/gc)

Russia uses Serbia as base for European espionage: report

Russian intelligence is using a Serbian agent to infiltrate EU institutions and to spread pro-Kremlin talking points about its invasion of Ukraine, according to a Western intelligence briefing seen by Politico. [Politico]

As recently as October 2023, Serbian national Novica Antic — an active “agent of influence” who knowingly worked closely with Russia’s security agency, according to the documents — held meetings with European officials in Brussels, particularly Members of the European Parliament, Politico reported. [Politico]

Those MEPs included German Greens lawmaker Viola von Cramon-Taubadel, Italian Socialists & Democrats lawmaker Alessandra Moretti, and Vladimír Bilčík, a

Slovakian member of the conservative European People's Party Group, according to a press release and a photo seen by POLITICO. Nothing in the intelligence briefing suggests that

Moretti, Bilčík and von Cramon-Taubadel were aware of Antic's FSB links when they met with him. [Politico]

The Russian security services also recorded a meeting of top German Military Officials, subsequently published by Russian media. In the meeting, officials talked about the capabilities of the long-range Taurus missile, which could target the logistically vital Kerch bridge connecting mainland Russia to the Crimean peninsula. [The Guardian]

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said Russia was creating divisions that would prevent aid to Ukraine. According to Der Spiegel, the talk was held on an unsecured public platform, not a secure military network. [The Guardian]

(js/gc)

Seven aid workers including Europeans killed by Israeli airstrike in Gaza

Seven people working with an aid charity including three British nationals and a Pole were killed by an Israeli airstrike in Gaza on April 1, sparking international outrage.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country's armed forces had "unintentionally" struck a convoy from the humanitarian group World Central Kitchen.

In response to the killings, World Central Kitchen suspended operations to deliver food aid in Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are on the brink of starvation after an Israeli offensive. [cbsnews]

Two armoured vehicles branded with the Washington-based NGO's logo were hit leaving a warehouse in central Gaza. [The Guardian]

"Unfortunately, in the last day there was a tragic case of our forces unintentionally hitting innocent people in the Gaza Strip," Netanyahu said the day after the killings.

"It happens in war. We will investigate it right to the end. … We are in contact with the governments, and

we will do everything so that this thing does not happen again." [cbsnews]

Those killed included workers from Australia and the Palestinian territories, as well as a US-Canadian dual citizen. [The Guardian]

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said: "We're asking Israel to investigate what happened urgently because clearly there are questions that need to be answered." [PBS] France voiced "firm condemnation" of the Israeli airstrike. [Reuters]

(pk)

All EU leaders urge Gaza ceasefire in breakthrough show of unity

EU leaders have unanimously appealed for a ceasefire in Gaza for the first time since war broke out between Israel and Hamas, putting on a united front after months of European divisions on the issue. [Euronews]

A statement approved by all 27 of the bloc's members at a summit in Brussels on March 21 also urged "the unconditional release of all hostages [by Hamas militants] and the provision of humanitarian assistance."

The text expressed deep concern about "the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and its disproportionate effect on civilians, particularly children, as well as the imminent risk of famine caused by the insufficient entry of aid into Gaza." [POLITICO] [Guardian]

EU members including Belgium, Ireland and Spain appealed for a ceasefire last year, but the Czech Republic and Hungary had previously blocked such a call, fearing it would undermine the bloc's support for Israel's right to self-defence. [Euronews]

At the latest EU summit, Budapest – which is at loggerheads with Brussels over democratic backsliding in Hungary – supported the call for the first time.

European Council President Charles Michel said on X that the bloc's leaders had urged "an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire."

Following an October 7 attack by Hamas gunmen, Israel launched an offensive that, according to Gaza's health authorities, has killed over 32,000 Palestinians

in the territory. Much of Gaza has been reduced to rubble.

EU four say they're ready to recognise Palestinian state

Meanwhile, after meeting on the margins of the Brussels summit, the leaders of Spain, Ireland, Slovenia and Malta announced they were ready to recognise a Palestinian state "when it can make a positive contribution and the circumstances are right." [Euronews]

Nine of the EU's individual member countries currently recognise a Palestinian state. The EU as a whole has not yet done so, though it supports a so-called two-state solution.

