German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence
for Public Policy and Good Governance
CPG

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 5, May/2024

Brought to you by CPG

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY
GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN
Universität Münster
Auswärtiges Amt
DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst German Academic Exchange Service

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.

After six months of political wrangling, the United States has finally approved a USD 61 billion support package for Ukraine. The news was greeted with jubilation in Kyiv. The massive influx of military aid will allow ammunition-deprived Ukraine to keep its guns firing at Russian troops as it fights for its survival.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament has approved a set of migration reforms eight years in the making, in a move hailed as historic by supporters, slammed as insufficient by far-right groups, and criticised as a regression on human rights by left-wingers and civil society organisations.

European lawmakers have also adopted a resolution condemning Iran's unprecedented drone and missile attack on Israel, and calling for further sanctions on Iranian entities.

In other news, foreign ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) major democracies have refused to endorse calls by the US to confiscate Russian assets and then use them to fund the war in Ukraine.

Finally, an appeal to our readers. We're **looking for private investors and institutional partners** to help keep Europe in Review going and to expand an ambitious new website that we're on the verge of launching.

If you enjoy our monthly newsletter, which keeps you abreast of key developments in Europe and the continent's relations with the rest of the world, please spread the word that we're seeking funding. We'll be happy to supply a detailed prospectus outlining our plans.

Kind wishes,

Henning Glaser

Editor-in-Chief

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

Main Sections

- Top Stories - Editors' Pick
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe
- Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe
- International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Ukraine boosted by new US aid as Russia attempts breakthrough

Six months of wrangling in the United States over a massive USD 61 billion support package for Ukraine have finally come to an end. The news was met with jubilation in Kyiv, whose forces have been hit hard by ammunition shortages amid constant Russian offensives. At the same time, the unloosening of the cash stream from America has opened new questions about European support. Meanwhile, the Russians have continued their campaign against Ukraine's civilian energy infrastructure, and have created a dangerous situation for the country's defenders outside the eastern town of Avdiivka.

America releases billions

The United States has been Ukraine's biggest military backer since the Russian invasion in 2022, drawing on its enormous stores of hardware and the largest military-industrial complex on earth. However, Kyiv faced a formidable obstacle to obtaining this help, which is vital to its survival – US domestic politics.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations think tank, American support for Ukraine reached USD 75 billion in February this year. That figure includes help of all kinds, including humanitarian supplies, financial and budgetary support for the Ukrainian state, and most importantly, the arms and ammunition relied upon by Ukrainian forces. US aid dwarfs that of any other single nation, though the European Union has provided nearly USD 100 billion in financial and humanitarian help from its budget.

The US government struggled for over half a year to obtain the support of the legislature to pass a further aid package worth USD 61 billion. Backing for Kyiv became hostage to the opposition Republican party, which sought to wring concessions from the

administration on issues like illegal immigration, cuts to welfare services, and turning aid grants into loans.

The leader of the Republicans in the legislature, Mike Johnson, refused to bring Ukraine aid to the table for several months as he faced pressure from the right wing of his party to stop funding for Kyiv. However, he also faced rising pressure from Republicans with pro-Ukraine leanings. Johnson's path forward was eased greatly when former president Donald Trump, the de-facto Republican leader, openly backed him at an April 13 press conference. There, Trump decried efforts to remove Johnson as "unfortunate" and offered his support for Kyiv's cause – of which he has previously been sceptical.

Key vote

After a missile and drone barrage launched by Iran against Israel in mid-April, Johnson committed himself to bringing Ukraine aid, alongside support for US allies Israel and Taiwan, to a vote. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CFR] [Economist] [Foreign Policy] [The Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [New York Times]

That took place on April 20. The proposal was carried by 210 Democrats and just 101 Republicans, with 112 voting against. Johnson's move has cost him the support of his party's influential right-wing, with a motion to remove him as speaker already waiting in the wings. The US senate rapidly approved the package. President Joe Biden signed the aid into law on April 24 and promised that weapons would be sent to Ukraine "in the next few hours". The news was met with celebration in Kyiv. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the funds gave his country "a chance at victory".

The package itself is split into several sections. The largest part, worth USD 27 billion, has been allocated to US defence procurement, which allows the country's military to purchase equipment from manufacturers to replace the vehicles, ammunition and weapons systems it has sent to Ukraine. USD 8 billion of this can be used to send further materiel from US stocks to Ukraine.

A further USD 14 billion is an outright grant to Kyiv, enabling Ukrainian procurement from US weapons manufacturers. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the package, as it allows Kyiv to directly purchase the systems and munitions it requires immediately, such as air defence missiles and artillery shells. Though these will take time to reach Ukraine, the effect is instant: Ukrainian gunners can fire their

existing stocks with more freedom, as they know replacements are on the way. [Associated Press] [CNN] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [Hill] [NBC News] [New York Times] [POLITICO] [Reuters]

The new US assistance, however, is late in arriving. This is acknowledged by Jake Sullivan, one of Biden's national security advisors, who said: "It's going to take some time for us to dig out of the hole that was created by six months of delay." In that time, Ukrainian ammunition reserves have been severely depleted, leading to Russian advances. Kyiv's forces have had to ration their Western-supplied anti-air missiles, allowing Russian bombers to run rampant at the front for the first time since early 2022. This has forced withdrawals as Ukrainian troops found their shelter and cover pummelled.

The American aid package will allow Ukraine to reverse Russia's growing advantage. Max Bergmann of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a US-based think tank, expects Ukraine to now be able to inflict heavy losses on Russian troops and blunt their advances, but warns that Kyiv will need to rebuild its forces and reorientate itself towards a long war. He points to the failure of European nations to ramp up production of military equipment, which means that Ukraine remains dependent on the US to keep its guns firing. [Atlantic Council] [Associated Press] [Business Insider] [CSIS] [Financial Times] [Hill] [POLITICO Europe] [Washington Post]

Manpower shortage

Bergmann, and many others, are also increasingly pointing to an issue that is as important as shells and Patriot missiles – manpower.

Ukraine's forces have drawn on two main sources: volunteers and conscripts. The supply of volunteers has dried up as most of those who want to fight have already joined up. The supply of conscripts is similarly constrained, as Ukraine's drafting age is relatively high, at 27. One survey puts the average age of Ukrainian soldiers at 43. Casualties have depleted the number of available men, and the sheer length of the frontline has spread units thin.

Disagreements have raged over how to replenish Kyiv's forces, contributing to the dismissal of Ukraine's respected commander-in-chief, General Valerii Zaluzhny, in February. President Zelensky has yielded to reality by bringing legislation forward to lower the age of conscription to 25, deny consular services to conscription-aged men who have sought refuge abroad, and create a digital database of men of

fighting age. Ukraine is also seeking the assistance of neighbouring Poland to repatriate conscription-aged men, and Warsaw has appeared willing to cooperate.

With its survival at stake and its forces facing an enemy that can draw on millions more men, Ukraine can ill afford to stall on this issue. While the latest measures will add to Ukraine's forces, they fall short of the full mobilisation that may be required. [Atlantic Council] [BBC News] [CEPA] [Financial Times] [PBS] [RFE/RL] [Washington Post]

Russia seizes rare opportunity

While Kyiv's forces await fresh supplies, Russia has continued to press its advantage, finding mixed success.

Since the fall of the eastern town of Avdiivka in February, Moscow's forces have been advancing at a slow but steady rate to the ruined city's west. Russians have raised their flag over several villages, but have faced stern resistance from Ukrainian units. The village of Tonenke, to Avdiivka's west, has fallen after weeks of heavy fighting which saw outnumbered Ukrainian units turn back battalion-sized offensives.

Russians have captured a belt of settlements on this western axis, stretching from Tonenke in the south to the village of Berdychi in the north, which allows them to launch deeper assaults into the hinterland of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has set his forces the task of capturing the entire region. With dozens of settlements to go, this is a difficult ask and one that is nearly impossible to achieve without breaking through Ukrainian lines – rather than pushing them back as the Russians have done to date. [Associated Press] [Barrons] [Business Insider] [Newsweek]

Moscow may be about to force that breakthrough, however. A severe error by Ukrainian forces around the village of Ocheretyne may have given Russian forces an opportunity they have not had in a long time.

Ocheretyne lies to the north-west of Avdiivka. Like most of the settlements Ukraine and Russia have fought over in recent months, it is a small Donbas village with a pre-war population of around 3,000. Its defence had been entrusted to Ukraine's 47th Mechanised Brigade. Formed after Russia's invasion, the 47th is heavily equipped and has seen near-constant combat, both on the offensive and in defence. It is one of Ukraine's most experienced units and has repeatedly deflected Russian assaults around

Avdiivka. Casualties, ammunition depletion and exhaustion after the fall of Avdiivka led the Ukrainian command to rotate the brigade out of its positions near Ocheretyne, to be replaced by the lighter-equipped but fresher 115th Mechanised Brigade.

Moscow seeks breakthrough

It is not entirely clear what happened next, with conflicting explanations offered. However, most observers agree that the 115th withdrew from positions near the village, leading Russian forces to advance almost five kilometres unopposed into the settlement, which they captured. Further Russian advances were blunted as the 47th launched a counterattack, but it was unable to repel the Russians, who flooded the area with reinforcements and unleashed aerial bombardments. Russian troops are attempting to turn the salient at Ocheretyne into a broader breakthrough into Ukraine's rear.

It is not yet clear if Russian forces have the capacity to exploit this breakthrough. With new supplies to Ukraine on their way, the Russians will seek to capture as much territory as they can before the frontline stabilises. Ocheretyne may be the gate to further and greater gains. [Business Insider] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Newsweek] [Reuters] [Telegraph]

Meanwhile, the area to the west of the ruined battleground of Bakhmut has seen fierce fighting in recent weeks as Russian forces seek to capture the town of Chasiv Yar.

That battered settlement north of Avdiivka, which had a pre-war population of nearly 12,000, would not give Russian forces an immediate advantage, as there are numerous villages to its rear that Ukrainian troops could retreat to. But it is clear that the Kremlin views its capture as important. Large numbers of Russian units have amassed around Bakhmut and have launched offensives against Chasiv Yar, backed by air cover and mass artillery strikes. Russian forces are close, with some sources claiming they have been able to enter the town's eastern half. That battle is likely to continue in May. [Forbes] [France 24] [New York Times] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal]

Europe struggles to match US military support

With the US finally renewing its support to Ukraine, eyes now fall on Europe's contribution.

While the latter has offered unmatched financial and economic aid to Kyiv, it has struggled to come up with the quantities of ammunition and equipment Ukraine

needs to hold back the Russian invasion. Though a recent Czech initiative has found hundreds of thousands of shells on the world market for Ukraine, Europeans have been unable to meet Kyiv's request for air defences.

Several European nations operate the much-vaunted Patriot air defence system, but they have been reluctant to part with their batteries – which are small in number – as these form an essential part of their own defence network.

Germany has handed over another Patriot battery, meaning the country has donated a quarter of its systems of this type to Ukraine. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has called on European nations to do more. In response to concerns over whether Europe will be left with enough systems to defend itself in case of attack, Stoltenberg said this was a "risk we have to take". Greece, however, pointed to its poor relations with nearby Turkey as the reason why it cannot part with any of its batteries.

While Ukraine's need for air defences is a topic of discussion in European capitals and at multilateral forums like the EU and NATO, further pledges are not yet forthcoming. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Carnegie Europe] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [RFE/RL] [Le Monde] [POLITICO Europe]

Infrastructure attacks

Ukraine needs air defences at the frontline, to counter Russian bombers, and at the rear, to protect vital infrastructure and civilian homes from missile and drone strikes. Moscow has been able to exploit Ukrainian arms shortages, pounding thermal power stations from the air.

The massive Trypilska power plant, which was the main producer of energy for the capital, Kyiv, was badly damaged by attacks in March and April. Ukraine has been able to stave off the mass blackouts seen in late 2022 by importing energy from its European allies, but few of the country's large power plants have escaped damage. Russia has also made use of "double tap" strikes, in which a second barrage follows a first – in the hope of killing the first responders who arrive at the scene. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [CNN] [Financial Times] [NBC] [Reuters] [Wall Street Journal] [Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

EU Parliament adopts contested migration reforms

The European Parliament has adopted a set of migration reforms eight years in the making, in a move hailed as historic by supporters, slammed as insufficient by far-right groups, and criticised as a regression on human rights by leftists and civil society organisations.

The laws – dubbed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum – are designed as a sweeping overhaul of the EU's migration system, which was overwhelmed in a 2015 refugee crisis. The new rules aim to impose tough screening systems while fast-tracking asylum procedures. People who do not qualify for refugee status will be returned to their home countries. [Euractiv]

"History made," said European Parliament President Roberta Metsola in a post on X, calling the rules a "balance between solidarity and responsibility".

The reforms still need to be rubber-stamped by EU member states. The laws are expected to start applying two years from now.

One of the most controversial measures is the relocation of a certain number of migrants from the EU country they first arrived in as part of a system of "mandatory solidarity". If other member states refuse to accept such people, they will be required to send equipment or personnel to countries of first reception.

There have been debates about introducing a system under which countries would have to pay a EUR 20,000 fine per person not accepted, but no binding decisions have been reached on this. [DW]

Poland is set to oppose the new relocation rules, with Prime Minister Donald Tusk arguing that his nation is already hosting around a million refugees from neighbouring war-torn Ukraine.

"We will find ways so that even if the migration pact comes into force in roughly unchanged form, we will protect Poland against the relocation mechanism," he said. [The Guardian]

European lawmakers approved the reforms in a series of ten tense votes, with some of the rules passing on thin margins obtained only due to abstentions. Right-wing politicians argued that the new laws did not go far enough and would cause a spike in migration, while left-wing groups saw the measures as too tough on refugees. At the start of the European Parliament vote,

the session was interrupted by a group of protesters in the public gallery yelling: “This pact kills – vote no!”

Over 160 migrant charities, human rights groups and non-governmental organisations repeatedly slammed the package as it made its way through the legislative process, warning that it would impose hardened conditions on people fleeing persecution. [AFP/France 24] [Europe Monthly January 2024]

Eve Geddie, the head of Amnesty International in Europe, called the reforms “a failure to show global leadership”.

She said the rules “will mean less protection and a greater risk of… human rights violations across Europe – including illegal and violent pushbacks, arbitrary detention, and discriminatory policing.” [Al Jazeera]

(qv/pk)

New task force to combat Russian interference in European election

EU leaders have decided to launch a crisis task force to counter suspected attempts by Moscow to interfere in upcoming European Parliament elections. [Euractiv]

The move comes after a recent scandal over an alleged Russian political influence campaign. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo accused Moscow of paying Euro-deputies “to promote Russian propaganda” ahead of the European elections, due to be held between June 6 and 9. [POLITICO]

Meanwhile, the European Commission has started an inquiry into social media giant Meta over its handling of political content. Officials said they would assess whether the company’s approach to moderating disinformation on Facebook and Instagram breached EU law. [BBC] [POLITICO Europe] [Financial Times]

De Croo, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, announced on April 17 during a summit of the bloc’s leaders that the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament and the EU Council would “monitor very closely what’s going on to coordinate information and pass it on to national bodies and authorities so that they can intervene if necessary.” [Euractiv]

The task force will be temporary. After the elections, a permanent monitoring system will be considered, De Croo added.

He told reporters that Moscow aimed "to help elect more pro-Russian candidates to the European Parliament" in order to weaken the bloc's support for Ukraine.

Far-right and populist parties, some of which are sympathetic to the Kremlin, are expected to make gains in the European elections. [CNN]

Czech connection

The decision by EU leaders to form a special task force against suspected interference by Moscow came after Czech security services reported they had uncovered a network used by Russia to funnel cash to politicians across the European Union. The Czech authorities sanctioned a website called Voice of Europe. [DW] [POLITICO]

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala wrote on social media platform X: "We have uncovered a pro-Russian network that was developing an operation to spread Russian influence and undermine security across Europe."

European Commission Vice President Vera Jourova called the revelations "very troubling." She added: "They only confirm what I've been saying for a long time: our democracy cannot be taken for granted, and the Kremlin will continue using disinformation, malign interference, corruption and any other dirty tricks from the authoritarian playbook to divide Europe."

Security services in Poland, working in cooperation with the Czech Republic, said in late March they had carried out searches, adding: "Actions aimed at organising pro-Russian initiatives and media campaigns in EU countries have been documented." [Reuters]

(pk)

European lawmakers, G7 condemn Iranian attack on Israel

The European Parliament has adopted a resolution condemning Iran's unprecedented drone and missile attack on Israel, in a vote of 357 to 20, and has called for further sanctions to be imposed on Iranian entities. The G7 echoed Europe's condemnation. [TimesofIsrael]

The resolution, passed during the final session before the upcoming European Parliament elections, reiterated a prior demand for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to be included on the EU's list of terror

organisations and called for Hezbollah in its entirety to be added to the list as well.

The resolution criticised Tehran's role in destabilising the Middle East through its “network of non-state actors” and pointed to attacks on Israel carried out before and during the assault by its proxies, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. [TimesofIsrael]

Tehran launched some 300 drones, ballistic and cruise missiles on April 13 in its first state-on-state attack against Israel.

Israeli officials said they would respond amid calls for restraint by allies anxious to avoid an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East. European allies pleaded with Israel to prevent a major regional spillover of the conflict. [EuroNews][Reuters]

G7 response

G7 leaders convened virtually in response to Iran’s strikes. In a statement following the meeting called by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the leaders said they “unequivocally condemn in the strongest terms Iran’s direct and unprecedented attack against Israel.”

The statement went on to “express our full solidarity and support to Israel and its people and reaffirm our commitment towards its security.” [Reuters] [Euractiv]

The group of seven - comprising the US, France, the UK, Italy, Germany, Canada, and Japan - said that “Iran has further stepped toward the destabilisation of the region and risks provoking an uncontrollable regional escalation. This must be avoided.”

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said shortly after the conclusion of the G7 meeting that the EU “will reflect on additional sanctions against Iran in close cooperation with our partners, specifically on its drone and missile programmes.”

Call to end fighting in Gaza

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell echoed the sentiments of the G7 leaders, calling Iran’s first-ever direct attack on Israel “an unprecedented escalation and a grave threat to regional security.” [Euractiv] [Politico]

Some in the EU leadership went on to express solidarity with Israel while simultaneously calling for an end to the fighting in Gaza.

“We unanimously condemned Iran’s unprecedented attack against Israel,” European Council President

Charles Michel posted on X. “We will continue all our efforts to work towards de-escalation. Ending the crisis in Gaza as soon as possible, notably through an immediate ceasefire, will make a difference.” [Euractiv]

Hamas - which continues to hold civilian hostages and has rejected previous ceasefire attempts - receives significant financial and military support from Iran. [The Times of Israel]

EU representatives also called for the immediate implementation of UNSC resolution 1701, which prohibits the placement of fighters and military installations south of the Litani River along Israel’s northern border with Lebanon - a mandate Hezbollah is actively defying. [The Times of Israel]

German warning

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called on EU member states to demonstrate solidarity with Israel and warned Iran not to intervene in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [AA]

“Today it’s about making it clear together (as EU members) that we support Israel in defending its own country against the terrible attacks by Hamas,” Scholz told reporters in Brussels ahead of a summit of EU leaders. [AA]

He also warned regional actors against taking steps which could trigger a broader conflict in the Middle East. [AA]

“Therefore, it should not happen that Hezbollah enters the war in the north with its own activities or that Iran and its proxies try to intervene here,” he said. [AA]

French-UK support

French President Emmanuel Macron confirmed that France, in conjunction with US, UK and Jordanian forces, had aided in Israel’s defence against Iran’s attack on April 13.

He said Paris mobilised jets from a French airbase in Jordan to intercept the Iranian assault, which US officials say included “over 100 medium-range ballistic missiles, more than 30 land-attack cruise missiles and over 150 attack drones,” all aimed at Israel. [Le Monde] [The Jerusalem Post]

Macron highlighted the troubling significance of the attack, saying: “Instead of targeting Israeli interests outside Israel, they [Iran and its proxies] went after Israel on its soil, and attacked from their own soil, which is a first." [rfi]

The French president reiterated his nation's support for Israel and its defence but also lobbied Israel not to respond in an escalatory manner.

"We need to be by Israel's side to ensure its protection to the maximum, but also to call for a limit to avoid an escalation," he said.

British Royal Air Force jets, deployed initially to counter ISIS in the region, were also tasked with intercepting drones in Iraq and Syria.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told journalists: "I can confirm that a number of Iranian attack drones were shot down and we pay tribute to the bravery and the professionalism of our pilots flying into the face of danger to protect civilians."

He added that if the coalition had failed, "the fallout for regional stability would be hard to overstate." [BBC], [The Guardian]

(cqk-js/gc)

G7, EU leaders urge US restraint on sanctions expansion for Russia, China

Foreign ministers from the Group of Seven (G7) major democracies refused at a meeting in Italy on April 17-19 to endorse calls by the US to confiscate Russian assets and then use them to fund the war in Ukraine. [FRG Federal Foreign Office]

Germany, France, Italy, and the European Central Bank have opposed an expansion in sanctions. European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde said in an interview at the Council on Foreign Relations on April 17 that moving beyond the current asset freeze to outright seizure would set a negative international precedent.

A move of this kind could justify Russia's cessation of cooperation with international financial institutions, "breaking the international legal order," and raising the risk that other countries may follow suit, Lagarde said. [CFR]

A week after the G7 meeting in the Italian city of Capri, US President Joe Biden signed a law providing American military aid to Kyiv, including a provision that allows the seizure of Russian assets in the US to partially defray the cost of supporting Ukraine. [POTUS]

In March, European leaders agreed to allow the profits from Russian assets in Europe to be channelled toward Ukrainian aid but not to seize the assets themselves. Following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, EUR 281 billion Russian assets were frozen worldwide. [AP] [Reuters]

However, only EUR 4.7 billion resides in the US, with about EUR 210 billion in Europe, with the majority of these funds in the Belgian Euroclear clearing house. The US will probably only seize assets on its own with European consent, according to press reports. [AP]

Differences on China

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited China in April to warn that Chinese banks and companies aiding Russia may face additional sanctions. [Bloomberg] [NYT]

Beijing has responded to previous US sanctions on Chinese companies involved in Russian trade by doubling their gold holdings in a year-long EUR 160 billion buying spree reported in the Telegraph on April 30, the day after a leading Chinese think tank published a report that claimed Chinese holdings of US treasury bills were becoming "hostages." [Telegraph] [Bloomberg] [China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations]

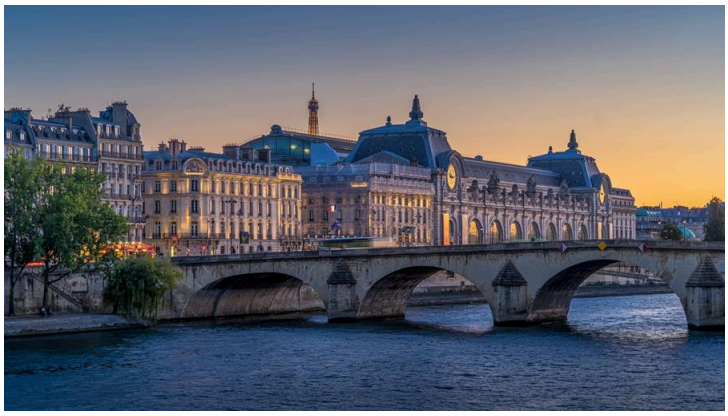
European leaders are engaging in a delicate balancing act with Washington on China.

While the US reportedly threatened to expand Russian-related sanctions to more Chinese entities in April, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz took a different approach when he visited Beijing, Berlin's largest trading partner. [DW] [WP]

He reportedly requested Chinese diplomatic assistance in negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine as well as commercial assistance in opening the Chinese market to greater participation by German companies.