(pk)

Italy joins EU mission to protect Red Sea shipping

Italy's lawmakers have approved the deployment of ships as part of an EU naval mission to protect cargo vessels in the Red Sea from Houthi rebels, who have been launching attacks in protest at the plight of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Italian lower house of parliament approved the mission by 271 to six votes. The Senate, the country's upper house, later unanimously backed the move.

Before the vote on March 5, Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani told deputies that the mission was defensive but that it gave Italian ships the right to defend themselves.

Tajani said the aim was "the neutralization of direct attacks on merchant ships under escort and repelling any attempts to seize the vessels".

Three days earlier, the Italian destroyer Caio Duilio shot down a drone launched towards it in a strait between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. [AP/Fox News]

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militia has launched a series of strikes on commercial Red Sea shipping in protest at Israel's military campaign in Gaza, which was unleashed in response to attacks by Hamas on Israel on October 7. [Reuters]

However, the Houthis have often targeted vessels with no clear links to Israel. [AP/Fox News]

The Israeli offensive in Gaza has killed over 30,000 Palestinians, according to the territory's Hamas-run health ministry.

(nbnc/pk)

Trump 'will not give a penny' to Ukraine, says Hungary's PM

Donald Trump will not help fund Ukraine's fight against Russia's invasion if he is elected again, Hungarian nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has said after meeting the Republican US presidential contender.

"He will not give a penny in the Ukraine-Russia war... Therefore, the war will end, because it is obvious that Ukraine can not stand on its own feet," Orban told Hungarian state media after the meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago mansion in Florida on March 8. [The Guardian] [BBC]

Orban added: "If the Americans don't give money and weapons, along with the Europeans, the war is over. And if the Americans don't give money, the Europeans alone can't finance this war." [The Guardian]

European nations are facing an uphill battle to keep Kyiv equipped after vital US military support stalled. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

According to CNN, the meeting with Orban – a self-professed champion of "illiberal democracy" who maintains friendly ties with the Kremlin – underlined Trump's history of embracing global strongmen, at times at the expense of more traditional US allies.

Trump praised the Hungarian as a "fantastic" prime minister, adding: "There's nobody that's better, smarter or a better leader than Viktor Orban."

The two men met "to discuss a wide range of issues affecting Hungary and the United States, including the paramount importance of strong and secure borders to protect the sovereignty of each nation," Trump's presidential campaign team said in a statement. [CNN]

In February, Trump triggered criticism from political and military leaders in Europe for suggesting that America would not protect NATO allies failing to spend enough on defence.

In comments that caused shock, Trump also said he would "encourage" Russia to attack any of America's

allies whom he considers have not met their financial obligations. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

(pk)

Poland, America reaffirm support for Ukraine, US approves missile sales to Warsaw

Warsaw and Washington reaffirmed their support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's invasion as Poland's president and prime minister visited the White House to mark 25 years since their country joined NATO.

Joe Biden reassured Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and President Andrzej Duda during talks in Washington on March 12 that US support for Warsaw, a staunch ally and fellow NATO member, was "ironclad". [Polish Radio]

Coinciding with the Polish leaders' visit, the US government approved the sale of air-launched missiles to Warsaw for USD 3.68 billion. [Janes]

The US also offered Warsaw a USD 2 billion loan and proposed selling Poland 96 Apache attack helicopters as the nation bolsters its military amid fears that Russia could be tempted to attack other countries if it succeeds in its invasion of Ukraine.

Polish president urges upped NATO spending target

Ahead of the talks at the White House, the Polish president called on NATO members to allocate 3% of their GDP to defence in response to increased military spending by Moscow.

Duda said: "Russia's aggression against Ukraine clearly demonstrated that the United States is and should remain the security leader. But other Allies must take more responsibility for the security of the Alliance as a whole." [Polish Radio]

Duda's spending proposal received a lukewarm response, with US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller saying it would be better to ensure that all NATO members first meet a 2% defence expenditure target, which many have failed to reach. [Notes From Poland]

Poland, historically fearful of its giant eastern neighbour Russia, allocates 3.9% of its GDP on its military, the highest proportion in NATO.