(rw/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe



French Constitutional Council rejects referendum on immigration

In France, the Constitutional Council has rejected a request from the centre-right party Les Républicains to hold a shared initiative referendum (RIP) referendum on immigration issues. [The European Conservative]

This decision comes on the heels of the council's previous ruling on the immigration law in late January. Back then, the Constitutional Council ruling rejected several measures aimed at toughening access to social benefits, family reunification, and the introduction of immigration quotas. While it upheld much of President Macron's initial bill, it censured contentious additions pushed by the right and far-right.

Crucially, the Constitutional Council's rejection of the RIP proposal was expected, and Les Républicains plans to leverage this decision politically, aiming ultimately for a constitutional revision if they win in presidential elections in 2027. [Le Figaro, in French]

(lm)

Crackdown on teen violence announced by French prime minister

In response to recent attacks on school children by their peers, including a fatal beating of a 15-year-old high school student, and ahead of the European Parliament elections on June 9, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal on April 18 announced measures to crack down on teenage violence in and around schools.

The measures include extending compulsory school attendance to all the days of the week from 8am to 6pm for children. Parents are called on to take more responsibility, with Attal warning that particularly disruptive children would have sanctions marked on their final grades. The prime minister is also

considering the possibility of children in exceptional cases being denied the right to special treatment on account of their minority in legal cases.

Attal's move comes as he is facing criticism of Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) claiming that the prime minister is failing to do enough on security. Less than six weeks away from the European elections, the RN is comfortably leading in the latest opinion polls, indicating a possible electoral debacle for French President Emmanuel Macron that would overshadow the remainder of his presidency until 2027. [France 24] [Le Monde]

(dql)

Police summons leading far-left MP over Hamas comments

On April 23, police summoned Mathilde Panot, the leader of far-left MPs in the French parliament for questioning as part of an investigation into her comments on Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel which are suspected of justifying "terrorism".

Panot heads a faction of the France Unbowed (LFI) party in the lower house of the French parliament. The faction has been facing repeated accusations by opponents of failing to clearly condemn Hamas' attack.

In response to the summoning, Panot has warned against the suppression of political expression through the exploitation of justice.

A text which was published on October 7 by the LFI group in parliament triggered controversy following the description of the Hamas attack as "an armed offensive by Palestinian forces" that occurred "in a context of intensification of the Israeli occupation policy" in the Palestinian territories. [France 24]

(dql)

German parliament amends country's climate change legislation after weeks of debate

The German Parliament, the Bundestag, on April 26 passed the second amendment to the Federal Climate Protection Act, after weeks of debate, in a move that has dismayed climate activists. The reform shifts the

focus from individual government ministries meeting their annual emission targets to achieving collective government targets for emission reduction. This change grants flexibility to ministries such as transportation, which have struggled to meet their emission goals in the past. [SEMAFOR] [JURIST]

During the Bundestag session, Germany's coalition government, composed of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Green Party, endorsed the amendments. However, the main opposition Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) opposed the bill, highlighting concerns about the legislative process. Notably, the FDP emphasised the necessity of revising market-based climate protection measures, while the Greens stressed the importance of maintaining existing targets.

Prior to the session, the Federal Constitutional Court dismissed objections raised by a member of the main opposition Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) regarding the amended bill. The court deemed the claim inadmissible, thereby clearing the path for the bill's advancement.

Under the original legislation, certain sectors, such as transportation and buildings, were obligated to meet specific emissions targets annually. However, the amended bill shifts the focus towards achieving the overarching goal of reducing Germany's emissions by 65 percent by 2030. This entails a shift away from monitoring individual sector targets towards assessing progress in achieving the broader emission reduction objective. The first evaluation under the new framework is slated for 2026.

In light of this, before the amendment, Germany’s transportation minister had threatened to ban weekend driving indefinitely if reforms to the Climate Protection Act were not passed by July. Minister Volker Wissing also dismissed other proposals to reduce emissions like implementing a speed-limit on Germany’s autobahn highways. [POLITICO]

The extended deliberations on climate reform within Germany’s ruling coalition once more strained the delicate alliance between the Social Democrats, FDP, and The Greens. Their relationship has been tense due to socio-economic disparities, highlighted by an incident where the environment ministry – run by the Green Party - suggested there should be stricter limits on importing trophies from hunting animals. This move irked the FDP and led to Botswana threatening to send 20,000 elephants to Germany, underscoring the issue of overpopulation. [bbc]

(lm)

German commission recommends officially legalising abortion

A government-appointed commission in Germany has recommended the official legalisation of abortion within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, marking a potentially historic shift in the nation's stance on reproductive rights. The proposal aims to abolish the longstanding criminalization of early abortions outlined in paragraph 218 of the criminal code, which currently exempts abortion from punishment within the first three months of pregnancy under specific conditions. [Deutsche Welle]

While the recommendations have garnered support from progressive groups advocating for women's rights, they have faced opposition from conservative factions, including religious organisations such as the Catholic Church. Political divisions have emerged, with the ruling coalition pushing for liberalisation of abortion laws while encountering resistance from opposition parties like the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

(lm)

German lawmakers break taboo by backing first post-unification Veterans' Day

The German parliament has passed a bill establishing the country's first post-unification Veterans' Day, slated for June 15 each year, marking a significant departure from the nation's historical reluctance to venerate soldiers. The commemorations, resembling similar events in the United Kingdom and the United States, will honour all Germans who have served in the military, with measures in place to support active soldiers, veterans, and their families. [The Guardian]

While the proposal received broad support in the Bundestag, with only the far-left Linke party expressing reservations, its passage represents a culmination of years of debate and resistance. Germany's historical aversion to military glorification, rooted in its turbulent past and the atrocities of World War II, has long posed a barrier to such initiatives. However, in light of Germany's growing military expenditures and a shifting geopolitical landscape following events like the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, the need for a dedicated Veterans' Day gained traction.

(lm)

Only one of Germany's three governing parties sees its numbers improve in poll

The latest polling data from *Euronews*'s exclusive voter intention tracking poll indicates that Germany's main centre-right alliance, the CDU/CSU, maintains a lead heading into the EU Parliament elections this summer. However, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has gained ground, moving into second place. The governing Social Democrats (SPD) are now in third place, with their coalition partners, the Greens, in fourth. The CDU/CSU's share of the vote has increased slightly, while the SPD and Greens have seen declines. The Free Democrats (FDP) are the only party within the coalition experiencing a slight increase in popularity. [EuroNews]

(lm)

German police arrest AFD official on suspicion of espionage

German police arrested an employee for the AFD under suspicion of allegedly conducting espionage for a foreign power. The employee was an assistant to one of the AFD's most prolific candidates for the European Parliament elections, Maximilian Krah.

Police believe the suspect passed intelligence onto China's Ministry of State Security concerning activities within Parliament. The suspect's boss Maximilian Krah is seen as a staunch pro-China voice in Europe and formerly called the genocide ongoing in Xinjiang as "anti-China propaganda." [DW]

Green Party lawmaker Konstantin von Notz told the RND news outlet "In the end, this is what it [AfD] has in mind for Germany. It makes no secret of its contempt for our democracy and our constitutional state. And that, obviously, makes its politicians very susceptible to influence and control from China and Russia." [DW]

(js/gc)

German police shut down pro-Palestinian conference

German police halted a pro-Palestinian conference after growing concerns that its speaker might incite hatred against Jewish people.

Salman Abu Sitta, the main speaker, published an essay in January that expressed sympathy for Hamas militants who massacred hundreds of Israelis on October 7. A day after the surprise assault, Sitta also reposted a post on X, which, in part, read, "Israel is going to kill us anyways. Israel wants us kneeling…So why not fight back and die in dignity?" [Times of Israel], [Novara Media], [New Statesman], [DW]

Germany also denied Former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis entry into the country to attend the conference. Varoufakis called Berlin's actions against him "fascist."

"I am 100% convinced that this was totally illegal," Varoufakis' legal representative, Alexander Gorski, told Novara Media. "What the German state is trying now is completely unprecedented. They are trashing the right to assembly and free speech. They ban people from coming to this country in order to share their opinions."

A day after the Hamas assault, Varoufakis expressed sympathy for the Palestinian people.

"I condemn every single atrocity, whomever is the perpetrator or the victim," he said. "What I do not condemn is armed resistance to an apartheid system designed as part of a slow-burning, but inexorable, ethnic cleansing programme." [Times of Israel], [Novara Media], [New Statesman], [DW]

Berlin's Mayor said on X that it was "intolerable" that the event was taking place in Berlin. German authorities have monitored the pro-Palestinian movement for antisemitic hate speech, which constitutes a crime in Germany.

Germany has a close relationship with Israel, one that the Holocaust defined. Its support for Israel has been unwavering following the attack by Hamas. Its stance has alienated its growing Muslim population, who overwhelmingly sympathise with Palestinians. [Times of Israel], [Novara Media], [New Statesman], [DW]

(js/gc)

New Irish premier appointed

Ireland's new prime minister was appointed on April 9 after receiving the seal of office from the county's President Michael D Higgins. Harris was voted in by the lower house with 88 in favour and 49 against.

The youngest prime minister in Ireland to date, Harris stated that he would 'work every day to improve the lives of all.' His first task was to appoint his Cabinet, whereby several senior roles were shuffled. Former Prime Minister Leo Varadker stated that he knew Simon Harris would "rise to the occasion." (Irish Times) (Irish Independent)

Mary Lou McDonald, leader of the Sinn Fein opposition party, stated that "for the third time, you rearrange the Cabinet deck chairs." (Irish Times)

(al/gc)

Dutch party leader Wilders denounces opposition's call to violence' as coalition negotiations drag on

Tensions are rising in the Netherlands, as four political parties, including the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, which came out on top in the November 2023 elections, are still trying to agree on a possible government agenda.

On April 15, Wilders made an early exit from the ongoing negotiations following what were described as "tough talks" regarding financial matters and strategies to reduce the influx of asylum seekers into the country. Although political sources emphasised that Wilders didn't leave the negotiations in anger, it's understood that he felt the suggested measures didn't sufficiently address his concerns. On social media, Wilders asserted that he had reached his limit in making concessions and called for the other parties to step up and deliver on their promises. [Dutch News 1]

The discussions come amidst the release of the spring financial statement, a customary interim budget presentation aimed at addressing developments since the previous September's budget unveiling. The outgoing government, still in power amid the coalition negotiations, went ahead with the statement's publication, garnering attention for allocating over EUR 1 billion for emergency refugee accommodation over the next two years. [Dutch News 2]

The negotiating parties, including Wilders' PVV, the pro-farmer Farmers and Citizen Movement (BBB), the Liberal National Democratic Party (NSC), and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) splinter group New Social Compact (NSV), have a deadline until mid-May to solidify their discussions into a concrete agreement, which would pave the way for the formation of an "extra-parliamentary" cabinet. This unconventional cabinet would consist of ministers chosen for their expertise rather than their party affiliations. While ministerial candidates and the potential prime minister have not yet been discussed, the focus remains on resolving the outstanding differences to move towards a cohesive government structure.

Against the backdrop of the looming deadline, Wilders announced on April 21 that he was filing a complaint against his main opponent, Frans Timmermans, former first vice president of the European Commission, following statements made by Timmermans at a Socialist-Green coalition gathering. Timmermans asserted that the alliance “would stop at nothing” to prevent Wilders from ascending to power. While Timmermans clarified that his actions were strictly within parliamentary norms, Wilders perceived this as an instigation to violence. [Dutch News 3] [Le Monde]

This clash coincides with a critical juncture in coalition formation, with the looming possibility of Timmermans assuming leadership if a right-wing alliance fails to materialise. Previously opposed to such an arrangement, Timmermans has now signalled a willingness to explore collaboration with the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VDD) party, signalling potential shifts in the country's political landscape.

(lm)

Dutch government says it may stop using *Facebook* over privacy concerns

The Dutch government is considering stopping its use of Facebook due to concerns raised by the Netherlands' privacy regulator about the platform's privacy risks. The Dutch Data Protection Authority (DPA) advised the government not to use Facebook pages unless there is clarity on how the platform handles visitors' personal data. If Facebook fails to address these concerns, the government may halt its activities on Facebook pages. [CNBC]

Meta disagreed with the DPA's assessment, stating that the company ensures compliance with regional

laws and will continue engaging with the government.

(lm)

Dutch energy conglomerate *Shell* appeal court's landmark climate ruling

Multinational gas and oil giant *Shell* has appealed against a landmark climate ruling issued by a Dutch court. The ruling, made three years ago, mandated that Shell must slash its carbon emissions by 45 percent before 2030, holding it accountable for exacerbating the adverse impacts of climate change. Notably, this ruling was hailed as a groundbreaking victory for climate activists, marking the first instance where a company was compelled to align its policies with the objectives outlined in the 2015 Paris climate accords. [France24]

However, Shell has opted to challenge this ruling, asserting that litigation is an ineffective mechanism for addressing climate change.

Meanwhile, environmental groups contend that the oil giant has failed to take meaningful action to comply with the court's directives. They highlight recent studies indicating Shell's continued investment in oil and gas projects, casting doubt on the company's commitment to transitioning to sustainable energy solutions.

(lm)

Swiss Lower House approves ban on nazi and extremist symbols

On April 17, the National Council, Switzerland's lower house, voted in favour of a general ban on Nazi and extremist symbols. This was approved by a large majority of 133-38. 17 members of parliament abstained.

The upper house, the Council of States, had already approved such a proposal in December. The government must now draw up a proposal for implementation.

The discussion about a ban on Nazi symbols has been going on for years but has not found a majority. The current proposal also includes other forms of extremist symbols that can incite hatred or violence.

The plan is for this ban to come into force in stages, starting with a ban on Nazi symbols, extending to other extremist symbols.

The discussion also took place against the backdrop of the current Israel-Gaza conflict in the Middle East, which has also seen reactions on the streets of Europe in recent months, including an increase in openly antisemitic and violent slogans. [AP] [Reuters] [Deutschlandfunk, in German] [SRF, in German]

(fg)

British PM announces new benefits system plan

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has introduced a comprehensive plan to transform the country's benefits system and combat what he terms the nation's "sick note culture."

Sunak's proposal addresses concerns over a rising trend of individuals being signed off work, contributing to a surge in welfare dependency [BBC].

Under the proposed reforms, Sunak aims to restructure the issuing of fit notes, shifting responsibility away from general practitioners to specialised work and health professionals. This move aims to ensure a more objective assessment of individuals' fitness for work, focusing on their capabilities rather than limitations.

Consultations will be initiated to seek input from various stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, employers, and individuals with lived experiences, to refine the current system and enhance support for those with health conditions seeking employment.

Sunak highlighted the need to break away from the prevailing "sick note culture," emphasising the importance of empowering individuals to re-enter the workforce with the appropriate support. He stressed that the proposed changes aim to provide a safety net for those genuinely in need while discouraging prolonged welfare dependency.

The announcement comes amid concerns over a sharp increase in economic inactivity, particularly attributed to long-term sickness exacerbated by mental health conditions. Sunak underscored the need for a more proactive approach to helping individuals return to

work, emphasising the positive impact of meaningful employment on mental and physical well-being.

Critics have raised concerns about the potential repercussions of the proposed reforms, particularly on vulnerable groups. Disability charities have condemned the plans, viewing them as detrimental to disabled individuals and lacking in compassion. They argue that the focus should be on addressing systemic issues rather than penalising those needing support. [BBC]

The Prime Minister emphasised the need for a "new welfare settlement for Britain" and outlined a series of reforms to put work at the heart of welfare policies. These reforms include initiatives to ensure that individuals are not left behind on the benefits system and modernise welfare programs to better serve the population's needs. [GOV]

Sunak's overhaul of the benefits system represents a significant step towards modernising welfare policies and aligning them with evolving societal needs. The proposed changes aim to balance providing essential support and fostering a culture of self-reliance and empowerment, ensuring a fair and inclusive system for all [BBC] [GOV].

(ha/gc)

Sunak says British defence spending set to rise

British Prime Rishi Sunak has decided to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030 after months of criticism by Tory party members and military officials that the United Kingdom needed to increase defence spending.

Flanked by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Sunak said that the UK raised its defence spending to deter an “axis of authoritarian states with different values to ours,” [BBC]

According to defence experts, the new military funds will allow Britain to rebuild its artillery and missile stocks, but it will not reverse the cuts to the size of the armed forces or army. It will also provide funds for new vessels for the Royal Navy and the modernisation of its nuclear capabilities, both of which have seen high-profile failures in the past few months. [BBC]

(js/gc)

Home Office employee detained for allegedly offering UK residency illegally

A Home Office employee faces detainment over allegations of attempting to sell UK residency to an asylum seeker in Northern Ireland. The accused purportedly demanded GPB 2,000 from a vulnerable individual in exchange for fast-tracking their refugee application. Sensitive Home Office records are said to have been exploited in this illicit transaction. [BBC]

Responding to the incident, the Home Office suspended the implicated staff member, stressing the expectation of utmost professionalism among its personnel. However, citing the ongoing police investigation, the department refrained from further commentary. Labour's Shadow Immigration Minister, Stephen Kinnock, expressed grave concern, suggesting a systemic breakdown within the asylum system under the Conservative government's watch.

In interviews with BBC News NI, the victim, Renas, detailed his encounter with the Home Office worker. Renas recalled a phone call in which the employee allegedly offered a favourable decision in exchange for the requested payment. Renas, initially sceptical, later confirmed the authenticity of the caller, who possessed detailed information from his application. Prompted by Renas, his solicitor intervened, leading to law enforcement involvement.

Lancashire Police confirmed the arrest of a suspect on charges of misconduct in public office, money laundering, bribery, and computer misuse. Investigations are ongoing to determine the extent of the misconduct and whether additional individuals were targeted. These developments underscore broader concerns about the integrity of the asylum system and the conduct of Home Office personnel. [BBC]

Simultaneously, revelations emerged regarding numerous Home Office staff under criminal investigation for various offences, including immigration crime, drug offences, and fraud. While the department acknowledged the suspension of the accused employee, it declined further elaboration pending the ongoing police inquiry. These allegations coincide with efforts to overhaul the UK's immigration processes, including implementing the eVisa scheme by 2025.[LBC]

(ha/gc)

British deputy PM calls for defences against threats to economy

British Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden has unveiled a series of measures designed to strengthen the UK's economic resilience amidst growing cyber and financial challenges. [GOV]

At Chatham House, Dowden underscored the vulnerabilities inherent in the British economic model, citing recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's actions in Ukraine. [GOV]

The proposed initiatives include establishing a specialised analytical team tasked with assessing risks associated with outward investment and bolstering crisis response capabilities. Additionally, consultations will be conducted to refine export controls on emerging technologies and streamline business decision-making processes. [GOV]

Dowden emphasised the importance of adapting to evolving threats while maintaining a balanced approach to safeguarding national security and supporting business interests. The government's response to the National Security and Investment Act will involve updates to ensure effective scrutiny of investments without unduly hindering business operations.

Furthermore, plans are underway to launch an online tool to assist small businesses in identifying and addressing security gaps, reflecting the government's commitment to enhancing economic defences and promoting resilience against emerging threats. [GOV]

(ha/gc)

Scotland's first minister quits

Scotland's first minister, Humza Yousaf, announced last month his intention to quit the role after reflecting on what was best for the Scottish National Party (SNP), the government and Scotland. [BBC]

A new leader must take over to "repair our relationship across the political divide," Yousaf said. John Swinney and Kate Forbes are two SNP MSPs being talked of for the role. [BBC]

Swinney is a political veteran of his party and was its leader at the turn of the century. He resigned from the

post in the summer of 2004 and was succeeded by Alex Salmond. [BBC]

Forbes was a former SNP leadership candidate, losing to Yousaf in the ballot held just over a year ago. She remains a divisive figure within the party over her views on social issues, including trans rights and gay marriage, and is likely to be unpalatable to the Greens. Still, her supporters have said they expect her to put her name forward. [BBC]

Coalition Ended

Before resigning, Yousaf ended a coalition agreement between the SNP and the Scottish Green Party. This created new challenges for Yousaf, whose party was engulfed in a funding scandal since last year. [NewYorkTimes]

A decision by the Scottish government to soften climate change targets and a disagreement within the coalition over trans rights policies had increased tension between the two parties, which have governed together since August 2021. [NewYorkTimes]

It left Yousaf struggling to secure enough support to lead a minority government. He had faced two votes of no confidence that he was unsure to win, with the Greens saying they would vote to remove him as first minister. [BBC]

His resignation happened 13 months after Yousaf won the contest to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as first minister and SNP leader after narrowly defeating Kate Forbes in a fractious leadership race. [BBC]

He became the first ethnic minority leader of a devolved government in the UK and the first Muslim to lead a major UK party. [BBC]

Failed as Minister

Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross said Mr Yousaf had failed as first minister "just like he failed as transport secretary, justice secretary and health secretary." [BBC]

"He has let the people of Scotland down, making Scotland the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom", Mr Ross said. [BBC]

Scottish Labour has previously said its motion of no confidence in the Scottish government would remain tabled even if Yousaf resigned.

(gc)

British parliament passes bill to send asylum seekers to Rwanda

In the United Kingdom, the controversial “Safety of Rwanda” bill, spearheaded by British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, has cleared its final legislative hurdles, following a months-long deadlock between the two Houses of Parliament. The bill aims to deter illegal Channel crossings and disrupt people-smuggling networks by sending those who arrive in the UK illegally to Rwanda. While the government argues the policy is necessary for security reasons, rights groups criticise it as inhumane and ineffective, citing concerns about Rwanda's human rights record under President Paul Kagame. [The Guardian]

The Home Office has already identified a subset of asylum seekers with tenuous legal grounds for remaining in the UK, earmarked for deportation commencing in July. This move is part of Prime Minister Sunak's broader strategy to address the Channel crossings issue. With a general election on the horizon, the premier hopes the bill will bolster support for his Conservative Party's tough immigration stance.

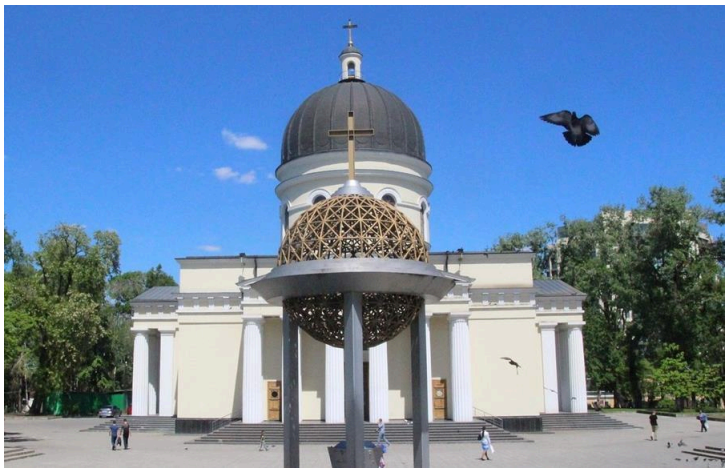
However, critics warn that the bill sets a dangerous precedent, undermining the UK's international reputation and its commitment to human rights. Instead, they advocate for a more compassionate and systematic approach to immigration, emphasising the expansion of safe pathways such as resettlement and family reunification. Additionally, the opposition Labour Party has pledged to scrap the Rwanda scheme if elected, proposing alternative approaches to immigration enforcement.

Thus, legal challenges against deportations are anticipated, with lawyers poised to contest removals on behalf of individual asylum seekers. These challenges will hinge on the stringent criteria outlined in the bill, which requires detainees to demonstrate a genuine risk of serious harm upon deportation to Rwanda. The legal process entails multiple stages of appeal, underscoring the complexities and potential delays involved in implementing deportation orders.

Additional challenges remain, including concerns about the bill’s cost to taxpayers, its effectiveness in reducing the backlog of asylum claims, and its potential violations of human rights laws. Trade unions and UN rights experts have hinted at further legal action, raising doubts about the bill's long-term viability. [UN News]

(lm)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



Man arrested on charges of insulting Lukashenko dies in custody

A man arrested on charges of insulting Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has died in custody.

Aliaksandr Kulinich, 51 years old, was being detained in Brest, Western Belarus. The detention centre has a reputation for "harsh treatment of opposition activists." Though his death has been officially listed as coronary heart disease, many have called for an investigation. [ABC News]

He was arrested due to social media posts he made in early 2024, which criticised Lukashenko and opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

There has long been media censorship and crackdowns on opposition activists under Lukashenko's government, particularly since his much-contested 2020 election win.

The Viasna Human Rights Centre says there are almost 1400 political prisoners in Belarus, many of whom face abuse and harsh treatment. [ABC News]

(ik/gc)

Belarus blocks news websites' domain names

On April 22, Belarus decided to block the domain names of at least 20 news websites ending in .by. This measure follows an order issued on April 4 by the Operational and Analytical Center (OAC) under the President of Belarus. This government agency is responsible for the protection of classified information and manages the Internet domain of Belarus. The websites in question were previously classified as extremist by the Ministry of Information.

The Belarusian government is accused of using the guise of combating "extremism" to fine or arrest critical journalists. Critics argue that the measure is part of the ongoing repression since the protests against the controversial re-election of President Lukashenko in 2020. [cpj]

(fg)

Georgia's 'Foreign Influence' bill sparks mass protests amidst concerns for country’s democracy and EU aspirations

Georgia finds itself at a crossroads as tens of thousands of citizens flood the streets of Tbilisi, waving Georgian and European Union flags, to protest the controversial "transparency of foreign influence" draft law. The proposed legislation, reminiscent of Russian laws targeting dissenting voices, has ignited a wave of discontent, and raised serious concerns about the country's democratic trajectory and aspirations for closer ties with the European Union.

The genesis of the current unrest can be traced back to mid-April, when Georgia's parliament advanced the bill through its first reading, and on May 1 through the second reading, despite fierce public opposition. The legislation, if passed, would mandate that media and non-commercial organisations register as being under "foreign influence" if they receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad. Critics argue that this move mirrors repressive measures employed by Russia to silence dissent and stifle independent media.

The reintroduction of the bill by the ruling Georgian Dream party has reignited tensions that had simmered since similar proposals were withdrawn last year amidst mass protests. The Georgian public, wary of any encroachment on their democratic freedoms, has taken to the streets once again to voice their

opposition to what they see as a threat to their country's sovereignty and aspirations to join the EU.

The response from authorities has been met with further outrage. Reports of police brutality, including the use of tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets against peaceful demonstrators, resulted in harsh criticism from both domestic and international observers. Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili condemned the excessive use of force, calling it a "shame" and urging the interior ministry to cease its crackdown on peaceful protests.

The European Union has also expressed grave concerns over the situation in Georgia. EU chief Ursula von der Leyen condemned the violence and reiterated the bloc's support for Georgia's European future. The EU's stance reflects a broader sentiment that the proposed legislation threatens to derail Georgia's progress towards EU membership, which was officially granted candidate status in December.

The ongoing turmoil comes at a critical juncture for Georgia, with parliamentary elections looming in October. The outcome of these elections, coupled with the fate of the "foreign influence" bill, will likely shape the country's trajectory in the years to come. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [France 24] [Georgia Today] [Politico] [The Guardian]

(ms)

Latvia to replace Russian with EU languages in schools

Latvia's education ministry announced on April 23 that Russian will no longer be taught as a foreign language in schools from 2026, with EU languages becoming mandatory.

This decision follows feedback from parents and aligns with Latvia's stance against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Children already learning Russian can continue until 2025. [Kyiv Independent]

(fg)

Moldova sets date for crucial presidential election, EU vote

Moldova is gearing up for a pivotal event on October 20, with both a presidential election and a referendum

on European Union membership scheduled. This follows a crucial decision by the Constitutional Court on April 14, which approved the organisation of a constitutional referendum on the country's accession to the EU.

The referendum question asks whether citizens are in favour of Moldova joining the EU. If successful, the constitution will be amended to include a new title emphasising integration into the EU as a strategic objective. The referendum marks the first instance of constitutional change through a popular vote in Moldova and is seen as confirming the country's European course. Despite opposition calls for a boycott, Moldova's pro-EU government is committed to advancing its integration agenda, aiming to start accession talks by 2030. [BalkanInsight]

Meanwhile, Moldovan opposition parties critical of President Sandu's pro-European agenda have announced the formation of an electoral bloc named Victorie (Victory). The alliance, led by fugitive pro-Russian businessman Ilan Shor, who was convicted in absentia for mass fraud, aims to contest the upcoming presidential election and the referendum on EU membership. Prominent figures from the pro-Russian Gagauzia region, predominantly inhabited by ethnic Turks, are also part of the bloc. [Reuters]

The formation of the Victorie bloc comes after Moldova’s highest court ruled in late March that candidates from the Shor party can stand in the country’s presidential election later this year. In its ruling, the Constitutional Court observed that amendments to the electoral code introduced last October were themselves unconstitutional, arguing the bill had been rushed through two sittings and that deputies hadn’t had enough time to draw up amendments.

(lm)

Moldovan court opens trial of pro-Russian leader of Gagauzia region

A Moldovan court has commenced the trial of Evgenia Gutul, the Kremlin-aligned governor of the Gagauzia region, accused of diverting funds from Russia to a pro-Moscow party. Gutul, known for her strong pro-Russian stance and opposition to Moldova's pro-European government, allegedly facilitated the financing of the now-banned "Shor" party, founded by exiled businessman Ilan Shor, convicted of fraud in Moldova. Gutul dismissed the charges as fabricated,

with the trial postponed to May 27 due to issues with the indictment language. If convicted, she faces a jail term of two to seven years and a ban on holding governmental positions. [Reuters]

(lm)

Romania reports unidentified "commercial" drones near its NATO base

The Romanian defence ministry has reported the presence of drones – believed to be commercial drones – on April 15 in the area of the country's military US/NATO 57th airbase Kogalniceanu, which Moscow recently described as the would-be "largest NATO base in Europe" and a major threat.

This came after Russian politicians and diplomats reacted in March with threats to reports about Romania building NATO's largest military base in Europe, a USD 2.5 billion project initiated by Romania in 2019 whose completion is expected to take 20 years. [Romania-Insider]

(dql)

New suspect arrested in Russia concert hall attack that killed 144

In the aftermath of the attack on a Moscow concert hall that resulted in the loss of 144 lives, Dzhumokhon Kurbonov, a Tajikistan citizen, has been detained as a suspected accomplice in the crime. The accusation against Kurbonov revolves around allegations of providing the attackers with essential resources such as communication devices and financial support. A judge ruled for Kurbonov's custody until May 22 for further investigation and trial. [Voice of America]

The circumstances surrounding Kurbonov's detention reveal a familiar pattern in Russian legal procedures. According to reports from Russian state news, Kurbonov was initially apprehended on April 11 for a 15-day period on charges of petty hooliganism. However, independent media outlets have highlighted this as a common tactic employed by Russian security forces to detain individuals while preparing criminal cases against them.

The overall tally of arrests related to the concert hall attack now stands at 12, with Kurbonov being the latest addition. Among these detainees are four

individuals believed to be directly involved in carrying out the assault. During a court appearance in late March, these four suspects faced terrorism charges, bearing visible signs of severe physical abuse.

Despite claims of responsibility from a faction of the Islamic State group, Russian authorities, including President Vladimir Putin, have persisted in alleging Ukrainian and Western involvement in the attack, a narrative refuted by Ukrainian officials who argue it serves as a pretext for further aggression by Moscow in the ongoing conflict between the two nations.

(lm)

Russian deputy defence minister appears in court on bribery charges

Russian Deputy Defence Minister Timur Ivanov appeared in court in the capital, Moscow, on charges of accepting a significant bribe during his tenure as one of Russia's 12 deputy defence ministers. The accusation against Ivanov centres on an alleged scheme to receive bribes related to contracting and subcontracting work for the Ministry of Defence, with investigators suggesting collusion with third parties. An acquaintance of Ivanov's, Sergei Borodin, was also arrested on similar charges. [EuroNews]

Ivanov, who was appointed in 2016 by a presidential decree, oversaw various military support functions and construction projects. Reports have also surfaced linking Ivanov to construction projects in Mariupol, a city in Ukraine's Donetsk region that saw significant damage and occupation by Russian forces in 2022.

(lm)

Russian court rejects American journalist Gershkovich's detention appeal

A Russian court on April 23 denied the plea by American journalist Evan Gershkovich for release from pre-trial detention, marking the latest development in a high-profile espionage case. Gershkovich, a correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, has been incarcerated in Lefortovo Prison for over a year following his arrest during a reporting assignment. Both Gershkovich and United States authorities vehemently reject the espionage allegations levelled against him by Russian authorities. Despite their

denials, no trial date has been scheduled, with his detention extended until June 30. [Al Jazeera]

Gershkovich's case has garnered significant attention, as he is the first Western journalist since the Soviet era to face espionage charges in Moscow. Amid speculation about a potential prisoner exchange, Russian President Vladimir Putin has hinted at negotiations, suggesting that Gershkovich's release could be contingent upon the release of another individual sought by Russia. However, specific details about these discussions remain elusive.

Meanwhile, Washington has accused Moscow of using American citizens as bargaining tools in diplomatic manoeuvres. Gershkovich's situation evokes memories of past incidents, notably the 1986 arrest of US journalist Nicholas Daniloff by the Soviet Union's KGB on espionage charges. The arrest was widely seen as an attempt by the Soviet authorities to use Daniloff as leverage in their diplomatic dealings with the US.

(lm)

Russian court places *Forbes* reporters under house arrest for 'fake news'

Sergei Mingazov, a journalist for the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine, was ordered to be placed under house arrest by a Russian court on April 27. He was detained in Khabarovsk on charges of spreading false information about the Russian military, specifically regarding posts about the situation in the Ukrainian city of Bucha. Mingazov faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted. [RFERL]

Mingazov's arrest is part of a broader crackdown on journalists critical of Russian actions in Ukraine. For instance, Roman Ivanov, a reporter for RusNews, received a 7-year sentence for his opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, while opposition figure Ilya Yashin was sentenced to 8.5 years under similar circumstances. [JURIST]

(lm)

Russia orders evacuations due to severe flooding

In mid-April, Russian authorities had ordered mass evacuations in the City of Orenburg as severe flooding devastated the region.

In Orenburg, residents were urged to leave immediately due to dangerous flooding caused by the swollen Ural River. Evacuations were also underway in the Kurgan and Tyumen regions, where tens of thousands have already fled their homes.

The flooding, triggered by snow melt and heavy rain, has led to emergency responses in affected areas.

Despite evacuation efforts, some residents refused to leave flooded areas. Measures were taken to address the risks, with authorities urging people to heed evacuation orders as water levels continued to rise, threatening vast areas in the affected regions.

The floods reached historic highs, with the water level of the Urals rising to 10.87 metres. So far, over 10,000 people have been evacuated and a further 1,000 have been accommodated in evacuation centres. These are the most severe floods in 80 years [CNN] [Al Jazeera]

(fg)

Putin's university classmate appointed as chair of Russia's Supreme Court

Irina Podnosova, a university classmate of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has been appointed as the new chair of Russia's Supreme Court.

She was confirmed by the Upper House of the Russian Parliament after being nominated as the sole candidate for the post following the death of the previous chairman, Vyacheslav Lebedev.

Podnosova. who previously served as deputy chair of the Supreme Court, received unanimous backing from senators in the Federation Council. [Politico]

(fg)

Serbia's president nominates ally Vucevic as prime minister designate; US-sanctioned politicians named ministers

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has nominated his close ally Milos Vucevic as prime minister to lead a new government. Vucevic, who previously served as deputy prime minister and defence minister, will face the task of forming a government with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which won the most votes in the

December 2023 election. The vote fuelled political tensions because of reports of widespread irregularities reported by both local and international monitors. An opposition group organised street protests in the wake of the election. [Reuters]

On April 30, Vucevic announced key appointments for his new cabinet, including controversial figures like Aleksandar Vulin and Nenad Popovic, both under United States sanctions for their pro-Russian ties. Vulin, a former intelligence chief who has fostered close ties with Moscow, will serve as one of the deputy prime ministers, while Popovic will be a minister without portfolio. Additionally, Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, leader of the far-right Zavetnici party, was appointed as minister of demography and family care. Marko Djuric, Serbia's current ambassador to the US, will become the new foreign minister. [Balkan Insight] [Associated Press]

Observers highlight that the decision to include Vulin and Popovic in the government does not represent a shift away from Serbia's overarching geopolitical strategy. Rather, it indicates the ongoing implementation of a policy commonly referred to as "sitting on two chairs." This approach involves nurturing strong relationships with both the European Union, which Serbia aspires to join, and Russia, its longstanding ally. [RFERL]

(lm)

Ukraine agriculture minister detained in corruption probe

Ukraine's agriculture minister, Mykola Solskyi, has been detained amidst a multimillion-dollar corruption inquiry.

Solskyi stands accused of illegally seizing land valued at over USD 7 million during his tenure as the head of a prominent farming company and as a member of parliament. An anti-corruption court has ordered his custody until June 24, with bail set at approximately USD 1.9 million.

Just a day before the detention Solskyi offered his resignation in response to the allegations, maintains his innocence and pledges cooperation with investigators. [Politico] [The Guardian]

Additionally Ilya Vityuk, head of the cybersecurity department of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) was also dismissed due to allegations of corruption.

The presidential decree formalising Vityuk's dismissal was issued on May 1, with no public statements from either Zelensky, the SBU, or Vityuk himself regarding the matter.

The move follows a media investigation by Slidstvo.Info, which uncovered significant discrepancies in Vityuk's personal finances, including his family's acquisition of real estate valued at millions of Ukrainian hryvnias.

The detention of Solskyi and Vityuk's suspension from duty were preceded by mounting scrutiny from the National Agency on Corruption Prevention and an ongoing criminal investigation by the Prosecutor General's Office into potential abuses of power and obstruction of journalistic activities. [The Kyiv Independent] [Radio Free Europe]

(ms)

Ukraine's national bank considers further rate reduction amid economic recovery

The National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) has indicated the potential for additional reductions in the key policy rate, following a recent adjustment to 13.5 percent on April 26. This decision is contingent upon the maintenance of favourable macro-financial conditions, including sustained economic recovery, supported by consumer and business adaptability, fiscal policies, and increased consumer demand.

The NBU emphasised the importance of preserving macro-financial stability to facilitate lending growth and economic revival without compromising price and financial stability. It intends to maintain a relatively high discount rate to ensure the attractiveness of hryvnia saving instruments, such as deposits and OVDP, thereby protecting savings from inflation.

However, the economic recovery faces challenges, including transport route blockades and geopolitical tensions. The NBU remains vigilant, leveraging real-time data from business surveys to monitor economic changes.

The updated macroeconomic forecast reflects cautious optimism tempered by external uncertainties, with projected economic growth rates revised downward due to energy infrastructure disruptions and anticipated electricity shortages. [National Bank Ukraine] [Ukraine Business News]

(ms)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bulgaria appoints Dimitar Glavchev as new PM in caretaker government

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev appointed Dimitar Glavchev as prime minister of a caretaker government on March 30.

Radev also charged Glavchev with forming a caretaker government in one week and called for snap parliamentary elections on June 9, the sixth in three years for Bulgaria. [Politico]

On April 9, the interim cabinet presented by Glavchev was sworn into office. [BTA]

The move comes after the resignation of former prime minister Nikolai Denkov in March as part of a planned government rotation and the later withdrawal from the candidacy of the next-in-line, Mariya Gabriel. [Europe Monthly April 2023][Euractiv]

Galchev was a former governing centre-right GERB party member but left GERB in 2023 to become the president of the Chamber of Audit. [Balkan Insight]

Glavchev said: "We must be a guarantor of stability, we cannot allow our country to be involved in a constitutional crisis, (and) ... be hostage to party ambitions and desires," [Reuters]

Military spending increase

Bulgaria's caretaker Defence Minister, Atanas Zapryanov, called for increased military spending on April 12 amid growing security concerns over the war in Ukraine.

Zapryanov said: "We want an increase in military spending, if possible, up to 2.5% of GDP," He added: "In NATO, 2% will be considered the minimum defence spending. We need to make this additional spending...,"

The topic of military conscription has also been a topic of discussion. [Novinite]

Zapryanov said that it is not yet on the agenda as a political decision because the understaffing of the military cannot be solved until the profession is made more competitive and attractive in the labour market. [BTA]

Foreign policy aide quits

The prime minister's foreign policy aide, Meglena Plugchieva, resigned.

Plugchieva is a three-time ambassador for Bulgaria and former deputy Prime Minister in charge of EU funds.

On April 22, Glavchev was appointed caretaker foreign minister. In response to Glavchev's move to assume the role of Foreign Minister, Plugchieva emphasised the importance of appointing career diplomats to key government positions. [Novinite] [BTA]

In an interview with Bulgarian National Television, Plugchieva said she would not be a good choice for caretaker Foreign Minister because she had come from the quota for political appointments as a diplomat. She could not be regarded as a career diplomat.[Sophia Globe]

The reasons for her resignation have not been disclosed.

(km/gc)

Greek government withstands no-confidence vote following 2023 railway disaster

The Greek centre-right government survived a no-confidence motion brought against it by four left-wing opposition parties following a deadly rail disaster in 2023.

The crash on February 28 last year resulted in 57 fatalities, including a large number of university students. The government was accused of hindering an investigation and "trying to hide the truth." (Reuters)

After a three-day debate, the motion failed by a margin of 159-141. (Independent)

Expert research showed that the area where the accident occurred was filled with gravel and concrete after the accident, defying research protocol and contaminating the site.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis denied any wrongdoing on the government's part and urged parliament to 'vote in favour of a government. His party claimed that the opposition has led 'a campaign of lies and deceptions,' with ulterior motives of benefitting politically. (Euractiv)

(al/gc)

First round of North Macedonia presidential elections sees conservative candidate ahead

On April 24, the first round of the presidential elections took place in North Macedonia. The right-wing conservative candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova received the most votes with 40% and is considered the favourite for the run-off on May 8. The incumbent president Stevo Pendarovski came second with just under 20% of the vote.

In North Macedonia, it is hoped that the future president will lead the country into the EU. Both candidates are pro-European. There is just disagreement about how this should happen.

One particular obstacle to accession is Bulgaria's condition that North Macedonia enshrines recognition of the Bulgarian minority in its constitution.

North Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005, but talks on accession did not begin until 2022. [France 24] [Politico] [AP]

(fg)

Romania paves way for resumption of magnesium mining in Europe

Romania on April 26 awarded a mining concession to Bucharest-based Verde Magnesium, a magnesium mining company backed by US private equity investor Amerocap.

Verde intends to make a USD 1 billion investment in a magnesium mine that was shut down in 2014 near the city of Oradea. At the time of its closure, the site of a magnesium mine was the last one operating in Europe. The company will set up processing facilities that would use renewable power and also recycle aluminium. Production is expected to start by late 2027 and reach 90,000 tonnes per year, half of European Union supply, and 9% of global production.

This paves the way for Europe's restart of magnesium mining for the first time in more than a decade and comes amid EU efforts to reduce its reliance on Chinese critical raw materials.

Over 90 percent of the EU's magnesium which is crucial for making lightweight aluminium alloys used in cars and packaging is imported from China. In 2022, the aluminium industry in Europe suffered severe disruptions when China temporarily shut down production due to high energy prices, triggering warnings of plant closures in the European Union. [Financial Times]

Verde's plans align with ambitious EU goals under its Critical Raw Materials Act that seeks to mine 10% of the EU's critical mineral consumption, process 40% of it and recycle 15% of it by 2030.

(dql)

Opposition wins Turkish local elections

In the March 31 local elections in Turkey, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Turkey's main opposition party, dealt an unexpected blow to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rule and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). In a sweeping victory, the CHP retained control of major cities including the capital, Ankara, and Istanbul.

Securing a second term as mayor in Istanbul with more than 50 percent of the vote and defeating the president's AK Party candidate by more than 11 points,

CHP's Ekrem Imamoglu emerged as the primary opposition challenger to Erdoğan in the next 2028 presidential election.

During the election campaign Erdogan, who conceded defeat on the same day, had made no secret of his desire to bring Istanbul back under his control, where he had served as mayor decades ago.

The CHP repeated a victory in Izmir, Adana, and the resort of Antalya. Importantly, it also won in the country's fourth-biggest city Bursa and Balikesir in the north-west, along with Adiyaman in the south-east, which was severely affected by last year's double earthquake.

Since assuming presidency in 2014, Erdogan has amassed sweeping powers. However, in the cities, directly elected mayors still have considerable influence in Turkey. In particular, Istanbul holds an outstanding position, hosting a fifth of the country's population of nearly 85 million people and accounting for a significant portion of Turkey's economy including trade, tourism and finance.

While broad swathes of the country's west, south and north of are now controlled by CHP, the AKP remains dominant central Turkey and had more success in areas of the south-east devastated by the February 2023 double earthquake, including the cities of Kahramanmaras and Gaziantep, although it lost in Adiyaman.

The pro-Kurdish Dem party, the third-largest party in the parliament, was successful in multiple large cities in the Kurdish-majority south-east of Turkey, including Diyarbakir, the region's largest city.

About 61 million Turks were eligible to take part in the election, with over a million first voters. The turnout was estimated at more than 77 percent across 81 provinces.

In a related development, the Supreme Election Board (YSK), Turkey's election authority, has reinstated Abdullah DEM candidate Zeydan as winner of the mayoral race in the eastern city of Van, reversing an earlier decision by the regional election commission.

Zeydan secured over 55 percent of the vote in the March 31 municipal elections. However, the regional electoral commission handed the mayoral seat to a candidate from AKP who had garnered only 27 percent of the vote, claiming that Zeydan was not eligible to run in the election, citing a previous conviction.

In 2016, Zeydan had been arrested and jailed in 2016 for his criticism of the Turkish army's air campaign against outlawed Kurdish fighters in the Kurdish-majority southeast. In 2022, he was released. [The Guardian] [CNN] [BBC] [Daily Sabah]

(dql)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Farmers stage mass protest against fake 'Made in Italy' food

Ten thousand farmers from across Italy protested on April 8 and 9 against foreign food products being labelled as Italian.

Demonstrators gathered at the Brenner Pass in the Alps, which marks the border between Italy and Austria, calling for better protection of the "Made in Italy" brand and demanding higher prices for domestically produced food.

Last December, the EU Court of Auditors presented the results of an investigation which concluded that Italian rules on origin-labelling for pasta, rice, tomato products, milk and cheese as well as sausage products were "obstacles to free trade". [Frankfurter Rundschau]

Demonstrators at the protest, which was led by the Italian farmers' association Coldiretti, called for increased controls, citing examples such as foreign potatoes being sold as Italian. [Euractiv]

The head of the Sardinian branch of Coldiretti, Battista Cualbu, said that "rules must be equal for everyone, with clear and transparent labels so that the consumer knows exactly what he is going to buy and eat." He added: "We ask all control bodies to intensify supervision so that these products do not acquire Italian citizenship." [L'Unione Sarda]

(acn/pk)

Italy seizes EUR 600m in recovery fund fraud probe

Italian police have arrested 22 people for suspected fraud involving EU funds and seized around EUR 600 million in assets including luxury goods such as villas and jewellery.

The suspects are alleged to have used a network of fictitious companies to apply for and embezzle money from the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund. [Euronews]

The European Public Prosecutor's Office, which investigates and prosecutes crimes endangering the EU's financial interests, collaborated with the Italian financial police on the case.

The European body said on April 4: "Eight suspects have been placed under pre-trial detention, whereas (another) 14 suspects are held under house arrest, and one accountant was prohibited from practising his profession."

It added: "The premises of the suspects and of the investigated companies have also been the target of searches and seizure of evidence." [European Public Prosecutor's Office]

The authorities suspect that a sophisticated fraud scheme was run by organised crime. The case is being investigated in cooperation with Slovak, Romanian and Austrian police forces. [Euractiv]

The European Union's "Next Generation EU" programme, worth over EUR 800 billion, was set up to help countries in the bloc recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Italy, which was one of the most severely affected nations, is slated to receive the largest share – nearly EUR 200 billion.