Polish Prime Minister Tusk said during the meeting with Biden that "there can be no safe Europe without a strong Poland and there can be no just Europe without a free and independent Ukraine."

US presidential hopeful Donald Trump caused alarm in Europe after suggesting in February that America would not protect NATO allies failing to spend enough on defence. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

Meanwhile, Hungarian nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban said after meeting Trump in Florida on March 8 that the US Republican presidential contender will not help fund Ukraine's fight against Russia's invasion if he is elected again. *(See separate story in this issue)*

The US State Department has approved sales to Poland of 821 Lockheed Martin air-to-surface extended-range standoff missiles for USD 1.77 billion, 745 RTX mid-range air-to-air missiles for USD 1.69 billion, and 232 Sidewinder short-range air-to-air missiles for USD 219.1 million. [Janes]

(pk)

Four European nations sign USD 100bn free-trade deal with India

India has signed a free-trade agreement with four European countries that are not EU members but are part of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) group.

Under the deal, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein have pledged to create a million jobs in India and invest USD 100 billion (EUR 92 billion) in a range of industries there – including pharmaceuticals, machinery and manufacturing – over 15 years, during which India will reduce tariffs on industrial goods from the four countries. [AP/Euronews]

The deal was 16 years in the making. [BBC] [Fortune] India and the four European nations now need to ratify the agreement before it can come online, with Switzerland planning to do so by next year.

The deal comes as the United Kingdom and India hold lengthy negotiations over a free trade agreement that started some two years ago. India is also planning a free trade deal with the EU.

(qv/pk)

Belarus blocks Lithuanian imports

Belarus has responded to Lithuania's closure of two border checkpoints by imposing a ban on imports from Lithuania, including food, alcohol, clothing, and car parts. The closures, prompted by concerns over national security, smuggling, and sanctions violations, have increased political tensions between the two countries. [LRT]

Lithuanian officials, including Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, criticised Minsk's decision, saying it would harm Belarusian consumers. They anticipated a shift in Lithuanian exports away from Belarus and minimal economic impact on the economy. [LRT] [Delphi].

(ha/gc)

Belarusian opposition figure fears deportation from Serbia

Belarusian journalist and opposition activist Andrey Gniot has urged Serbian authorities not to extradite him to his home country, where he says his "life will be ruined."

Gniot was arrested on October 30, 2023, at Belgrade's airport at the request of Belarus, which charged him with tax evasion. He has been in custody since.

In December, Belgrade's high court ruled that conditions for his extradition had been met. He has denied the allegations, and his lawyers have appealed the court ruling.

Since Belarus's disputed 2020 presidential election, authoritarian ruler Alyaksandr Lukashenka has cracked down on dissent and civil society, jailing hundreds and forcing most of the country's opposition figures to flee [Radio Free Europe].

(js/gc)

Bulgaria bans two Russian citizens from entering EU for alleged spying

Bulgaria has banned two Russian citizens from entering the European Union on alleged spying plans

for Russia.

Vladimir Nikolayevich Gorochkin and Tatyana Anatolievna Gorochkina, both Russian nationals, presented as Bulgarians under the names Denis Rashkov and Diana Rashkova.[Politico]

Bulgaria, an EU member, issued a five-year ban on the two Russians' entry into the Union.

Bulgaria's State Agency for National Security (DANS) said that the couple were part of an operation by Moscow's

Foreign Intelligence Service aiming to infiltrate foreign countries under false identities.[Euronews]

The agency said: "The main purpose of their presence in Bulgaria was to obtain the Bulgarian identity documents and credible biographical data, which they would later use to carry out intelligence activities outside Bulgaria." [Reuters]

(km/gc)

Czech Republic suspends talks after Slovakia's 'problematic' meeting with Russia

The Czech government has announced that it is suspending bilateral talks with Slovakia's cabinet after the Slovak foreign minister held a meeting with his Russian counterpart amid Moscow's war against Ukraine.