Member states are required to present detailed plans with specific investment projects to access the financial aid. [Spiegel]

Simest, a company owned by CDP, a major financial institution under Italian government control, managed funds for these projects. In a statement, Simest said it had worked closely with the authorities, particularly the Italian financial police. [Euractiv]

(acn/pk)

Italian lawmakers vote to give anti-abortion activists access to clinics

The Italian parliament on April 16 approved a controversial plan by the hard-right government that would allow anti-abortion activists to enter family planning clinics.

Opposition parties said the move would undermine women's rights in Italy. [The Guardian] [POLITICO] Critics see the measure as an attempt to coerce women into reconsidering decisions to end their pregnancies.

Although abortion was legalised in Italy in 1978 under Law 194, access to safe terminations has become increasingly difficult in practice because many gynaecologists refuse to perform such procedures on moral or religious grounds. Health ministry data from 2021 indicated that 63% of gynaecologists declined to provide such services. [Euronews]

Deputy Prime Minister Antonio Tajani said that the government did not intend to alter Law 194 but rather aimed to uphold freedom of conscience on abortion-related issues.

However, opposition leaders such as Elly Schlein, the left-wing head of the Democratic Party, have decried the government's plans as a severe infringement on women's liberty.

Silvia Roggiani, another Democratic Party deputy, described the government's approach as patriarchal. [ANSA]

The opposition populist Five Star Movement lamented that Italy was regressing in terms of women's rights.

Before the parliamentary vote, representatives from Pro Vita, Italy's largest anti-abortion organisation, indicated that they did not intend to physically enter abortion clinics. However, they want clinics to focus on providing alternatives to terminations.

The government's plans are now expected to be approved by the Senate, the upper house of parliament.

(vm/pk)

Italian court clears migrant rescue workers in landmark ruling

In a landmark decision, an Italian court on April 19 dismissed all charges against ten crew members of migrant rescue ships who were accused of colluding with human traffickers.

The long-running case, which began in 2017, targeted individuals affiliated with NGOs Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Save the Children and German organisation Jugend Rettet. [AFP/France24]

The defendants, who faced up to 20 years in prison, had been accused of facilitating illegal immigration to Italy from Libya. [AP News]

Rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have long criticized Rome for its treatment of migrant rescue workers.

While the acquittal is a victory for NGOs, concerns remain about ongoing efforts to restrict sea rescue activities by Italy's hard-right government, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, which has taken a tough stance on illegal immigration.

The acquittal of the rescue workers came after a boat capsized about 50 km south-east of the Italian island of Lampedusa on April 11, resulting in the deaths of nine people, including a baby. Many others are missing.

The incident underscored the dangers faced by migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean, and the role that rescue workers play in saving lives. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

(vm/pk)

Italy opens doors to remote workers with new digital nomad visa

Italy, a long-time favourite tourist destination, is now attracting a new kind of visitor: the digital nomad. With the recent launch of its "digital nomad" visa, the country is seeking to capitalise on the growing trend

for remote work by offering a legal pathway for skilled professionals to live and work in Italy for extended periods. [Euronews]

This new visa programme, which came into effect on April 4, caters to citizens of non-EU states who can perform their jobs remotely using technology. Applicants must demonstrate they have a minimum annual income and possess health insurance valid for their stay. [CNBC]

Such visas are valid for a year and can be renewed annually if eligibility requirements continue to be met. Additionally, successful applicants can bring family members with them, subject to approval by Italian authorities. [CBS] [USA Today]

This development in Italy is part of a larger trend. Countries around the world, from Costa Rica to Japan, are creating visa programmes to attract digital nomads. Italy's initiative offers a tempting option for those seeking a taste of *la dolce vita* while continuing their careers remotely.

(vm/pk)

Prison guards arrested in Italy over suspected torture of juveniles

Italian police have arrested 13 prison guards suspected of torturing and abusing juveniles at a detention centre in Milan.

An investigation was launched following witness statements from young inmates and surveillance footage revealing alleged offences at the Cesare Beccaria juvenile detention facility dating back to 2022. [Reuters]

Accusations against the arrested guards include complicity in torture, mistreatment and attempted sexual violence against at least one detainee, according to Italian media reports. [L'Unione Sarda]

Letizia Mannella, Milan's deputy public prosecutor, said: "The suspects believed their actions were justified as educational, in response to bad behaviour by inmates, but instead this was unlawful violence." [L'Unione Sarda] [Reuters]

(acn/pk)

Seven killed in blast at Italian power plant

Seven workers were killed in an explosion triggered by a fire at a hydroelectric power plant near Bologna, northern Italy, on April 9. The incident prompted union calls for improved safety.

Rescue efforts spanned three days, culminating in the retrieval of the last two missing bodies from a submerged turbine hall at the Enel Green Power plant on Lake Suviana. The cause of the blast is being investigated by prosecutors.

The disaster has sparked concerns among trade unions, who are urging stricter safety regulations and enforcement measures.

According to the Italian National Workers' Compensation Authority (INAIL), the country had over 1,000 workplace fatalities last year. [Reuters] [The New York Times] [BBC] [Euronews]

(vm/pk)

New centre-right minority government sworn in as instability looms

Amid the spectre of political instability, centre-right leader Luis Montenegro was sworn in as Portugal's new prime minister on April 2 at the head of a minority government that will need the opposition to pass legislation. [POLITICO]

Montenegro, the chief of the Democratic Alliance party, laid out his administration's priorities on April 8, though it is unclear whether he'll be able to deliver on them after refusing to create a coalition with the surgent far-right Chega grouping.

The Democratic Alliance won 79 parliamentary seats – more than any other grouping – in a March 10 early election. [POLITICO]

As any party needs 116 votes in the 230-seat parliament to pass legislation, the new government will have to rely on either the centre-left opposition Socialists or on Chega to enact policy.

The challenges facing the minority administration were underlined by the three attempts needed to appoint a new parliamentary speaker. Under a deal struck with the Socialists, the role will alternate between the latter and the Democratic Alliance.

One of the main policies that the government is planning to push through is a EUR 1.5 billion tax cut for the middle classes, a move that aims to stimulate economic growth. The proposal would lower income tax by 0.5 to 3% from 2023 levels. [República Portuguesa]

Analysts believe that Montenegro will be able to pass the tax cut, as well as wage increases for police, teachers and doctors, with support from the opposition.

The Democratic Alliance appeared to acknowledge the government's precarious position, with Cabinet Affairs Minister Antonio Leitao Amaro revealing that the administration's plans include 60 proposals from rival parties' electoral programmes. [Reuters]

The government also appears to be continuing some policies of the previous Socialist administration. One is the privatisation of Portugal's national airline TAP. The former government in September approved the sale of at least 51% of the carrier but the process stalled. [Portugal Resident]

The big survival test for the new minority government is likely to be the passage – or not – of the 2025 budget at the tail-end of the year. Historically, failure to pass a budget has often led to early elections in Portugal.

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

(jt/pk)

Portuguese Catholic Church to compensate victims of sex abuse

Catholic authorities in Portugal have announced they will pay compensation to victims of child sexual abuse perpetrated within the Church.

The Portuguese Bishops' Conference (CEP), the central body of the country's Catholic Church, said on April 11 it had approved the allocation of damages on a case-by-case basis. [The Portugal News]

Antonio Grosso, co-founder of sexual abuse survivors' group Silenced Heart, criticised that approach, arguing there was no clear way of measuring the exact level of trauma sustained. He said all victims should receive the same amount of compensation. [Reuters]

The move by the Catholic authorities comes after a report by a Church-funded commission in February 2023 found that over 70 years, at least 4,815 minors were subjected to sexual abuse by clergy members in Portugal. [The Portugal News]

The authors of the report said their findings were the "tip of the iceberg". [Reuters]

The Catholic Church in Portugal has softened its stance on compensation in recent years. Previously it said it would pay victims only if ordered to do so by courts. [AP News]

(jt/pk)

Portuguese government rejects president's suggestion of slavery reparations

The Portuguese government, led by a centre-right coalition, has rejected a suggestion made by President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa to pay reparations for slavery and colonial-era crimes. While acknowledging the country's historical involvement in the slave trade and colonial atrocities, the government emphasized its focus on deepening international cooperation and fostering relations with former colonies. [The Guardian]

President Rebelo de Sousa proposed various forms of reparations, including cancelling debts of former colonies or introducing financial packages, but the government stated it has no specific program for reparations and follows the approach of previous administrations.

Rebelo de Sousa's remarks drew criticism from right-wing and far-right parties in Portugal, with some accusing him of betraying the country. Internationally, the UN human rights chief and African and Caribbean nations have called for meaningful action on reparations, highlighting the ongoing impact of slavery and colonisation.

Portugal's colonial history, spanning over five centuries, involved territories in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, with decolonization occurring after the Carnation Revolution in 1974. However, European leaders, including those in Portugal, have been hesitant to address reparations, with previous efforts focused on initiatives such as education and addressing present-day impacts rather than direct compensation to descendants of enslaved peoples.

(lm)

Spanish PM says he will stay on after considering resignation

Spanish Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced on April 29 that he would continue in his position after earlier saying he was considering quitting following a corruption investigation into his wife's business affairs.

Uncertainty arose on April 25 as Sanchez made a statement on X that he was cancelling his public duties for the rest of the week and considering resignation. His comments came after a court launched an inquiry into his wife, Begona Gomez, for purported influence-peddling. [The Guardian]

Sanchez said he was prompted to reflect on his position because of a "harassment and bullying operation" mounted by his political opponents in an effort to bring about his "personal and political collapse". [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera]

Large demonstrations in Madrid followed Sanchez's initial announcement that he was considering stepping down. He said the rallies had encouraged him to remain in his post. [Reuters]

The leader of the conservative opposition People's Party, Alberto Nunez Feijoo, said Sanchez's announcement that he was considering his position had been a "piece of theatre".

Analysts said that Sanchez's decision to stay on staved off the prospect of his government collapsing and of early elections being called. [Reuters]

(jt/pk)

Spanish MPs back plan to give 500,000 undocumented migrants citizenship

The lower house of the Spanish parliament on April 9 approved a bill that would grant legal status to half a million undocumented migrants.

The proposal was spurred by an initiative that started in 2021 called #RegularizacionYa. The movement collected more than 600,000 signatures, which led to the proposal being heard in parliament. [Euractiv]

After meeting with initial hostility from some deputies, the bill passed with the support of the Socialist-led governing coalition as well as the main opposition grouping, the conservative People's Party. The only votes against were from the far-right Vox party. [Reuters]

Spain's influential Catholic Church came out in support of the measure. [Reuters]

However, the bill is expected to be amended, as the Socialists have expressed concerns about the initial draft.

A similar motion was passed in 2005, when a previous Socialist government granted citizenship to around 800,000 people without documentation.

(jt/pk)

Spain to scrap 'golden visas' for foreign real estate investors

The Spanish government plans to end a "golden visa" scheme which grants residency to foreign nationals who make large investments in retail estate in the country.

Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez argued that ending the scheme would help tackle the problem of rising house prices and ensure that "housing is a right and not just a mere speculative business". [Bloomberg]

Currently, the scheme grants a special permit to non-EU citizens that allows them to live and work in Spain for three years if they invest at least EUR 500,000 in Spanish real estate, without using a mortgage. [Reuters]

Housing Minister Isabel Rodriguez said that from the start of the scheme in 2013 until 2023, the government had accelerated around 14,600 visas linked to real estate investments. [Bloomberg]

House prices in Spain are estimated to have risen by 7% in the last year. [Bloomberg]

Non-EU citizens still have pathways to acquire residency. These include investing EUR 1 million in stocks or shares of Spanish companies, or generating employment opportunities in the nation.

Portugal also recently altered its "golden visa" scheme so that non-EU residents can no longer claim residency

by investing in property in the country. Instead, foreign nationals are required to make large deposits into domestic investment funds. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

(jt/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Austria's justice minister aims to tighten espionage law

Austria's justice minister Alma Zadic said on April 2 that she aims to tighten the country's espionage laws after the arrest of a former Austrian intelligence officer accused of spying for Russia. [Fox news]

The allegations against Egisto Ott, who worked for a now-defunct intelligence agency and whose arrest was announced on March 26, prompted Chancellor Karl Nehammer to call a meeting of Austria's National Security Council. Ott has denied wrongdoing. [The Independent]

Austria, an EU member with a policy of neutrality, hosts various international organisations in Vienna, including the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Austria bans espionage if it is directed against the country itself but not if it targets other nations or international organisations. [FOX][Zeit [[Diepresse]

Zadic said in a statement to the Austria Press Agency that her country has long been accused of being an "island of the blessed" for intelligence services from

around the world, and lamented that “gaps in the law so far have allowed foreign intelligence services to spy with impunity in Austria.”

“We want to expand the espionage paragraphs so that, in the future, our law enforcement authorities can also act against foreign spies when they are not targeting Austria itself, but international organisations based here such as the UN or friendly states,” she added.

(mr/pk)

Austria plans to end Russian gas imports by 2028

Austria aims to stop importing Russian gas by 2028 and is seeking alternative suppliers of energy. [Kleine Zeitung] [The New Voice of Ukraine/Yahoo news]

Legislative proposals unveiled by Energy Minister Leonore Gewessler would require Austrian suppliers to gradually increase the proportion of non-Russian natural gas in imports, reaching 100% by 2027-2028.

The plan, which needs to be approved by the Austrian parliament, is in line with a broader agreement among EU countries to stop importing Russian gas by 2027 in response to Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Up to 98% of Austria’s gas imports came from Russia last December, 97% in January, and 87% in February.

(mr/pk)

Austria plans ban on carrying knives in public

Austria’s interior ministry on April 11 unveiled a draft new law under which carrying a knife in public will be banned. [VOL.AT] [Der Standard] [Heute.at]

The move comes after a spate of stabbings in public spaces in recent months, often involving young people.

The planned measure would prohibit the carrying of a knife in towns, residential areas, parks, sports facilities, amusement parks and on public transportation, as well as in educational and childcare facilities.

Anyone who violates the ban would face a penalty of up to EUR 3,600 or a prison sentence of up to six

weeks.

(mr/pk)

Ruling conservatives win elections in Croatia, but lack majority

The ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) emerged victorious in early parliamentary elections held on April 17, but with fewer seats and without a majority, heralding a period of political uncertainty. [The Guardian] [AFP/MSN] [Total Croatia News] [Euronews/MSN]

Negotiations to form a new government could take weeks or months. If HDZ stays in power, the country will keep its pro-Western orientation. If the opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) takes over, observers say Croatia might turn pro-Russian, following in the footsteps of Hungary and Slovakia.

Led by Andrej Plenković, a pro-European politician who has served two terms as prime minister, HDZ won 61 seats in the 151-seat assembly.

A centre-left coalition headed by the Social Democratic Party of President Zoran Milanović, a maverick populist who is against the EU supplying aid to Ukraine, finished second with 42 seats. The right-wing Homeland Movement came third with 14, positioning it to be a potential kingmaker.

The early parliamentary elections were called after the ruling HDZ was accused of corruption by opposition parties. Amid a political scandal, mass protests were held ahead of the vote.

Meanwhile, a minor constitutional crisis erupted when Milanović declared his candidacy for prime minister while refusing to step down as president. Croatia's top court barred him from running officially or being listed on the ballot if he declined to resign. [POLITICO]

Nevertheless, Milanovic canvassed across the country. Plenkovic, who has served as prime minister since 2016, accused his rival of violating the constitution. [AFP/MSN]

(mr/pk)

Mass rally held by challenger to Hungary's nationalist government

Tens of thousands took to the streets of Budapest on April 6 in a protest organised by a rising challenger to the nationalist government who is shaking up Hungarian politics.

Peter Magyar, a lawyer and former government insider turned critic, told a crowd gathered near parliament he was creating a new political grouping that aims to unite conservatives and liberals, offering an alternative to both Prime Minister Viktor Orban's ruling Fidesz party and the opposition. [RFE/RL] [The Guardian] [AlJazeera]

"Change has started, which can't be stopped," Magyar said, making a case for a more pro-European Hungary. He accused the government of corruption and pledged to clean up public life. [The Guardian]

Some of the protesters shouted: "Orban resign!" Magyar, who has presented himself as a centrist figure, added that the rally was "the biggest political demonstration in years". [AlJazeera]

He announced he would launch a party that would contest the European Parliament election in June. A recent survey found that this would be the third most popular grouping in Hungary, with 15% of voters who had a political preference supporting it. [The Guardian]

The April 6 rally was the third mass demonstration in less than a month called by Magyar, who rose to prominence earlier this year after making allegations that triggered a political crisis in the government. [RFE/RL] [AlJazeera]

Magyar, the former husband of one-time Justice Minister Judit Varga, in March released an audio recording in which his ex-wife said that senior officials caused evidence to be removed from court records to cover up their roles in corrupt business dealings. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

Critics say that under Orban, who has ruled since 2010, Hungary has moved towards a corruption-riddled autocracy that has flouted democratic norms.

Amid political tumult in recent months, President Katalin Novak, a political ally of Orban, resigned in February after it emerged that she had controversially pardoned a man convicted of helping to cover up sexual abuse in a children's home. The pardon triggered Hungary's largest protests in years.

(pk)

Opposition nationalists, government both claim boost from Polish local elections

Poland's nationalist opposition claimed victory in local elections on April 7, the first major test for a pro-EU coalition government that came to power last year, but the ruling parties said the results confirmed that their pro-democracy reforms were supported by voters.

Some observers said the outcome was a blow to centrist Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who was hoping to strengthen his grip on power. [Reuters] Others saw it as a disappointment for the right-wing, populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, which was looking to improve on its result in the national elections four months ago, when it was ejected from government. [POLITICO]

The Eurosceptic Law and Justice won the most seats in regional assemblies, but its score was lower than the combined tally of the three groupings that make up the national government.

The outcome means that Tusk's party together with its coalition partners look set to govern in 11 regions, while PiS is likely to retain a majority in five regional assemblies in the south and east of the country. [Polish Radio]

The results echoed Poland's parliamentary elections in October, when PiS won more votes than any other single grouping but failed to secure a majority in the lower house, causing it to be ousted after what critics said were eight years of authoritarian-minded rule that saw democracy dismantled and human rights eroded. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

'News of my death is premature'

PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski said: "This result is an encouragement to act energetically." Referring to opponents who "already wanted to bury" his party, he added: "As Mark Twain once said, the news of my death is premature."

The local ballot came ahead of European Parliament elections scheduled in Poland for June 9 and presidential elections next year.

Tusk, whose centrist Civic Coalition heads the government, told cheering supporters in Warsaw that the outcome confirmed the choice Poles had made in parliamentary elections last year to end two terms of nationalist rule.

Tusk came to power pledging to reverse democratic backsliding, increase the rights of women and

minorities, and improve ties with Poland's Western allies that became strained under the previous PiS government. [Reuters]

The premier acknowledged he was worried about the "demobilisation" of voters since October, particularly young people, and about his grouping's "failure in the east and the countryside" – poorer areas of Poland that are PiS's heartland. [Notes from Poland]

Turnout in the local ballot, at just over 50%, was much lower than the record of over 74% in the October parliamentary elections, and slightly down on the last regional government elections in 2018.

The governing pro-EU bloc won high-profile mayoral races in several big cities, including Warsaw and Gdansk on the Baltic coast.

Rafal Trzaskowski, a senior Civic Platform politician, celebrated gaining his second term as mayor of the Polish capital after he secured almost 60% of the vote – three times the score of his PiS rival.

Trzaskowski appealed for continued support from voters for Tusk's government, saying: "Everyone is watching how we are able to clean up (after PiS), restore democracy, restore the rule of law".

Trzaskowski, who is socially liberal, added that his victory "is more than a personal achievement; it's a clear message that Poland aspires to be a nation of openness, tolerance and European values." [Polish Radio]

The Warsaw mayor's strong showing bolsters his chances of being chosen to run for president next year. That post is key to the Tusk administration's plans to push through reforms. [Reuters]

A priority task the government has set itself is unravelling sweeping changes to Poland's judicial system introduced by Law and Justice. The right-wing party parachuted its own nominees into key positions, triggering concerns that many judges could no longer be trusted to deliver a fair trial. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

'First serious warning'

Parliamentary speaker Szymon Holownia, one of the leaders of the centre-right Third Way grouping that is a junior partner in government, said that PiS's strong performance in the local elections was "the first serious warning for our coalition".

He added: “People told us today, ‘Enough arguing’.” He was referring to tensions between Poland’s governing parties over a proposed loosening of strict abortion laws.

Factions from the centre-right and left within the ruling camp came to loggerheads after Holownia postponed debates on liberalising abortion legislation until after the local elections. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

PiS won 34.3% of the vote in elections to regional assemblies. The ruling Civic Coalition group came second with 30.6%.

Holownia’s Third Way grouping finished third on 14.3%. The far-right opposition Confederation was fourth, with 7.2%. The Left party, another member of the governing coalition, came fifth, garnering 6.3%.

(pk)

Former right-wing gov’t used spyware on almost 600 people: justice minister

Security services under Poland’s previous government used spyware against almost 600 people, the justice minister has said amid accusations that the formerly ruling nationalists eavesdropped on their political opponents and critics.

Adam Bodnar, who is also Poland’s prosecutor general, on April 15 delivered a report to parliament saying that between 2017 and 2022, 578 people were targeted by the powerful Israeli-made Pegasus system, which allows mobile phones to be taken over. [Wirtualna Polska]

The minister in charge of Poland’s security services, Tomasz Siemoniak, said that using spyware to fight terrorism and for counter-intelligence purposes was allowable.

“However, the temptation for politicians to use (Pegasus) against inconvenient politicians, lawyers, judges, prosecutors was too great,” he added.

Senior figures in the nationalist Law and Justice party, which ruled Poland from 2015 to 2023, have insisted that spyware was used against legitimate targets.

But an investigation by the European Parliament last year found that the Polish authorities had deployed Pegasus as part of “a system for the surveillance of the opposition and critics of the government – designed to

keep the ruling majority and the government in power". [Notes from Poland]

After a pro-EU coalition won Poland's parliamentary elections in October, it set up a special commission to examine the use of the spyware.

The coalition is led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (PO). In 2019, when the PO was in opposition, the party's election campaign manager, Krzysztof Brejza, was targeted by Pegasus.

PO politicians have said that the use of the spyware by the then-Law and Justice government meant the 2019 parliamentary elections were unfair.

The use of Pegasus by the former Law and Justice administration is also being probed by prosecutors.

(pk)

Poland ready to host NATO nuclear weapons, president says

Polish President Andrzej Duda has said his country would be ready to host the nuclear weapons of its NATO allies, prompting neighbouring Russia to warn that it would take "all the necessary retaliatory steps" to guarantee its security.

However, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, a centrist who has often been at loggerheads with the conservative Duda, appeared to rebuke the president for his remarks. Observers suggested that Duda may not have consulted his comments with the government in Warsaw.

Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on April 23 there were no plans to locate nuclear weapons in more members of the Western military alliance under a sharing scheme.

In an interview published by Polish newspaper Fakt a day earlier, Duda said: "If our allies decided to deploy nuclear weapons as part of nuclear sharing on our territory as well – in order to strengthen the security of NATO's eastern flank – we are ready for it."

"Russia is increasingly militarizing the Kaliningrad region," Duda added, referring to the Russian exclave bordering north-east Poland. "Recently, it has been relocating its nuclear weapons to Belarus."

Under NATO's nuclear sharing system, nations that do not have an atomic arsenal of their own can host such arms from allies that do.

Kremlin responds

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to Duda's remarks by saying that the Russian military "of course will analyze this if it is implemented. I think, in any case, they will take all the necessary retaliatory steps to guarantee our security." [RIA Novosti]

Duda said that Poland and the US have discussed nuclear sharing "for some time," adding: "I've already talked about it several times. I must admit that when asked about it, I declared our readiness."

Tusk, Poland's premier, appeared unhappy at Duda's remarks, saying: "I want Poland to be safe and well-armed, but I would also like any initiatives to be very well prepared by the people responsible for them and for all of us to be convinced that this is what we want." [Notes from Poland]

Tusk added: "This idea is absolutely massive, I would say, and very serious, and I would need to know all the circumstances that have led the president to make this declaration." [Polish Radio]

NATO has three members that are nuclear powers: France, Britain and the United States. Under a sharing programme, the US has nuclear facilities based in some allied countries – Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey – to deploy and store atomic weapons. [AP News]

A White House official told public broadcaster Polish Radio in late 2022 that the United States was not planning to station nuclear weapons in countries that, like Poland, joined the NATO alliance after 1997.

(pk)

Ally of pro-Russia PM wins Slovak presidential election

Parliamentary speaker Peter Pellegrini has been elected as Slovakia's new president, ringing alarm bells in the EU over a victory that will consolidate the grip pro-Russia populist Prime Minister Robert Fico has on power.

Pellegrini, a Fico ally, heads the centre-left Hlas grouping, which is a member of the premier's three-

party ruling coalition. Pellegrini secured 53% of the presidential vote in a runoff round on April 6, defeating pro-Western former Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok, who scored not quite 47%. [BBC] [FT] [Politico] [Slovak Spectator] [AP 1] [Aljazeera 1] [Independent 1]

The win for Pellegrini, who shares Fico's dovish attitude towards Moscow, deprives the EU of a prominent pro-Kyiv voice. Pellegrini takes over as head of state from Zuzana Caputova, whom Fico has repeatedly criticised over her staunch support for war-ravaged Ukraine. [Bloomberg 1] [FT]

Slovakia was once among Ukraine's most steadfast backers, donating its entire fleet of Mig-29 fighter jets in response to Kyiv's request for warplanes. But this stance has shifted since Fico won a fourth term in power last October with a pledge to withdraw key military aid for Ukraine.

Despite not possessing many executive powers, Slovak presidents can veto laws passed by parliament, challenge them in court, and nominate Constitutional Court judges.

By appointing judges in favour of a legislative overhaul launched by Fico, Pellegrini can play a key role in pushing through the premier's controversial penal code revamp, which would drastically soften penalties for financial crimes. [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [France 24][The Guardian 1] [AP News 1]

The opposition claims that Fico's plans are designed to obstruct investigations into individuals linked to his leftist ruling Smer party.

Outgoing President Caputova, Slovakia's first female head of state and a standard bearer of pro-Western liberal politics, has launched a Constitutional Court challenge to Fico's effort to limit the state's ability to prosecute corruption. [Bloomberg 1]

Pellegrini, who echoes Fico's Kremlin-friendly attitude, has vowed "to ensure that Slovakia remains on the side of peace and not on the side of war". He added that his election win would not prompt an immediate shift in foreign policy as he has pledged to keep Slovakia firmly anchored in the EU and NATO. [Independent 1] [The Guardian 1] [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [Independent 1] [Bloomberg 1] [BBC]

Claims of dirty campaign

Pellegrini portrayed his pro-Western presidential rival Korcok as a warmonger for backing the arming of Ukraine. Pellegrini implied that Korcok was ready to

drag his country into war by deploying Slovak troops to fight in Ukraine, a claim which Korcok denied. [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [The New York Times] [Bloomberg 1] [FT]

Korcok, who promised to realign Slovakia with trans-Atlantic interests, lashed out at Pellegrini's campaign tactics, saying that fear had decided the outcome of the election.

Korcok told his supporters as he conceded defeat: "It turns out that it is possible to become president of the Slovak Republic not only by spreading hatred, whipping up passions and pushing people to the barricades, but also by painting the opposite number, that is to say me, as a candidate of war." [BBC] [FT] [Aljazeera 1]

In Slovakia, any decision to send troops to other countries must be made by the government and parliament. The president lacks the constitutional power to approve such deployments. [Slovak Spectator] [AP 2] [BBC] [Politico]

Fico said the result of the presidential election was an "overwhelming victory" and a "big win for the people" of Slovakia. [Politico]

Fico has soured ties with Ukraine after questioning its sovereignty and calling for peace talks with Russia. He said Russian President Vladimir Putin had been "unfairly demonised, and claimed that Western involvement in the Ukraine war would result in Slavic nations killing each other. [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [BBC]

Slovakia's pro-Western liberal opposition has criticised Pellegrini for remaining silent as Fico overhauls the criminal justice system to abolish the country's anti-graft office. Fico has also submitted plans to turn the country's public broadcaster into what critics say will be a government propaganda machine.

Such moves have triggered anti-government protests across the country and raised concerns in the EU that the rule of law is being violated in Slovakia. [Reuters 1] [Aljazeera 1] [Independent 1]

(yl/pk)

Slovakia moving to turn public broadcaster into gov't mouthpiece, say critics

Slovakia's government has approved a contentious draft law to replace the nation's public broadcaster with what critics fear could become a propaganda machine for populist Prime Minister Robert Fico's ruling coalition.

Fico's administration approved an amended bill on April 24 to replace broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) with a new institution named Slovak Television and Radio (STVR), which will be obliged to broadcast the Slovak national anthem at least once every day.[Europe Monthly April 2024] [BBC] [AP News] [Politico]

Fico, who last year won a fourth term in power on an anti-US and pro-Russia platform, claimed that RTVS was biased and argued that a media overhaul was necessary because the broadcaster was "in permanent conflict with the Slovak government". [BBC 2]

The leftist ruling coalition is set to fire the current director general of RTVS, Lubos Machaj, even though he has a parliamentary mandate until 2027. His replacement will be chosen by a council whose members will be appointed by the parliament, where Fico's allies have a majority, the culture minister and the finance minister. [BBC 2] [AP News 2] [Balkan Insight]

The government has watered down some of its most controversial earlier proposals, such as granting the broadcaster's board of governors the right to dismiss the director general at any time without a reason. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

Under the latest plans, a new ethics commission will be appointed in an advisory role instead of a previously proposed "programme council". The latter would have supervised editorial decisions, which critics said would have amounted to censorship.

Nevertheless, Machaj told The Guardian that the new ethics commission would "gain competencies beyond its authority" and the editorial freedom of RTVS would be "jeopardised".

The Slovak parliament is expected to pass the changes in June. [AP news 2] [Politico]

In March, thousands of protesters rallied in the capital, Bratislava, to condemn the media overhaul, which has been widely criticised by journalists, opposition parties, media freedom groups and the European Commission.

Crackdown on 'hostile' media

Meanwhile, an international press watchdog has urged Fico's three-party ruling coalition to cease "all attacks, threats, and pressure" on independent media, including private broadcaster TV Markiza.

Media critical of the government should not be deemed "enemies", and the authorities should permit news outlets to fulfil their role as watchdogs without fearing political retaliation, the International Press Institute (IPI) said in a statement published on April 8.

TV Markiza, an established private broadcaster owned by Czech billionaire Renata Kellnerova's PPF Group, has been targeted by Fico over its critical coverage of his ruling coalition.

The station was among four leading outlets – including Denník N, SME and the portal Aktuality – labelled as "hostile" by Fico, who claimed these media groups "do politics" instead of journalism.

Shortly after coming to office last October, Fico started taking aim at several media outlets, accusing them of publishing "false" and "incomplete" information. He threatened to restrict their access and halt their state advertising revenue. [Bloomberg 1] [The Guardian] [Bloomberg 2]

The International Press Institute called on TV Markiza's owners to "resist external pressure and guarantee editorial independence in the newsroom".

TV Markiza's own news staff have accused the station of adopting a softer line in its government coverage. In February, the station's journalists appealed to management, claiming that their new director of news, Michal Kratochvil, had stifled critical reporting and portrayed government officials in a more positive light. [International Press Institute] [Slovak Spectator]

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark launches its biggest offshore wind farm project

Denmark's climate ministry on April 22 launched the country's largest tender for constructing offshore wind farms as part of a drive to transition to green energy.

The facilities are set to be completed by 2030 to help the nation reach its climate goal of reducing CO2 emissions by 70% by the end of the decade.

The plan includes six sites in four zones in Danish waters, with the aim of constructing as many wind turbines as possible, allowing for a capacity of six to ten gigawatts. [Danish Energy Agency]

This would be more than enough to cover Danish energy consumption, opening the possibility of exporting green power.

One gigawatt is enough to power around a million homes. Denmark currently has a total of 2.7 gigawatts of offshore wind power capacity installed.

The head of the Danish Energy Agency, Kristoffer Bottzauw, said: "We are pleased that we can now offer the largest offshore wind tender in Denmark to date. This is a massive investment in the green transition." [AFP/France 24]

Climate and Energy Minister Lars Aagaard said: "The next chapter must now be written and executed by the market." [Reuters]

Diesel fuel tax hiked to fund green transition

Meanwhile, Denmark announced on April 15 that it will raise taxes on diesel fuel as part of its plans to accelerate the country's green transition.

The Danish parliament has agreed to allocate DKK 5 billion (EUR 670 million) to the green transition of the agriculture sector and other environmental initiatives. The plan aims to reduce CO2 emissions by 300,000 tons next year.

Tax on diesel fuel will be increased by DKK 0.5 per litre beginning in 2025. [Bloomberg]

Aagaard said: “It will become a little bit more expensive at the pump.” [The Local]

The plan was agreed upon by both governing and opposition parties.

(km/pk)

Denmark temporarily closes shipping strait after missile malfunction

Denmark temporarily closed a major shipping strait on April 5, warning that a malfunction on a navy missile could cause it to launch and break up, raining down fragments in the area.

According to the defence ministry, the Harpoon missile aboard a navy frigate contained 150 kg of explosives but was not armed and would not detonate if it crashed into the sea.

Denmark’s Maritime Authority issued a warning for ships to avoid sections of the Great Belt strait – which gives access to the Baltic Sea – due to a risk of “falling missile fragments”. [Reuters]

The armed forces said: “Until the booster is disabled, there is a risk that the missile could launch and fly several kilometres away.” [AP News] [Forsvaret]

The armed forces added that the problem was detected on a missile aboard the Niels Juel frigate while it was at anchor in the Korsoer naval base. [AP News]

The shipping lane reopened later the same day.

The previous day, Denmark’s chief of defence, General Flemming Lentfer, was fired for failing to report that a weapons system failed on a Danish frigate in the Red Sea as the ship was attacked by a drone controlled by Houthi militants.

The vessel was part of a US-led effort to guard shipping off the coast of Yemen. [NYT]

Denmark's defence minister, Troels Lund Poulsen, said he had lost trust in Lentfer. [BBC]

(km/pk)

Finland plans to toughen immigration and citizenship laws

Finland's right-wing government has presented a proposal to parliament for a series of amendments aimed at tightening rules on immigration and the acquisition of Finnish citizenship. [Finnish Government] [Helsinki Times]

Interior Minister Mari Rantanen of the Finns Party, a far-right member of the ruling coalition, said the government also aimed to concentrate more on assisting individuals facing a difficult situation in their home countries. [Helsinki Times] The aim is to encourage people not to emigrate to Finland.

The government has suggested a modification that would increase the residency requirement for Finnish citizenship from the existing five years to eight. Only the duration spent in Finland with a valid residence permit would be considered when calculating this residency period. [Finnish Government]

"In the autumn, we'll present the second part of [changes to] the citizenship act to parliament, raising the income requirement and the integrity requirement. The rules on family reunifications will become tougher," said Rantanen. [Helsinki Times]

He added that the aim was to emphasise the importance of following societal rules, combat misconduct, and tighten measures against illegal entry. [Helsinki Times]

Finland's coalition government under Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, which came to power in June 2023, has been described as the most right-wing administration in the country's history.

The ruling coalition, which includes the far-right Finns Party, has taken a hard line on immigration, planning to reduce the number of refugees it accepts annually through the UN refugee agency from 1,050 to 500.

Additionally, it intends to create distinct social security benefit systems for immigrants and permanent residents, a move that experts have indicated may contravene the nation's constitution. [The Guardian] [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(rs/pk)

New PM takes over in Iceland

In Iceland, Bjarni Benediktsson has assumed the role of Prime Minister, replacing Katrín Jakobsdóttir, who resigned to pursue candidacy in the upcoming presidential election. The transition of power followed negotiations between Benediktsson's Independence Party, known for its conservative and pro-business stance, and the other governing parties, including the Progressive Party and Jakobsdóttir's Left-Greens. [The Guardian]

Benediktsson, a former foreign minister who previously served as finance minister under Jakobsdóttir's administration, now aims to address various pressing issues facing Iceland. In his inaugural address to parliament as prime minister, Benediktsson outlined the government's priorities, including energy development, economic stability through inflation reduction, and a sustainable immigration approach. [Iceland Review]

In Iceland's political system, the prime minister holds executive authority and leads the government, supported by the cabinet and parliament. The president, on the other hand, serves as a ceremonial figurehead with limited political power, elected by the public.

(lm)

Record number of candidates for Iceland's presidential election

In preparation for Iceland's presidential election scheduled for June 1, the National Electoral Commission has confirmed that 11 official candidates are vying for the position. This marks a significant increase compared to previous elections, with Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the former prime minister, among the contenders. The commission reviewed the applications of all 13 candidates who submitted their endorsements, ruling two applications as invalid due to not meeting the required criteria. [Iceland Review]

Candidates are required to gather a minimum of 1,500 endorsements from across the country, ensuring support from diverse regions. One disqualified candidate had submitted only nine endorsements, while the other fell short by several hundred.

(lm)

Norway plans ‘historic boost’ in defence spending

Norway’s centre-left government has announced plans to increase the country’s defence budget by 600 billion crowns (EUR 51 billion) over the next 12 years to strengthen its ability to ward off the danger posed by Russia and other potential threats. [Reuters] [Politico EU]

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said on April 5 that the “historic boost” in defence spending would mean strengthening all branches of the armed forces to meet “the emerging security environment”.

Overall, the Nordic NATO member country aims to spend 1.6 trillion crowns on defence by 2036. Adjusted for inflation, expenditure in 12 years will be 83% higher than current levels, according to officials. [Reuters] [Euronews]

The navy will be the biggest beneficiary of the hike, receiving five new frigates with anti-submarine helicopters, five submarines, and ten large and 18 smaller vessels.

Additionally, Oslo plans to purchase long-range air defence systems, augment surveillance capabilities with satellites, drones and vessels, and double the number of National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS). [POLITICO] [Euronews]

The spending boost by Norway, which shares a border with Russia in the Arctic, comes amid uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine. [Reuters] [Euronews]

(nbnc/pk)

Norwegian health minister quits in plagiarism scandal

Norwegian Health Minister Ingvild Kjerkol resigned on April 12 after her master’s degree was revoked amid plagiarism accusations.

Her move came after an inquiry by Norway’s Nord University found a “not insignificant amount of plagiarism” in a thesis Kjerkol submitted in 2021 for her master’s degree in health management. [The Independent][ABC News]

Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said it would have been hard for the minister to continue in her job. [POLITICO EUROPE]

Kjerkol said she and a co-author "did not intend to plagiarize other people's assignments", adding: "Although it hurts not to be believed, we have to deal with the fact that (the university) is of a different opinion." [AP News]

Kjerkol is the second government member embroiled in a plagiarism controversy this year. Research and Higher Education Minister Sandra Borch resigned in January after a student said on social media that Borch had copied her master's thesis, including spelling mistakes, and had not credited the original author. [Atlas News]

(nbnc/pk)

Workers in Norway agree to pay deal, strike averted

Industrial workers in Norway have struck a pay deal with employers, averting the prospect of a strike by over 10,000 union members.

The workers will receive a wage hike of 5.2% on average under the agreement. [Reuters] [Bloomberg UK]

Around 14,300 members of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) had been scheduled to launch strike action, including employees at companies such as Adecco, Aker Solutions and Kongsberg Gruppen's maritime unit.

(nbnc/pk)

Record anti-trust fines reduced for top food retailers in Norway

Penalties imposed on three of Norway's top food retailers for breaching anti-trust rules were on April 10 dropped to a total of 4.9 billion crowns (EUR 420 million), down from the record 21 billion crowns the Norwegian Competition Authority fined them in 2020.

The authority said the fines had been cut because the case was no longer considered an intentional breach of competition rules, among other things. [Reuters]

The three firms, Norgesgruppen, Rema 1000 and Coop Norge, had been accused of collaborating in ways that may have inflated prices. [Reuters]

Norgesgruppen now faces a reduced fine of 2.3 billion crowns, and Rema 1000 and Coop Norge each face a 1.3 billion fine.

The three companies have denied accusations of wrongdoing. The decision to fine the firms is preliminary and they can appeal to a court against the penalties. [European Supermarket Magazine] [PYMNTS][Just Food]

(nbnc/pk)

Sweden passes law lowering legal age to change gender

Sweden's parliament has passed a law lowering the minimum legal age for gender changes from 18 to 16.

Those under 18 will need approval from a parent or guardian, a doctor and the National Board of Health and Welfare. A gender dysphoria diagnosis will no longer be required.

In opposition to the change in the law was the opposition far-right Sweden Democrats party. The grouping's leader, Jimmie Akesson, said it was "deplorable that a proposal that clearly lacks the support of the population is so lightly voted through."

Johan Hultberg, a member of the governing centre-right Moderate Party, welcomed what he described as "a cautious but important reform for a vulnerable group." [AP News]

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said the change in the law, which parliament approved on April 17 and which will come into force in July 2025, was a "balanced and responsible" move.

Sweden in 1972 became the first country to make gender transition legal. [BBC]

(km/pk)

Swedish police leak info to gangs

Investigations by a Swedish newspaper have uncovered cases of police officers leaking confidential

information to members of criminal gangs with whom they have romantic relationships. According to reports by Dagens Nyheter, leaked information has been linked to revenge attacks, including murders. Some 30 police employees, deemed security risks, have either resigned or been dismissed from their positions.

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has acknowledged the seriousness of the situation, expressing concerns about the potential impact on public trust in law enforcement. Discussions among government officials and police leadership are underway to address the issue and assess its implications for national security.

The revelations come amid ongoing challenges in Sweden related to escalating violence, particularly attributed to conflicts between criminal gangs vying for control of drug markets. [Euro News] [The Sun]

(ms)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

French President Macron warns Europe 'can die' in speech on protectionism, geopolitical threats

French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a poignant address at Sorbonne University in Paris, issuing a stark warning about the potential demise of Europe if it fails to shore up critical gaps in its architecture, from inadequate investment in innovation, lack of industrial protection, to its

approach to defence and immigration. [POLITICO] [groupe d'etudes geopolitiques]

Throughout his speech, Macron emphasised the urgent need for Europe to assert its independence and resilience in the face of growing pressure from the United States and China. He called for a nuanced approach, advocating for a third way that would position Europe as a global leader without aligning too closely with either superpower.

Macron proposed a series of bold reforms – albeit with a strong French undertone – aimed at revitalising Europe's economy, bolstering its security, and enhancing its global influence. These included significant investments in strategic sectors such as artificial intelligence, quantum information, and space technology, as well as measures to promote European preference in military procurement.

It's important to highlight that this recent speech aimed to reconnect with a similar one Macron delivered in 2017, shortly after his election, at the Sorbonne. That earlier address centred on the idea of a "sovereign Europe" across various domains. Macron lamented at the time that Europe had lost its ambition, stagnating due to either fatigue or conformity. He warned that the European spirit was being surrendered to those who sought to undermine it.

(lm)

EU must enlarge or face ‘new Iron Curtain’, European Council chief warns

European Council President Charles Michel warned that the European Union must expand its membership or risk encountering a "new Iron Curtain" along its eastern border. He emphasised the importance of enlargement for the EU's future, stating that stability and economic development in neighbouring regions are vital common interests. [EuroNews]

Michel's remarks coincide with the 20th anniversary of the EU's largest-ever enlargement in 2004, which prevented a de facto division within the bloc. Currently, nine Eastern European and Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine – are awaiting EU membership, but the accession process is complex and lengthy. In addition, Kosovo has applied for membership in 2022 but still does not have candidate status.

In a separate interview on April 29, Michel emphasised the urgency for both the European Union and aspiring candidate states to prepare for enlargement by 2030, cautioning against delaying the process. He highlighted the dual challenge: candidate countries must meet the EU's democratic and economic standards, while member states must demonstrate willingness to support enlargement. [Le Soir]

(lm)

European court rules human rights violated by climate inaction

The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights on April 9 issued three separate rulings on cases related to climate change, including one that found violations of the European Convention on Human Rights due to Switzerland's failure to implement sufficient measures to combat climate change. [Council of Europe]

Central to the case was the assertion by a group of older Swiss women, collectively known as *Senior Women for Climate Protection*, that their age and gender rendered them particularly susceptible to the adverse impacts of climate change-induced heatwaves. They argued that Switzerland had fallen short in fulfilling its obligations under the Convention concerning climate change, thereby violating their right to respect for private and family life. [bbc]

The court's verdict concurred with the plaintiffs, highlighting critical deficiencies in Switzerland's climate policies, notably its failure to quantify reductions in greenhouse gas emissions—a pivotal aspect in combating climate change. Additionally, the ruling emphasised the necessity for more robust measures to safeguard vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, from the escalating impacts of climate change.

The court's ruling marks a significant milestone as it represents the first instance of the influential European Court of Human Rights deliberating on matters related to global warming. The decision carries substantial weight, as it now legally binds 46 European countries, including the United Kingdom, potentially influencing climate litigation worldwide. Similar cases are emerging in other countries, indicating a global trend towards holding governments accountable for climate action. [TIME]

In the court's second ruling delivered on April 8, it addressed a complaint from a former resident and

mayor of Grande-Synthe, contending that France had failed to adequately address global warming, thereby violating the right to life and respect for private and family life. However, the Court dismissed the application as inadmissible, citing the applicant's failure to meet the criteria for victim status under Article 34 of the Convention. [European Courts of Human Rights]

Similarly, in the case Duarte Agostinho and Others v. Portugal and 32 Others, the Court considered claims regarding the severe impacts of climate change on the applicants' lives, well-being, and mental health, which they attributed to the respondent states. The court found no basis in the Convention for extending extraterritorial jurisdiction as requested by the applicants. Additionally, since the applicants had not pursued legal avenues in Portugal regarding their complaints, the complaint against Portugal was deemed inadmissible due to non-exhaustion of domestic remedies. Consequently, the court declared the applications against Portugal and the other states regarding climate change issues inadmissible.

(lm)

Lead candidates in European elections face off in first debate of race

The so-called Maastricht debate on April 28 brought together prominent candidates vying for the position of European Commission president in upcoming European elections.

Lasting 90 minutes, the debate, hosted by POLITICO Europe and Studio Europa, showcased a diverse range of political perspectives. Among the contenders were the so-called Spitzenkandidaten, representing various political factions, including Ursula von der Leyen (European People's Party), Bas Eickhout (European Green Party), and Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party), among others. [EuroNews] [Politico]

Throughout the event, candidates engaged in robust exchanges, tackling pressing issues such as the Green Deal, the Israel-Hamas conflict, migration challenges, and technological advancements like artificial intelligence and TikTok. The debate's dynamics oscillated from impassioned to awkward, with each participant defending their respective platforms.

Notable moments included a confrontational exchange between Bas Eickhout and Anders Vistisen, primarily

revolving around foreign policy. Eickhout rebuked Vistisen over allegations of Russian and Chinese influence within the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, prompting a tense back-and-forth. Meanwhile, Walter Baier's pivot to the Israel-Hamas conflict sparked further debate, with Ursula von der Leyen defending the EU's stance while facing scrutiny over potential sanctions against Israel.

Another significant discussion arose regarding potential collaboration with the hard-right, Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) party, which was absent from the debate. Bas Eickhout directly questioned Ursula von der Leyen's stance on cooperation with the formation, eliciting a nuanced response that underscored the complexities of forming alliances within the European Parliament.