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on March 6 that Prague and Bratislava have "remarkable differences on crucial foreign policy issues" as he called off the April talks, which were due to be hosted in the Czech Republic. [AFP/Barron's]

"We consider the meeting between the Slovak foreign minister and the Russian foreign minister to be problematic," said Fiala. [The Guardian]

He added: "The government, therefore, does not believe it is appropriate to hold intergovernmental consultations with the government of the Slovak Republic at this time." [AFP/Barron's] [Politico] [expats.cz]

Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanar met his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov at a diplomatic forum in Turkey on March 2, even though the European Union

has sought to isolate Moscow after its troops invaded Ukraine. [Reuters]

In a statement to the Guardian, Blanar noted that other NATO foreign ministers had also interacted with Lavrov. He added that ties with Prague are "precious to us".

However, Blanar's meeting with his Russian counterpart has proved too controversial for many in Prague.

The relationship between Prague and Bratislava has grown frosty following the return to power of Kremlin-friendly populist Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who has criticised the West's collective approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict as "an absolute failure". [AFP/Barron's] [Europe Monthly March 2024]

While Prague has initiated a plan to buy artillery rounds for shell-hungry Kyiv from countries outside the EU, Bratislava has pledged to halt arms deliveries to Ukraine amid its fight against Russia's invasion.

Fico, who blamed "Ukrainian Nazis and fascists" for initiating the war, has soured ties with Ukraine after questioning its sovereignty and calling for peace talks with Russia.

Michal Simecka, the leader of the pro-Western opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, said on X that Fico had "turned Slovakia into a black hole on the map of Europe" since his return to office last year. [AFP/Barron's]

The Czech Republic and Slovakia used to enjoy a close relationship as they once formed a single country. Czechoslovakia split into two nations in 1993. Newly-elected leaders from the two countries would traditionally visit each other before calling on other heads of state. [AP News]

The Czech Republic and Slovakia, both of which are EU and NATO members, have hosted regular bilateral cabinet meetings since 2012.

(yl/pk)

Estonia and Ukraine forge security pact

Estonia and Ukraine have announced their intention to formalise a security cooperation agreement.

This announcement follows Estonia's commitment made during the NATO Summit in Vilnius, where Margus Tsahkna, the Estonian Foreign Minister, outlined plans for the agreement.

Tsahkna underscored Estonia's dedication to providing military support to Ukraine and pledged to allocate 0.25% of its GDP annually for this purpose. The move is seen as a rallying call to other Western nations to join in supporting Ukraine. [Pravda 1]

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky met with a delegation from the Estonian Parliament on March 26, 2024, to discuss bilateral cooperation and the impending security agreement. He expressed gratitude for Estonia's support and emphasised the importance of collaboration in the face of ongoing challenges.

The discussions touched upon various aspects of cooperation, including military aid, the use of frozen Russian assets, and progress on finalising the security pact. The Estonian delegation's visit signals a deepening of ties between the two nations and underscores Estonia's commitment to standing by Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. [Pravda 2]

Estonia pledges military aid

Estonia pledged EUR 20 million in military aid to enhance Ukraine's defence capabilities amid ongoing conflict with Russia. Defence Minister Hanno Pevkur announced the aid package on March 21 during discussions with Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustem Umerov in Kyiv.

The aid comprises crucial equipment, including anti-tank guns, explosives, artillery ammunition, gas masks, sniper gear, and smaller-calibre ammunition, meticulously selected to address Ukraine's defence needs while ensuring Estonia's readiness. This commitment comes as both nations engage in military exercises to strengthen their preparedness for potential conflicts.

Estonia will contribute 155 mm calibre shells to the European Union's initiative to provide one million shells to Ukraine. Partial funding from Denmark will support Estonia's contribution, with specific quantities undisclosed for security reasons.

Discussions highlighted Ukraine's pressing requirements, emphasising ammunition, air defence elements, spare parts, and electronic warfare equipment as summer approaches. This aid complements Estonia's prior support, including Javelin anti-tank missiles and medical supplies, reflecting

broader European efforts to bolster Ukraine's defence procurement amidst escalating tensions [ERR] [Pravda].

(ha/gc)

Germany arrests pair over suspected Islamist plot against Swedish parliament

Germany on March 19 arrested two men for allegedly plotting to kill police officers and others near the Swedish parliament. [Politico]

The two Afghan nationals, identified by the authorities as “Ibrahim MG” and “Ramin N”, are allegedly supporters of the so-called Islamic State (IS) militant group and are suspected of planning the attack in Stockholm in retaliation to a series of Koran burnings in Sweden in 2023.