Ultimately, Ursula von der Leyen and Bas Eickhout emerged as the standout performers, with von der Leyen exhibiting eloquence and gravitas in her responses, while Eickhout demonstrated assertiveness and incisive counter-arguments. In contrast, Anders Vistisen struggled to resonate with the audience, and Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann's performance was criticised for being scripted and lacking depth. Overall, the debate offered a comprehensive insight into the diverse perspectives shaping European politics ahead of the elections.

(lm)

EU Parliament wants to make access to abortion a fundamental right

The European Parliament on April 11 voted through a non-binding resolution to include access to abortion in the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

However, to be included in the bloc's legally-binding charter, access to "safe and legal" terminations would have to be backed by all 27 EU member states, some of which have tight restrictions in their national laws.

The move by the European Parliament came after France on March 5 became the first country in the world to enshrine the right of women to have an abortion in its constitution. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

French President Emmanuel Macron said at the time he would push for abortion to be included in the EU rights charter. [Le Monde]

Euro deputies backed access to terminations by 336 votes to 163, with support mainly coming from left-wing and centrist members. Thirty-nine lawmakers abstained. [Euractiv]

The head of the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life, a body that promotes the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion, called the European Parliament's decision a "significant cultural regression, undermining our societal values." [Vatican News]

Abortion is tightly restricted in several EU member states, which would be likely to veto efforts to declare it a right. [Euronews]

In Poland, lawmakers on April 12 opened a debate on loosening the nation's abortion laws amid fierce arguments. A near-total ban on terminations was introduced under the country's previous right-wing government, sparking mass protests. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

Splits in Poland's ruling coalition mean the outcome of efforts to liberalise the domestic law is uncertain.

(pk)

European Union to ban forced-labour products in move mostly targeted at China

The European Parliament has approved comprehensive legislation aimed at eliminating products linked to forced labour from the European Union market. The law, approved with overwhelming support, targets modern slavery and human rights abuses, particularly in countries like Turkmenistan and China.

Under the new regulation, national authorities can investigate and ban products suspected of being produced through forced labour. The European Commission will also have the authority to initiate probes and request inspections in non-EU countries. Companies failing to comply will face fines, and products already on the market will be disposed of. [EuroNews]

The move aims to counter the influx of cheap products made from forced labour and tackle the rise in illegal profits. However, critics, including Germany's FDP party, argue that the law will burden businesses with excessive bureaucracy. Civil society organisations also raise concerns about the regulation's limitations, such

as the lack of provisions for victim remediation and the absence of presumptions of state-imposed forced labour in certain high-risk areas. Despite these criticisms, advocates emphasise the importance of robust implementation and enforcement to ensure the effectiveness of the new rules.

(lm)

Serbia angry after Kosovo moves closer to joining Council of Europe

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has recommended Kosovo's accession to the Council of Europe, – while deciding to monitor its fulfilment of an extensive list of commitments and obligations as from its accession. The recommendation was passed by 131 votes in favour and 29 against with 11 abstentions. The decision now awaits approval from the Committee of Ministers on May 16. [Council of Europe]

Membership in the council, which has been a goal for Pristina ever since its declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, would mean, among other things, that Kosovars could have their cases tried at the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

PACE's decision has sparked anger from Serbian officials, who fear it could lead to international recognition of Kosovo's independence. [euroNews]

(lm)

European Union votes to ratify landmark international law to protect oceans

The European Union has voted to ratify the High Seas Treaty, a landmark international law aimed at protecting marine life beyond countries' maritime borders.

The treaty, which requires ratification at both EU and member state levels, will now be formally adopted by the European Council before being deposited at the United Nations. With 89 countries having signed and four ratified the treaty so far, the EU's endorsement is expected to bolster global efforts towards achieving the required 60 ratifications for the treaty to come into force. [EuroNews]

In separate developments, the EU has committed EUR 3.5 billion to ocean protection and sustainability initiatives, announced by Virginijus Sinkevicius, the European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans, and Fisheries, at the "Our Ocean" conference in Athens. This funding includes investments and reforms in sustainable fisheries and marine pollution efforts across several EU member states, aiming to promote the "blue economy" – the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic and ecological benefit. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

EU refugee funds for Turkey criticised for inefficiency, lack of transparency

European Union auditors have criticised in a report released on April 24 the insufficient impact of the EU's refugee funding for Turkey and the European Commission's failure to present a sufficient cost analysis and long-term plan.

Under the EU-Turkey migration deal, concluded in 2016, the bloc committed to providing at least EUR 6 billion – half from the EU budget and half directly from member states – aimed at assisting Turkey in managing the influx of migrants coming from Syria. Turkey, in return, vowed to prevent migrants from crossing to Europe.

The report criticised the delay to projects and the Commission's failure to present a sufficient cost analysis, with no indication of how to secure sustainability on the EU's financial contributions end. [Euractiv]

(dql)

Joint European police operation busts migrant smuggling network in Romania

A joint European police operation, led by the Romanian police, supported by Europol and involving the Austrian police and the Italian Carabinieri Corps has dismantled an international organised crime group.

Composed mainly of Romanian and Pakistani nationals who established companies in Romania, the group arranged the illegal arrival of migrants to Romania through illegally obtained work visas. It then facilitated

their further illegal movements towards other EU countries.

Twenty-nine locations in Austria, Italy and Romania were raided on April 24, which saw 12 arrests in Romania and luxury cars, electronic equipment, documents, and the equivalent of over EUR 146,000 in cash in different currencies seized. [Europol]

(dql)

Finnair suspends flights to Estonia due to GPS malfunctions amid accusations of Russian jamming

Finnish airline Finnair announced On April 29 that it would be suspending flights to Tartu, Estonia for a month. The reason for this was GPS malfunctions. Previously, two Finnish flights had to turn back halfway.

Finland and the Baltic states accuse Russia of carrying out GPS jamming in this region around the northern Baltic Sea as a form of "hybrid attack". According to Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna, Russia is thus violating international aviation rules. Estonia and Lithuania want to discuss this problem with their partners and allies in the EU and NATO.

Germany had already indicated at the beginning of April that the interference was probably coming from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, according to the German Ministry of Defence. [Reuters 1]

Jamming disrupts the reception of signals sent to the GPS, unlike spoofing, in which manipulated data is transmitted. [Politico] [Financial Times] [Reuters 2]

(fg)

Poland arrests ‘would-be assassin’ suspected of Russian plot to kill Zelensky

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has said his country has arrested a “would-be assassin” working for Russian intelligence services who planned to kill Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The suspect, a Polish citizen, was detained on April 17 over an alleged plot to target Zelensky when the Ukrainian leader was travelling through Poland.

Tusk, whose country is a staunch supporter of Ukraine amid its war with Russia, declared that Poland would show “no leniency for collaborators” with Moscow. He vowed to “root out every act of betrayal and every attempt at destabilization.” [Polish Radio]

Among the tasks Russia reportedly assigned the suspect, named only as “Pawel K”, was gathering intelligence on security at Rzeszow airport in eastern Poland, which during the war has become a hub for transport in and out of Ukraine, including for top officials. [Notes from Poland]

Pair held over attack on Navalny aide

In a separate case, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda announced on April 19 that two people had been detained in Poland on suspicion of attacking Leonid Volkov, an exiled top aide to the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. [DW]

Volkov was injured after being assaulted with a hammer on March 12 outside his home in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

Lithuanian counterintelligence said at the time that the attack was the work of Russian security services. [Reuters]

Nauseda thanked Poland’s authorities for detaining the assailants, as did Volkov, who added on social media platform X: “It is of enormous importance to investigate and to expose all the chain-of-command from Putin to the guy with the hammer.”

According to Tusk, both the alleged attackers are Poles.

(pk)

Sweden, Turkey back Dutch PM Rutte as next NATO chief

Sweden and Turkey have become the latest NATO member states to back Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte as the next chief of the military alliance.

Rutte, who has the backing of the majority of NATO countries, heads a caretaker government in the Netherlands amid difficulties in forming a new administration following the Dutch national elections in November 2023. [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Europe Monthly February 2024]

Voicing support for Rutte, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on April 4: “In a time characterised by increased uncertainty and a deteriorating security policy situation, a strong NATO is needed, which through deterrence and defence contributes to the security of all allies, and to promoting peace and freedom.” [Reuters]

The term of the current NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, expires in October.

In February, Rutte received support from the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the United States.

A senior American official said: “President Biden strongly supports Prime Minister Rutte’s candidacy to be the next NATO secretary general.” [The Guardian]

Amid Russia’s war in Ukraine and concerns about America’s future commitment to the transatlantic relationship if NATO-sceptic Donald Trump wins the US presidency, Rutte has a reputation as a “Trump whisperer”. [POLITICO 1]

Turkey announced on April 29 its decision to support Rutte’s candidacy. The move came on the heels of the outgoing Dutch prime minister’s meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on April 26 in Istanbul, where he reaffirmed Turkey’s decisive role and highlighted Ankara’s efforts to resolve the situation in Gaza and to deal with the war in Ukraine.

In January, Turkey approved Sweden’s bid to join NATO, following more than 18 months of delay. Sweden officially joined the alliance in March. [NATO] [The Jerusalem Post]

Meanwhile, a British official told journalists earlier this year: “Rutte is well-respected across the alliance, has serious defence and security credentials, and will ensure that the alliance remains strong and ready to defend and deter.” [POLITICO 2] [El Pais]

The NATO secretary general is appointed by consensus, meaning all members must consent to a final decision. However, Hungary has openly criticised Rutte.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said in March: “We certainly can’t support the election of a person to the position of NATO’s secretary general who previously wanted to force Hungary on its knees.”

In 2021, Rutte criticised anti-LGBT laws introduced by the right-wing government in Budapest, saying: “The

long-term aim is to bring Hungary to its knees on this issue." [POLITICO 1]

(km-dql)

Ukraine on 'irreversible path' to NATO, says Secretary General

During NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's visit to Kyiv on April 29, he reaffirmed NATO's unwavering support for Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression and its path towards NATO membership. The visit, marked by a series of high-level meetings and announcements, underscores the critical juncture at which Ukraine finds itself in the ongoing conflict.

During discussions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Stoltenberg commended Ukraine's resilience and leadership in the face of adversity. However, he emphasised the urgent need for tangible support, citing delays in aid deliveries that have adversely impacted Ukraine's ability to counter Russian advances on the battlefield. Stoltenberg acknowledged NATO's failure to promptly fulfil its commitments, stating, "NATO countries have not delivered [on] their promises." These delays, he noted, have allowed Russia to gain ground, posing grave consequences for Ukraine's security.

Stoltenberg announced the initiation of a special EUR 100 billion fund dedicated to supporting Ukraine's military over the next five years.

Despite dissatisfaction over aid delays, Stoltenberg remained resolute over NATO's support for Ukraine's NATO aspirations. He affirmed Ukraine's "irreversible path" to NATO membership, asserting that the ongoing efforts are laying the groundwork for seamless integration into the alliance when the time is ripe. However, he tempered expectations by indicating that a political consensus among NATO's 32 members for Ukraine's accession is unlikely to materialise at the upcoming summit in Washington.

Ukraine's President Zelensky underscored the imperative of expediting aid deliveries to stabilise the front lines and thwart further Russian aggression. He emphasised the critical need for advanced weaponry, including long-range weapons and anti-aircraft defences, to counter Russian incursions effectively. [Euro News] [France 24] [POLITICO] [NATO] [Ukraine Business News]

(ms)

Zelensky attends Three Seas Summit in Lithuania, highlighting Ukraine's need for air defence

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 11 visited Lithuania to take part in the Three Seas Summit and engage in discussions with partner countries' leaders.

He highlighted the importance of scheduled meetings and the signing of a new bilateral security agreement, emphasising the urgent need to strengthen Ukraine's air defence system and garner international support against Russian aggression.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda underscored the initiative's significance in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The Three Seas Initiative is a forum consisting of 13 European Union states, spanning from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic and Black Seas. It aims to facilitate regional dialogue and cooperation on issues impacting member states' interests, focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Ukraine obtained partner-participant status in the initiative during the seventh summit in 2022. [Kyiv Independent]

(fg)

ICJ rejects emergency measures over German arms exports to Israel

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has denied Nicaragua's request for emergency measures to halt Germany's arms exports to Israel. However, the court has allowed the case to continue, indicating that the legal process will proceed further. [Al Jazeera] [CNN]

Nicaragua accused Germany of breaching its obligations under the Genocide Convention by providing political, financial, and military support to Israel and suspending funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Berlin, for its part, refuted allegations of facilitating genocide and criticized Nicaragua's case as rushed and lacking evidence.

(lm)

Netherlands will consider resuming support to Palestinian UNRWA

The Dutch government is considering reinstating its support for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in Gaza, provided the agency undertakes measures to enhance its impartiality. This consideration follows an inquiry led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, which assessed allegations of UNRWA employees' involvement in a Hamas attack on October 7. [swissinfo.ch]

Colonna's investigation concluded that Israel lacked substantial evidence to support its claims that hundreds of UNRWA personnel were linked to terrorist groups in Gaza. Despite having already allocated its annual contribution to UNRWA in January, prior to these allegations, the Dutch government, along with other European nations, halted further funding for the agency following the accusations.

(lm)

Spain, Ireland, Norway set to recognise Palestinian state

Spanish Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has announced his government will recognise the state of Palestine by July, while Ireland and Norway have said they are ready to do the same, though without naming a date.

Spain's foreign minister, José Manuel Albares, told journalists that the reason for Madrid's planned move was the scale of casualties caused by Israel's offensive in Gaza and the lack of progress made towards peace. [POLITICO]

Albares argued that Spain's new position was necessary to help secure peace in the region, adding that it would benefit both Palestinians and Israelis. [POLITICO]

Meanwhile, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said that his nation stood ready to recognise the state of Palestine but added that Oslo had "not set a firm timetable yet". He said that the next steps would be taken in joint efforts with "like-minded countries". [Al Jazeera]

Spain, Ireland, Malta and Slovenia in March announced they intended to recognise a Palestinian state when "the circumstances are right". That plan has been

heavily criticised by Israel, who told the countries it would amount to a "prize for terrorism" and would diminish the chances of a negotiated solution to the Middle East conflict. [Al Jazeera]

After bilateral talks with Sanchez in Dublin, Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris on April 12 confirmed his nation's intentions. Dublin is likely to recognise Palestine in June, according to sources in the Irish government. [Irish Examiner]

Nine of the 27 EU member countries recognise a Palestinian state. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

However, others – notably Germany – have said they will only support such a step if it is part of a so-called two-state solution agreed upon by Israel and the Palestinians. [FT]

The EU as a whole does not have an agreed position on Palestinian statehood, though it supports a two-state solution.

In March, EU leaders 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. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

(jt-nbnc-sr/pk)

Pope calls for halt to 'spiral of violence' in Middle East

The day after Iran launched an unprecedented attack on Israel using scores of drones, ballistic and cruise missiles, Pope Francis warned against any moves that could escalate tensions in the Middle East.

During his weekly Sunday appearance in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on April 14, the pontiff called for "a halt to any action that could fuel a spiral of violence with the risk of dragging the Middle East into an even greater conflict." [Reuters]

The Vatican has been calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and advocating a so-called two-state solution since a conflict between Hamas and Israel began on October 7 last year. [Vatican News] [Foreign Policy]

(ar/pk)

Blinken assures Black Sea allies of US support

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken promised American support for its allies bordering the Black Sea at the Second Black Sea Security Conference on April 15.

The conference in Bulgaria's capital city, Sophia, aimed to strengthen security in the Black Sea region in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

"Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has dramatically undermined the security system in the region of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and has impacted directly the security of Europe," the participants said in a press release from the conference. [BTA]

Countries in the region include Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

The conference was co-organized by the Bulgarian and Ukrainian foreign and defence ministries and Ukraine's Centre for Defence Strategies. [BTA]

At the conference, Blinken said the US would support its Black Sea allies to make the region more secure and ensure peace and freedom in Europe.

He said: "Our allies in the Black Sea can count on the US to make the region more secure, more prosperous and more integrated," [Euractiv]

The Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, said that increasing the capabilities of Ukraine's air defence would also strengthen regional and global stability by protecting the Black Sea region from Russian aerial attacks. [Euronews]

Kuleba said: "Today, there's no other language Moscow understands better than the language of force. This is what they respect, anything else is seen as a weakness,"

He added that the Black Sea must become "the sea of NATO, of peace and stability," and that the alliance should implement "a comprehensive and ambitious Black Sea strategy aimed at reducing Russia's malign influence." [AP News]

(km/gc)

Slovenia joins group of Artemis Accords signatories

Slovenia has become the 39th country to sign the Artemis Accords, a series of non-binding bilateral arrangements between the United States government and other governments that – building upon the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 and related international agreements – describe practices signatory nations are called on follow in space exploration. The signing took place on April 26 during a U.S.-Slovenia strategic dialogue in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Slovenia is the third European country to sign the accords in less than a week, following Switzerland and Sweden which signed the Artemis Accords on April 15 and 16 respectively. Belgium, Greece, and Uruguay had signed earlier this. [Space News]

(dql)

China can't enjoy good relations with West if it aids Russia's war in Ukraine: NATO chief

China cannot have good relations with the West if it keeps fuelling Russia's war in Ukraine, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has warned.

Beijing "cannot have it both ways," Stoltenberg said during a visit to Berlin on April 25.

He accused China of "propping up Russia's war economy" by sharing high-end technology like semiconductors.

Stoltenberg added that last year, Russia imported 90% of its micro-electronics – used to produce missiles, tanks and aircraft – from China.

Beijing is also working to provide Russia with improved satellite capabilities and imagery, the NATO chief said.

"All of this helps Moscow to inflict more death and destruction on Ukraine, bolster Russia's defence industrial base, and evade the impact of sanctions and export controls." [NATO]

China has strengthened trade and military ties with Russia in recent years as the United States and its allies imposed sanctions on both Moscow and Beijing. [Reuters]

Russia-China trade hit a record of USD 240.1 billion in 2023, 26.3% up on the year before, Reuters reported, citing Chinese customs data.

(pk)

France joins Balikatan military exercises amid South China Sea tensions

France's participation in the annual Balikatan joint exercises with the Philippines and the United States marks a significant development in regional defence cooperation. The exercises, which began on April 22 and are scheduled to continue until May 10, include maritime drills conducted within the disputed waters of the South China Sea. This marks the first time the Balikatan exercises have extended beyond Philippine territorial waters.

The decision to include France in the drills reflects the deepening concerns over China's assertive actions in the region and the desire among like-minded nations to strengthen security ties. With France having territories in the South Pacific, its involvement in the exercises signifies a broader international effort to counterbalance Beijing's growing influence.

Tensions in the South China Sea have escalated in recent times, particularly between Manila and Beijing, over competing territorial claims. The Balikatan exercises serve as a platform for participating nations to enhance interoperability and readiness in potential conflict scenarios, including the retaking of enemy-occupied islands.

Despite objections from China, Manila remains committed to upholding international law and ensuring the security of the region. The participation of France in the Balikatan exercises underscores the shared commitment among participating nations to preserve a rules-based order in the South China Sea and address common security challenges.

As the Balikatan exercises unfold, they serve as a tangible demonstration of solidarity and strategic cooperation among nations facing common challenges in the South China Sea region. [AiR No. 17, April/2024, 4] [AiR No. 18, April/2024, 5] [NHK Japan]

(ms)

US urges Netherlands, South Korea and Japan to enhance chip export controls against China

The United States has been actively encouraging its allies, particularly in Europe and Asia, to strengthen restrictions on the export of chip-related technology and tools to China. This push is fueled by growing apprehensions regarding Huawei's advancements in semiconductor technology and aims to curb China's progress in this critical sector.

The Biden administration has specifically targeted key allies such as Japan, South Korea, and the Netherlands, urging them to utilise their existing export control mechanisms more effectively. This includes measures to prevent engineers from these countries from servicing chipmaking tools at advanced semiconductor facilities in China. The objective is to bolster the competitiveness of the US industry and mitigate China's rapid strides in semiconductor development.

Despite the imposition of comprehensive export controls by the US in 2022, concerns persist regarding China's ability to circumvent these measures. This was exemplified by Huawei's unveiling of the Mate 60 Pro smartphone in September last year (see AiR No. 36, September/2023, 1) and the and the Pura 70 series in April, featuring an advanced chip 7nm chip (see AiR No. 17, April/2024, 4).

To address these challenges, the US is advocating for stricter controls to prevent third-country companies from supplying China with technology originating from allied nations such as Japan, South Korea, and the Netherlands. However, responses from these allies have varied.

Japan has taken steps to impose restrictions on certain chip-making tools, although questions remain about the effectiveness and transparency of these measures. South Korea, on the other hand, has not indicated any awareness of US requests to enhance its export controls, highlighting discrepancies in allied responses.

Meanwhile, the US is intensifying pressure on the Netherlands in particular to halt servicing contracts between Dutch chip-making equipment manufacturer ASML and Chinese entities. Alan Estevez, the chief of US export policy, is set to engage Dutch officials and ASML representatives to address this issue, reflecting Washington's determination to impede China's technological advancement. [Bloomberg] [Financial Times] [First Post] [Reuters]

The Netherlands holds particular significance in this context due to ASML's prominent position in the global semiconductor industry. ASML's advanced lithography systems are crucial for chip manufacturing.

In reaction to these intensification efforts by the US on the Netherlands, China is intensifying efforts for semiconductor self-sufficiency, highlighted by Naura Technology Group's lithography research and Huawei's SAQP patent application, aiming to produce 5-nanometre chips without ASML's Extreme ultraviolet lithography tools (see AiR No. 15, April/2024, 2).

(ms)

India's external affairs minister slams 'Western media' for interference in elections

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, speaking at a forum in Hyderabad, criticised Western media for what he perceived as interference in India's democratic processes. He accused them of considering themselves political players in Indian elections, citing instances where they questioned the timing of elections during heatwaves. Jaishankar expressed confidence in India's electoral system, noting that even in challenging conditions, voter turnout remained high compared to Western countries. [mint]

Moreover, Jaishankar highlighted India's growing prominence on the global stage, mentioning initiatives like the G20 Summit where India successfully brokered consensus despite initial scepticism from other nations. He emphasised the interest from various countries in connecting with and working with India, showcasing India's increasing influence in international affairs.

(lm)

Albania-Italy migrant deal moves ahead as Rome publishes tender for processing centre

The migrant deal between Albania and Italy, signed in November 2023, is moving forward, with details emerging about the processing centres in Albania. The agreement, aimed at handling asylum applications of migrants rescued by Italian authorities, has been a subject of contention, both domestically and

internationally. Despite the controversy, both governments remain committed to its implementation. [Euractiv]

The recently published tender documents shed light on the operational aspects of the processing centres. These facilities, expected to be operational by May 20, will comprise three structures capable of accommodating around 3,000 individuals.

One of these structures will be situated at the port of Shengjin, designated for initial landing and identification procedures, while the other two will be located in Gjader, focusing on assessing eligibility for international protection and serving as a repatriation detention centre.

However, work on the processing centres has yet to commence, leading to doubts about their readiness by the projected start date. Additionally, the location of Shengjin, which previously hosted Afghan refugees, adds complexity to the situation.

(lm)

Albania courts NATO investors to revive Soviet-era munitions plants

Albania is seeking to revive its dormant weapon and ammunition production facilities, aiming to attract NATO investors for the project. Defense Minister Niko Peleshi announced the government's intention to promote innovation through this revitalization process, acknowledging the need for foreign investment to drive development in the industry. The initiative comes amidst heightened military conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, with Albania joining other European countries in bolstering ammunition production following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [DefenseNews]

The Defense Ministry is collaborating with the NATO Support and Procurement Agency to determine investment values and potential product demand for the three factories located in Poliçan, Elbasan, and Gramsh. These facilities, built in the 1960s, ceased operations after Albania's transition to a market economy from communism.

(lm)

Armenia, Azerbaijan agree on ‘historic’ return of several villages

Armenia and Azerbaijan have made significant strides towards a peace deal by agreeing to the return of several villages from Armenia to Azerbaijan, marking a potential turning point in their decades-long conflict. This agreement, deemed a "historic event" by Azerbaijan, addresses one of the key conditions it had set for a peace deal: the return of villages occupied by Armenia since the early 1990s. [Al Jazeera]

The agreement was reached during the eighth round of talks between Armenian Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigorian and Azerbaijani counterpart Shahin Mustafayev -- held at an undisclosed section of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border on April 19. The delimitation on those sections is to be completed by the middle of May, the parties agreed.

The initial stage will affect land areas between four villages in the territory of Armenia's Tavush Province and four abandoned villages that used to be part of Azerbaijan's Qazax district during Soviet times. The villages in question hold strategic importance, particularly because they are situated close to Armenia's main highway leading north to the border with Georgia. This route is crucial for Armenia's trade and connects to a pipeline through which it receives gas from Russia.

However, residents of border villages in Tavush are deeply concerned about the demarcation of the border with Azerbaijan, fearing that adherence to the Soviet-era configuration will result in the loss of access to their farmlands and create logistical challenges in communicating with the rest of the country. Additionally, they worry that Armenia's withdrawal from current military positions could heighten the vulnerability of local civilians to potential Azerbaijani armed attacks. [RFERL]

This development comes in the wake of Azerbaijan's military success in regaining control of Nagorno-Karabakh, a region populated primarily by ethnic Armenians, in September. The conflict led to the displacement of virtually the entire population of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia within a matter of days. Russia, which had deployed peacekeepers in the region after the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has begun withdrawing its troops, raising concerns about the region's future stability and Russia's influence.

The United States and the European Union have been actively involved in facilitating negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, urging both sides to reach a comprehensive peace agreement. On April 28, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke separately

with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, expressing Washington's continued support for a peace treaty between the two South Caucasus neighbours. [Voice of America]

(lm)

Bulgaria and Romania partially join Schengen

Bulgaria and Romania partially joined Schengen on March 31, allowing ID-check-free access to those travelling by air or sea from the two countries.

The European Commission confirmed that Bulgaria and Romania were ready to join Schengen in 2011. After a 13-year wait, the two countries have been approved to join the zone, marking a new step for their integration into the European Union. [European Commission]

The Schengen zone was established in 1985 and now has 29 members, including Bulgaria and Romania.

Land border checks will remain in place due to opposition from countries like Austria and Hungary, who previously blocked the bid, citing concerns about illegal migration. [Euronews]

On April 11, the European Parliament called for lifting Schengen land border controls for Bulgaria and Romania by the end of 2024. [BTA]

Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu said: “We have a clear and firmly assumed government plan for full accession to the Schengen Area by the end of the year,” [Le Monde with AFP/AP]

Bulgaria’s interior minister Kalin Stoyanov said: “Bulgaria’s full accession to Schengen will happen by the end of 2024,” adding, “We showed and continue to show to illegal migrants that they should not take the road to Europe through Bulgaria.” [AP News]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen wrote on X: “This is a great success for the people of both countries.” [X]

Both countries have agreed to implement random security checks at airports and maritime borders to combat illegal migration and cross-border crime.

(km/gc)

Czechs eye securing 1.5m shells to help Ukraine amid firepower shortage

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has said that an ammunition initiative led by his country may provide Ukraine with a total of 1.5 million artillery shells, nearly doubling a previous pledge to send 800,000 rounds to help Kyiv overcome its depleted firepower amid Russia's invasion.

During a visit to Washington, Fiala said on April 16 that Prague had so far secured 500,000 rounds from suppliers outside the EU and saw "no reason why we cannot deliver 1 million more in the next 12 months." [Government of the Czech Republic]

Fiala added that the aim of the Czech-led initiative was to "find ammunition on world markets, to negotiate the financing, and to potentially negotiate deliveries to Ukraine".

The Czech Republic has mediated the procurement of ammunition from suppliers from Asia to Africa with the financial support of 20 countries, including the Netherlands, France, Canada, Poland and Germany. [Bloomberg] [Europe Monthly April 2024]

Meanwhile, a crowdfunding campaign in Slovakia has raised more than EUR 2 million to support the Czech government's initiative, though pro-Russia Prime Minister Robert Fico has firmly refused to join the Czech operation. Fico has claimed that the West's policy of arming Ukraine is only prolonging the country's war with Russia. [BBC]

In March, Czech national security advisor Tomas Pojar said the first tranche of military aid for Kyiv was expected to arrive in Ukraine as early as June. [Euractiv]

(yl/pk)

European Court of Human Rights elects new Irish judge

The parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe elected Justice Una Raifeartaigh as Ireland's judge on the European Court of Human Rights.

Rafertaigh will replace Siofra O'Leary, who was elected the court's first woman president in 2022. O'Leary has

served on the ECHR since 2015, and her term will end in July.

Justice Una Raifeartaigh brings a wealth of experience to her new role. She has served at the Irish High Court and the Court of Appeal, and has also excelled as a senior counsel barrister and a legal academic, specialising in criminal law and the law of evidence. (The Journal)

Raifertaigh's opponents were Judge Fergal Gaynor and Professor Colm O'Cinneide; Ni Raifeartaigh won by a majority of 164 votes, with Judge Gaynor receiving nine votes and Prof O Cinneide receiving four. (The Irish Times)

(al/gc)

Finland, Latvia sign 10-year security pacts with Ukraine

Finland and Latvia have signed 10-year security agreements with Kyiv, committing to provide Ukraine with military support as it fights Russian invaders. [Reuters]

Finnish President Alexander Stubb inked the deal with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky on April 3. [Euronews]

Stubb announced that Finland would contribute an additional EUR 188 million in aid, encompassing air defence and heavy-calibre ammunition. This raises Finland's total military help for Kyiv to around EUR 2 billion since the start of the Ukraine-Russia war. [Reuters] [Euronews]

"We are not giving this military support only for Ukraine to defend itself, we are giving this military support for Ukraine to win this war," Stubb said at a joint news conference in Kyiv. [Reuters]

Ukraine heavily depends on air defence systems provided by Western countries. It has recently experienced an increase in Russian missile and drone attacks, which have damaged its energy infrastructure. [Reuters]

Finland, which shares a 1,340 km border with Russia, became a member of NATO last year. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Latvia has also entered into a similar pact with Ukraine, committing to provide annual military support

equivalent to 0.25% of its GDP, according to Zelensky. [Reuters]

"Latvia also made a 10-year commitment to assist Ukraine with cyber defence, de-mining, and unmanned technologies, as well as support for Ukraine's EU and NATO accession," Zelensky said on social media platform X. [Reuters]

Finland and Latvia have become the eighth and ninth NATO members respectively to pledge sustained security cooperation with Kyiv. [Reuters]

Britain in January was the first to establish a 10-year agreement with Ukraine, aligning with Kyiv's aspirations to join NATO within that timeframe. Subsequently, Germany and France signed similar deals, followed by Denmark, Canada, Italy and the Netherlands. [Reuters] [Yahoo]

At last year's NATO summit in Vilnius, the G7 group of countries signed a declaration to establish "long-term security commitments and arrangements" with Ukraine which would be negotiated bilaterally.

These deals involve military aid, defence development, training, intelligence cooperation, and immediate consultations in case of a Russian attack. Over 30 countries have signed the pledge. [Associated Press] [Reuters] [Europe Monthly August 2023]

(rs/pk)

Finland extends border closure with Russia indefinitely amid security concerns

The Finnish government has announced it is extending the closure of its border crossings with Russia for an indefinite period, citing ongoing threats to national security. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

All eight of the Nordic nation's frontier road crossings will stay shut, but only as long as required to block an influx of migrants at these points, Finnish Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said. [Bloomberg]

Finland closed its land borders with Russia in November following a spike in arrivals by people from countries such as Syria and Somalia. Helsinki has accused Moscow of orchestrating the rise in migration as a weapon against the Nordic country, a claim that the Kremlin has denied. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

“Finnish authorities see this as a long-term situation. We have not seen anything this spring that would lead us to conclude that the situation has changed meaningfully,” Rantanen said in a statement. [Reuters]

In February, the government in Helsinki had announced that the frontier closure was scheduled to continue until April 14. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly March 2024]

Despite the shut border, some asylum seekers have still been arriving from Russia, and the Finnish government anticipates that these numbers could increase substantially as temperatures rise this spring. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

“There are hundreds and possibly thousands of people close to Finland’s border on the Russian side that could be instrumentalised against Finland,” said Rantanen. [Reuters]

He was referring to Moscow’s alleged policy of directing migrants towards the frontier to increase pressure on Finland and the European Union in response to their political and military backing of Ukraine. [Reuters]

Last year, Finland irked Moscow by forsaking its long-standing policy of military neutrality to join the NATO alliance, a move prompted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The Finnish border authority reported that between August and December last year, over 1,300 asylum seekers from countries such as Yemen, Somalia and Syria crossed into Finland from Russia. Before this surge, the daily average was about one person a day. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

France, Germany agree on new tank deal

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius and his French counterpart Sébastien Lecornu on April 26 signed a significant deal outlining a joint armaments project between their countries. This agreement centres on the development of the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), a next-generation battle tank intended to replace Germany's Leopard 2 and France's Leclerc tanks. Described as a historic milestone by Pistorius, the memorandum of understanding delineates the tasks and responsibilities within the

project, although specific details were not disclosed publicly. [Deutsche Welle]

Pistorius highlighted that while the agreement marks a crucial step forward, there is still a considerable journey ahead before tank production commences. He expressed optimism about finalising contracts with industry partners by the year's end and obtaining approval from German lawmakers. Lecornu identified potential contributors to the project, including KNDS, Rheinmetall, and Thales.

The MGCS project is part of a broader collaboration between Germany and France in the defence sector, initiated in 2017 under French President Emmanuel Macron and then German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It follows plans for the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and drone systems. Despite the ambitious goals, the project faces challenges stemming from industrial competition and differing political interests between the two countries.

(lm)

Germany leading Europe’s reconstruction plan for Ukraine

In the wake of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the international community has rallied behind efforts to support the nation's recovery and reconstruction. Among the key players in this endeavour, Germany has emerged as a pivotal partner, spearheading initiatives aimed at bolstering Ukraine's human capital, agricultural sector integration into the EU, and economic recovery.

One key initiative is the establishment of a Human Capital Coalition to address the shortage of qualified personnel in Ukraine. Led by German Development Minister Svenja Schulze, this coalition aims to provide training and educational opportunities in vital sectors like healthcare, construction, IT, and renewable energy. By partnering with international organisations and companies, Germany seeks to empower Ukrainians to contribute to their country's recovery.

Additionally, Germany is facilitating the integration of Ukraine's agricultural sector into the EU as part of preparation for accession negotiations. The European Commission has initiated discussions with Ukrainian representatives to assess progress and provide recommendations for negotiating agricultural policies. Despite anticipated challenges, the EU remains

committed to supporting Ukraine's economic integration efforts.

Moreover, the German government has adopted a comprehensive package of measures to support economic recovery in Ukraine. These measures include grants, interest subsidies, and investment guarantees aimed at bolstering small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are crucial for Ukraine's economy. Plans are also underway to establish an institution in Ukraine, modelled after Germany's Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), a German government-owned development bank. Established in 1948, amid Germany's reconstruction efforts after the second world war, it provides financial support for projects promoting economic development, infrastructure improvement, and environmental sustainability in Germany and internationally.

In addition, the European Committee of the Regions has called for increased long-term funding from the EU to support Ukraine's recovery. Recognizing the demographic and economic challenges facing Ukraine post-war, the EU is committed to providing additional financing to ensure the country's long-term stability and prosperity. [German Government] [The European Committee of the Regions] [Ukraine Business News 1] [Ukraine Business News 2]

(ms)

Ukraine no longer a sovereign state, says Kremlin-friendly Hungarian PM

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has claimed that Ukraine is no longer a sovereign state and criticised Western backing for Kyiv in its war against Russian invaders.

Orban, a nationalist who is Russia's closest ally in the EU, also told a conference of right-wing leaders in Brussels that Budapest would maintain ties with Moscow.

"Ukraine is now just a protectorate of the West," Orban said at the European National Conservatism Conference held on April 16 and 17.

"Without getting the money and weapons from the European Union and United States, Ukraine as a state would cease to exist. So it is not a sovereign state any more." [VOA]

Orban added that there should be a buffer between NATO and Russia, and Ukraine could serve as such a zone. [TASS]

Earlier this year, Orban blocked a EUR 50 billion EU support package for Ukraine for over a month before finally rescinding his threats to veto the aid.

Brussels, meanwhile, has withheld billions in EU funds earmarked for Budapest over concerns about democratic backsliding and corruption during Orban's 14-year rule. [Europe Monthly February 2024]

A controversy broke out over the National Conservatism Conference in the Belgian capital when local authorities tried to stop it from taking place due to what they said were safety concerns. A court eventually struck down an order from the local mayor and allowed the event to be held. [POLITICO]

(pk)

Lithuania, Poland hold joint drills to defend strategic land corridor

Lithuania and Poland have conducted joint military exercises near their shared border to test the two countries' ability to defend a strategic land corridor known as the Suwalki Gap. [AP] [Euronews] [Polish Radio] [Notes From Poland]

The exercises, dubbed Brave Griffin 24/II, ran from April 21-26 and involved 1,500 Lithuanian and almost 200 Polish troops, as well as US and Portuguese forces. [AP] [Notes From Poland]

The Suwalki Gap is a 65 km-long strip of territory between Poland and Lithuania. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

The narrow corridor is flanked by the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad to the west and Russia-allied Belarus to the east. Analysts say that leaves Lithuania and neighbouring Latvia and Estonia – all three of them NATO member states – at risk of being surrounded and cut off from the rest of the Western military alliance in the event of an armed conflict. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

However, experts say that since Sweden's accession to NATO in March this year, the threat of being cut off is less severe as the Baltic Sea is now almost completely surrounded by members of the alliance. [AP]

Commenting on the joint drills, Polish President Andrzej Duda said: "There is a potential threat, which is why these exercises are going on." He added: "A potential aggressor must see our readiness." [AP] [Euronews]

Duda and his Lithuanian counterpart, President Gitanas Nauseda, met and observed the drills on the last day of the joint exercise. [AP]

The manoeuvres are part of the larger NATO Steadfast Defender training programme, which is the largest such operation undertaken by the military alliance since the Cold War, involving more than 90,000 troops from all member states. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland]

Steadfast Defender began as a response to Moscow's ongoing war in Ukraine, and aims to demonstrate NATO's readiness to deter potential Russian aggression. [TVP World]

(ek/pk)

Serbia buys French fighters

Serbia has decided to buy fighter jets from France in a strategic pivot to Europe.

Belgrade announced it would buy 12 Rafale Fighter Jets from French company Dassault Aviation, diversifying its arms inventory, primarily Russian and Chinese weapons. [Radio Free Europe]

Belgrade has carved out its foreign policy in the last few years and, more tellingly, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Allegedly, Belgrade sent ammunition to aid Ukraine fend against Russia's invasion despite nurturing ties with Moscow.

Yet it has also assuaged Moscow by hosting Russian networks, continuing to do business with Russian companies, and buying Russian weapons. [Reuters], [Radio Free Europe]

European Union Foreign Ministers agreed to freeze Serbia's accession path to the European Union if it does not normalise relations with its neighbour Kosovo. Russia and China have not recognised Kosovo as an independent state. [Radio Free Europe], [Euro News]

(js/gc)

Sweden to contribute mechanised battalion to NATO forces in Latvia

Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson on April 25 announced that Sweden will contribute a mechanised battalion to NATO forces in Latvia in 2025 as a deterrent against potential Russian aggression.

This marks Sweden's first troop contribution to NATO since the Nordic nation joined the alliance on March 7. The move is awaiting confirmation by parliament.

The intention to station a team of around 600 soldiers in Latvia for six months was announced in January, before Sweden officially joined NATO. [Anadolu Ajansi]

(fg)

Ukraine must remain independent, says Polish PM

Warsaw and Copenhagen agree that the integrity and independence of Ukraine must be maintained, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has said after holding talks with his Danish counterpart.

After a bilateral meeting with Danish premier Mette Frederiksen in Warsaw on April 15, Tusk said: "We will work... towards a unified, clear and fair EU stance on the war in Ukraine, and we will be among those who help and mobilise others to assist Ukraine."

Poland has been one of neighbouring Ukraine's staunchest supporters since it was invaded by Russia in February 2022, and has been calling for more Western military aid for Kyiv.

Tusk added: "Denmark and Poland rule out any scenario other than one in which Ukraine maintains its integrity and independence." [Polish Radio] [Polish Press Agency]

Warsaw is preparing to take over the rotating presidency of the EU on January 1 next year. Copenhagen will assume that role six months later.

(pk)

UK extradites controversial Montenegrin businessman wanted for graft

Dusko Knezevic, a prominent Montenegrin businessman and former ally of ex-President Milo Djukanovic, has been extradited from the United Kingdom to Montenegro to face charges related to corruption.

He is accused of involvement in financial misconduct, including abuse of office, incitement, money laundering, and forming a criminal organisation. Knezevic claims to possess evidence implicating Djukanovic in corrupt activities. His extradition follows a lengthy legal battle and comes amid ongoing political tensions in Montenegro. [BalkanInsight]

(lm)

Russia tells citizens not to travel to Middle East

Russia has told its citizens to refrain from travelling to the Middle East due to the potential conflict between Iran and Israel. [Reuters]

The warning was made after Iran threatened to retaliate against an Israeli attack on its embassy compound in Damascus, Syria, which killed a top Iranian general and six Iranian military officers. Iran carried through with its threat on April 13 with drones and missile attacks directed at Israel. [Reuters]

The warning, issued by Russia's foreign ministry, emphasised the dangers of travelling to Israel, Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov also spoke about the conflict, saying, "Right now it's very important for everyone to maintain restraint so as not to lead to a complete destabilisation of the situation in the region". [Reuters]

(lk/gc)

Former Syrian general on trial in Sweden over alleged role in war crimes

A former Syrian army general accused of taking part in war crimes during the civil war in his home country went on trial before a Stockholm court on April 15.

General Mohammed Hamo is the highest-ranking Syrian military official to be tried in Europe. [AFP/France 24]

He was living in Sweden when he was first arrested in December 2021. Hamo was later released due to lack of evidence. However, in February he was charged with aiding and abetting crimes that violate international law. [Sveriges Radio]

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government in 2011 repressed peaceful pro-democracy protests, sparking a civil war between the regime and armed opposition groups.

Hamo is accused of participating in warfare between January and July 2012 that "systematically included attacks carried out in violation of the principle of distinction, caution and proportionality," the Associated Press reported.

Hamo defected from the Syrian army in mid-2012 and joined forces fighting to remove President Assad from power.

Aida Samani of the Civil Rights Defenders, a human rights organisation, said: "This trial is the first in a European court to concern the conduct of hostilities and, more specifically, indiscriminate attacks by the Syrian army." [AFP/France 24]

Hamo faces 18 years to life in jail if convicted. His defence lawyer said Hamo was innocent, adding: "He had acted in a military context and had to follow orders."

The trial is expected to last until the end of May.

(km/pk)

Turkey, Iraq discuss anti-terrorism cooperation with an eye on PKK

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held bilateral talks on April 22 with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in Baghdad to discuss security, economic and energy cooperation.

In a joint news conference, Erdogan disclosed that the sides agreed to deal with the challenge of non-state armed actors that could cooperate with "terrorist" groups.

Welcoming Iraq's designation of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a banned group, he added that the leaders discussed ways the two countries could cooperate in combating the PKK, which Ankara considers a "terrorist" group and which has a presence in northern Iraq. In addition, he reaffirmed Turkey's interest in expanding mutual trade and cooperation in energy, health and tourism with Iraq.

During Erdogan's visit to Iraq, 26 cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding were signed, including a strategic framework agreement to oversee security, energy and economic cooperation, a 10-year agreement on management of water resources, and a preliminary agreement to cooperate on a USD 17 billion Development Road project. [Al Jazeera] [Iraqi News Agency]

In the latest development, Iraq has reportedly set up two military bases in the village of Kishani in Zakho District, near the Turkish border, where PKK presence is assumed. This marks the first time Iraqi border guard forces have been deployed in the said region in 30 years. [Daily Sabah]

(dql)

Turkey denies claims of military support for Israel

Turkey has denied claims of military cooperation with Israel, saying that 'It is not possible for the Republic of Turkiye, which has always supported Palestine, to carry out or engage in any activity that would harm the Palestinians.' (Daily Sabah)

Media reports claimed that Turkey had exported ammunition and weapons to Israel. The Turkish Presidency's Directorate of Communications Centre for Countering Disinformation also rejected the claims.

It said that the products in the export list in question were "not war weapons and ammunition but ungrooved rifle spare parts and accessories and fishing equipment used for individual purposes such as sports and hunting." (Daily Sabah)

Ankara supports a two-state solution and collaborates with Egypt to deliver aid to Gaza. (Al Mayadeen).

(al/gc)

Polish PM says victory by 'pro-Russian' Trump may hurt European security

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has warned that a win by "pro-Russian" Donald Trump in the US presidential elections could damage European security.

Tusk's comments came as Polish President Andrzej Duda held private talks with Trump in New York on April 17, a meeting that the pro-EU government in Warsaw appeared to view with distaste.

Duda, a conservative who has frequently been criticised by politicians in Poland's ruling coalition, enjoyed close relations with Trump when the latter was in office.

The two men had dinner at Trump Tower in Manhattan amid the US election campaign. They discussed the war in Ukraine, the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and a proposal recently touted by Duda that NATO countries should spend at least 3% of their GDP on defence, Trump's campaign team said. [Notes from Poland]

Duda described the talks as "a friendly meeting in a very nice atmosphere."

Many liberals in Europe are jittery about America's future commitment to NATO if Trump wins the presidency again.

The outspoken Republican caused shock and anger when he said in February that if re-elected he would "not protect" any NATO nations that failed to meet a target of spending at least 2% of their GDP on defence. He added that he would even encourage Moscow to attack them. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

Poland, long fearful of its giant eastern neighbour Russia, is one of America's staunchest allies and looks to the US as the key guarantor of its security.

'Critical attitude to NATO'

Commenting ahead of Duda's meeting with Trump, Tusk, a pro-EU centrist, said: "In Poland, I think almost all of us understand that from the point of view of Poland's security, the security of Europe, the future of NATO, a possible victory by Mr Trump would probably be unfavourable for these issues."

Tusk added: "Almost every speech by... Trump very clearly shows his rather anti-Ukrainian sentiment, his pro-Russian attitude... his reluctance to help Ukraine,

his very critical attitude towards NATO." [tvn24.pl] [Rzeczpospolita]

However, Polish Deputy Defence Minister Pawel Zalewski said Duda's meeting with Trump was "a good idea", adding: "We need contact with the most important candidates, that is, Joe Biden and Donald Trump." [Notes from Poland]

(pk)

Former British PM Truss supports Trump in US presidential race

Former British Prime Minister Liz Truss has supported Donald Trump in the upcoming US presidential election. In several recent statements and interviews, Truss endorsed Trump's leadership, citing her belief that the world was safer during his tenure in the White House [BBC].

Truss served as prime minister for a record-short 49 days and has been vocal about her support for Trump's policies, particularly international affairs. She highlighted Trump's assertive stance towards Iran and China and his support for Ukraine, including the approval of military aid despite opposition from within his party [BBC].

Speaking to various media outlets, Truss has underscored the need for a strong America, describing it as crucial in the face of escalating global tensions. She has also voiced her concerns about the current trajectory of Western society, issuing a stark warning against what she perceives as the undermining of conservative values by left-wing ideologies [BBC].