Those anti-Islamic incidents heightened tensions with Muslim nations. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

The two men are believed to be supporters of the Islamic State Khorasan Province group since at least last year. They allegedly collected donations of around EUR 2,000 to help IS members imprisoned in northern Syria. [Euronews][Sveriges Radio]

The pair were arrested in Gera, eastern Germany. [DN] Reuters]

(km/pk)

Hungarian populist PM urges supporters to ‘occupy Brussels’ in anti-EU speech

Hungarian right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban has urged his supporters to “occupy Brussels” ahead of upcoming European Parliament elections in order to “defend Hungary’s freedom and sovereignty”.

In a fiery speech on March 15, Orban compared the European Union, of which his country is a member, to imperial occupiers that have dominated Hungary in the past.

He railed against the “Western world,” saying: “They start wars, destroy worlds, redraw countries’ borders and graze on everything like locusts.” He added: “We Hungarians live differently and want to live differently.” [AP News] [Reuters] [DW]

Orban, a nationalist and self-professed champion of "illiberal democracy", has frequently clashed with the European Union, accusing Brussels of trying to force Budapest to accept its stance on issues such as immigration and LGBTQ+ rights. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

The premier's speech, delivered from the steps of the National Museum in central Budapest, came on his country's national day, which marks Hungary's failed 1848 revolution against Habsburg rule. [AP News] [Reuters] [DW]

Orban said that elections to the European Parliament in June were a chance to stand up for Hungary. He told a crowd of around 1,000 supporters: "If we want to defend Hungary's freedom and sovereignty, we have no other choice but to occupy Brussels."

He added: "We will march to Brussels and bring the change to the European Union ourselves."

The Hungarian prime minister's Fidesz party is hoping for a boost in the EU elections amid an expected swell in support for far-right groupings across the continent which share many of Orban's views. [AP News] [Reuters]

Hungary is slated to take over the rotating presidency of the EU in July. Kremlin-friendly Orban has come under fire for opposing EU sanctions against Moscow and for democratic backsliding in Hungary. That record has led critics to warn that he is not a leader who should be allowed more sway over European decision-making. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

(pk)

Italy lags behind in aid for Ukraine, despite Rome's rhetoric: study

Italy, the third largest economy in the EU, has provided less aid for war-torn Ukraine than any other G7 country, and is behind smaller nations like the Czech Republic, Belgium and Denmark, according to a leading economic research institute.

The Italian parliament recently authorised arms deliveries for the whole of this year, although the details and size of the package for Kyiv are being kept secret. Germany's Die Welt newspaper reported that the military support was unlikely to be "decisive aid for Ukraine's self-defence".

Since taking office in 2022, Italian hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has positioned herself as a strong supporter of Ukraine. During a February 24 visit to Kyiv on the second anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she signed a 10-year security partnership with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Meloni emphasised the importance of help for Kyiv and said "we will do our part to defend" Ukraine. [Die Welt]

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said at the Munich Security Conference, held from February 16 to 18 in Germany, that Rome "is ready to do more at the economic, political and military level". [US News]

However, even in terms of total support for Ukraine rather than donations calculated as a percentage of GDP, Italy has been outpaced by a number of smaller EU countries, according to the Kiel Institute, a German research body.

Italy has committed a total of EUR 1.3 billion in military, financial and humanitarian aid to Kyiv, placing it 17th among donor nations, the Kiel Institute's Ukraine Support Tracker found.

(acn-pk)

Russian opposition figure assaulted in Lithuanian capital

Leonid Volkov, a prominent figure in the opposition movement led by the late Russian leader Alexei Navalny, was assaulted near his residence in Vilnius, Lithuania.

According to reports, Volkov's assailant vandalised his car, sprayed tear gas, and proceeded to attack him with a hammer, leaving Volkov hospitalised. (AP)

The attack occurred following Navalny's recent death in a Russian penal colony. Navalny's supporters have alleged Kremlin involvement, although Russian authorities deny any responsibility. (MSN)

Volkov, who had played a pivotal role in coordinating Navalny's political activities, had been living in exile in Lithuania due to increasing pressure from Russian authorities. (AP)

The incident prompted swift international condemnation, with Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda claiming Russian President Vladimir Putin's

involvement in the attack. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis emphasised the importance of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. (MSN)

The incident involving Volkov sheds light on the risks associated with political engagement. It underscores the ongoing challenges faced by individuals advocating for various causes, including those aligned with Navalny's movement, amid the country's complex political landscape. (AP)

(ha/gc)

Russian-plated cars must exit Lithuania

Lithuania has enforced stringent regulations regarding vehicles with Russian licence plates, necessitating either local registration or departure from the country as of March 11.

Non-compliance entails fines and potential vehicle confiscation, as per Lithuanian customs under section 515 of the Administrative Offences Code. Exceptions were granted to Russian citizens who are transiting to or from the Kaliningrad Oblast, provided that transit is at most 24 hours and the vehicle owner is present. [ERR]

Lithuanian customs confiscated the first car with Russian plates, driven by a Moldovan citizen heading to Belarus.

With the vehicle's owner revealed Russian, strict enforcement measures were applied, including an administrative violation report and confiscation of the EUR 41,690 worth Audi Q7. [European Times]

These actions aim to align with the European Commission's recommendation, prompting neighbouring countries like Latvia, Estonia, Poland, and Finland to implement similar restrictions, aiming to regulate and monitor the presence of Russian-registered vehicles within the region. [ERR]

(ha/gc)

Serbia receives military shipment from Russia

Serbia received a shipment of a Russian anti-drone system known as the Repellent despite being flanked

by multiple countries that have banned Russian flights in their respective airspaces. Over the past few years, Serbia has embarked on a military buildup of Chinese and Russian defence equipment. [AP]

This buildup has coincided with increasingly fraught relations with its neighbour and former territory, Kosovo. [AP]

(js/gc)

Vatican backtracks on call for Ukraine to raise 'white flag'

Pope Francis sparked outrage in Kyiv, and controversy internationally, by calling on Ukraine to raise the "white flag" and begin negotiations with Russia amid the war between the two nations.

In an interview with Swiss Public Broadcaster RSI that was recorded in February and aired on March 9, the pontiff said that he believed "those who have the courage to raise the white flag and to negotiate are stronger."

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky responded to the comments in his daily address to the nation on March 12, saying that the church was, "together with people not two and a half thousand kilometres away somewhere, virtually mediating between someone who wants to live and someone who wants to destroy you."

Criticism from Ukraine and its allies prompted the Holy See to backtrack on the pope's comments. On March 12, the Vatican's top diplomat, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, told Italian media that Russia was the aggressor in the conflict "and it should be the aggressors who cease fire first – and then the opening of negotiations."

This is not the first controversy sparked by the pope's comments on the Russia-Ukraine war. In May 2022 he suggested that NATO "barking at the gates of Russia" may have led to the invasion of Ukraine and said that he didn't know whether other countries should supply Kyiv with more arms. [WSJ]

However, Francis has also repeatedly expressed solidarity with "martyred Ukraine". The Vatican has long been calling for a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. [Guardian] [Reuters] [POLITICO]

(ar/pk)

EU offers Egypt billions in bid to stem migration

The EU has signed a deal with Egypt offering a EUR 7.4 billion aid package aiming to stem rising migration to the continent, a hot-button issue ahead of June's European Parliament elections.

The agreement has been criticised by campaigners worried at rights violations in Egypt. The deal was inked in Cairo on March 17 by European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, with the leaders of Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Italy in attendance. [AP News]

As well as offering grants and loans over the next three years, the EU announced it was upgrading its relationship with the Arab world's most populous nation to a "strategic partnership". [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Italian hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who has been a driving force behind similar recent deals, said the EU-Egypt agreement was a chance to give people in Africa a chance "not to emigrate" to Europe. [POLITICO]

She added: "This initiative shows our willingness to strengthen and encourage a new structural method of cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean." [AP News]

Italy is among EU frontline states that have struggled to deal with a spike in refugee numbers crossing the Mediterranean, and tackling "irregular" migration is a priority for Meloni's government. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

Migrant flows to southern Europe last year were the highest since 2016. However, they were still a far cry from the 1.3 million who sought asylum on the continent in 2015 – the most since World War II.

Fears of more migration pressure

The deal with Cairo comes as fears mount that Israel's ground offensive in Gaza amid a war with Hamas could force vast numbers of Palestinians to break into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Egypt has long been a refuge for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa fleeing war or poverty, with many using the country as a transit point before attempting the

dangerous Mediterranean Sea crossing to Europe. [AP News]

The EU says its new, expanded partnership with Egypt aims to promote democracy, but rights activists have criticised Western backing for President Sisi and his country's crackdown on dissidents. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

(pk)

NGOs sue Denmark to stop arms exports to Israel

A group of NGOs has announced plans to sue the Danish state in a bid to end the Nordic country's arms exports to Israel over concerns that the weapons may be used to commit crimes against civilians in Gaza.

Among the NGOs are Amnesty International Denmark, Oxfam Denmark, ActionAid Denmark and Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq.

The NGOs said in a joint statement on March 12 that they would bring the case against Denmark's foreign ministry and the national police. [Politiken]

According to Amnesty, by supplying weapons to Israel, Denmark violates international rules on arms trade and risks becoming complicit in violations of international humanitarian law.

However, Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen told reporters: "We feel that we are completely within the lines, the rules of the game that apply." [Reuters]

Tim Whyte, secretary general of ActionAid Denmark, said: "For five months we have been talking about a potential genocide in Gaza, but we have not seen politicians take action." [Reuters]

A war broke out between Israel and Hamas militants after an attack by Hamas in October which killed 1,200 Israelis.

Israel denies committing war crimes in its offensive against Hamas in Gaza, blaming militants for fighting in densely populated areas. Gaza authorities have reported more than 31,000 Palestinian deaths since the start of the conflict.

The European Union has struggled to demonstrate political unity around the worst outbreak of violence in

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades. [Europe Monthly November 2023] [TheNewArab] [The Guardian]

In January, the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled it is plausible that Israel's actions may amount to genocide in Gaza. The court ordered Israel to take all measures possible to prevent genocidal acts. [United Nations]

(km/pk)

Italian court blocks extradition of Palestinian to Israel amid rights fears

An Italian court of appeal has decided that a suspected Palestinian militant arrested in Italy should not be extradited to Israel, saying he could face "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment".

The court ruling on March 13 came after the suspect's lawyer presented reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch on the detention conditions of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. [Reuters]

The man, named by the court as Anan Kamal Afif Yaeesh, 36, is suspected of planning attacks in an unspecified country. Israel has accused the defendant of financing an armed group from the Tulkarem refugee camp in the West Bank. [Die Presse]

The court in the central Italian city of l'Aquila said that the detainee's rights would be at risk if he was extradited. [Kurier] [Reuters]

Israel has repeatedly stated that detainees are treated in accordance with international law.

(acn/pk)

US threatens Austrian bank with sanctions for business in Russia

The United States has warned Austria's Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI) that it could face sanctions for its dealings in Russia.

The US Treasury Department told the bank that it could be cut off from the American financial system if it was helping to fund the Russian military. [EU Observer] [Reuters/MSN] [Euractiv] [MSN]

RBI made EUR 1.3 billion in profit in Russia last year, where it employed almost 10,000 people, and also took part in a Russian scheme to provide loan perks for military conscripts, according to EU Observer.

Meanwhile, Austria is seeking to have Raiffeisen Bank International removed from a Ukrainian blacklist. The list, naming "international sponsors of war", aims to shame companies doing business in Russia and supporting Moscow's war effort.

Austria has adopted a stance delicately balanced between supporting Ukraine and maintaining decades-old ties with Russia, according to analysts. [business-humanrights.org]

(mr/pk)

Nicaragua files case against Germany in the ICJ for supporting Israel

Nicaragua has filed a case against Germany at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging that Berlin is complicit in Israel's actions in Gaza.

The Nicaraguan government accused Germany of providing financial and military support to Israel, exacerbating the international crisis and conflict in the region [DW].

Nicaragua asserted that Germany's decision to halt funding for the UN Palestinian Refugee Agency (UNRWA) is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis [Reuters].

Nicaragua has requested urgent measures to halt military assistance to Israel, emphasising the importance of upholding international law [DW].

While Germany and the United States suspended UNRWA funding over alleged Hamas involvement, Nicaragua argued that the agency is vital for the well-being of Palestinian civilians [Reuters].

(ha/gc)

Serbian president denies Trump's son-in-law plans to develop bombed military facility

The president of Serbia denied that he might have tried to steer a valuable real estate project in Serbia's capital to Jared Kushner, Donald J. Trump's son-in-law, to influence Trump should he return to the White House.

"I died laughing," the Serbian leader, Aleksandar Vucic, said at a rally, mockingly to news reports that Kushner was close to an agreement to invest $500 million in redeveloping a high-profile site in central Belgrade, the capital. "I read in some papers that I used this for a political influence on Trump, that corrupted America or someone in America. I am a miracle. It is incredible what all I can do."

Kushner, who was a senior White House adviser under Mr. Trump, has teamed up with Richard Grenell, a second former Trump aide, on the plan.

The tentative agreement between the Kushner team and the Serbian government would grant Mr. Kushner's investment firm a 99-year lease, at no charge, and the right to build a luxury hotel and apartment complex and a museum on the site of the former headquarters of the Yugoslav Ministry of Defense in Belgrade, which was bombed by NATO in 1999.

Grenell said of the deal: "The opportunity to have American investors redevelop the former military headquarters of the government of Yugoslavia symbolises the tremendous progress that has been made to heal the wounds from the past." [NYT]

Serbian right-wing opposition member Aleksandar Pavic said the deal would show "so much absence of dignity, feeling for the country."

The multi-million dollar deal would include a 99-year lease and the rights to build a hotel, apartment, and museum. [NYT]

(js/gc)

Former US President Obama holds private talks with Sunak

Former US President Barack Obama unexpectedly visited Downing Street and engaged in private discussions with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

The hour-long meeting, initiated by Obama's team, covered topics including artificial intelligence,

according to The Guardian, and discussed the work of the Obama Foundation. (The Independent)

This is not Obama's first visit to Downing Street. He previously met with then-Prime Minister David Cameron in 2016, discussing concerns about British defence spending and its impact on the "special relationship" between the United States and the UK. (The Guardian)

The meeting comes amid political differences within the Conservative Party, with Sunak facing scrutiny over leadership ahead of elections. Sunak has expressed confidence for the future, while figures within the party urge an end to internal disruptions ahead of the general election (The Independent).

Obama's visit to Downing Street provides insight into ongoing political dynamics, intertwining with broader discussions on international relations and leadership amidst domestic agendas. Their interactions underscore the complex interplay of politics and diplomacy, with implications extending beyond Downing Street's walls.

(ha/gc)

US, UK sign landmark AI agreement

The Financial Times reported that the US and the UK have signed a landmark agreement on artificial intelligence, as the allies have become the first countries to formally cooperate on testing and assessing risks from emerging AI models. [FT]

UK Science Minister Michelle Donelan and US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo signed the agreement, which lays out how the two governments will pool technical knowledge, information and talent on AI safety. [FT]

The deal represents the first bilateral arrangement on AI safety in the world and comes as governments push for greater regulation of the existential risks from new technology, such as its use in damaging cyber attacks or designing bioweapons. [FT]

“The next year is when we’ve really got to act quickly because the next generation of [AI] models are coming out, which could be complete game-changers, and we don’t know the full capabilities that they will offer yet,” Donelan told the Financial Times. [FT]

(gc)

Team:

Anna Lavery (al), Ann-Charlotte Neumann (acn), Caleb Klubben (cqk), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Glen Carey (gc), Harmia Amadi (ha), Henning Glaser (hg), Isobel Knight (ik), Jacob Smith (js), Joss Thomas (jt), Katherine Mansfield (km), Maria Rusu (mr), Nydia Ndam Carrillo (nbnc), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rex Wempen (rw), Rohini Singh (rs), Sophie Riordan (sr), Venus Phuangkom, Warren O'Broin (wb), Yi-Ting Lo (yl)

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German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

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