Her endorsement of Trump, a move that has sparked widespread interest and debate, coincides with the publication of her new book. This book, a unique blend of memoir and manifesto, is titled 'Revolution Against Globalism, Socialism and the Liberal Establishment'. It delves into her brief tenure as prime minister, shedding light on the challenges she faced and her vision for political change [Politico].

(ha/gc)

Belarus, Kazakhstan strengthen ties

The Belarusian Foreign Minister, Sergei Aleinik, and the Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, Murat Nurtleu,

met on April 11 in Minsk to strengthen bilateral ties. They discussed trade and further collaboration in political, economic, cultural and humanitarian fields.

They also evaluated the progress of joint projects in construction, mechanical engineering and the agro-industrial complex.

Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister Murat Nurtleu, who also serves as the Foreign Minister, said “Kazakhstan has close and comprehensive relations with Belarus, the country’s important, time-tested strategic partner.” [The Astana Times]

(ik/gc)

EU investigates Chinese trade practices

The European Union (EU) is ramping up investigations into Chinese trade practices, reflecting growing concerns over unfair competition and market access. The EU's Competition Commission has initiated probes into Chinese wind turbine manufacturers operating in five EU nations, including Spain, Greece, France, Romania, and Bulgaria. This move comes amid fears of market distortion due to the presence of Chinese products in a market largely dominated by European firms like Vestas and Siemens Gamesa.

Chinese companies such as Goldwind and Envision have made inroads into Europe's wind energy sector, prompting questions about their competitive practices, especially in onshore wind projects. This investigation follows similar probes into Chinese solar panel manufacturers and electric vehicle subsidies, highlighting the EU's commitment to ensuring fair competition.

In a separate development, the EU is gearing up to launch an investigation into China's procurement practices regarding medical devices. Concerns have been raised regarding Beijing's alleged favouritism towards domestic suppliers, potentially shutting out foreign competition. This move reflects broader tensions between the EU and China over trade practices, with previous investigations targeting industries like electric vehicles and security equipment.

Amid these investigations, the EU Agriculture Commissioner emphasised the importance of expanding agri-food exports to China during his visit to Shanghai. Despite trade tensions, the agri-food sector maintains a trade surplus with China, presenting

opportunities for growth in sectors like poultry, pork, beef, and dairy.

China, in response to these probes, has criticised the EU's approach, labelling it as protectionist and urging the EU to cease suppressing Chinese enterprises. The EU's stance aligns with that of the United States, which has also expressed concerns about unfair trade practices.

Meanwhile, China has adopted a new Tariff Law aimed at enhancing its trade defence capabilities amidst ongoing trade tensions with key partners like the US and the EU. This move signifies Beijing's readiness to respond to tariffs imposed on its exports and protect its economic interests. [China Daily] [FMPRC, in Chinese] [FMPRC] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Reuters 3] [Reuters 4] [Reuters 5]

(jm/ms/yg)

EU Commission updates economic distortion report on China

The European Commission released an updated 712-page report detailing state-led economic distortions in China on April 10, now including telecom equipment, semiconductors, rail, renewable energy, and electric vehicles, in addition to the previously covered steel, aluminium, chemicals, and ceramics sectors. This comprehensive report serves as a basis for EU industries to file anti-dumping complaints.

Observers suggest that the inclusion of new sectors may motivate more industries to explore anti-dumping complaints. The Commission, which launches approximately ten anti-dumping investigations every year, is currently investigating subsidies granted to Chinese wind turbine suppliers. Additionally, an anti-subsidy probe has been initiated against Chinese electric vehicle imports by the commission (see AiR No. 38, September/2023, 3).

Amidst international scrutiny over its industrial policies, China's National People's Congress pledged to curb overcapacity in March. This move was seen as a response to criticisms made by the U.S. and EU that China's overcapacity would harm Western businesses by saturating the market with low-priced exports

However, Chinese state media dismissed the concerns as an attempt to hinder China's growth. [Reuters]

(yq)

French, Chinese militaries sign inter-theatre cooperation and dialogue mechanism

During a meeting between General Wang Xiubin, Commander of the Chinese PLA Southern Theater Command, and visiting Rear Admiral Geoffroy d'Andigné, Commander of the Pacific Ocean and French Polynesian maritime zones, China and France on April 25 signed a framework document to establish a maritime and aerial cooperation and dialogue mechanism between the two militaries' theatres.

The two sides also discussed inter-theatre communication and cooperation, the international and regional security situation and other issues of common concern.

The agreement comes ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping's upcoming visit to France where he will meet French President Emmanuel Macron. It also comes as France joined the US and the Philippines in the first military drill of the annual "Balikatan" military exercise, which concluded on April 29. [China Military] [South China Morning Post]

(dql)

Germany's Scholz visits China

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz travelled to China, where he promoted business ties and highlighted Beijing's growing ties with Moscow.

Scholz told reporters that he made a case to Leader Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang that they should make it easier for German companies to operate in China mainly by receiving equal market access and protecting intellectual property. [Reuters]

Scholz also asked the Chinese leader "to exert pressure on Russia so that (President Vladimir) Putin finally calls off his insane campaign, withdraws his troops and ends this terrible war." Shortly before the trip, the German Chancellor remarked that the war was causing reputational damage to Beijing, and while Scholz said he talked about China's growing support for Russia in its war, he made no indication about whether this would cease. [Reuters]

Germany was jolted by a spying scandal that reverberated through one of Berlin's power echelons,

the European Parliament. The detention of a parliamentary assistant to a far-right Alternative For Deutschland on suspicion of espionage for the Chinese state has cast a shadow on Germany-China relations.

(js/gc)

Germany allows India to buy small arms from its firms

In a move underscoring Germany's commitment to strengthening its relationship with India, Berlin has granted New Delhi a licence to purchase small arms from German companies, marking a significant relaxation in its policy. Additionally, Germany has simplified licensing requirements for the sale of military equipment to India. [Times of India] [The Hindu]

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius' visit to India last year provided a renewed thrust to the bilateral defence partnership. The first German defence minister to visit the South Asian country since 2015, Pistorius is in favour of making defence cooperation and weapons deals with India easier by treating the country as a strategic partner like Australia or Japan. [AiR No. 23, June/2023, 1]

In March, the German ambassador to India, Philipp Ackermann, said in an interview that there is now a "clear political will" in Berlin to improve defence ties with New Delhi, calling it a "huge paradigm shift." These remarks came after the defence secretaries of both countries held talks in Berlin at the end of February over developing defence cooperation, the security situation in the Indo-Pacific and possible joint exercises in the region.

The German air force is now slated to take part in the Tarang Shakti multilateral drills hosted by the Indian air force in August, along with France, the United States and other countries. Additionally, in October, a German naval frigate and a combat support ship are scheduled to visit India's western state of Goa and engage in exercises with the Indian Navy.

Separately, Germany and Spain are competing in India's Project-75I tender for six conventional submarines, with Germany presenting a government-to-government proposal. Germany is satisfied with the evaluation process and plans to discuss the proposal further once the evaluation is complete.

(fd)

Singapore to upgrade bilateral ties with Germany, France

Following his visits to Germany and France last week, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong revealed plans to strengthen ties with both nations, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence, sustainability, and defence. Wong underscored the significance of engaging with Europe amid shifting global dynamics, highlighting discussions with key leaders and initiatives to capitalise on opportunities in digital trade and energy. [Business Times]

During his visit to Germany from April 8 to 10, Wong met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin, where they agreed to pursue an upgrade of bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. If successful, this move would mark Germany as only the second European Union member state to establish such a strategic partnership with Singapore, alongside France. [The Straits Times]

Wong also engaged with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and German Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action Robert Habeck, while also meeting with overseas Singaporeans, stressing their role as valuable ambassadors.

In France from April 10 to 13, Wong met with French President Emmanuel Macron, and they concurred that their countries are poised to elevate their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) by 2025, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties. France will be Singapore's second CSP partner after Australia. Both leaders acknowledged the substantial progress made in bilateral cooperation since elevating their relations to a strategic partnership in 2012. Additionally, they inaugurated the France-Singapore Joint Year of Sustainability, focusing on sustainable development initiatives aligned with the green transition. [The Straits Times]

(lb)

Chinese automaker mulls new plant in Italy, domestic producer unhappy

Chinese automaker Dongfeng said on April 16 it is considering building a plant in Italy with an annual capacity of over 100,000 vehicles as the government in Rome seeks to increase car production.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government is also in talks with China's Chery Auto and others from outside Asia.

However, the CEO of Stellantis, Italy's dominant automaker, has warned that allowing Chinese companies to set up shop in the southern European country could trigger plant closures and job losses – a politically sensitive scenario the government in Rome hopes to avoid.

Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares said on April 10 that increased rivalry from Chinese manufacturers would mean his company's operations may need to be streamlined so they remain competitive.

Tensions flared recently over a decision by Stellantis, which owns the Alfa Romeo brand, to manufacture its Milano SUV in Poland instead of Italy.

Stellantis on April 15 announced it was changing the name of the car to Junior after Industry Minister Adolfo Urso accused the firm of misleading buyers, adding: "A car called Milano cannot be produced in Poland." [Telegraph]

Such disagreements highlight the challenges facing Italy's automotive industry. The government must achieve a delicate balance: attracting foreign investment to boost production while ensuring that a vital domestic sector stays competitive. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2] [Bloomberg]

(vm/pk)

Norway removes Pakistan from list of nations posing security concerns

Norway has decided to remove Pakistan from its list of nations considered to pose a security concern after diplomatic efforts by Islamabad, news outlets have reported.

The move to take Pakistan off the National Threat Assessment List was revealed in the latest report by Norway's Police Security Service, which is responsible for intelligence, security and defence issues in the Nordic country. [APP] [Business Recorder] [Arab News]

The decision is expected to help improve Pakistan's image internationally and make life easier for Pakistani researchers and students, who have faced difficulties in studying and working in Norway due to their

country's inclusion on the list. [APP] [Global Village Space] [The News International]

(nbnc/pk)

Poland to buy South Korean rocket launchers and missiles for USD 1.6bn

Poland is to buy 72 Chunmoo rocket artillery units and several thousand tactical guided missiles from South Korea in a USD 1.6 billion deal.

The hardware will be supplied by South Korean conglomerate Hanwha Aerospace. The contract is an extension of a larger deal that Warsaw struck with the same firm two years ago for 218 launchers. [Polish Radio] [Notes from Poland]

The 2022 contract under Poland's previous government was South Korea's largest-ever arms sale. [Reuters]

The new agreement was announced on April 25 by Polish Deputy Defence Minister Pawel Bejda during a visit by a government delegation to South Korea.

"The acquisition of these launcher modules and guided missiles marks a significant advancement in our defence capabilities, incorporating 122mm rocket ammunition produced by the Polish arms industry," said Bejda.

Fearful of potential Russian aggression after Moscow's forces invaded neighbouring Ukraine in 2022, Poland has hiked its defence spending to 4% of its GDP, the highest proportion in NATO. [Polish Radio] [Notes from Poland]

(pk)

Romania, South Korea sign MoU on nuclear energy

On April 23, Romania and South Korea signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to create a new dialogue platform for cooperation in the field of civil nuclear energy. The signing by South Korean Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun and his Romanian counterpart Sebastian-Ioan Burduja took place in Seoul.

The envisioned dialogue platform is intended to involve governments and private companies from both

countries in long-term consultations. The MoU promises to deepen cooperation in nuclear power generation, nuclear fuel and advanced small modular reactors.

Romania in particular hopes that this agreement will enable the country to continue the expansion of nuclear energy to achieve its emission reduction targets.

In separate talks, Ahn and Burduja also agreed to jointly push ahead with the construction of a tritium removal facility at the Romanian nuclear power plant in Cernavoda, Romania. In 2023, the South Korean company Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power Co. was awarded the contract to build this plant, which extracts tritium from heavy water and stores it in a safe form. [Yonhap]

(fg)

China supports Russia with weapon manufacturing

China has been supporting Russia's weapon manufacturing industry as part of Russia's extensive military expansion triggered by the invasion of Ukraine. [CNN]

China has been providing machine tools, drone and turbojet engines, cruise missiles, microelectronics, and more, CNN reported, citing US officials and US intelligence. [CNN]

Support from China has allowed Russia's military effort to continue, whilst Ukraine struggles with funding for weapons and defence (especially before the US aid bill passed in the Senate).

The partnership goes beyond weaponry: China is helping Russia with satellites and imagery pertaining to the war in Ukraine. [CNN]

(ik/gc)

Chinese President Xi Jinping meets Russian foreign minister

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov on April 9 in Beijing.

During the discussions, Xi expressed support for Russia's efforts to maintain social stability and jointly reform global governance, reflecting a shared agenda to counter Western influence. Lavrov reaffirmed that enhancing ties with China remains a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy.

Lavrov's visit was framed as a prelude to an anticipated state visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin, following his election victory last month. The meeting comes after Lavrov's meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. During the meeting, Wang Yi highlighted the countries' ties as being at "the highest level in history" and opposed a Cold War mentality.

The meeting also set the stage for further diplomatic engagements, including a potential peace conference on Ukraine, demonstrating the deepening partnership as both nations navigate global geopolitical challenges. [CNN] [FMPRC, in Chinese]

(yg)

Slovenia, China deepen ties

Slovenia's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon visited China from April 16 to 20. On her four-day trip, Fajon was accompanied by a large Slovenian business delegation.

On April 17, Fajon met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing. During their talks, the two ministers pledged to strengthen cooperation in various fields.

Wang highlighted the stable and mature relationship between China and Slovenia, appreciating Slovenia's support for China's core interests and its adherence to the one-China principle. He also congratulated Slovenia on its election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and expressed China's readiness to cooperate with Slovenia in international institutions. [The State Council, the PRC]

Fajon affirmed Slovenia's commitment to the one-China policy, emphasised the importance of bilateral relations, and expressed willingness to deepen cooperation, particularly in economy, trade, tourism, and innovation, as well as to address global challenges together under multilateral frameworks. [Republic of Slovenia]

During an exclusive interview with the Chinese state media outlet Global Times on April 17, Ziga Vavpotic, chairman of the Slovenian-Chinese Business Council,

emphasised the potential for collaboration between Slovenian and Chinese companies, particularly in areas like tourism, vehicles, logistics, and pharmaceuticals.

Slovenia's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative since 2017 was highlighted as strengthening bilateral ties. China expressed readiness to work closely with Slovenia, welcoming the visit as an opportunity to deepen dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation in various areas. [Xinhua Silk Road] [Global Times]

(jm)

Sweden expels Chinese journalist, citing national security fears

Sweden has expelled a Chinese journalist, citing concerns over national security.

The 57-year-old woman had been in custody since October. She had lived in Sweden for almost 20 years, held a residence permit and was married to a Swedish man, broadcaster SVT reported. [AP News]

Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer told Reuters: "On April 4, the government decided to reject an appeal against a decision on deportation under the law on the special control of certain foreigners."

The journalist reportedly had contacts with the Chinese embassy and people in Sweden connected to the government in Beijing, hosting Chinese officials on visits to the Nordic country. [SVT] [Euronews] [DN]

Her lawyer said the journalist denied all accusations from the Swedish authorities.

A spokesperson for China's embassy in Stockholm said the government in Beijing always requests Chinese citizens to comply with the laws of their country of residence, adding it expects Sweden to guarantee that the rights of Chinese citizens are not violated. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Turkey seeks support from Cambodia in developing relations with ASEAN

Turkey is seeking Cambodia's support to strengthen its ties with ASEAN countries, aiming for closer cooperation across the region. Ankara made this request during a meeting between the president of the

Cambodian Senate, Hun Sen, and Turkey's ambassador to Cambodia, Ülkü Kocaefe, on April 29 that focused on enhancing bilateral relations.

Kocaefe emphasised the growing relations between the two countries, particularly in education, tourism and trade. He noted the positive progress in bilateral trade and expressed confidence in achieving an increased trade target of USD 1 billion. They also discussed enhancing tourism and people-to-people revelations through exchanges and educational opportunities.

Hun Sen expressed his commitment to enhancing the relationship between the Cambodian Senate and the Turkish parliament.

The leaders also discussed Turkey's EU membership, regional and international issues such as the Russia-Ukraine and Middle Eastern conflicts.

Last year Prime Minister Hun Manet affirmed Cambodia's determination to deepen cooperation with Turkey in various sectors, including defence, education, agriculture, tourism, and trade, with plans for joint military exercises in the future. [Khmer Times]

(lvw)

UK, Vietnam sign new agreement to combat illegal migration

The United Kingdom and Vietnam have signed an agreement to increase cooperation in tackling illegal migration to the UK, particularly addressing the risks faced by Vietnamese individuals crossing the English Channel.

Both nations have committed to increasing intelligence-sharing, deterring dangerous journeys, facilitating returns for illegal migrants, and developing a joint action plan to combat human trafficking. Britain's Minister for Countering Illegal Migration, Michael Tomlinson, and Senior Colonel Vu Van Hung from Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security signed the joint statement in London on April 17. [GOV.UK]

The deal comes as an increasing number of Vietnamese migrants have arrived in the UK via small boats, surpassing other nationalities in recent numbers. This surge in Vietnamese migrants has contributed to record-breaking figures of arrivals in the UK, prompting the government to advocate for the passage of the Rwanda Bill, which aims to combat

illegal migration and the exploitation of migrants by smuggling gangs.

Under the policy, anyone "entering the UK illegally" after January 1, 2022, could be sent to Rwanda to have their claims processed there, with no limit on numbers. [The Telegraph]

(wn/lm)

EU launches new regional initiatives in Africa

The European Union has launched multiple initiatives reflecting its latest efforts in empowering African youth with education. The initiatives include the Team Europe Initiative on Opportunity-driven Skills and Vocational Education and Training and the Africa-Europe Youth Academy as well as 15 new projects under the flagship Youth Mobility for Africa.

The Team Europe Initiative Opportunity-driven Skills and Vocational Education and Training in Africa seeks to enhance the match between skills training and concrete employment opportunities, with a geographical focus on Sub-Saharan Africa which has seen Global Gateway investments.

The Africa-Europe Youth Academy will provide opportunities for formal and informal learning and exchanges to young people who seek to improve their leadership skills and build networks between Africa and Europe.

Covering 22 African countries, the 15 Intra-Africa Mobility Scheme projects, meanwhile, will offer learning mobility opportunities for students, trainees, and staff across the continent, aimed at boosting high-level green and digital skills. [European Commission]

(dql)

French plans for development spark outrage in Western Sahara

Leaders in the disputed regions of the Western Sahara territory have publicly denounced a new partnership between France and Morocco to develop high-voltage power lines.

The proposed development would traverse the desert between the Western Saharan capital of Dakhla and

the Moroccan financial hub of Casablanca, located on the kingdom's Atlantic coast, according to reporting from Le Monde. [Reuters]

An Algerian state media report, based on Western Sahara's Information Ministry, referred to the move by France as "provocative." The statement went on to characterise the French-Moroccan project as "a dangerous escalation of France's hostile stance towards the Sahrawi people," adding that this plan by the French Development Agency (AFD) "represents explicit support for Morocco's illegal occupation of parts of Western Sahara." [Reuters]

Morocco has held around 80% of the Western Sahara territory since Spain ceded control to the kingdom in 1975. Subsequent unrest has persisted as the Polisario Front of the Sahrawi people have launched a series of guerrilla wars against the Moroccan government. Tensions between the Algerian-backed militant group and Morocco have continued to climb following the collapse of a previous UN-brokered cease-fire agreement in November of 2020, with Polisario leader Brahim Ghali previously threatening to attack "air, land and sea targets" across Morocco. [Reuters] [Africa Defense Forum]

Wider conflict

The Moroccan-Sahrawi rift is often associated with the larger feud between Morocco and the neighbouring state of Algeria. Moroccan officials have accused the Algerian government of furnishing Polisario Front fighters with weapons and other supplies.

Additionally, Algerian officials helped to open an office for another breakaway independence group- the Moroccan Republic of the Rif- in the Algerian capital of Algiers in March 2024. The Moroccan government has responded by increasing its support for the Kabyla people's claims of independence from Algeria. Algeria closed its border with the neighbouring kingdom in 1994 and proceeded to cut off diplomatic ties in August of 2021. Earlier in 2023 Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said that relations between the two states had deteriorated to "the point of no return." [Africa Defense Forum]

The combined spending of the former French territories make up 74% of all defence spending in North Africa according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and the Global Firepower yearly review reports that Algeria is set to spend an estimated $21.6 billion for the year 2024 with Morocco coming in second at $12.1 billion. [Africa Defense Forum]

These tensions have also worked to push each nation to opposite ends of the geopolitical spectrum as Morocco continues to strengthen ties with Israel, France, and the United States who help to provide Rabat with support including military equipment, while in July 2021, Algeria announced a $7 billion arms deal with Russia. [Africa Defense Forum]

(cqk/gc)

Burkina Faso junta expels three French diplomats over alleged subversive attacks

Burkina Faso's military junta on April 16 expelled three French diplomats over alleged subversive activities, according to a government document. The diplomats, including two political advisors, have been declared persona non grata and given 48 hours to leave the country. [EuroNews]

The expulsion reflects deteriorating relations between Burkina Faso and France, exacerbated by the junta's severing of military ties with France in 2023. Anti-French sentiment has risen amid ongoing Islamist extremist violence, prompting calls to strengthen ties with Russia instead. Additionally, the junta has distanced itself from regional and Western nations, leaving the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and forming an alliance with Mali and Niger.

(lm)

Italy pledges help for Tunisian firms in bid to cut migration

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Tunisia's President Kais Saied have signed an agreement under which Rome will extend credit facilities to small and medium enterprises in the North African country, as part of a broader effort to curb migration to Europe.

The credit facilities are designed to stimulate economic growth and foster entrepreneurship in Tunisia.

The deal was inked during a trip by Meloni to Tunisia on April 17, her fourth visit to the country in ten months. She and President Saied discussed the implementation of the Mattei Plan, a cornerstone of Italy's foreign policy, and its implications for bilateral cooperation. [ANSA] [LeMonde]

The Mattei Plan aims to forge a new partnership with African nations to address the underlying causes of irregular migration to Europe, such as poverty, while also positioning Italy as a key energy hub in the region.

Among other agreements signed during Meloni's visit were provisions for bolstering support for the Tunisian state budget, specifically for enhancing energy efficiency and promoting renewable energy sources.

Meloni is playing a leading role in facilitating an EU-Tunisia partnership, which encompasses financial assistance and cooperation measures aimed at combating human trafficking.

As well as reaffirming Italy's commitment to strengthening ties with its North African neighbour, Meloni's visit underscored the pivotal role Tunisia plays in Rome's geopolitical and economic objectives on the African continent, observers said. [Governo]

(vm/pk)

Poland, Australia reinforce defence ties

Poland and Australia have drafted a new bilateral agreement on cooperation in security and defence, "particularly with a focus on the situation in Ukraine" as that country battles Russian invaders, the Polish defence minister has said.

Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz made the announcement after talks with his Australian counterpart Richard Marles in Warsaw on April 26.

Kosiniak-Kamysz voiced gratitude to Australia for its support of Ukraine, including its military, financial and humanitarian aid. [Polish Radio] [Polska Zbrojna]

Warsaw has been a staunch backer of Kyiv since Ukraine was attacked by Russia in 2022.

(pk)

Team:

Aimee Rae (ar), Anna Lavery (al), Ann-Charlotte Neumann (acn), Caleb Klubben (cqk), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Eric Kliszcz (ek), Florian Gareis (fg), Glen Carey (gc), Harmia Amadi (ha), Isobel Knight (ik), Jacob Smith (js), Joss Thomas (jt), Katherine Mansfield (km), Lucas Meier (lm), Maria Rusu

(mr), Morten Strantzen (ms), Nydia Ndam Carrillo (nbnc), Peter Kononczuk (pk), Quentin Vidberg (qv), Rex Wempen (rw), Rohini Singh (rs), Sophie Riordan (sr), Venus Phuangkom, Vincenzo Marino (vm), Warren O'Broin (wb), Yi-Ting Lo (yl)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: info@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

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

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe