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Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest issue of 'Europe in Review'.

As always, we are happy to share our latest content on European Affairs in domestic politics and international relations with you, and we have a special request. To continue delivering insightful analyses and to support the continuation of the Europe in Review with our new website, we are seeking private investors and institutional partners.

If you value our monthly newsletter, we kindly ask for your support in spreading the word about our funding needs. We are eager to share a detailed prospectus outlining our plans with interested parties.

For the meanwhile, have a great day and an interesting read!

Warm regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor-in-Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Russia opens new front as Western nations resupply Ukraine

Russia has opened a new front in its war against Ukraine, sending thousands of soldiers over its border with the north-eastern region of Kharkiv. Western ammunition has, after months of delay, finally arrived in the hands of Ukrainian gunners. Key allies of Kyiv have – on a limited basis – allowed it to strike Russian territory with Western-supplied weaponry. Meanwhile, Moscow is hitting civilian infrastructure with impunity as Ukraine continues to suffer a shortage of air defences.

Russia launches offensive in Kharkiv but faces stern resistance

After weeks of buildup, Russian forces in the Belgorod region poured across the Ukrainian state border and into the neighbouring Kharkiv area on May 10.

The offensive reopened a front that had largely remained closed since Russian forces were pushed out of the region in the autumn of 2022. Unlike previous Russian offensives, the operations in Kharkiv were led by infantry assaults and lacked the armoured vehicles that usually spearhead the Kremlin's assaults.

Nevertheless, the offensive advanced several kilometres into Ukrainian territory. Much of Ukraine's northern border with Russia is a "grey zone", where fortification is difficult due to Russian artillery, meaning Moscow's forces faced little resistance – until they reached the first defensive line.

Russian troops are currently stopped on the Ukrainian defensive lines along the Donets river. Fierce fighting is taking place in the now devastated northern town of Vovchansk, where several Russian attempts to advance have ground to a halt around six kilometres from the Russian border. The timely arrival of Western shells has allowed Ukrainian artillery units to contribute significantly to the defence of Vovchansk.

Taking Kharkiv remains an unrealistic goal for the Kremlin, but this latest offensive will serve to further stretch the Ukrainian defenders and weaken their opposition to Russia's main axis of attack – the eastern Donbas region. Kharkiv itself continues to suffer indiscriminate bombardment from Russian missile units across the border, with significant civilian casualties. Russia is likely to continue its assault against Vovchansk, but will need to advance significantly and at a rate not seen since early 2022 if it wants to threaten the city of Kharkiv itself. [Associated Press] [Bloomberg] [Financial Times] [Forbes] [New York Times] [Irish Times] [Reuters] [Sky News]

Elsewhere, Russia continued its grinding offensive in the Donbas and threatened to open another northern front.

Moscow's forces remain concentrated around the eastern town of Chasiv Yar, which lies several kilometres from the ruined city of Bakhmut, and continue to assault Ukrainian lines west of Avdiivka. Russian troops face stiff resistance but continue to advance through the wooded areas to the town's south. The southern axis offers better prospects for the Russians, but it is likely the battle for Chasiv Yar will become a grinding urban encounter in the weeks to come.

Outside Avdiivka, little progress was made in May. Russian forces have advanced hundreds of metres, but have largely taken fields and villages. The largest capture on that front was the village of Umanske, which incurred a high cost for the invaders. Incremental advances are likely to continue for Russia, which is facing a depleted Ukrainian force in need of resupply and reinforcement.

Moscow's troops are also mustering in the regions of Kursk and Belgorod, which border the northern Ukrainian region of Sumy. While Ukrainian commanders have warned that these forces may be preparing for an incursion, it is unlikely they have the resources for a large-scale assault.

Russia has also continued to strike Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, targeting both power facilities and civilian buildings such as the Epicenter hypermarket in Kharkiv. While Ukraine now has more artillery shells and air-to-ground missiles, it continues to suffer from a shortage of air defence systems. [Bloomberg] [Guardian] [Kyiv Independent] [Newsweek] [New York Times]

May also saw a large-scale purge among Russia's military and defence elite.

Russia's military has continually underperformed during the war, despite a formidable advantage in manpower and materiel. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu had come in for considerable criticism, and appears to finally have faced the consequences. Although he has been dismissed as defence minister, he has been moved to a prominent political post as the secretary of Russia's Security Council.

Shoigu has long been a loyal courtier of Russian President Vladimir Putin and has been spared the fate of most officials caught up in this most recent purge. Several other figures have been arrested on corruption charges, including Major-General Ivan Popov, who had previously been dismissed in 2023 for criticising his commanders. [BBC News] [CEPA] [CNN] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Spectator] [Wall Street Journal]

Ukraine permitted limited strikes on Russia with Western weapons

Ukraine's international allies faced heavy pressure in May to allow Kyiv to strike Russian territory using Western weapon systems.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Western nations have been wary of allowing their weapons to be used inside Russia. In general, the use of long-range

weapons like the HIMARS missile artillery system and Storm Shadow cruise missiles is confined to internationally recognized Ukrainian territory. Ukrainian commanders in the Kharkiv region have complained in recent weeks of being unable to use their Western-supplied systems to return fire against Russian artillery batteries – because those batteries are located on Russian territory. As a result, Kyiv has increased pressure on its Western allies to relax their restrictions.

That pressure finally bore fruit towards the end of May. Both French President Emmanuel Macron and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg have called for an easing of these restrictions. Ultimately, a compromise was struck with both Germany and the US – which have provided significant long-range weaponry – agreeing that Ukraine may strike Russian territory in defence of Kharkiv.

There is no consistency in Western restrictions on the use of their systems by Ukraine. Some nations, such as Sweden, have not imposed any limits. Others, such as Italy, have completely ruled out the use of their weapons on Russian territory. The United Kingdom, which supplies air-launched Storm Shadow cruise missiles to Ukraine, has given mixed signals.

Russia has responded to the moves in the same fashion as it has reacted to previous Western support for Ukraine – by decrying "escalation" of the "Ukraine crisis" and by making thinly-veiled nuclear threats. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Economist] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

(wb/pk)

Far-right populists set to gain ground in European elections

Around 373 million eligible voters will head to the ballot boxes between June 6 and 9 to choose new members of the European Parliament, with an expected surge by right-wing and far-right groups likely to result in pressure for a harder stance on migration and softer line on green policies. [CNN] [Reuters]

The European Parliament, the world's only directly elected transnational assembly, will play a crucial role in shaping the direction of the EU's policies for the next five years.

It wields the power to approve laws proposed by the European Commission, decide on international agreements, endorse the bloc's annual budget and govern the EU market of more than 400 million people. [BBC][Reuters] [The Guardian] [France 24] [CNN]

The election, the first such ballot since Brexit, is being closely watched, with polls predicting that populist far-right and anti-establishment parties will gain ground.

Opinion surveys suggest that centrist pro-EU groups will nevertheless retain a majority, with some 450 seats in total in the 720-member chamber. That compares with 491 seats in the outgoing, smaller parliament, which has 705 members. [Reuters 2]

Meanwhile, the populist nationalist Identity and Democracy (ID) group is expected to gain momentum and secure at least 80 seats, up from the current 58. The group decided to expel Germany's far-right AfD party on May 23 after a string of scandals involving its lead candidate Maximilian Krah.

Among the controversies was a comment by Krah that the Nazi SS – which played a pivotal role in carrying out mass exterminations during the Holocaust – were "not all criminals". [DW] [Reuters 2][Barron's/AFP]

Another hard-right Eurosceptic group, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), dominated by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Poland's former ruling PiS party, is expected to secure 80 seats.

Meloni was hailed by far-right parties across Europe when she became Italy's prime minister in 2022, but has surprised many observers by working closely with EU elites rather than clashing with them. [Reuters 2]

The centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the largest group in the European Parliament, has signalled its willingness to work with the ECR as long as it is pro-EU, anti-Russia, and in favour of the rule of law. [Politico 1][Euronews]

Meloni has not ruled out the possibility of supporting centre-right European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen for a second term in the post. [Reuters 2] [The Guardian 2]

See our more detailed analysis of the European elections, and their potential impact on the continent's political landscape, later in this issue

(yl/pk)

China’s Xi visits Europe for first tour since 2019

Chinese Premier Xi Jinping landed in France on May 5 as part of a six-day European tour at a time when views on China across the continent have shifted dramatically since his last visit in 2019. [CNN]

China's support of Russia after the Ukraine crisis and its trade practices have not gone unnoticed by the European Union (EU0 and its member states. The EU launched probes into China's wind turbines and procurement of medical equipment, and raided the offices of Chinese security equipment maker Nuctech as part of an investigation into subsidies.

These actions, which reflect the EU's concerns about China's foreign policy, could have significant implications on China's relations with the EU and its member states. [CNN]

Germany and the United Kingdom in recent days also arrested or charged at least six people for alleged espionage and related crimes linked to China. Italy formally exited the Belt and Road in March, costing the program its only G7 member country, which was a blow to China and its leader. [CNN]

The shift in European sentiment towards China is not a sudden development but a result of long-standing economic grievances and concerns about Beijing's global ambitions. The EU is now preparing for a potential major trade confrontation with China, a move that could significantly impact their economic relations.

Moreover, suspicions about China's influence, particularly its deepening ties with Russia amid the Ukraine crisis, have further fueled Europe's growing distrust. [CNN]

Xi's tour is not just a diplomatic visit, but a significant event that is shaping the geopolitical landscape. As the EU forges a more unified voice with Washington, opposing China's capacity for cheap exports and perceived national security risks, Xi's visit is bound to impact European countries' economic and security relations with China. Distrust toward Beijing in Brussels is growing, exemplified by a recent flurry of arrests of alleged Chinese spies and a salvo of trade actions. [Bloomberg]

"China is seen increasingly as a multi-faceted threat in many European capitals. But there are divisions within Europe over how fast and far to go in addressing concerns about China, both in the economic and security spheres," said Noah Barkin, a Berlin-based

visiting senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. [CNN]

Xi's visit to Hungary and Serbia holds significant implications for China's relations with these countries and the broader European region. His visits are expected to further strengthen economic and political ties between China and these nations, as well as demonstrate China's growing influence in the region. [CNN]

Xi in Paris

In an article published by French outlet Le Figaro on May 5, Xi pledged to deepen cooperation with France on innovation and green development. China welcomes "more quality French farm products and cosmetics to the Chinese market," he added. [Bloomberg]

While French President Emmanuel Macron has criticised China's cheap exports, he has also called for a reset of ties with China and advocated for European autonomy, indicating a nuanced approach to China's role in Europe.

This stance provides Beijing with some space to court a key US ally, but also underscores Europe's growing concerns about China's economic practices. [Bloomberg]

The French leader held trilateral talks on May 6 with Xi and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. [Bloomberg]

“I will encourage the Chinese government to address these overcapacities in the short-term,” she said in a statement ahead of talks with Xi. “At the same time, we will closely coordinate with G7 countries and emerging economies that are increasingly affected by China‘s market distortions.” [Bloomberg]

Serbia welcomes Xi

China and European Union candidate Serbia signed an agreement to build a "shared future," making the Balkan country the first in Europe to agree on such a document with Beijing. [AP]

Xi and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic announced in Belgrade that they would "deepen and elevate the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia" and "build a new era of a c"community with a shared future between China and Serbia." [AP]

Xi launched the term "community for shared future" ten years ago. While it may not denote a specific

initiative, experts believe it has an underlying significance as another term for an alliance. [AP]

“Eight years ago, Serbia became China’s first comprehensive strategic partner in the Central and Eastern European region, and today Serbia is the first European country to build a community of destiny with China, fully reflecting the strategic, special and high level of China-Serbia relations,” Xi said during a press conference after signing the agreement.

Xi's visit underscored the historical ties between Serbia and China and demonstrated the importance of trade. Serbia, the largest recipient of Chinese investment in Europe, recently welcomed high-speed electric trains from China.

Financed by China, the trains will eventually connect Belgrade to Budapest, further strengthening the economic ties between the two nations. The Chinese investment in Belgrade also provides Beijing with a strategically aligned partner in the heart of NATO-dominated Europe. [BBC], [Politico]

Commercial connections are also a factor. The two countries signed a free trade agreement last year, which aims to eliminate trade barriers and promote bilateral trade and investment. This agreement, building on a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2016 – the year of Mr Xi's previous visit to Serbia, signifies the commitment of both countries to deepen their economic ties and mutual benefits. [BBC], [Politico]

China now claims to be Serbia's most important foreign direct investment (FDI) source. Its ambassador, Li Ming, says that Hisense, miningSerbia's Zijin, and tyre manufacturer Linglong provide 20,000 jobs. [BBC], [Politico]

UN trade figures put China fifth on the foreign direct investment list in Serbia, behind Germany, Italy, the US, and Russia. This ranking underscores China's growing economic influence in Serbia, as it surpasses other major global players in direct investment. [BBC], [Politico]

Nonetheless, the Chinese investments are eye-catching – and only likely to increase. Serbia has just delivered its first Chinese electric high-speed trains. They will eventually run alongside Swiss-made rolling stock on the Belgrade-Budapest railway, which is being reconstructed with Chinese expertise and finance.

And that is just the start. Serbia's infrastructure minister, Goran Vesic, says Chinese partners will work

on other infrastructure, including Serbia's bridges, roads, tunnels, and sewage.

This collaboration improves Serbia's infrastructure and provides business opportunities for Chinese companies. 'There is really a lot of Serbia's cooperation with Chinese companies,' he told Serbia's national broadcaster, RT', underscoring the mutual benefits of the partnership. [BBC], [Politic']

(js/gc)

British PM announces snap election for July 4

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has vowed to "fight for every vote" after calling for an early United Kingdom general election on July 4 as the date for a vote his governing Conservatives are widely expected to lose to the opposition Labour Party after 14 years in power. [BBC][AlJazeera]

The PM announced the election in a rain-soaked speech outside 10 Downing Street as he bids to win a fifth term in office for the Conservatives. The surprise move overturned expectations of an autumn poll, which might have given the Tories a better chance of closing the gap with Labour. [BBC]

"Now is the moment for Britain to choose its future," he said, listing what he considers to be the highlights of his time in government, including introducing the so-called furlough scheme that helped businesses through the COVID-19 pandemic. "We will have a general election on July 4." [AlJazeera]

Sunak's decision is likely driven by a desire to capitalize on recent economic improvements and preempt potential challenges in the coming months. It reflects an attempt to secure the Conservatives' position amid growing support for the opposition Labour Party. [Al Jazeera 1] [Associated Press] [The Indian Express]

Sunak's decision comes less than two years into his premiership, succeeding a turbulent period marked by successive changes in leadership, particularly following the resignation of David Cameron post-Brexit referendum in 2016.

The Conservative Party, in power since 2010, has faced internal upheavals and criticism, including Liz Truss's brief tenure as Prime Minister, which ended in 2022 amidst economic instability sparked by her financial policies. Sunak's claim of responsibility for the UK's

economic improvement, highlighted by a drop in inflation to 2.3% in April, served as a key justification for calling the election.

End the 'chaos'

Both parties have all but started campaigning for an election, with the attack lines on the economy and defence already firmly drawn. [AlJazeera]

Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, positioned as a frontrunner according to recent polls, issued an optimistic call for change, while Ed Davey of the Liberal Democrats welcomed the opportunity to advocate for community interests. Nigel Farage, representing the Reform Party, criticized the Conservatives' handling of the election launch.

Starmer said the election would allow the country to end the "chaos" of Sunak's Conservative government. [AlJazeera]

"No matter what else is said and done, that opportunity for change is what this election is about," Starmer told supporters.

Farage Steps Back in

Pro-Brexit, anti-immigration campaigner Nigel Farage has stepped back into front-line British politics on June 3, announcing he will take the helm of the right-wing party Reform UK and run for Parliament in the election. [Time]

Farage said he'll run in the seaside town of Clacton-on-Sea in his eighth attempt to win a seat in the House of Commons. The announcement came just days after Farage said he would not be a candidate because it was more important to support his ally Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election in November. [Time]

The dissolution of Parliament is set for May 30, with MPs returning to their constituencies to campaign for the next six weeks. Government activities are restricted during this period by the UK law of "purdah," ensuring political impartiality.

Eligible voters, numbering nearly 50 million, will choose members of parliament (MP) to represent their constituencies in the House of Commons. Polls indicate concerns about the economy, health, and immigration are top priorities for voters.

Mandatory service

Sunak announced his proposal to reintroduce mandatory national service for 18-year-olds if his party

would win the election. The plan envisions to present young adults with the choice of full-time military training or part-time civil service. Sunak asserts that this initiative aims to foster a "shared sense of purpose" and bolster national pride among the youth.

However, critics are voicing concerns about the scheme's economic viability and societal implications. They are seeking clarity on exemptions and consequences for non-participation, as well as questioning the estimated cost of EUR 3 billion. If implemented, this proposal would mark a notable departure from Britain's historical abandonment of compulsory national service over six decades ago. [Al Jazeera 2] [BBC]

Rwanda

The election is also causing uncertainty about the government's already controversial Rwanda deportation policy.

The outcome of the polls could either solidify the policy or lead to its dismantlement, making the vote pivotal for the future of the UK's approach to asylum seekers. [AA]

Sunak has affirmed that no flights will depart for Rwanda before the July 4 general election, but he has vowed that if re-elected, the first transfers would occur in July.[AA]

The government introduced the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill in December last year, aimed at clarifying in domestic law that Rwanda is a safe country for deporting asylum seekers. [AA]

Britain intends to begin deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda on July 24, a government lawyer said. [YahooNews]

In documents submitted to the London High Court as part of a challenge to the policy by charity Asylum Aid, government lawyers said the intention was "to effect removals with a flight to Rwanda on 23 July 2024 (and not before)."

(fg/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgian political landscape divided ahead of June elections

Belgium will hold triple elections on June 9 for a new federal parliament, regional parliaments, and European Parliament members.

Opinion polls suggest a strong divide between the fragmented country's Dutch-speaking Flanders and the French-speaking Wallonia regions. [De Morgen] [Politico]

In Flanders, the separatist Vlaams Belang (VB) party leads with 27% of the vote. It is riding the wave of Europe's recent far-right surge fueled by uncontrolled immigration and extremist progress ideology. VB runs on a platform of Flemish independence, "focus[ing] its strategy and all its actions on the orderly division of Belgium." [De Morgen] [Politico] [VRT NWS]

Following VB, the nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) polls at 20%. Unlike VB, N-VA rejects short-term separatism, opting for a confederal Belgian state that gradually transfers power to regions as a step toward eventual Flemish independence.

N-VA leader Bart De Wever has firmly rejected the possibility of forming a coalition with VB, stating, "If you ask me whether I feel related to that party and would form a government with it? Then the answer is absolutely no." [De Morgen] [VRT NWS]

In Wallonia and Brussels, the left-wing Socialist Party and the centre-right liberal Reformist Movement lead at around 22% of votes each, with the far-left Worker's Party trailing. Although some French-speaking parties have become more open to state reform, they are staunchly against splitting the country entirely. [Politico][L'avenir]

Current Prime Minister Alexander De Croo's centre-right Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats party polls far behind at 10% in Brussels and Flanders. Although he has expressed his desire to reprise the position, De Croo has admitted, "The chance that I will become Prime Minister again is small. But it still exists." [Politico] [De Standaard]

Ahead of election day, migration remains the most commonly cited concern in Flanders, likely driving the success of anti-immigration parties. In Brussels and Wallonia, voters see purchasing power as the biggest problem. [Politico]

While right-wing nationalist parties dominate Flemish polls, the task of forming a coalition for the entire Belgian state is no easy feat.

It involves negotiating with parties chosen by the historically left-leaning Walloon electorate, a process that has historically proven challenging.

The 541 days it took to form a coalition in 2010–2011 are a testament to this difficulty. This year's elections are expected to face similar delays, further complicated by increased political polarisation both between and within regions.

(gvc/gc)

Belgian constitution amended to include animal welfare

The Belgian Parliament on May 2 approved an amendment to include in the constitution a principle mandating that "the federal state, the communities, and the regions strive to protect and care for animals as sentient beings." [De Standaard]

The amendment garnered 70 out of 150 votes, with significant support from centrist and left-wing parties. It follows a modification in Belgium's Civil Code in 2020, acknowledging animals as sentient beings rather than mere possessions. [The Brussels Times] [De Standaard]

GAIA, a Belgian animal rights organisation, celebrated the change as a "historic advancement" after several years of campaigning. [The Brussels Times]

Not all members of Parliament agreed. Member of Parliament (MP) Vincent van Quickenborne of the Open Vld, a Flemish liberal political party, expressed concerns about the potential impact on farmers and

warned of a slippery slope towards a meat consumption ban. His views reflect the concerns of some sectors of society about the amendment. [The Brussels Times] [The Standaard]

Meanwhile, MP Sander Loones, from the New Flemish Alliance, a Flemish nationalist and conservative political party, said the decision was "purely a symbolic change," noting that animal welfare is already protected in the Civil Code and indirectly by European Law. He abstained from the vote. [De Standaard]

GAIA stated that "Politicians realise all too well that symbolism is important. This is an important step forward, which will leave its mark, not only in actions, but especially in the minds and hearts of people." [De Standaard]

(gvc/gc)

Belgian government prepare for state reform after June elections

On May 3, the Belgian federal government agreed on the constitutional articles it declared subject to revision in the next administrative period. [De Standaard] [De Morgen]

Central to this process is Article 195, which outlines the procedure for revising the constitution itself. The temporary suspension of Article 195 can expedite the constitutional amendment process, a mechanism previously employed during the sixth state reform in 2011. [De Morgen]

“We keep our word,” said Minister of the Interior Annelies Verlinden. “As stated in the coalition agreement, this government has made it possible for Article 195 of the Constitution to be declared open to revision. With a revision of Article 195, work can be done on a new state structure after the elections.” [De Morgen]

Other articles that were opened allow for the enshrining of ethical rights in the constitution, such as euthanasia, abortion, and LGBT+ rights. [De Standaard]

Deputy Prime Minister Petra De Sutter said, “this package is very relevant in times of attacks on LGBTQ+ rights by the extreme right. We make it possible to prevent achievements such as gay marriage from being reversed.” [De Morgen]

(gvc/gc)

Biggest Brussels health NGO faces mass resignations over bullying claims

The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA), a non-profit association comprising 89 public health non-profit organisations in 21 European countries, faced a wave of resignations following serious allegations of "harassment, intimidation, and bullying" in February.

These allegations, which were made by multiple former employees and board members, have raised significant concerns about the work environment and leadership at EPHA. [Politico]

Director General Milka Sokolovic refuted to Politico on May 20 the allegations "in the strongest possible terms," corroborated by an investigation by Belgian law firm Thales that found no evidence to corroborate the claims. [Politico]

Since February, a significant number of the NGO's board members, all but two, have resigned, a situation that leaves the organisation below the minimum of three required by Belgian law. This development is a cause for concern. [Politico]

Nicolas Philippou, a resigning board member, emphasised in an email to Politico that a stable public health coalition is not just important, but essential for Europe. He believes that EPHA, with its potential to continue playing a leading role, is crucial in this regard. [Politico]

A source working in European public health said to Politico: "The situation is not only damaging the reputation of public health civil society, but it also has the potential to significantly impact public health. Only an immediate leadership change at EPHA can begin to address this." [Politico]

EPHA is the most prominent NGO in Brussels representing groups that speak for patients with cancer, mental illness and infectious diseases, doctors, pharmacists and nurses.

It plays a crucial role in EU policy making at the highest level, from discussions about how to handle drug shortages to mental health plans and pharmaceutical regulations. The current leadership crisis at EPHA could have far-reaching implications for these policy discussions and the interests of the represented groups.

(gvc/gc)

Flemish government considers suspending food subsidies

Flemish Minister for Poverty Reduction Benjamin Dalle announced on May 14 in the Flemish Parliament that there are no plans to extend the food subsidies past expiration in November 2025, stating that they were always meant to be temporary.

Dalle emphasised the role of local social services (OCMWs) in managing food aid, pointing out that these services already receive federal funding. [De Standaard] The Flemish government has taken steps to address food poverty by allocating EUR 2.4 million to support food hubs.

These hubs, located at twelve different locations in Flanders, play a crucial role in redirecting surplus food from supermarkets and companies to local organisations assisting impoverished people. This concrete action demonstrates the government's commitment to tackling the issue. [De Standaard]

Opposition Member of Parliament Maxim Veys called this decision "an unmitigated disaster for all those people who rely on food aid today." He claimed that organisations will "fear that with the loss of support, they will also have to stop or severely curtail a number of activities. This could mean that an entire group of people in food poverty are no longer helped and that a lot of fresh food is again forced to end up in the waste mountain." [De Standaard]

In response to Dalle, Mechelen, a city in Flanders, announced its intention to continue supporting the food hub project "with or without support from Flanders." [De Standaard]

(gvc/gc)

French government organises a symposium to address growing antisemitism

French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal pledged to combat antisemitism during the 38th dinner of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (CRIF), an advocacy group for Jewish issues.

Attal reaffirmed the government's determination to stop antisemitism. Attal also criticised the radical-left

party La France Insoumise and its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, for enabling the sharp increase in antisemitism over the past seven months. [LeMonde] [The Times of Israel]

Since the Hamas assaults in Israel on October 7, France recorded a total of 366 anti-semitic incidents in the first quarter of 2024, an increase of 300% compared to the first three months of 2023. Attal added that although there are only 1% of French Jews in the nation, 60% of attacks motivated by religion are antisemitic and are amplified by threats, violence and hate speech.

The far-right Rassemblement National party criticised Attal, saying his support for the Jewish community reflected his anti-Muslim sentiment. [LeMonde] [The Times of Israel]

Attal said that education was the most effective way to combat antisemitism. With the support of French Education Minister Nicole Belloubet, a curriculum for primary schools that teaches tolerance and respect will be developed and taught in all national primary schools starting in the upcoming academic year. [LeMonde] [The Times of Israel]

(fe/gc)

French trans supporters rally against possible 'offensive' legislation

Thousands of demonstrators protested in French cities on May 5 against what they called an "offensive" against transgender rights after right-wing Senators tabled legislation on gender transition for minors. [France 24]

United in their cause, activists, left-wing members of parliament, trade unionists, and young people rallied, chanting and brandishing placards calling for "health resources for transitions." The Interior Ministry reported that 10,880 demonstrators took to the streets of France, 2,500 of them in Paris. [France 24]

The protests erupted in response to a study on transgender adolescents released by centre-right Republican lawmakers. Claims made by trans rights groups that the study called for a return to "conversion therapy" are refuted by the authors of the report. [France 24]

Legislators created a proposed bill of legislation, the potential impact of which was discussed on May 28.

Additionally, a book called "Transmania," co-authored by Marguerite Stern and Dora Moutot, was criticised by protestors for being transphobic. The writers, who accused the protesters of an attempt at censorship, denied the accusation.

(fe/gc)

French security authorities foil plan to attack Paris Olympics

French security personnel arrested an 18-year-old man from Chechnya on May 22 on suspicion of being behind a plan to attack soccer events that will be held in the southern city of Saint-Etienne. According to the initial

investigation, the man was preparing an attack targeting the Geoffroy-Guichard stadium in Saint-Etienne, which will host several soccer matches during the Summer Games. [France24]

The planned attack was to target spectators and police forces, the statement said. The suspect wanted to attack the Olympic events "to die and become a martyr," the statement also said. The Paris Olympics will run from July 26-August 11.

Soccer matches will occur in cities across France before the Paris' Stade de France final. [France24]

(gc)

France begins first war crimes trial of Syrian officials

France has opened its first trial into officials from the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad with three top security officers tried in absentia for complicity in crimes against humanity and war crimes. On May 21, the Paris Criminal Court heard the cases against the officials for their alleged role in the deaths of two French Syrian men, Mazzen Dabbagh and his son Patrick, who were arrested in the Syrian capital, Damascus, in 2013. [Aljazeera]

The judges convicted the officials for their role in the imprisonment, enforced disappearance and torture of two dual Syrian-French citizens, Patrick Dabbagh and his father Mazzen, in 2013, as well as the confiscation of their property. [HRW]

On May 24, 2024, the court concluded that imprisonment, enforced disappearance and torture committed by the officials Ali Mamlouk, Jamil Hassan, and Abdel Salam Mahmoud, amounted to crimes against humanity and war crimes. [HRW]

(gc)

S&P credit rating agency downgrades France

Credit rating agency Standard & Poor's on May 31 cut France's credit rating, pouring cold water on the French government's efforts to put its public finances back in order. [Politico]

The agency lowered France's credit rating from AA to AA−, citing larger-than-expected deficits and political fragmentation as reasons for the downgrade. The outlook is stable. [Politico]

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire was quick to stress that the downgrade was the price to pay for bolstering the French economy with public support during the pandemic and the inflation crisis. [Politico]

(gc)

Microsoft announces the largest investment to date in France

Microsoft announced on May 13 the largest investment to date in France to accelerate the adoption of AI, skilling and innovation. [Microsoft]

The company will invest EUR 4 billion in cloud and AI infrastructure, AI skilling, and French Tech acceleration, aiming to train 1 million people and support 2,500 AI startups by 2027. [Microsoft]

This broad investment package is designed to accelerate the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud technologies, increase the country's competitiveness by fostering digital technology made in France and create long-term benefits for the French economy and job market.

With these investments, Microsoft is directly contributing to France's National Strategy for AI and aligns with the recent recommendations of the French Commission for Artificial Intelligence, to position

France as a leader in the development and usage of artificial intelligence. [Microsoft]

(gc)

Former Berlin mayor assaulted in local library amid politician attacks

Berlin's former mayor and current state senator, Franziska Giffey, was assaulted in a local library, marking the latest in a series of violent attacks on German politicians.

Giffey, a prominent member of the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), was struck on the head and neck with a bag filled with complex objects by a 74-year-old man known to police for hate crimes. She received brief hospital treatment for her injuries. [BBC] [The Guardian]

The attack on Giffey is part of a worrying trend of increasing violence against political figures in Germany. Just days earlier, SPD MEP Matthias Ecke was severely injured in Dresden while putting up campaign posters, and two suspects were arrested for assaulting a Green Party politician in the same city.

The rise in assaults coincides with the upcoming European and local elections, heightening concerns about political safety. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Chancellor Olaf Scholz condemned the attacks, describing them as "outrageous and cowardly," emphasising that violence has no place in democratic debate. The German government and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also stressed the need to protect those who uphold democratic values from such attacks. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Berlin Mayor Kai Wegner echoed these sentiments, stating that attacks on politicians are attacks on democracy itself. He pledged to explore stricter penalties for such offences. Meanwhile, Giffey expressed her shock at the escalating violence against political figures and underscored the importance of maintaining open public engagement despite the risks. [BBC] [The Guardian]

Police indicated that Giffey's attacker might be suffering from mental health issues and are considering psychiatric care for the suspect. The surge in political violence has prompted federal and state

interior ministers to call for enhanced police protection for politicians and campaigners. [BBC] [The Guardian]

This alarming pattern of violence has been partly attributed to the rising influence of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which has seen increased support in recent elections. The German government is considering stricter laws to combat the growing threats against political figures. [The Guardian]

(ha/gc)

German court rules far-right party can be spied on

On May 13, a German high court ruled domestic intelligence agencies are justified in viewing the far-right Alternative for Germany party as a suspected extremist organisation.

The ruling will allow Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution to use informants and wiretaps to monitor AFD gatherings and activities.

Judges said the verdict was justified due to the party's statements about immigrants and Muslims, one of which recently called for the mass deportation of those from a non-German background. [Politico] [AP]

AFD member Bjorn Hocke used a banned nazi slogan at a rally and was fined EUR 13,000 for closing a campaign speech in 2021 by saying, "Everything for Germany!" a phrase used by Hitler's SA stormtroopers, who engaged in violent street brawls before he became chancellor. [Politico]

Despite arguing he was not aware of the phrase's origin, critics have noted he was formerly a history teacher. This is not the first time Hocke has made questionable comments about Germany's past. [Politico]

In 2017, he observed that Germans are "the only people in the world who planted a memorial of shame in the heart of their capital," the memorial of shame he talks of is the Holocaust memorial. [Politico], [Politico], [AP]

(js/gc)

Trial begins for leaders of alleged 'Reichsbürger' coup plot in Germany

On 21 May, the trial against the key figures of the so-called "Reichsbürger" (Reich Citizens) group, which is accused of planning a coup d'état, commenced in Frankfurt. The alleged leaders of the group, in particular the self-proclaimed Prince Heinrich XIII Reuß, are among the defendants in this trial. The "Reichsbürger" group consists of former judges, members of parliament and retired military officers. A total of 27 individuals have been charged. [Reuters] [BBC] [Guardian]

The so-called “Reichbürger” do not recognise the Federal Republic of Germany as a state and instead claim that the German Reich continues to exist based on conspiracy theories. This group often espouses far-right ideologies and rejects Germany's democratic foundations and legal system. [DW] The public prosecutor has accused the defendants of having drawn up a detailed plan for a coup d'état, which became known as "Day X". This plan involved storming the Reichstag, arresting members of the Bundestag and installing Heinrich Reuß as the new head of state. Their preparations included the collection of weapons and ammunition as well as the involvement of former military personnel who were to put their military expertise at the service of the planned revolution.

In late 2022, the plans of the Reich Citizens' Movement were uncovered by a series of nationwide raids. These operations affected the suspects' homes and business premises in Germany and abroad. During the searches, the authorities seized more than 380 firearms and large quantities of ammunition as well as detailed documents relating to the planned actions. Twenty-five people were arrested (see EiR No. 1, January/2023).

The trial in Frankfurt is part of a larger series of court proceedings against members of the Reich Citizens' Movement. The trial against the so-called "military arm" of this group was opened in Stuttgart in April. A third trial is scheduled to start in Munich on 18 June. Due to the large number of defendants, these trials are spread over several court locations. [Deutschlandfunk, in German]

(fg)

Ireland to review range of support offered to asylum seekers

Ireland's Prime Minister Simon Harris has said that the range of support provided to refugees in Ireland will be reviewed, as there is a shortage of beds for those entering the system.

More than 5,600 people, who were granted permission to remain, are now being asked by the government to leave direct provision and find accommodation. This move has been criticised by opposing parties, who argue that it exacerbates the ongoing housing crisis.

There will be a careful reassessment of when the obligation to pay social welfare begins after the asylum process, with a deep understanding of the challenges faced by asylum seekers.

"Many, many people who are still living in free State accommodation without making a contribution," Prime Minister Harris emphasised. "Ireland benefits from migration. Immigration is a good thing, but at the same time we have to make sure that our system is working, that our system is efficient and effective and meets a common sense test." [Irish Times]

(al/gc)

Trinity College Dublin agrees to divest from Israel

Ireland's Trinity College Dublin has agreed to divest from Israel after student protests on May 2 calling for an end to the university's investments in Israeli institutions.

Trinity had investment funds in 13 Israeli companies, three of which were blacklisted by the United Nations for being involved in illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine. After four days of protests, the college agreed to meet with students to discuss their demands.

Trinity College Dublin's fine of its Student Union EUR 214 000 for disruptive protests also caused the demonstrations. [The Journal]

Following the talks, Trinity agreed to complete divestment from Israeli institutions by the end of June.

The college's official statement said: "We fully understand the driving force behind the encampment on our campus and we are in solidarity with the students in our horror at what is happening in Gaza… we abhor and condemn all violence and war, including the atrocities of October 7 and the continuing

ferocious and disproportionate onslaught in Gaza. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the dehumanisation of its people is obscene." [Irish Times]

(al/gc)

Four Dutch parties reach provisional coalition agreement

Four Dutch parties concluded on May 16 a provisional coalition agreement, dominated by the rightwing PVV party led by Geert Wilders, known for his outspoken views on immigration and Islam, after an extensive five months of negotiations.

The centre-right VVD, farmers' protest party BBB, and the centrist NSC party have joined the coalition in a deal that sets the Netherlands on course for its most rightwing government in decades. Rightwing parties are gaining support due to rampant immigration, climate change policies that target farmers and extreme progressive ideologies across Europe. [Reuters]

The coalition's pact, among other policies, places a strong emphasis on a 'strictest asylum regime,' and a swift exit from European Union migration rules. Geert Wilders, in his declaration, aims to discourage potential immigrants, stating, 'The Netherlands will be ours again.'

These policies, if implemented, could significantly reshape the country's immigration landscape, a development that is likely to draw attention and concern from various quarters.

The European Commission is likely to resist these plans. Unsurprisingly, the European Commission has expressed its reservations about the coalition's plans.

European Commission spokesman Eric Mamer stated, "We have a new pact on migration and asylum, which has been voted upon and confirmed and therefore has to be applied. This legislation will be applied and the commission will play its role in making sure it is." [Reuters]

VVD leader Dilan Yesilgoz, in a reassuring note, has underscored the new government's commitment to domestic and international safety, as well as its continued support for Ukraine. She also affirmed that 'sensible climate measures would be continued,' indicating a balanced approach towards environmental concerns.

NSC leader Pieter Omtzight suggested that the new government would also focus on investing in social insecurity: “That is not only your income, but that also means that there are enough homes.” [NOS]

BBB Leader Caroline van der Plas added that the new coalition does not aim to expropriate agricultural land or forcefully reduce livestock herds. [NOS]

Coalition agreement

The new Dutch government submitted its initial coalition agreement that established safety as a top priority, particularly "a more noticeable presence" of local police officers, a firmer stance against organised crime, increased efforts to combat child abuse, cybercrime, and street harassment, and a stricter approach to dealing with football hooligans. [NOS]

Chief of Police Janny Knol expressed in a letter to the House of Representatives that "setting safety as a top priority offers us hope. But realising the ambitions of the outline agreement will demand a lot from us." [NOS]

Specifically, the police and unions requested an amount of 200 million euros for structural maintenance and another 200 million euros for follow-up steps to realise the plans outlined in the coalition agreement. [NOS]

The funding will go towards, for example, anti-cybercrime infrastructure, better working conditions for police officers, and psychological help for "confused persons." [NOS]

Loes Thissen, chairman of the Central Works Council of the police, said: "The fact that the police are closely interwoven in the neighbourhood is indeed one of the unique features of this police. But sentiment in society is really changing, there is a lot of dissatisfaction...Now the pressure is so high that the police are in trouble. As a result, we are withdrawing further and further from the neighbourhood. That is precisely what we do not want to do to continue to guarantee safety." [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

New Dutch coalition nominates Dick Schoof as prime ministerial candidate

Dick Schoof, former Secretary General of the Ministry of Justice and Security, was nominated on May 28 as

the next Dutch prime minister by a four-party right-wing coalition.

In a press conference, Schoof expressed his intention to be a “Prime Minister for all Dutch people,” not just for the parties that selected him. [BBC] [NOS]

Schoof did not delve into specifics but described the coalition agreement as “ambitious,” adding: “My plans for the Netherlands are what the party leaders have agreed on.” [BBC] [NOS]

Formerly a social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA) member, Schoof has been non-partisan since 2021, as he no longer felt aligned with the party. After the press conference, PvdA Leader Frans Timmermans praised Schoof as a “very loyal and dedicated civil servant.” [NOS]

Not all members of parliament were satisfied with the choice.

Thierry Baudet, Leader of the far-right Forum for Democracy Party, expressed his discontent,

“The Netherlands voted for Geert Wilders and we get a former PvdA official who has been spying on people for years,” he said. Baudet was referring to a 2021 scandal involving the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, which, under Schoof, used fake accounts to follow citizens on social media. [NOS]

Other MPs were more supportive. Joost Eerdmans of the conservative-liberal Juiste Antwoord 21 remarked, “A very good civil servant. It remains to be seen whether he is also a good politician.” [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

Dutch Remembrance Day celebrated amid fears of protests

The Netherlands observed Remembrance Day on May 4, a significant event marked by a formal ceremony led by the king and queen. [Volkskrant]

Only 10,000 tickets were allotted following Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema's decision to tighten security due to "heightened tensions in society," which increased the risk of "spontaneous actions" disturbing the ceremony.

Attendees were also not allowed to bring flags, signs, sound, or amplifying equipment and were searched

upon entrance. [Volkskrant] [Reuters]

This protocol comes after pro-Palestinian protesters disrupted the March opening of a Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam by setting off fireworks and booing in response to the arrival of Israeli President Isaac Herzog. [Reuters]

Although five protestors were arrested before the event, the two minutes of silence passed smoothly. Some activists protested silently by turning around when wreaths were laid. [Volkskrant] [NL Times]

An estimated 4,400 observers were present compared to the 20,000 who usually attend the commemoration. A spokesperson for the National Committee suggested that inclement weather may have deterred some from attending. [Volkskrant]

Marvin Celie, who was at the ceremony, said, "I think it is important to reflect on the past, on the fallen. So when I saw that you could reserve a place, I did so immediately. I have confidence in the measures, but it is a pity that it is necessary to commemorate together in this way." [Volkskrant]

(gvc/gc)

Police disperse pro-Palestinian student protests at Amsterdam university

Dutch riot police clashed with pro-Palestinian protesters at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) on several occasions beginning May 6 as tensions on European campuses increased amid ongoing student-led protests against Israel's war in Gaza. [Reuters]

The UvA's student council stated that the protestors had been seriously endangered by the university "resorting to violence." Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema faced scrutiny from the city council for the deployment of riot police. [NOS]

According to Halsema, "the blows would not have been necessary if people had listened to the police and just left as the police told them to." She noted, "Hundreds of thousands of euros worth of art have been destroyed, all kinds of household goods have been thrown onto the street." The university had asked protestors several times to leave. [NOS]

On May 13, the UvA announced a two-day closure, with the Executive Board saying that they could not "take responsibility for the safety of all those on campus."

The university estimated that protests had caused EUR 1.5 million in damage. [Reuters] [NL Times] [Universiteit van Amsterdam]

Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, stated on social media, "You can always demonstrate, but using violence against the police and causing damage is not okay...The violence in Gaza is increasingly being blamed on Jewish Dutch people, but this is unfair. It is a form of anti-Semitism that we must continue to fight loud and clear. Do not remain silent; do not look away." [Dutch News]

"They have authorised extreme police violence towards their staff and students, who were engaged in non-violent protest on campus against UvA's complicity in the ongoing genocide in Gaza, said UvA professor Sarah Bracke on X. "We are shocked by the absolute disregard, disrespect and general unwillingness of the Board towards its students and staff." [POLITICO]

Smaller protests have spread to other universities in the Netherlands, including Utrecht, Rotterdam, and Maastricht. More protests are being called for in the coming days by the Amsterdam Student Encampment, which has organised most demonstrations so far. [AP] [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

Climate report identifies drought as top climate change threat for Netherlands

The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) released a climate report on May 14 that found that drought threatens the country's agricultural industry.

Lead author Frank van Gaalen's words paint a grim picture, "Dry periods are becoming more frequent and last longer and at the same time the demand for water is growing. In increasingly many parts of the Netherlands, there is therefore not enough water available for irrigation in agriculture, nature and ultimately possibly also for drinking water." [NOS] [Dutch News]

The report found that existing adaptation measures, such as agricultural spraying during drought, mitigate the drought damage at the expense of further groundwater decline. [NOS]

The PBL recommended that “climate adaptation affects many policy processes and requires future-proof, structural choices. A climate-proof society therefore does not only focus on adjustments for a single problem, with technical solutions such as raising dikes or irrigation.” [NOS]

Van Gaalen's concluding remarks underline the crucial role of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, “adaptations to climate change can reduce the risks we have described, but not completely solve them. It remains important to limit the extremes as much as possible by reducing greenhouse gas emissions as much as possible.” [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

Cost of Dutch childcare benefits scandal recovery may increase by EUR 5 billion

The financial cost to resolve the Dutch childcare scandal, a case involving the Tax and Customs Administration, is projected to reach EUR 14 billion, EUR 5 billion more than initially anticipated, as per a confidential memo from the Ministry of Finance.

The administration falsely accused about 26,000 parents of fraud between 2005 and 2019. The issue, which came to light in September 2018, revealed discriminatory practices and institutional bias, particularly against parents with foreign backgrounds.

These parents were disproportionately targeted and faced more severe consequences, highlighting systemic issues within the administration. This scandal eventually led to the government's resignation in 2021. [The Guardian]

The initial victim compensation scheme, which was estimated to cost around EUR 500 million, has now ballooned to a budget of EUR 9 billion this year, with potential to escalate to EUR 14 billion. This significant increase is primarily attributed to the government's adoption of the Laurentien method, a controversial approach that provides affected parents with faster and more generous assistance. [NOS]

A spokesperson for State Secretary for Benefits Aukje de Vries said the Laurentien method was a "large-scale pilot." However, insiders indicated that the programme is already at a much further stage. [NOS]

According to an anonymous official at the Ministry of Finance, the amount paid out via the Laurentien

method is "disproportionate." He expressed concern that the high compensation levels via the scheme would be challenging to explain to taxpayers and those financially struggling. [NOS]

The Equal Recovery Foundation, a government-appointed body responsible for administering the recovery, responded that the Laurentien method 'does justice to what has been done to the affected families.' The foundation plays a crucial role in ensuring fair and equitable distribution of the compensation funds. [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

EU immigration to the Netherlands doubled in ten years

The number of people with a nationality from one of the other European Union member states living in the Netherlands doubled in ten years. On January 1, the Netherlands counted 745,500 residents with another EU nationality. On the same date in 2014, that was around 360,000, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) reported.

Nearly 649,000 residents with another EU nationality are 18 years or older and can vote for the European Parliament in the Netherlands if they have declared that they wouldn't vote in another country. Netherlands residents go to the polls on June 6.

(gc)

UK's potential ECHR exit could undermine Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland

The ongoing debate about the UK's possible withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) has raised significant concerns, particularly about the implications for Northern Ireland. Sir Robert Buckland, Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, has expressed fears that such a move would breach the Belfast and Good Friday Agreements.

The Committee stresses that withdrawal from the ECHR could have serious implications for cross-border criminal investigations and practical policing in Northern Ireland, where compliance with the ECHR is a

requirement for public bodies. [UK Parliament Committees] [BBC]

The UK government's reasons for considering withdrawing from the ECHR, expressed in particular by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, are based on problems with the implementation of immigration policy, in particular the plan to deport irregular migrants to Rwanda. Although Parliament passed the controversial "Security of Rwanda" Bill last month (see EiR No. 5, May/2024), it is not unlikely that it will be challenged in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

In the past, this plan to deport people to Rwanda has already been hampered by legal challenges such as a decisive intervention by the ECtHR in June 2022, which stopped a deportation flight. The UK Supreme Court also declared the Rwanda policy unlawful in December 2023, citing serious human rights concerns. As a result, there is serious debate about withdrawing from the ECHR, with voices in the UK government stating that it does not want to be constrained in its migration policy by a 'foreign' court [the conversation] [The Times]

The Good Friday Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998, is central to peace and political stability in Northern Ireland. It ended most of the violence of the Troubles, established a power-sharing devolved government and incorporated the ECHR into Northern Ireland law.

Breaking the agreement by withdrawing from the ECHR could not only jeopardise the achievements of the peace process in Northern Ireland, but could also strain the UK's international relations, particularly with the EU and Ireland, as compliance with the ECHR is also a condition of post-Brexit trade agreements between the UK and the EU.

(fg)

UK court rules anti-protest measures unlawful

The British High Court ruled that anti-protest measures introduced by the government earlier this year were unlawful. The case was brought by Liberty, a UK-based civil liberties organisation, who hailed the decision as a "victory for democracy." [HRW]

Last June, then Home Secretary Suella Braverman substantially increased police powers by lowering the threshold at which police could intervene in protests from those causing "serious disruption" to those causing "more than minor" disruption.

As a result, hundreds of protesters have been arrested, including climate activist Greta Thunberg, who was acquitted of all charges in February. [HRW]

(gc)

Tories pledge to tackle 'confusion' over legal definition of sex, BBC reports

British Conservatives have promised to rewrite the Equality Act so that protections it enshrines based on a person's sex apply only to their biological sex, the BBC reported. [BBC]

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the "safety of women and girls" meant the "current confusion around definitions of sex and gender" cannot be allowed to continue. The Tories say their election pledge will make it simpler for service providers for women and girls, such as those running sessions for domestic abuse victims, to stop biological males from taking part.

Labour's shadow defence secretary John Healey told BBC Radio 5 Live that the change was unnecessary, adding that it was "an election distraction from the core issues that matter to people.

"He said the Equality Act "already protects single-sex spaces for biological women" but acknowledged there was a need for "clearer guidance", something he said Labour would produce.

(gc)

UN experts concerned about migrant labour exploitation in UK

Independent UN human rights experts have expressed concern about the protection risks faced by migrant workers in the United Kingdom (UK), including “deception, exorbitant recruitment fees, debt bondage, undignified living conditions, and potential deportation.” [UN]

The experts said they have received allegations that migrants are being deceived about “working and living conditions and the nature of their agreements with employers in the agricultural or care sectors.”

“This is unlawful and highlights the need for urgent reform of the current system governing labour

migration, to ensure effective protection of the rights of migrant workers," they said. [UN]

The UN experts are concerned about shortcomings of the Seasonal Worker Scheme – a system implemented in response to labour shortages in the UK. [UN]

These specialists say some "scheme operators", which are licensed recruitment companies, will recruit migrants to work on farms or in poultry production, and some will illegally charge them upwards of £3,000 to become employed, leaving the migrants in bondage. [UN]

(gc)

United Kingdom closes in on 16 GW installed solar capacity

Installed solar power capacity in the United Kingdom has reached 15.9 GW, according to the latest data published by the UK government's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) [PVMagazine]

The installation figures released on May 30 showed that 190 MW of capacity was added in the first four months of 2024, trailing the 330 MW added during the same period in 2023. [PVMagazine]

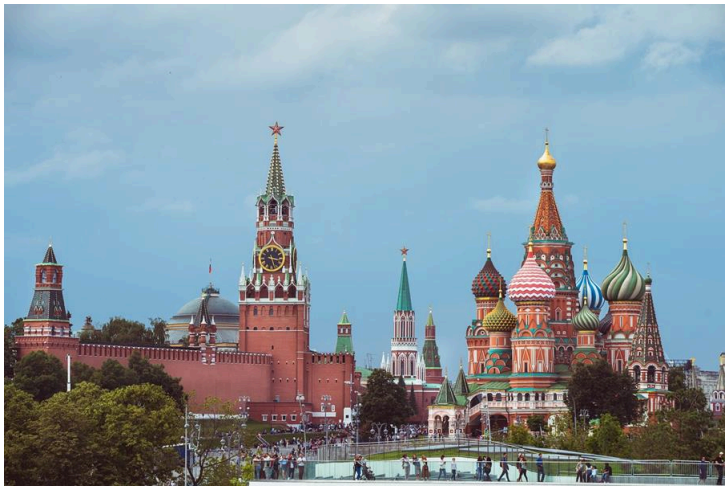
While the United Kingdom made significant strides in 2023 by installing 916 MW of solar capacity, it was only the fifth-highest year on record for new capacity. This is a clear indication of the challenges we face, with smaller installations dominating the additions, as per the latest DESNZ data [PVMagazine]. It's crucial that we address these challenges to ensure a robust and sustainable solar power sector in the UK.

The latest British government installation figures reveal a slower start to the year for the United Kingdom, with small-scale installations accounting for most additions.

As the UK General Election approaches, industry calls for the next government to act quickly on the issues hindering capacity expansion. [PVMagazine]

(gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe



Armenian protests demand Prime Minister's resignation

A large crowd of protesters gathered in the Armenian capital, Yerevan, on May 9 to demand Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's resignation over his decision to cede several border villages to Azerbaijan, a neighbour and longtime rival. [DW] [Reuters]

Armenia, a country with a long-standing territorial dispute with Azerbaijan, has agreed to return the uninhabited villages, which both sides said was an important milestone as they edge towards a peace deal after fighting two wars since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This conflict, rooted in the historical and cultural differences between the two nations, has been a source of tension for decades. [DW] [Reuters]

The "Tavush for the Motherland" movement, a grassroots movement led by the influential Armenian cleric Archbishop Bagrat Galstyan, announced a six-day march from the country's northeastern village, Voskepar, to the capital city, Yerevan, to oppose the decision. The movement, which has gained significant traction among the Armenian population, is a key player in the ongoing protests. [DW] [Reuters]

On May 9, the rally reached the capital, where additional protesters joined. Police detained dozens of protestors. The Interior Ministry of Armenia reported that over 270 individuals were detained on May 27 during protests. [Radio Free Europe] [DW] [Reuters]

The State Commission on the delimitation of the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a body established to oversee the process of defining the border between the two countries, agreed to the delimitation process between the two parties in its 8th meeting held on April 19. This decision, while legally

binding, has sparked widespread protests in Armenia. [DW] [Reuters]

According to the agreement, which has far-reaching implications for the region, Azerbaijan gains control over the four borderline villages in the Tavush region of Armenia. This move is in line with the legally recognized inter republican borders existing between the Soviet republics at the time of its dissolution. The decision has sparked widespread debate and opposition. [DW] [Reuters]

(zh/gc)

Estonia advances bill to allocate frozen Russian assets for Ukrainian reparations

The Estonian parliament has passed a bill allowing the use of frozen Russian assets to compensate Ukraine for damages caused by the war. With 65 members of the Riigikogu voting in favour and only three against, the legislation now awaits presidential approval to take effect.

The new law, titled the Act on Amendments to the International Sanctions Act and Amendments to Other Associated Acts, establishes a mechanism to hold an aggressor state financially accountable for severe violations of international law. The assets of individuals and companies linked to Russia's acts, which have been frozen under sanctions, will serve as advance payments for the reparations Russia owes to Ukraine.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will oversee the use of these assets, ensuring that the damages are proven and meet the criteria under international law. A formal request from the affected foreign state is required, and the connection between the asset owner and the illegal actions must be established. Asset owners can contest these decisions in Estonian courts. [ERR]

Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna praised the legislation, highlighting Estonia's leadership in creating a model for other European nations to follow. Tsahkna expressed hope that the European Union could swiftly progress towards using the profits from frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine's defence efforts. "This should only be the first step in making the aggressor pay for the destruction it has wreaked in Ukraine," he stated.

Chairman of the Constitutional Committee, Hendrik Johannes Terras, acknowledged the complexity of drafting the legislation, which involved extensive

consultations with various stakeholders and foreign experts over six months. He emphasised that Russia must bear the financial responsibility for the war damages it has caused. [ERR][MSN]

The bill's approval comes amid broader international efforts to utilise frozen Russian assets for Ukraine's benefit. The Group of Seven (G7) countries, which froze approximately USD 300 billion worth of Russian financial assets following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, have been debating the use of these funds for Ukrainian reparations. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently affirmed America's intent to seize Russian assets for Ukraine's reconstruction in coordination with the G7. [MSN]

Despite its passage, the bill faces legal scrutiny. Experts like Paloma Kroot Tupay, a constitutional law professor at the University of Tartu, have raised concerns about its constitutionality, arguing that it could set a precarious precedent by linking private individuals' assets to their country's actions.

Others, like lawyer Norman Aas, suggest that as long as the sanctions remain, the law might withstand constitutional challenges since the assets are unusable by their owners.

President Alar Karis and his legal advisors are deliberating the bill, with a decision expected by the end of May. If approved, this legislation will mark a significant step in holding Russia accountable for military actions against Ukraine. [ERR2]

(ha/gc)

Georgian ‘foreign agent’ bill causes presidential split from parliament

Georgia's parliament voted through on May 14 a divisive "foreign agent" law that has sparked weeks of mass street protests after the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has been in power for 12 years, introduced it.

The bill requires the registration of nongovernmental groups and media outlets as organisations "bearing the interests of a foreign power" if they obtain more than 20% of their funding from foreign benefactors. [BBC]

Under the bill - which passed its third and final reading with 84 votes against 30 - NGOs and independent media will be monitored by the Justice Ministry and

could be forced to share sensitive information - or face hefty fines of up to USD 9,400.

Georgia's President Salome Zurabishvili vetoed the bill on May 20. Critics called the bill the "Russia law" and argued that it could be used to threaten civil liberties. [Politico]

Zurabishvili stated, “This law is, in its essence, in its spirit, a Russian law, which contradicts our constitution and all European standards and is an obstacle to the European path.”

On May 28, parliament overrode Zurabishvili's veto, allowing the bill to become law and take effect this summer despite Western criticism labelling the legislation as authoritarian and influenced by Russia. [Radio Free Europe] [Reuters]

Ahead of parliaments’ vote, speaker and Georgian Dream party member, Shalva Papuashvili, announced their intention to override the veto as the party holds a majority in the Parliament. [AP News]

European Council President Charles Michel previously stated that the veto would provide the government with “a moment for further reflection” as the bill hinders Georgia’s path to European Union membership. [Politico]

The bill has sparked weeks of protests in Georgia's capital, with police detaining demonstrators and using tear gas and water cannons to disperse them. [AP News]

Organisers intend to maintain the protest momentum, although less frequently than during the adoption of the "foreign agent" law, by planning occasional demonstrations throughout the summer. Many protesters remain sceptical about the elections and hope for alternative ways to oust the Georgian Dream from power. [Radio Free Europe]

The "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" is almost identical to the Georgian government's prior attempt in early March 2023 to enforce the draft law on "foreign agents," which was abandoned following the surging protests in the streets of Tbilisi opposing the bill. [Human Rights Watch]

Parallels have been outlined between the Georgian bill, revisited in April 2024, and the one that took effect in Russia in 2012, both seeking to restrict or cease the activities of nongovernmental organisations labelled as "foreign agents" according to the law. [BBC]

Crowds of demonstrators, predominantly young protestors, have repeatedly occupied the streets of Tbilisi, denouncing the proposed bill as authoritarian and Russian-influenced. Among the rally goers, the introduced bill is believed to impede Georgia's EU joining efforts, prompting calls from the European Union and the United States for the ruling party to withdraw it. [Reuters] [Reuters]

(zh/gc)

Latvia marks May 8 honouring WWII Nazi defeat and Nazi victims

Latvia commemorated the defeat of Nazism and the victims of World War II on May 8, 2024, with ceremonies held across several cities. The central event occurred at the Riga Brethren Cemetery, where top officials laid wreaths and flowers.

The commemoration began at the cemetery gates, with Latvia's leaders walking through an avenue of lime trees to the Heroes' Terrace. The National Armed Forces Staff Band provided music, and a memorial service was led by the Chaplain, followed by the singing of the Latvian National Anthem.

President Edgars Rinkevics, Speaker of the Saeima Daiga Mieriņa, Prime Minister Evika Silina, Minister of Defense Andris Sprūds attended, and military leaders, MPs, and soldiers. President Rinkevics emphasised the importance of remembering the sacrifices of WWII, particularly in light of current conflicts in Europe. [LSM]

Despite not participating as an independent country, Latvia, heavily impacted by WWII, joins Western Europe in marking May 8. "This day did not bring freedom to us, but we stand in solidarity with the liberated nations," said President Egils Levits.

May 9, Europe Day, will also be celebrated, commemorating the 1950 Schuman Declaration, which laid the foundation for the European Union, uniting all member countries, including Latvia. [The Baltic Times]

(ha/gc)

Lithuania: President Gitanas Nausėda secures second term

Lithuania's incumbent President Gitanas Nausėda has secured reelection for a second term, prevailing over

Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė with a clear majority of 74.5 percent of the votes.

The electoral process, culminating in the May 26 run-off election, saw Nausėda and Šimonytė vying for the presidency amid heightened concerns over national security, particularly in the context of Russia's assertive actions in the region. Nausėda's victory reflects his consistent advocacy for Lithuania's sovereignty and his commitment to strengthening the country's defence capabilities.

While Nausėda and Šimonytė shared similar positions on issues related to national security and defence spending, they diverged on domestic and social matters. Nausėda, supported by left-leaning parties, maintained conservative stances on issues such as abortion rights and LGBTQ+ equality, aligning with traditional values prevalent in Lithuanian society. In contrast, Šimonytė, representing the ruling conservatives, espoused more liberal views, advocating for reforms in these areas.

Beyond social issues, the candidates also clashed on economic policy and governance. Nausėda's platform emphasised the importance of promoting economic stability and social welfare, with a focus on prudent fiscal management and support for small businesses. Šimonytė, known for her fiscal conservatism, prioritised measures aimed at enhancing competitiveness and attracting foreign investment, while also advocating for fiscal discipline and regulatory reform.

Internationally, Nausėda's re-election is expected to reinforce Lithuania's standing as a reliable partner within the European Union and NATO, particularly in advocating for the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia into Euro-Atlantic structures. His renewed mandate underscores Lithuania's commitment to regional security and cooperation in the face of evolving geopolitical challenges.

As Nausėda prepares for his second term in office, his administration is poised to address a range of domestic and international issues, including economic growth, social reform, and continued engagement with key allies and partners. [Associated Press] [France 24] [Friedrich Neumann Stiftung] [The Guardian]

(ms)

Russia: High-ranking military officials face bribery charges amid corruption

crackdown

The Russian military has been rocked by a series of corruption scandals, with high-ranking officials facing charges of bribery and abuse of authority. The most recent arrest involves Lieutenant General Vadim Shamarin, the deputy chief of the army's general staff, who stands accused of accepting substantial bribes.

Shamarin's detention is part of a broader crackdown on corruption within the military, which has seen several senior figures arrested in recent months. Among those detained are Major General Ivan Popov, former commander of Russia's 58th army, and Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov.

These arrests come amidst its ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and have raised concerns about the integrity of Russia's military leadership. President Vladimir Putin's decision to replace Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu with economist Andrei Belousov is seen as another worrying sign for the Russian military, as well as seen as Russia is preparing for a long-lasting war.

The Kremlin has denied claims of a targeted purge, framing the arrests as part of routine efforts to combat corruption. However, critics argue that the scale and frequency of these arrests point to deeper systemic issues within the military.

As Russia grapples with these corruption scandals, questions arise about the effectiveness of Putin's leadership and the sustainability of his regime. The erosion of public confidence in the military leadership poses challenges to Putin's authority and could embolden opposition forces. [Al Arabiya] [Associated Press] [BBC] [Deutsche Welle]

(ms)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Bulgaria restricts gambling advertising

The Bulgarian parliament restricted gambling advertising on April 30. Under the new restrictions, gambling advertising is prohibited on nearly all television and radio programmes, through media, websites, print and on state-owned property.

Casinos will be banned in areas with less than 10,000 inhabitants. [Economic.bg]

Advertisements will continue to be allowed on billboards at least 300 metres from educational institutions, as well as on sports equipment, facilities, stadiums, and sports-related products. The advertisements will also have to include text on the risks related to gambling.

The bill was introduced by the right-wing GERB party and the centrist Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party and passed unanimously. The bill became effective immediately.

In response to the new legislation, the Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters (ABRO) said: “A ban on advertising in the media is a ban on the provision of a media service…” [Euractiv]

People on monthly welfare assistance, those with mental disabilities or people placed under guardianship will not be allowed to gamble.

These added restrictions will come into force on January 1, 2025. [BTA]

(km/gc)

North Macedonia: Conservative victory raises questions on country’s EU path

On May 8, 2024, North Macedonia held consequential presidential and parliamentary elections, resulting in a notable win for the conservative opposition, led by the VMRO-DPMNE party. This electoral outcome carries significant implications for the country's political direction and its aspirations for EU and NATO membership.

Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova's election as the first female president, backed by VMRO-DPMNE, signifies a shift in public sentiment away from the ruling SDSM party. The conservative coalition, operating under the "Your Macedonia" banner, capitalized on voter dissatisfaction with the previous government's performance. VMRO-DPMNE's campaign focused on anti-corruption measures and economic promises, resonating with voters and leading to their electoral success.

In the presidential runoff, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova secured nearly 65 percent of the vote, while her closest competitor, incumbent President Stevo Pendarovski, garnered 29 percent. In the parliamentary elections, the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition "Your Macedonia" won 43 percent of the votes, earning 58 seats in the 120-seat parliament, just shy of a majority.

The defeat of the SDSM underscores voter discontent with the party's governance. Despite their promises of reform and EU integration, the SDSM's failure to address key issues such as corruption and economic stagnation contributed to their electoral setback.

Additionally the conservative victory raises questions about North Macedonia's path towards EU membership. While both major political factions support EU integration, the conservative resurgence may impact the approach to resolving disputes with neighbouring countries, critical for advancing membership talks.

North Macedonia has aimed to join the EU and NATO for several years, viewing membership in both organizations as crucial for its economic development, security, and international standing. The country officially applied for EU membership in 2004 and became an EU candidate country in 2005. However, progress towards accession has been hindered by various challenges, including disputes with neighbouring countries and the need for significant reforms.

In terms of EU membership, North Macedonia's accession negotiations formally began in 2020. However, progress has been slow, with various issues,

including the unresolved dispute with Bulgaria and the need for comprehensive reforms, posing challenges. Despite ongoing efforts to meet EU membership criteria, North Macedonia has yet to open accession negotiations with the EU.

Regarding NATO, North Macedonia began seeking membership in the alliance following its independence from Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The country's NATO accession process faced obstacles primarily due to the longstanding dispute with Greece over its name. This dispute was resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, paving the way for North Macedonia's NATO membership. The country officially joined NATO in March 2020, becoming the alliance's 30th member.

The inauguration of North Macedonia's new president, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, reignited tensions with Greece over the name issue. During her swearing-in ceremony, Siljanovska-Davkova referred to her country simply as "Macedonia," omitting the "North" prefix included in the Prespa Agreement. This move was perceived by Greece as a violation of the agreement and sparked immediate backlash from Greek officials.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis condemned the president's speech as a "gross violation" of the Prespa Agreement, warning that Greece could reimpose its veto on North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations. The Greek ambassador even left the parliamentary chamber in protest during the inauguration.

The president's stance, supported by the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party, reflects nationalist sentiments within North Macedonia and signals a potential shift in the country's approach to the name issue. This development raises concerns about the future of bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Greece, as well as the broader implications for regional stability and Euro-Atlantic integration. [Al Jazeera] [Balkan Insight] [BBC] [Deutsche Welle] [Friedrich Neumann Stiftung] [VOA News]

(ms)

Erdogan calls for new constitution

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on May 27 for a new constitution to replace the current one adopted after the 1980 military coup. [TASS]

"The time of coups and [military] memorandums in this country is over," Erdogan said in a speech broadcast by the TRT Haber TV channel. "The current constitution undermines the credibility of politics, Turkey cannot move forward under it." [TASS]

After being re-elected to a new and final presidential term in May 2023, Erdogan pledged to introduce a new liberal civil constitution to replace the current one, which, according to him, is "a product of the (1980) coup." [MSN]

His insistence has raised concerns that the move will help him cement his power indefinitely by allowing him to run for president again in the 2028 elections. [MSN]

The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has been reluctant to agree to a new constitution, mainly due to political reasons. Officials have said the government is "imposing" the constitution upon them. (Daily Sabah)

Parliament Speaker Numan Kurtulmus said lawmakers are willing to contribute to a draft. The constitution has undergone almost 20 amendments since it was enforced. (Daily Sabah)

"I have seen that they are prepared to contribute to the process and support, without prejudice, the work on drafting a new constitution," Kurtulmus said. (Daily Sabah)

Kurtulmus said lawmakers want input from the general public, nongovernmental organisations, universities, academics, and human rights groups. He added that he welcomes anyone to express their "sincere" opinion, although he rejects any attempts to "disrupt" the process with "false opposition."

The Turkish president voiced support for a new constitution on the "island of democracy and freedom" in the Sea of Marmara near Istanbul, where former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two ministers of his government were executed after the 1961 military coup. On May 27, Turkey commemorated the anniversary of this coup.

"We will not forget or forgive the plotters neither after 64 years nor centuries," Erdogan said. [TASS]

(al/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Strikers accuse Italian government of stifling press freedom

Journalists at Italy's public broadcaster RAI staged a strike on May 6 against what they said were efforts by hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's administration to transform state TV and radio into a government mouthpiece.

The journalists' union criticised "suffocating control" of the broadcaster by the government.

Since Meloni came to power in 2022, there has been an exodus of high-profile presenters and managers from RAI due to perceived government interference. [POLITICO] [Aljazeera] [The Guardian]

The abrupt cancellation of the reading of an antifascist monologue scheduled for broadcast by RAI on April 25, Italy's Liberation Day, sparked accusations of censorship.

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, of the centre-right Forza Italia party, dismissed claims that media freedom was being suppressed at RAI. He suggested that the broadcaster had always been subject to political influence.

The Meloni government has also faced allegations of using defamation lawsuits strategically to stifle criticism in the media, with notable cases involving the Domani newspaper and anti-mafia journalist Roberto Saviano.

However, a Rome university professor, Donatella Di Cesare, was acquitted on May 15 of slandering Agriculture Minister Francesco Lollobrigida.

Di Cesare had compared comments by Lollobrigida about Italy's low birth rate and the risk of "ethnic replacement" to the language of a "Gauleiter" – an official in Adolf Hitler's Nazi party. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the government's postponement of a parliamentary debate on defamation law reform has raised concerns about press freedom in Italy. Such moves have contributed to the nation's decline in the World Press Freedom Index, where it currently ranks 46th.

Press freedom advocacy group Reporters Without Borders pointed to Italy under Meloni as an example of a country where political groups are attempting to control the media landscape.

(vm/pk)

Italian NGO rescues 87 migrants in Mediterranean

An Italian NGO rescued 87 migrants from a dinghy in distress in the central Mediterranean on May 3.

The overcrowded and deflated dinghy was adrift in international waters. The migrants had departed from Zawiya, Libya, 20 hours earlier with no food or water. [EMERGENCY] [Euronews]

The *Life Support* ship, operated by an NGO called EMERGENCY, found the migrants in a perilous situation and brought all 87 people on board.

The ship headed to the scene after being alerted by an aircraft operated by Pilotes Volontaires, a France-based NGO which flies search-and-rescue missions.

The rescued group included eight women, one of whom was pregnant, and 17 children, 14 of them unaccompanied minors. They originated from countries facing conflict and humanitarian crises, including Sudan, Nigeria and Eritrea.

The migrants were disembarked in the Italian port of Naples. They received medical attention, with priority given to a pregnant woman and a diabetic child. [ANSA]

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

The latest rescue operation was the 19th mission by the *Life Support* ship since December 2022. The vessel has now rescued over 1,630 people.

(vm/pk)

Climate protesters disrupt Italian Open

Climate protesters from the Ultima Generazione (Last Generation) group on May 13 disrupted the Italian Open in Rome, a major event in the international tennis calendar, glueing themselves to the stands. [CNN] [New York Times]

The protest was staged during a last-16 match between Madison Keys of the United States and Romania's Sorana Cîrstea. It forced a temporary halt to the match, with both players retreating to the locker rooms.

Simultaneously, a doubles match on a different court pitting Santiago González and Édouard Roger-Vasselin against Marcelo Arévalo and Mate Pavić was also disrupted. The protest caused a brief delay, but the match continued. [BBC]

Ultima Generazione, known for its dramatic demonstrations, released a video on social media outlining its demands and emphasising the severity of the climate crisis. The Italian Open organisers noted that the group was in Rome to discuss climate proposals and had previously conducted several demonstrations.

(vm/pk)

European watchdog rebukes Italy over Roma rights

A report by an influential European watchdog on May 13 condemned Italy for failing to uphold the housing rights of its Roma minority.

The rebuke from the European Committee for Social Rights (ECSR) followed a complaint by Amnesty International, which highlighted the dire living conditions of over 15,000 Roma in shanty towns

around major cities such as Rome, Milan and Naples. [Reuters] [ECSR]

The ECSR is part of the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights watchdog. It found Italy in violation of the European Social Charter due to what it said were forced evictions, segregated camps, and limited access to social housing for Roma people. The legally binding Social Charter treaty guarantees fundamental rights, including housing, employment and education.

Despite the Italian government's assertion of ongoing improvements, the ECSR pointed to what it said was systemic discrimination and inadequate measures to help Roma people. The committee said Italy should provide non-segregated, non-discriminatory housing and offer remedies for affected Roma communities.

Elisa De Pieri of Amnesty International said the ECSR's decision "confirms what has long been known and has been reported several times: in Italy the Roma communities have suffered and continue to suffer... from widespread and systematic discrimination and unequal treatment with regards to housing."

(vm/pk)

IMF warns Italy over public debt

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has issued a warning to Italy about its escalating public debt, projected to reach 145% of GDP.

The IMF called for swift fiscal adjustments and structural reforms to ensure economic stability and long-term debt sustainability. [Euronews] [IMF] [Reuters]

The Italian economy grew 0.9% in 2023, with a modest 0.7% forecast for 2025.

(vm/pk)

Naples earthquake raises concerns about volcanic activity

A 4.4 magnitude earthquake rattled the Phlegraean Fields, a volcanic zone west of the Italian city of Naples, on May 21. The tremor, the strongest ever recorded in the area, caused minor damage and sparked evacuations.

Some 140 inmates from a women's prison in Pozzuoli, a suburb of Naples, were relocated, as were 40 families from apartment buildings deemed unsafe.

Hundreds of residents chose to spend the night in tents set up by civil protection services or in their cars amid a series of aftershocks. [The Washington Post] [ANSA]

The Phlegraean Fields, a sprawling network of ancient volcanic craters near the Tyrrhenian Sea, are known for both seismic and volcanic activity.

Giuseppe De Natale, a volcanologist with Italy's National Geophysics and Volcanology Center (INGV), stressed the difficulty of predicting eruptions and earthquakes.

With at least half a million people residing in the high-risk zone, the INGV has said a government plan is urgently needed to ensure buildings can withstand earthquakes exceeding a magnitude of 5.0. [Al Jazeera]

(vm/pk)

Remote-controlled submarine of drug gang uncovered in Italy

Italian police on May 14 announced the discovery of a sophisticated drug trafficking operation involving the development and testing of a remote-controlled submarine intended for smuggling narcotics. [Reuters] [CBS News]

Authorities seized over 204 kilograms (450 pounds) of drugs such as cocaine, hashish and marijuana during a crackdown on a criminal organisation allegedly led by two Albanian brothers.

The investigation began with a probe into car wash operators suspected of managing marijuana cultivations. This led to the unearthing of a larger drug trafficking network. The gang's activities are believed to have extended to Ecuador, Belgium, France and Spain. [Le Monde]

Italian police have made several arrests in connection with the operation, though details on the number of individuals detained have not been disclosed.

The use of remote-controlled submarines signifies a new level of technological advancement in the illicit drug trade.

(vm/pk)

Portugal approves tax cut to prevent youth emigration

Portugal's centre-right minority government has approved a hefty tax cut in an effort to stop young people from emigrating in search of a better life.

The measure will benefit more than 300,000 people aged between 18 and 35, decreasing the average tax they will have to pay by two-thirds. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Luis Montenegro announced that "the vast majority will pay somewhere between 4.4% and 7%-8%", while the maximum rate will be 15% for young taxpayers earning up to EUR 5,800 a month. People earning more than that will not benefit. [Reuters]

The measure is expected to enter into force in 2025 as a part of a broader package focused on young people. [TPN] The tax cut will cost Portugal around EUR 1 billion per year, Montenegro said. [Reuters]

About 850,000 people, or 30% of those aged between 15 and 39, have left Portugal and are currently living abroad in search of better wages and working conditions. [Observatório da Emigração] [Reuters]

(fs/pk)

Renewables produce rising share of electricity in Portugal

Ninety percent of the electricity consumed in Portugal in the first four months of this year came from renewable sources, according to the national grid operator, Redes Energeticas Nacionais (REN).

April, for which the figure was 94.9%, was the fourth consecutive month with readings above 80%: 81% in January, 88% in February, and 91% in March. [REN]

Portugal is among European nations leading the way in transitioning to "clean" energy.

The share of renewables in the country's electricity production rose from 27% in 2005 to 54% in 2017. The country aims to achieve 80% in 2026. This would help Portugal to reach net zero in 2045, five years earlier than an initial goal of 2050. [Euronews]

Renewable sources used to produce electrical energy in the first four months of the year included hydroelectric power, at 48%, wind power, at 30%, photovoltaic power, 7%, and biomass, 6%. [REN]

(fc/pk)

Portugal no longer at risk of being suspended from Schengen zone

The European Commission and Portugal have announced that the country is no longer at risk of suspension from the Schengen Area, comprising 29 European countries that have abolished internal border controls, allowing the free movement of people and goods. [TPN]

The SSI, the Portuguese public agency in charge of producing intelligence to safeguard the internal security of the country, said it had overcome delays in the installation of digital and biometric border control systems, which are required by the EU for Schengen area nations. [Lusa]

Senior official António Leitão Amaro, the Portuguese Minister of the Presidency, had said in early May it was hypothetically possible that the country's membership of the Schengen area could be suspended. [TPN] [Euractiv]

(fs/pk)

Portugal approves direct Lisbon-Madrid train connection

The Portuguese government has approved plans for the construction of a new high-speed train line between Lisbon and Madrid, with the link expected to be operational in 2034.

The connection is expected to cut the travel time between the two capitals to three hours, compared to the more than nine hours and two transfers that it currently takes by train. The route will be operated by the Spanish state-owned rail company Renfe. [ITN]

A new bridge crossing over the Tagus river will be built in Portugal, as it is the only way to ensure a high speed train connection between the two cities. [El País]

The government in Lisbon estimates that more than EUR 2.2 billion will be needed for the completion of the

Portuguese part of the project, and it hopes to receive funding from the European Union. [El País]

The project is in line with the Spanish government's recent initiatives to promote the use of trains and reduce dependence on air travel as a way to limit greenhouse gas emissions. [ITN]

(fs/pk)

Socialists win Catalonia election in blow to separatists, but lack majority

Spain's governing Socialist Party won the biggest shares of votes in local elections that took place in Catalonia on May 12, in a setback for the separatist groupings that have ruled the north-eastern region for years.

However, the Socialists failed to win a majority, and face an uphill task if they want to form a regional government.

The Socialists, led by former Health Minister Salvador Illa, secured 42 seats in the 135-seat regional legislature, followed by the two main separatist parties – the rightist Junts per Cat with 35 seats, and the leftist Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) with 20.

The conservative People's Party, Spain's main national opposition, quintupled its number of seats compared to the previous 2021 regional elections, going from three to 15. [Reuters]

The results dealt a serious blow to separatist movements. Support for independence has fallen from 49% in 2017 to 42% in 2024, according to the Catalan government's statistics institute [BBC].

Four pro-independence parties – the ERC, Junts per Cat, the far-left CUP and the far-right Aliança Catalana – won a combined 61 seats, the first time separatists did not reach the 68 seats required to form a coalition government since the Catalonian push for independence, known as "el procés", began in 2012. [Politico]

Socialist regional leader Illa has secured the support of the six representatives of the leftist Comuns Sumar party, with which Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez forms a coalition government at the national level.

But Illa still needs the support or abstention of another party, possibly the ERC, since the 20 seats it obtained would allow a triple coalition between Socialists, Comuns Sumar and the ERC. However, negotiations are expected to be long lasting, as the ERC's leader and former President of Catalonia, Pere Aragonès, has dismissed the idea of reaching any deals with the Socialists. [AP News]

Carles Puigdemont, the leader of Junts per Cat and former president of the region, also ruled out negotiating with the Socialists, and announced his intention to form a government with the rest of the separatist groups. [AP News]

Puigdemont's future remains uncertain since he had announced he intended to leave active politics if he wasn't elected regional president, saying that he "has a right to get some rest after these very difficult years." [Politico].

In the event that no new regional government is formed in Catalonia, elections will be held again in October.

(fc/pk)

Spain's drought-hit Catalonia eases water restrictions after rainfall

Authorities in Spain's north-eastern Catalonia region have eased restrictions on water use across a wide area, including the city of Barcelona, after recent rainfall helped alleviate an extended drought.

A drought emergency was declared in February after reservoirs plummeted to less than 16% capacity following almost three years of below-average rain. [Euronews] [Europe Monthly December 2023] [Europe Monthly March 2024]

According to the regional government, reservoir levels have now climbed back up to 25% of capacity. [La Vanguardia].

Individual water use limits have been raised from 200 to 230 litres per day, while farmers will have to decrease their average use by 40% instead of the previous 80%. Industrial users will have to save 15% instead of the previous 25%. [AP News]

The loosening of the restrictions has been criticised by environmental groups like Aigua és Vida, which argue the drought is far from over and that easing the rules

is a short-sighted decision made for political reasons. [La Vanguardia].

(fc/pk)

Spain cancels national bullfighting prize, sparking political row

The Spanish Ministry of Culture has announced that an annual government prize for bullfighting has been scrapped, amid a cultural shift in the country as concerns grow about animal welfare. [El País].

Culture Minister Ernest Urtasún, of the leftist Sumar party, said the decision to cancel the award, worth EUR 30,000, was based on the "new social and cultural reality in Spain". Animal-rights activism has surged in recent years, while attendance at bullfights has shrunk. [Reuters]

According to data from the Ministry of Culture, less than 2% of the Spanish population attended a bullfight during the 2021-22 season. Interest among young people in particular has dwindled. [DW]

Bullfighting has become a politicized issue in Spain, pitting left-wing groupings like Sumar against rightist parties like the opposition VOX and the People's Party (PP), which has announced it intends to restore the prize if it returns to power. [DW]

The bullfighting sector criticised the government decision, arguing that Urtasún is "not complying with his obligations as a public representative" and discriminating against bullfighting for "ideological reasons". [El País].

Several regional governments run by conservatives, like Extremadura in central-western Spain and Aragón in the north-east, have announced they will introduce their own bullfighting awards.

Castilla la Mancha, the central region governed by the Socialist party (PSOE), has announced a similar measure, marking a rupture with the common leftist opposition to bullfighting. [El País]

(fc/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Top Czech court rules gender change no longer requires surgery

The Czech Republic's Constitutional Court has struck down rules requiring transgender people to undergo surgery to officially complete their transition.

Under the current law, transgender people must undergo sterilisation and sex-organ surgery before they can officially change their gender. [expats.cz]

The constitutional court said on May 7 that these legal requirements violate human dignity and contradict the fundamental right of transgender people to have "their physical integrity and personal autonomy" protected. [brno] [expats.cz]

The verdict, which cannot be appealed, was opposed by two out of 15 judges. The court gave lawmakers until mid-2025 to change the relevant sections of the law. [AP News] [expats.cz] [Reuters]

The Czech Republic's centre-right ruling coalition has struggled to reach an agreement on such issues, despite a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in 2017 to strike down the required sterilisation for individuals seeking to change their gender.

Human rights activists have welcomed the Czech Constitutional Court's decision, which brings the central European country in line with most other EU member states.

(yl/pk)

Poland to spend over EUR 2bn to fortify border with Russia, Belarus

Poland is to invest over EUR 2.3 billion to fortify its borders with Russia and Moscow-allied Belarus in an effort to increase security, according to the country's prime minister. [Politico] [Reuters] [Euronews] [Barron's]

The spending pledge comes amid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, which Belarus helped facilitate in February 2022.

A significant portion of Poland's eastern frontier borders Belarus, while the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad flanks part of the northern Polish border.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk highlighted his country's strategic position within both NATO and the EU – both of which back Ukraine in its defence against Russia – and the responsibility it has for Europe's security. [Euronews] [Politico]

"We will invest PLN 10 billion (EUR 2.3 billion) in the security of our border with Belarus and Russia," Tusk said, adding: "We have begun these works to make Poland's border a safe one in times of peace, and impenetrable for an enemy in times of war." [Politico]

Tusk also said: "We are starting a major project to build a secure border, including a system of fortifications as well as landscaping and environmental decisions that will make this border impossible to pass for a potential enemy." [Reuters]

Poland's border with Belarus has been the site of tensions between the two countries since 2021, when thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants began attempting to illegally cross into Poland in what Warsaw and Brussels called a "hybrid" attack mounted by Minsk and supported by Moscow. [Europe Monthly September 2023] [Reuters]

Poland's previous government, led by the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, built a EUR 367 million wall along the Belarusian border in an attempt to stop the crossings. [Reuters]

Russia is also thought to have moved tactical nuclear weapons and Wagner Group mercenaries into Belarus last year, leading Poland to bolster troop numbers on the border. [Europe Monthly September 2023]

Russian sabotage suspected

Warsaw has also recently accused Moscow of attempted sabotage in Poland and other European countries after 12 members of an alleged Russian spy ring were arrested by Polish authorities, accused of "beatings, arson, and attempted arson," according to Tusk. [The Guardian] [Notes From Poland]

Tusk said the criminal plots included plans to set fire to a paint factory in the western Polish city of Wroclaw and an Ikea shop in Lithuania. [The Guardian]

He added that Poland has been investigating the "quite likely" involvement of Russian security services in a blaze that destroyed Warsaw's largest shopping centre in mid-May. [TVP World]

Meanwhile, two Polish citizens and a Belarusian national were arrested in April, suspected of being involved in an attack on Leonid Volkov – a Russian opposition figure and friend of the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. [The Guardian] [Notes From Poland]

That same month, another Polish man was detained for allegedly taking part in a planned Russian assassination attempt on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. [The Guardian] [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Poland restricts travel for Russian diplomats amid spying fears

Poland has imposed travel restrictions on Russian diplomats within the country and announced that a special commission will probe suspected Russian and Belarusian "subversion". [TVP World]

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski announced the restrictions after a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on May 27. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland]

Sikorski said: "In connection with the Russian state's involvement in a hybrid war against the European Union, including Poland, [we are introducing] restrictions on the movement of Russian diplomats in our country." [Notes From Poland]

The new rules mean that Russian diplomats working in the Russian embassy in Warsaw or in consulates across the country will be confined to the province in which their branch is located. [Notes From Poland]

Russia's ambassador to Warsaw, however, will be exempt from the restrictions. [TVP World]

On May 21, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced the formation of a new special commission that will examine and detail suspected acts of subversion carried out by Russia and its ally Belarus in the two decades from 2004 to 2024. [TVP World] [Reuters]

Tusk said: "To preempt questions and speculation, we also want to examine potential media influence. This is nothing new; we know well that this Russian and Belarusian subversion in Poland and Europe also concerns broadly understood social communication." [TVP World]

The move comes amid political friction between Poland and Belarus, its Moscow-allied eastern neighbour.

Poland's border with Belarus has been a focal point of tensions since 2021, when thousands of mostly Middle Eastern migrants began attempting to illegally cross into Poland in what Warsaw and Brussels called a "hybrid" attack mounted by Minsk and supported by Moscow. [Europe Monthly September 2023] [Reuters]

The number of attempted crossings has begun to increase again in recent months, and several Polish border guards were reportedly attacked and hospitalised by migrants in May. [Reuters] [TVP World]

Judge defects to Belarus

Meanwhile, Polish judge Tomasz Szmydt fled Poland in early May to seek asylum in Belarus after claiming he was the target of political persecution. [Reuters] [TVP World]

Poland's National Prosecutor's office subsequently charged Szmydt – who had access to military secrets – with spying and placed him on a wanted list. [Reuters] [TVP World]

Polish authorities also arrested 12 people in May suspected of involvement in various acts of sabotage on behalf of Russian intelligence services. [TVP World]

Prime Minister Tusk said that Russian agents were "quite likely" involved in a massive fire that burned down Warsaw's largest shopping mall in May. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Polish PM reshuffles cabinet ahead of European elections

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has reshuffled his cabinet for the first time since his pro-EU coalition government came to power in December.

The reshuffle, announced on May 10, saw the interior, culture, state assets and development ministers leaving their posts, hoping to swap Warsaw for Brussels as they prepare to contest European Parliament elections in June.

The new ministers are either trusted associates of Tusk or specialists in their field. [TVP World]

In a key change, Marcin Kierwinski was replaced as interior minister by Tomasz Siemoniak, who headed the defence ministry from 2011 to 2015 in a previous Tusk government.

In his new post, Siemoniak will simultaneously continue in his role as the minister in charge of Poland's security services.[Notes from Poland]

In another change, Hanna Wroblewska takes over as culture minister from Bartlomiej Sienkiewicz, who has headed a government drive to prise Poland's public media free of the grip of the nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party.

Under PiS, which was ousted in parliamentary elections last October, state media were turned into a propaganda machine that daily vilified the right-wing party's many perceived enemies, including liberals, left-wingers and the LGBT community.

(pk)

Slovak pro-Russia PM shot in 'politically motivated' attack

Slovakia's populist Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot five times and seriously wounded on May 15 in what officials described as a politically motivated assassination attempt.

Fico, a polarising figure who won a fourth term in power last October with a pledge to send "not one more round of ammunition" to Ukraine, was shot in the arm and abdomen at a short range while greeting his supporters in the small town of Handlova, some 85 miles (140km) northeast of the capital, Bratislava.

[CNN] [Economist 1] [The New York Times] [Reuters 1] [AP news 1] [France 24/AFP]

In critical condition, the 59-year-old veteran politician was airlifted by helicopter to a hospital in the nearby city of Banska Bystrica. He is understood to have undergone several operations. [Bloomberg 1] [Reuters 1] [The Hill] [BBC 1] BBC 2]

Two weeks after the attack, the hospital confirmed on May 27 that Fico was no longer in a life-threatening condition. He was later taken to his apartment in Bratislava to continue his recovery. [Reuters 1] [The Hill] [Bloomberg 2] [BBC 1] [Politico 2] [FT 1] [Independent] [The New York Times][The Guardian 1] [Slovak Spectator]

Slovakia's outgoing liberal president, Zuzana Caputova, who had sued Fico for calling her an "American agent", condemned the shooting, saying it was "an attack on democracy".

'Hateful rhetoric'

"The hateful rhetoric we witness in society leads to hateful acts," she added. [BBC 2]

Fico, the country's longest-serving prime minister, is the most powerful lawmaker in Slovakia because he holds executive power, as opposed to the president, whose role is largely ceremonial.

The shooting followed controversial reforms by Fico's ruling coalition that sparked anti-government protests in recent months.

Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok said the suspect was motivated by his dissatisfaction with Fico's policies, including halting military aid to Kyiv, abolishing Slovakia's anti-graft prosecution office, and overhauling the public broadcaster. [CNN 2] [Reuters 2]

Estok added that the gunman had participated in anti-government protests and became radicalised after Peter Pellegrini, Fico's political ally, won the presidential election in April. That victory strengthened the premier's grip on power. [CNN 2] [BBC 3]

The alleged assailant, identified by Slovak media as 71-year-old Juraj Cintula, was apprehended at the scene and taken into custody. The suspect, a former security guard and an amateur poet, has been charged with attempted premeditated murder. If convicted, he could face up to life in prison. [Politico 2] [BBC 3] [Bloomberg 2] [BBC 4] [The Guardian 2]

Government officials said the suspect might not be a "lone wolf" as initially believed, adding that "a certain group of people" may have assisted the perpetrator. [The Guardian 1] [AP News 1] [Reuters 2] [The New York Times]

'Political war'

Fico's closest political allies have claimed that foreign-funded NGOs, independent media and the pro-EU opposition whipped up an atmosphere of hatred in which the shooting took place.

Andrej Danko, who heads the pro-Russia and ultra-nationalist SNS party in the ruling coalition, said the country is heading towards a "political war".

He claimed it is necessary to change the current media climate, adding it is time to end "the era of insolence". [Politico 1] [BBC 5]

Opposition leaders have urged the ruling coalition not to exploit the shooting to tighten its control over Slovakia's institutions. Fico's populist administration has faced criticism from the EU for rewriting the criminal code to undermine the country's anti-graft efforts and for replacing the public broadcaster with what critics call a government mouthpiece. [Europe Monthly April 2024] [The Guardian 2]

Crackdown on media feared

Journalists in Slovakia have expressed alarm that the attempted assassination could lead to a crackdown on independent voices and a more polarised political scene in an already divided country. [Politico 1]

Lawmakers from the ultra-nationalist SNS party submitted a draft amendment on May 27 to revise the country's media law.

The proposed changes would require media outlets to correct any allegedly false or incomplete statements "that impugn [a person's] honour, dignity or good reputation."

(yl/pk)

Opposition needs EU election success to counter power of populist gov't: ex-PM

Former Slovak Prime Minister Ludovit Odor has said that the opposition needs to do well in June's European Parliament vote to counterbalance the power of

populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, whom critics have accused of democratic backsliding and of steering the country away from its pro-Western course.

As the nation prepares to hold European elections on June 8, Odor, the lead candidate of the main opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, said: “It is very important that Fico sees that there is some power in Slovakia which can beat him.” [The Guardian] [ALDE party]

Odor is a former central bank deputy governor who briefly led a pro-Western technocrat government before Slovakia’s snap parliamentary elections last September.

He said that the European Parliament elections were important because liberal voters needed “some new impulses” to help them believe that Slovakia can return to a “more democratic” path, especially after Peter Pellegrini, a close ally of Fico, defeated pro-Western diplomat Ivan Korcok to become the country’s president in April.

Fico, a Kremlin-friendly populist, won a fourth term in power last October with a pledge to withdraw key military aid for Ukraine. Anti-government protests broke out across Slovakia over his plan to abolish the country’s anti-graft office and to replace the public broadcaster with what critics call a government mouthpiece.

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark eases abortion law

Denmark's government has said it has reached an agreement with four other parties to ease the country's abortion law, allowing women to terminate pregnancies up to the 18th week as opposed to 12 weeks.

It is the first time in 50 years that Denmark has loosened its abortion rules. The law will also be changed to allow girls between 15-17 to have abortions without parental consent.

Fifteen is the legal age of consent in Denmark. The health ministry said that a girl of that age should be able to make her own choices about her body.

Gender Equality Minister Marie Bjerre said: "It is about the freedom of the individual woman, about the right to decide over her own body and her own life. It is a historic day for women's equality." [POLITICO]

Denmark has offered free abortions since 1973. [Politiken]

Health Minister Sophie Løhde said: "After 50 years, it is time for the abortion rules to keep up with the times." [DR]

But Mette Thiesen, a member of the right-wing opposition Folketing party, criticized what she described as "a terrible new law." She added that there was a "very fine balance between the woman's right to her own body, but also the right to life of the little life that lies in the mother's womb." [AP News]

The changes to the law are expected to be passed by parliament and to take effect in June 2025.

(km/pk)

Danish lawmakers debate AI after deepfake of PM released

The Danish parliament was called to meet on May 15 to discuss the use of artificial intelligence following the release of a deepfake video of the prime minister.

So-called deepfakes are videos created using digital software and AI to create realistic footage of events, statements or actions that never happened.

In April, the far-right opposition Danish People's Party released an AI-generated video of Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen.

In it, Frederiksen appeared to announce that Ascension Day, Easter and Christmas would no longer be public holidays and would instead be replaced by the Muslim festival of Eid as the country's only holiday.

The video seemed to reference the government's unpopular decision last year to abolish *Store bededag*, or "Great Prayer Day" as a public holiday. [The Local 2]

The deepfake was labelled as AI-generated, ending with the Danish People's Party's leader, Morten Messerschmidt, awakening from a nightmare.

Another AI-generated video was released in April by the Liberal Alliance for Great Prayer Day depicting the prime minister, defence minister and foreign minister as animated characters in a Wes Anderson-style trailer for a fictional film titled "The Theft of Great Prayer Day."[The Local]

'Devastating for democratic conversation'

Frederiksen responded to the videos by saying: "I think that political parties should refrain from this. It is devastating for our democratic conversation." [Politiken]

The Speaker of the Danish parliament, Soren Gade, said in a statement: "We all have a responsibility to take care of democracy and ensure that you can trust what we as politicians say and do." [Berlingske]

At the meeting of parliament, the house's presidium – which comprises the Speaker and Deputy Speakers – said it would propose that political parties agree on rules for the use of artificial intelligence and deepfakes.

Previously, Denmark's parties entered into a voluntary agreement in 2019 not to spread fake news.

In response to criticism, the Danish People's Party group chairman, Peter Kofoed, called its deepfake “a very innocent and humorous video, in which we also declare that we have used artificial intelligence.” [DR]

European Union lawmakers in March gave final approval for a set of world-leading regulations, known as the AI Act, designed to place guardrails around the development of artificial intelligence. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

(km/pk)

Danish police temporarily ban Bandidos motorbike club, citing violence

Danish police issued a temporary ban on May 22 on the Bandidos motorcycle club, citing the group’s violent behaviour. The move prohibits the group from meeting or displaying their insignias. [Politiken]

Lasse Boje, the head of the country’s National Special Crime Unit, said the Danish branch of Bandidos had been involved in at least 10 violent conflicts with other criminal groups in the last decade.

“The crime and behaviour displayed by the Bandidos is so serious that we will have to intervene now and not wait for the courts to deal with it,” he added. [DR]

In April, the Danish government had said it wanted a court to formally dissolve the motorcycle club, which has branches in various countries and is the second-largest of its kind in the world, behind the Hells Angels.

Members of the Bandidos in Denmark have been imprisoned for murder, assault and drug-related crimes.

Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard said that “the freedom of association was not created to protect vicious criminals.” [AP News]

(km/pk)

Denmark plans to stop its fishermen from beam trawling

The Danish government has proposed a ban on fishing with beam trawls in the country’s waters due to environmental concerns.

As a fishing method, beam trawling has been criticised by environmental organisations for causing destruction to the seabed and the marine ecosystem.

The proposed restrictions will apply only to Danish fishermen. Denmark's minister for food, agriculture and fisheries, Jacob Jensen, said in a statement: "The first step on the road to a better marine environment will be a national phasing out of beam trawling, while at the same time we will work hard for a common European solution so that it is banned for everyone." [DR]

Jensen added: "We cannot simply make rules that prohibit fishing with beam trawls for other countries' vessels, even if they fish in Danish waters." [Berlingske]

Meanwhile, Danish Environment Minister Magnus Heunicke said that foreign beam trawlers "have caused great damage to our reefs in the North Sea and Skagerrak [between Denmark, Norway and Sweden] for far too long." [Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries]

(km/pk)

Finland expands military storage to Norway and Sweden in strategic defence tactic

Finland has begun storing military equipment in Norway and plans to expand this strategy to Sweden as part of its efforts to bolster defence preparedness in response to perceived increased aggression from Russia. [Financial Times] [Yle]

Lieutenant General Mikko Heiskanen, the Finnish Defence Forces' deputy chief of staff responsible for armaments and logistics, told the Financial Times: "We are planning [to] store equipment in other countries. It's a security of supply issue, dispersing the stocks... We plan to do it especially with Sweden and Norway, but also with further-away countries. It's equipment and ammunition and maybe spare parts."

Finland, which has the longest border with Russia of any EU country, joined NATO in 2023 after decades of military non-alignment in the wake of Moscow's attack on Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

"We are not alone anymore. We can trust others," Heiskanen added. [Financial Times] [Yle]

The Nordic country maintains reserves of fuel and grain sufficient for at least six months and has enough air shelters for its entire population. Nearly a third of adult Finns are reservists, meaning the country of just 5.6 million has one of the largest militaries in Europe, the Financial Times reported.

“Russia respects power,” Heiskanen said. “Power consists of both the will and the capacity. The will is in place. The people’s will to defend the country is probably the highest in the world.” [Financial Times] [Yle]

Heiskanen told the Financial Times that Finland’s production of grenades and shells has increased tenfold compared to five years ago but did not provide details.

He also said that Finnish officials had recently evaluated over 1,000 contracts with private enterprises for the production of equipment and provision of services in wartime scenarios. [Financial Times] [Yle]

(rs/pk)

Finnish deputies back plan to limit strike rights

Finland’s right-wing government has garnered parliamentary backing for its contested plans to impose restrictions on politically motivated and “solidarity” strikes. [Yle]

The legislation will restrict the duration of political strikes to 24 hours and other forms of political industrial activities, like refusals to work overtime, to no more than two weeks. [Yle]

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.

Members of parliament voted 107 to 57 in favour of passing a series of bills introducing the restrictions on strikes.

The opposing votes were cast by three opposition parties, the centre-left Green League, the socialist Left Alliance, and the centre-left Social Democrats. [Yle]

All 91 ruling-party members present at the vote supported the bills, along with all 15 lawmakers from the Centre Party and one from Movement Now. Thirty-

five lawmakers were absent from the vote. [Helsinki Times]

The Employment and Equality Committee of the parliament proposed several changes to the legislation, one of which is a one-year waiting period before any political industrial action aimed at the same goal can be resumed. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

The committee also listed criteria under which employees involved in illegal strikes will be subject to a fine of 200 EUR. [Yle]

The date on which the new rules will come into force will be decided later. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

The bills are part of a series of government measures that have attracted extensive opposition from trade unions, including a four-week strike that stopped cargo operations at major export ports and interrupted deliveries of goods.

According to an estimate by the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), the strike caused the country's gross domestic product to shrink by hundreds of millions of euros. [Helsinki Times] [Europe Monthly April 2024]

(rs/pk)

Finland proposes law to halt migrants on Russian border

The Finnish government has unveiled plans for emergency legislation aimed at stopping asylum seekers from entering the country across its long border with Russia.

The right-wing government in Helsinki believes that migration is being encouraged by Moscow amid political tensions following the start of the Ukraine war. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

The proposed legislation would enable border guards to deny entry to certain individuals or deport them "to a place where applications for international protection are accepted," Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said on May 21 as the government decided to submit the bill for approval in parliament. [Bloomberg]

Finland closed its 1,340 km (830 mile) border with Russia last year following a surge in arrivals from countries such as Syria and Somalia shortly after

Helsinki joined NATO. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Orpo said that Russia is assaulting the EU on various fronts, including GPS jamming and using migrants as weapons, and stressed that the bloc needs to improve its response. [POLITICO]

“Russia is aggressive, uses all kinds of hybrid tools against the West, against Europe,” he said in an interview with POLITICO.

The Kremlin refutes allegations of weaponising migration, claiming that the West is conducting a smear campaign against it. [Reuters]

Since Finland closed its land borders, only a few dozen migrants have arrived from Russia this year, compared to 1,300 in 2023, according to data from border guards. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly May 2024]

The Finnish right-wing coalition government concedes that refusing migrants entry without reviewing asylum applications would contravene the country’s international human rights commitments. However, Orpo said that the new measures would be temporary and implemented only in extraordinary situations. [Reuters] [European Council on Refugees and Exiles]

Finland, which has the longest border with Russia of any EU and NATO member, is urging the European Union to permit exceptions when a member country is targeted with migrant flows intended to destabilise its society. [Reuters]

In several rulings, the European Court of Human Rights has condemned similar pushback practices by countries such as Poland, Hungary, Italy and Greece. [Reuters]

The legislation proposed by the Finnish government requires a five-sixths majority in parliament to pass, and its success is uncertain. The bill would permit border authorities to turn back asylum seekers arriving from Russia, using force if necessary, though it would not apply to children or disabled individuals. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

(rs/pk)

Far-right Finns Party expels members after shooting incident and nomination row

The far-right Finns Party, which is a partner in Finland's governing coalition, has expelled two prominent politicians, an MP and a member of the European Parliament, amid controversy. [Yle]

MP Timo Vornanen, aged 54, was suspected of involvement in a shooting incident outside a bar in Helsinki on April 26. He is believed to have fired a small-calibre handgun at the ground after waving and aiming it at two individuals. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

A week prior to his expulsion, Vornanen was removed from the Finns Party parliamentary group due to a loss of confidence stemming from his alleged involvement in the incident.

"If a Finns Party representative is carrying a firearm while intoxicated in a nightclub in Helsinki, there's plenty there to damage confidence," said Riikka Purra, leader of the Finns Party. [Helsinki Times]

Finland has one of the highest firearm ownership rates in Europe. However, the country enforces stringent regulations on the use and storage of guns. [New York Times]

Vornanen said he has no plans to join another party and is awaiting the outcome of an initial police investigation. [Yle] [Helsinki Times]

Meanwhile, MEP Teuvo Hakkarainen and the Finns Party clashed over the upcoming European Parliament elections. Despite Hakkarainen wanting to keep his seat in Brussels, the party declined to nominate him. Consequently, the 64-year-old lawmaker is now running as a candidate for the Freedom Alliance, a newly established right-wing populist party.

"Now there is this mentality that if you question the party leadership or criticise their actions, you will be thrown out," said Hakkarainen.

Hakkarainen has previously been convicted of sexual harassment and assault when he was a member of the Finnish parliament in 2018. [Yle]

Shortly after joining a government coalition in 2023, the Finns Party faced controversy over racist comments made by several of its ministers, including the party leader and finance minister, Riikka Purra. The scandal also resulted in the resignation of the economy minister, Vilhelm Junnila. [Yle] [Europe Monthly August 2023] [New York Times]

(rs/pk)

Support for Finland's opposition Social Democrats hits 20-year high

Support for Finland's opposition Social Democrat Party (SDP) has surged to its highest level in almost 20 years, according to a poll by national broadcaster YLE.

The party, led by Antti Lindtman, saw its approval rating climb by 2.7 percentage points to 24.4%. [YLE]

In second place is Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's party, the centre-right National Coalition (NCP), which has 21.3% support. Its popularity has increased by 0.7 percentage points from the previous measurement. [YLE]

The latest poll, conducted from April 3 to May 7, highlights a shifting political landscape, with support for the far-right Finns Party, a member of the ruling coalition, having dropped by 1.8 points to 15.6%, marking its third consecutive month of declining popularity. The populist party was the only member of the governing coalition to lose support in the survey. [YLE] [Helsinki Times]

The upswing for the Social Democrats comes amid parliamentary debates on strike restrictions and budget cuts.

Tuomo Turja, research director at Taloustutkimus, the market research company that carried out the survey for YLE, said that the Social Democrats performed strongly throughout the polling period, attracting support from both women and blue-collar workers. [YLE] [Helsinki Times]

"The SDP is doing very well to hold on to its own voters. It's additionally getting support from people who voted for... other parties. Also, the Finns Party and National Coalition are parties that are losing support to it," he said. [YLE] [Helsinki Times]

The pro-European SDP formed a coalition government in 2019, with Sanna Marin at 34 becoming the world's youngest prime minister upon assuming leadership of the party and the Finnish premiership. Marin successfully guided the country through the Covid pandemic and brought it to the brink of NATO membership. [Guardian]

Her party lost power in April 2023 to the current ruling coalition comprising the NCP, the right-wing Finns Party, the centre-right Christian Democrats and the liberal Swedish People's Party.

Orpo's government has been surrounded by controversies since taking office, mainly due to allegations of racism levelled at members of the Finns Party. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Europe Monthly September 2023]

Other groupings have experienced slight shifts in popularity. Among the opposition, the liberal Centre Party's approval rating fell by 0.5 points to 11.5%, the socialist Left Alliance dropped by 0.7 points to 8.8%, and the centre-left Green League declined by 0.6 points to 7.7%. [Helsinki Times]

(rs/pk)

Businesswoman Halla Tomasdottir wins Iceland's presidential elections

Halla Tomasdottir, a businesswoman, has been elected as Iceland's president, succeeding the incumbent Gudni Johannesson in the largely ceremonial position. [Reuters]

Tomasdottir, aged 55, secured 34% of the vote, defeating former Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, who received 25%.

Jakobsdottir had resigned from her prime ministerial post in April to run for the presidency. [Reuters]

Halla Hrund Logadottir, an environmental expert and professor at Harvard University, was the third closest contender, receiving 15.5% of the vote. [DW]

Tomasdottir is currently on leave of absence as chief executive of The B Team, a global nonprofit co-founded by British entrepreneur Richard Branson. The organisation, with offices in New York and London, advocates for business practices that prioritise humanity and the environment. [Al Jazeera]

Elected for a four-year term, the president of Iceland, while holding limited political authority, often serves as the guardian of the constitution and a symbol of unity for the nation, which is part of the NATO alliance. [Reuters] [Al Jazeera]

Although the position is mostly symbolic, the president retains the authority to veto legislation or call a referendum. [Al Jazeera]

Tomasdottir, who is set to become Iceland's seventh president since the republic was established in 1944, previously ran for the post eight years ago, finishing

second to Johannesson. Her swearing-in is scheduled for August 1. [Reuters]

She ran for president positioning herself as an independent candidate not aligned with any political party, focusing on opening conversations about issues like the impact of social media on young people's mental health, Iceland's growth as a tourist hub, and the implications of artificial intelligence. [Al Jazeera]

Previously serving as the head of Iceland's Chamber of Commerce, Tomasdottir founded the financial services firm Audur Capital in 2007 with the goal of integrating social responsibility and women's perspectives into the finance sector. [Reuters]

Tomasdottir will be the second woman to hold the presidency in Iceland. The first was Vigdis Finnbogadottir, who made history in 1980 by becoming the first woman in the world to be democratically elected president. [Le Monde] [Al Jazeera]

(rs/pk)

Far-right Sweden Democrats reassign staff as smear tactics exposed

The far-right Sweden Democrats party, whose support is vital for the minority governing coalition, announced on May 16 that it would reassign staff after a TV investigation revealed they had run online smear campaigns ahead of European elections. [Reuters]

The investigation by Swedish network TV4, which aired in early May, showed Sweden Democrats communications staff involved in secret online campaigns using anonymous social media accounts to discredit and troll both political opponents and partners. [TV4] [Sveriges Radio]

The party said in its announcement that two of its communication office staff members had been reassigned and that it would tighten its social media policies.

The party added: "We are prepared to make some minor adjustments to soften the tone going forward so that we can once again focus on solving important problems in society."

Earlier, the Sweden Democrats – whose founders had links to neo-Nazis – had responded to the TV4 report by saying that the investigation was a "domestic

influence operation from the combined left-liberal establishment." [Reuters]

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson denied the claim, saying: "It would be completely out of place for me to interfere in how free media works in a free democracy."

Kristersson added that he had no plans to suspend collaboration between the ruling coalition – which includes centre-right politicians and liberals – with the Sweden Democrats in the wake of the scandal. [Euractiv]

He told reporters: "If your real question is: Do you want to stop working together to solve Sweden's major problems because I have strong objections to smear campaigns in Swedish politics, then the answer is no." [The Local]

(km/pk)

Sweden's central bank cuts interest rates for first time in eight years

Sweden's central bank cut its key interest rate on May 8 for the first time since 2016 amid falling inflation and an economy that shrank 0.2% last year.

The Riksbank slashed the interest rate from 4% to 3.75% and said that it expected more cuts later in the year if inflation remained low. [Financial Times]

Annual inflation in Sweden fell to 2.3% in March from 2.6% the previous month, after peaking at over 10% in late 2022. [Statistics Sweden] [YCharts]

Riksbank governor Erik Thedeen said: "If the outlook doesn't change, we can cut rates a further two times during the second half of the year."

The Swedish crown weakened after the decision to cut interest rates was announced.

Previously, Sweden had increased rates eight times in less than two years and many households are struggling with high

mortgage payments.

The last time that the interest rate was cut was in early 2016, when it fell to -0.50%, its lowest recorded level. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

European elections: Will key new alliances emerge amid likely surge by far-right?

As voters prepare to cast their ballots in European Parliament elections from June 6 to 9, ideas are being floated for new alliances that could drastically change the EU's political landscape amid an expected surge by the far-right.

An "informal" campaign launch by far-right parties in Madrid mid-May saw Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy, and Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally (RN), rallying support for Spain's far-right Vox Party. This scenario is intriguing, as Meloni and Le Pen's parties belong to different groupings in the European Parliament.

To the right of the European People's Party (EPP), to which European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen belongs, there are two main far-right groupings: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID).

The ECR includes Meloni's party, Spain's Vox, and Poland's opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, among others. The ID group, further to the right, includes parties that are considered extremist by many, including Le Pen's RN and, until recently, Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). These right-

wing parties represent, to varying degrees, nationalist, eurosceptic and restrictive migration policies. [Politico 1]

ID group expels AfD

On May 23, the AfD was expelled from the ID group due to statements by its lead candidate, Maximilian Krah, which were deemed unacceptable. These included comments to an Italian newspaper in which he downplayed the criminality of members of the Nazi Waffen-SS during World War II. As a result, Le Pen distanced herself from the AfD, saying she believes that the AfD is dominated by the radical wing.

Furthermore, the AfD has been involved in a number of scandals prior to the European elections, including allegations of espionage and bribery from China and Russia. (see EiR No. 5, May/2024)

Observers say that Le Pen wants to improve her party's image – she has distanced herself from the highly radical views of her father, the party's founder – in order to appear more electable and that she is aiming for a third attempt at the office of French president.

Le Pen is publicly offering to form an alliance with Meloni – a "super group" of otherwise heterogeneous right-wing parties to create the second-largest group in the new European Parliament. [euronews] [BBC] [Politico 2] [Guardian]

Meloni courted

Meanwhile, the door to the EPP does not seem to be closed to Meloni either, as von der Leyen has not entirely dismissed the possibility of collaborating with the ECR, particularly with the Italian leader.

Such an alliance, in the context of a predicted surge by right-wing parties, could help von der Leyen secure a second term as European Commission president.

It has been signalled that an alliance may be feasible between these two groups, provided they guarantee they will be pro-European, pro-Ukraine and in favour of the rule of law. This prospect has met with criticism from the centre-left European Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group, which has warned of a potential erosion of European values should the EPP collaborate with right-wingers. [Politico 3] [Euractiv]

(fg/pk)

EU eases green rules for farmers after protests

The Council of the EU, representing the bloc's member states, on May 13 adopted changes to the Common Agricultural Policy, giving the final green light to a "simplification package" designed to cut red tape and ease environmental requirements after widespread farmer protests.

The amended rules, first introduced by the European Commission in March, include changes to six of the nine environmental standards required by farmers to receive EU subsidies, and give member states increased flexibility in suspending requirements like crop rotation and fallow land rules.

The reforms also allow small farms of less than 10 hectares to receive subsidies without having to go through compliance checks on environmental requirements. [Euractiv]

These changes are now law and will remain in place until 2027. They come after farmer protests against EU agriculture policies at the start of 2024 in almost every country of the EU. [Euractiv]

In addition to voicing anger at green and other EU policies they saw as burdensome red tape, protesters demanded measures to combat production cost hikes, reduced profits and unfair competition from non-EU countries, notably Ukraine. [Europe Monthly March 2024]

The European Commission and some national governments had already made concessions, including shelving plans to halve the use of pesticides and other dangerous substances. [Euronews]

While the reforms were hailed by farmers' groups, the package's lightning-fast two-month journey from proposal to approval by EU institutions drew criticism from environmental and left-wing groups, who frame the changes as a sacrifice of sustainability policies motivated by political opportunism ahead of the European elections. [Euractiv]

On May 13, 140 non-governmental organisations published a letter accusing EU capitals and institutions of "accelerating the nature and climate crisis, and risking the lives of the people they represent".

(qv/pk)

As EU completes migration reform, 15 members call for external partnerships

Days after the EU completed a watershed reform of its migration and asylum policy, a group of 15 member states led by Denmark unveiled a push for the bloc to increase partnerships with non-European countries to implement its migration policy.

The group praised the bloc's sweeping new rules – dubbed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum – in a letter published on May 16, but urged for more to be done.

Reforms have been a critical issue for the EU since its immigration system was overwhelmed in the 2015 refugee crisis, but divisions across the bloc on the politically explosive issue have led to a deadlock—until now.

The new rules aim to impose tougher screening systems while fast-tracking asylum procedures. The laws are expected to start applying two years from now.

One of the most controversial measures is a system of "mandatory solidarity", under which some migrants are to be relocated from the EU country they first arrive in to other member states. If other EU countries refuse to take in these refugees, they will be required to send equipment or personnel to countries of first reception – which are under pressure from migration – or potentially pay a EUR 20,000 fine per person not accepted. [Euronews]

Poland and Hungary irked

These reforms have drawn the ire of Warsaw and Budapest, which have fiercely opposed the pact throughout its entire approval process. Poland, however, likes some of the tougher migration measures in the reforms and is among the letter's endorsers, alongside Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Romania and Finland.

The letter's 15 signatories called for further collaboration with "key partner countries along the migratory routes" which accept "large numbers" of refugees. The group cites the EU's partnerships with Turkey, Tunisia and Egypt, to which the bloc has allocated hundreds of millions of euros in funds in exchange for tougher border controls. [CPHpost]

The letter also suggested building on a protocol agreed in November 2023 between Italy and Albania – conducted without Brussels' intervention – under which Rome plans to outsource the processing of up to 36,000 asylum applications a year to the Balkan country, which is to temporarily host migrants rescued at sea by the Italian authorities. [Europe Monthly November 2023]

The group argued for stronger and swifter returns of people denied asylum, and said the EU should revise its criteria of "safe third countries," as well as the conditions under which people could be sent there. While awaiting deportation to their home country, people could be transferred to a "return hub" in an unspecified third country before "final removal", the letter argues.

Rights groups unhappy

These proposals have been contested by migrant rights organisations, who argue relocated people could face persecution in third-party countries that appear on paper as stable.

The bloc's new migration rules required a qualified majority for approval by the EU's institutions, which is why Poland and Hungary's opposition has not stopped the reforms. A qualified majority is reached when at least 15 of the EU's 27 member states representing a minimum 65% of the bloc's total population agree to a measure.

While the letter's proposals have the backing of the minimum required number of member states, the group does not meet the population requirement, lacking the support of some of the bloc's most populous members like Germany, France and Spain.

The European Commission said it would review the letter, but stressed that its focus in the coming years would be on implementing the newly approved reforms. [Euronews]

(qv/pk)

EU probes Meta amid fears social media addicts children

The European Union has started a probe into Facebook and Instagram amid fears the social media platforms are addicting children and damaging their mental health. [BBC] [Guardian]

The European Commission, the bloc's executive, said on May 16 it was worried that algorithms used by the platforms, owned by Meta, to recommend videos and posts could "exploit the weaknesses and inexperience" of children and stimulate addictive behaviour.

EU investigators will examine whether these algorithmic systems are leading users to increasingly disturbing content in a "rabbit-hole" effect. [Al Jazeera]

The commission added it was "concerned about age-assurance and verification methods put in place by Meta."

The EU's executive said the company may have breached the Digital Services Act (DSA), a landmark law passed by the bloc last summer that makes digital companies liable for child abuse, disinformation and other forms of online harm.

The EU commissioner for the internal market, Thierry Breton, said: "We are not convinced that [Meta] has done enough to comply with the DSA obligations to mitigate the risks of negative effects to the physical and mental health of young Europeans on its platforms." [Guardian]

Meta responded by saying it had "spent a decade developing more than 50 tools and policies" to protect children.

It added: "This is a challenge the whole industry is facing, and we look forward to sharing details of our work with the European Commission." [BBC]

(pk)

EU adopts corporate sustainability due diligence directive

The Council of the European Union on May 24 adopted the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Following the renegotiation of the details by the member states earlier this year and the approval of the European Parliament in April, the Council's approval marked the last step in the decision-making procedure.

The CSDDD requires EU and non-EU companies to comply with human rights and their impact on the environment. The directive also holds companies' subsidiaries and business partners along the entire value chain accountable.

This has a wide scope of application, as companies must introduce measures to identify and remedy possible negative impacts on human rights or environmental and climate protection. Otherwise, they can be held responsible or sanctioned for violations. The impacts range from child labour and slavery to pollution, emissions, deforestation, and ecosystem damage.

Furthermore, companies are obliged to implement a climate protection plan that is in accordance with the objectives of the Paris Climate Agreement. [Council of the EU] [Jurist news]

The European Commission has already presented two mechanisms for enforcing these new regulations. On the one hand, member states are required to establish an authority to supervise and enforce the rules, to be integrated at the European level with the European Network of Supervisory Authorities.

Secondly, civil liability is to be guaranteed in each member state, thus enabling those affected to take legal action against breaches of due diligence and receive compensation for damage. [European Commission]

Although the directive was regarded as having been diluted from the original proposals and had to be renegotiated, especially after Germany announced in March that it would abstain from the vote in the Council [Forbes], the directive now adopted has been lauded by human rights organisations as a milestone that transcends the boundaries of the EU as it calls upon all companies to respect human rights. [Amnesty International]

Once the CSDDD is published in the Official Journal of the European Union it will take effect 20 days after publication. Member states will have two years to implement the necessary regulations and administrative procedures to comply with the directive. Companies will have different deadlines to comply with the directive, depending on their size and turnover, over a period of three to five years.

(fg)

European Commission allocates over EUR 1bn to defence projects

The European Commission has announced the results of the 2023 calls for proposals under the European Defence Fund (EDF), including 54 selected defence

projects receiving a total of EUR 1.031 billion in funding from the EDF. These projects cover a wide range of defence capabilities, including cyber defence and space asset protection.

The “calls for proposal” are annual calls by the Commission inviting companies and research institutions to submit proposals for defence research and development projects to receive EU funding.

This money is then channelled through the EDF, a key EU instrument for promoting defence cooperation in Europe. With a designated budget of EUR 7.953 billion for the period 2021-2027, the fund supports projects ranging from research to the development of advanced defence technologies and equipment.

After the project selection, the EU Commission will start preparing the grant agreements to launch the projects by the end of the year. [European Commission 1] [European Commission 2]

(fg)

NATO allies plan ‘drone wall’ for border defence against Russia

Six NATO member countries have announced plans to build a "drone wall" along their shared borders to enhance security against potential Russian threats.

The initiative, disclosed on May 24 by Lithuanian Interior Minister Agnė Bilotaitė, includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Norway and Finland.

This project aims to use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and advanced anti-drone technologies to improve border protection. The so-called drone wall will combine physical barriers, surveillance systems, and anti-drone measures to address threats and prevent smuggling.

The plan follows Poland’s recent participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative, which involves 21 European nations working to strengthen air defences. However, the “drone wall” specifically focuses on UAVs for border security.

The project is in its early stages, with countries considering funding options, including possible European Union support. [CNBC] [LRT] [The Eurasian Times] [The Kyiv Independent]

EU redirects profits from frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine

The European Union has decided that the windfall and extraordinary profits arising from Russian assets frozen in Central Securities Depositories (CSDs) in the EU due to EU sanctions will be used to support Ukraine.

Russian central bank assets frozen in the EU are estimated at around EUR 210 billion, resulting in interest on the money of around EUR 3 billion per year. [Council of the EU] [AP]

The EU has now taken the first step to syphon off these profits for the European Peace Facility. CSDs that hold Russian state assets and reserves worth more than EUR 1 million must now transfer part of their net profits that have accrued since February 15.

Ninety percent of this will flow into the European Peace Facility and 10% into EU-funded programmes. This is intended to co-finance further military support for Ukraine and the country's reconstruction.

At the same time, the G7 is discussing how all frozen Russian assets could be used to support Ukraine, for example as collateral for extensive loans. But technical, political, and legal issues would have to be resolved. [Guardian]

(fg)

Hard-right leaders descend on Madrid ahead of European elections

Hard-right leaders from across Europe came together at an event hosted by Spanish party Vox on May 19 near Madrid ahead of European elections expected to produce a surge in support for the far-right.

Illegal migration was among the topics debated at the meeting, which was attended by top politicians including the Italian and Hungarian prime ministers, as well as Argentina's President Javier Milei.

André Ventura, leader of the far-right Portuguese party Chega, said: "We are not against human rights, but we want strong borders in Europe, because it is ours."

He added: "We cannot continue to have this massive influx of Islamic and Muslim immigrants into Europe." [AP News]

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, attending the event via video conference, defended Rome's recent policy of reaching agreements with third parties as a way to contain illegal immigration.

French National Rally party leader Marine Le Pen called for reform of Europe's Schengen area, which allows the free movement of people. [AP News]

The meeting concluded with Spain's national anthem and insults being thrown at reporters present. [Reuters]

Polls predict a surge by the far-right in the June 6-9 European Parliament elections. [Euronews]

(fs/pk)

Italian PM opposes expanded use of Western weapons by Ukraine

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has rebuffed a call by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg for the lifting of restrictions on Ukrainian use of Western-supplied weapons for strikes inside Russian territory.

Speaking to Italy's public broadcaster RAI on May 26, Meloni said: "We must exercise greater prudence." [Il Fatto Quotidiano] [ANSA]

Meloni also criticised French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal in early May that Western troops could be deployed to Ukraine to bolster that country's military efforts. [Euronews]

Meanwhile, the German government has allowed Ukraine to strike Russian territory with weapons provided by Berlin. That decision followed a similar move by America to allow Ukrainian forces to use US-provided weapons to strike targets inside Russia near the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine's east, which has been under sustained attack by Russian forces. [POLITICO]

Despite Italy's staunch NATO allegiance, both Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and Defence Minister Guido Crosetto have voiced reservations about any moves that could escalate the conflict in Ukraine.

Call for truce

Crosetto appealed for a truce and peace negotiations. In an interview with *Il Messaggero* newspaper published on May 6, he said that economic sanctions imposed by Western nations on Moscow had been

ineffective, and urged a renewed focus on diplomatic solutions involving Russian President Vladimir Putin. [Reuters] [Esteri]

Crosetto argued that the West had overestimated its economic influence, noting that sanctions by themselves had not been enough to stop Russia's military activities. He suggested that resolving the crisis required the involvement of all parties, beginning with a truce and progressing towards peace. [MSN]

Italy, which holds the rotating presidency of the Group of Seven (G7) major democracies this year, has supported Ukraine militarily. Crosetto defended Rome's decision to continue arms shipments to Ukraine, arguing that such support is intended to create the conditions necessary for a truce and eventual peace.

Geopolitical risk

In his interview, Crosetto also warned of the broader geopolitical consequences if Russian forces were to capture Kyiv. He suggested that such an event could provoke a confrontation with other nations unwilling to tolerate a Russian military presence on their borders.

Additionally, Crosetto criticised Ukraine's counter-offensive last summer, describing it as a strategic error given Russia's military superiority. He revealed that he had cautioned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky about the likely failure of the offensive.

Crosetto's remarks underscore Italy's complex position in the Ukraine conflict – balancing military support for Kyiv with calls for diplomatic solutions.

Meanwhile, in an address to the UN General Assembly on May 7, Italian President Sergio Mattarella said that the conflict in Ukraine cannot be resolved by rewarding Moscow's aggression. He insisted that peace can only be achieved when Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are restored.

Mattarella added that Italy's stance in supporting Ukraine was part of a broader commitment to uphold the principles of international law and the United Nations Charter. [AP News]

(vm/pk)

Russian proposal to change Baltic Sea borders sparks international concern

A Russian plan to expand the country's territorial waters in the eastern Baltic Sea sparked international concern, though the proposal was deleted by the defence ministry in Moscow soon after appearing.

Russia's Tass news agency and other media reported on the draft defence ministry decree on May 21, but the proposal was taken down the following day with the message: "The draft is deleted."

There was no further explanation by Russian officials.

The draft decree suggested moving the sea borders around Russian islands in the Gulf of Finland and around the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. [BBC]

In response, Finland's defence and foreign committees held an emergency meeting on May 22. Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said the government was "monitoring the situation closely". [BBC]

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis wrote on social media site X: "This is an obvious escalation against NATO and the EU, and must be met with an appropriately firm response".

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson told Sweden's TT news agency: "Russia can't unilaterally decide on new borders." [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Sweden's defence chief Micael Byden warned that Russia's President Vladimir Putin has "both eyes" on the strategic Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. [Politico 2]

Byden said: "Putin's goal is to gain control of the Baltic Sea... If Russia takes control and seals off the Baltic Sea, it would have an enormous impact on our lives — in Sweden and all other countries bordering the Baltic Sea. We can't allow that."

Iceland affirmed its support for Finland and the Baltic states. [Ukrainska Pravda]

"We stand firmly with our Nordic Baltic friends and allies – Estonia, Finland and Lithuania – against Russia's provocative behaviour in the Baltic," Iceland's foreign minister, Thordis Kolbrun Gylfadottir, posted on X.

Finland, Sweden and the Baltic states are all members of the EU and NATO, and the military alliance is committed to defending their borders. [BBC]

In recent months, Russia's "shadow fleet" of around 1,400 oil tankers has been operating off the coast of Gotland outside the official maritime sector. [CEPA]

These operations have raised environmental concerns as well as fears of Russian espionage after the Swedish Navy reported in late April that such tankers also carry communications equipment. [Politico]

(km/pk)

Kyiv strikes security deals at Nordic-Ukrainian summit

Kyiv concluded long-term security agreements with Sweden, Norway and Iceland as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky took part in a Nordic-Ukrainian summit in Stockholm on May 31.

Following a Russian attack launched against Ukraine's second-largest city Kharkiv on May 10, Kyiv has focused diplomatic efforts on convincing its allies in Europe and the US to allow its military to use NATO weaponry against targets on Russian soil. [El Pais]

On May 30, US President Joe Biden said that Ukraine could use American weapons on Russian territory near the border with the Kharkiv region. The move was backed by Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark among other countries. [Barron's/AFP]

At the summit in Stockholm, Zelensky met with the leaders of Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. [Government Offices of Sweden]

Zelensky said on social media platform X: "I am in Stockholm for the third summit between Ukraine and Northern Europe. Our main goals are to secure more air defence systems for Ukraine, joint defence industry projects and weapons for our fighters, as well as global efforts to force Russia to make peace." [X] [SVT]

The leaders of Sweden, Norway and Ukraine said in a joint statement: "We will jointly strive to increase Ukraine's and our own production capacity to meet Ukraine's needs for battle-decisive munitions."

Under its deal with Ukraine, Sweden will provide two ASC 890 surveillance aircraft and its entire stock of armoured tracked personnel carriers. [TVP]

So far, Sweden has provided Ukraine with military equipment including air defence systems, combat vehicles, battle tanks and Archer artillery systems among others. [The Defense Post] [Government Offices of Sweden]

Ukraine also signed a 10-year security deal with Norway at the summit in Stockholm, adding to existing military and humanitarian aid programmes between the two countries amounting to more than EUR 6.4 billion over five years.

Iceland, meanwhile, pledged to provide economic, humanitarian and defence support to Ukraine between 2024 and 2028, allocating over EUR 28.6 million annually. [President of Ukraine]

Denmark and Finland signed 10-year security agreements with Ukraine earlier this year. [Reuters]

(km/pk)

Russia downplays Armenia's decision to withdraw CSTO funding

Russian Deputy Minister Alexander Pankin, speaking at the Russia-Islamic World Forum on May 16,said that the CSTO could potentially function without Armenia's financial contributions.

"From a military-political point of view, Armenia's future direction towards the CSTO will be determined both by the national interests of that country, which it must well imagine and understand, as well as by the capabilities of that country to ensure its own security," Pankin stated during the Forum. [Hetq]

Following suspending membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Armenian government declared on May 8 that it would discontinue its financial contributions to the Russian-led military alliance. This decision was made due to the Armenian government's dissatisfaction with the CSTO's perceived lack of action in addressing its security concerns. [Radio Free Europe]

In March, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's administration was jeopardising Russian-Armenian relations. Later in April, the Russian Foreign Ministry emphasised that Armenia remains a full member of the CSTO and must "fulfil appropriate obligations" to the organisation.

The withdrawal of Armenia's funding could potentially strain the financial resources of the CSTO and affect its operational capabilities. [Radio Free Europe]

The Armenian government has criticised CSTO for not fulfilling its security obligations. It has refrained from

participating in the organisation's high-level meetings, military exercises, and other activities for over a year. [Radio Free Europe]

(zh/gc)

Sunak joins Biden in condemning ICC's Israeli ruling

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak denounced the International Criminal Court's pursuit of arrest warrants for Israeli officials and leaders of Hamas's military wing.

On May 20, ICC's Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan announced that the ICC was pursuing arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and leaders of Hamas's military wing, including Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar.

Khan said he believes there is subsequent evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity to pursue charges against the individuals. [Politico]

"There is no moral equivalence between a democratic state exercising its lawful right to self defence and the terrorist group Hamas," Sunak said during a press conference. "It is wrong to conflate and equivocate between those two different entities."

Some Western leaders, such as the German Chancellor, said his country would detain Israeli officials if a warrant were issued. US President Joe Biden and Sunak vehemently condemned the action.

In contrast, the opposition Labour Party Shadow Foreign Secretary, whose party holds a considerable lead in most polls for the election in July, said all signatories of the Rome Statute, which established the ICC, "have a legal obligation" to answer any future arrest warrant. [Politico]

(js/gc)

UK's Cameron calls for NATO to honour 2% defence spending

UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron has urged NATO members to fulfil their commitments to spend 2% of GDP on defence, a longstanding agreement within the alliance.

This commitment, first made in 2014, is seen as a crucial indicator of a member's dedication to collective defence. Cameron emphasised the need for a more assertive foreign policy amidst perceived rising global threats.

In a speech at the National Cyber Security Centre, Cameron warned on May 9 that the world is more dangerous "than most of us have ever known" and stressed that NATO must take a tougher stance to safeguard security and stability. [Reuters]

Cameron outlined a six-point plan advocating bold, realistic, and practical security measures. He highlighted the importance of increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, a benchmark he believes all NATO allies should adapt quickly to.

Failure to meet this commitment, he warned, could lead to a weakened defence posture and a loss of credibility for the alliance. "We are in a battle of wills. We all must prove our adversaries wrong—Britain and our allies and partners around the world," Cameron stated. [Reuters]

The Foreign Secretary praised Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's pledge to raise British defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030, amounting to an additional GBP 75 billion over six years. He strongly emphasised the urgency of prioritising security against perceived threats from China, Russia, and Iran, making the audience feel the need for immediate action. [Morningstar]

Cameron also addressed the conflict in Gaza, advocating for a humanitarian pause rather than an immediate ceasefire. He drew distinctions between British and US arms exports to Israel, responding to questions about potential withholdings of weapons deliveries. [Reuters]

On Russia, Cameron criticised the West's response to President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, arguing that the lack of a firm stance has only encouraged further aggression. He called for NATO to "out-compete, out-cooperate, and out-innovate" its adversaries, advocating for a more robust collective defence strategy. [Morningstar]

Cameron, who returned to government as Foreign Secretary in November 2023, emphasised the necessity of reinforcing existing alliances and forging new ones, such as the AUKUS partnership with the US and Australia. He insisted that NATO adopt a "harder edge for a tougher world", underlining the importance

of collective defence and making the audience feel the significance of this approach. [Morningstar]

(ha/gc)

UN passes resolution to commemorate Srebrenica genocide

The UN General Assembly passed a resolution on May 23 that established July 11 as the International Day of Remembrance for the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, with 84 votes in favour, 19 against, and 68 abstentions. [Al Jazeera]

The resolution, supported by Germany and Rwanda, avoided directly naming the Serbs as the perpetrators. Bosnian Serb President Milorad Dodik and Serbia's populist President Aleksandar Vucic campaigned for a "no" vote. [AP News]

After the vote, Vucic declared that the resolution aimed to put "moral and political guilt on one side," that is, the people of Serbia, Republika Srpska, and the Bosnian Serb region of Bosnia. [AP News]

Germany and Rwanda have characterised the vote as a "crucial opportunity to unite in honouring the victims and acknowledging the pivotal role played by international courts" in a letter to the UN members. [Al Jazeera]

The Srebrenica massacre occurred after Yugoslavia's breakup, fueling nationalist and territorial conflicts between Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslim Bosniaks. The massacre, involving the killings of Bosnian Muslim men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces, was legally classified as genocide by both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Court of Justice. [AP News] [Al Jazeera]

US Warns

The United States has expressed concern after Bosnian Serb political leaders declared plans for a "peaceful separation" from Bosnia after a Republika Srpska government meeting in the town of Srebrenica.

After the meeting, Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, said that the Serb-dominated entity should separate from the Bosniak- and Croat-dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity. The meeting was held before the UN General Assembly vote on the Srebrenica genocide resolution on May 23. [Balkan Insight]

US envoy Sarajevo, Michael John Murphy, said in a statement on X that this was "secession by another name" and "based upon a set of lies" that would mean the end of the entity.

"It is dangerous, irresponsible, anti-Dayton, and puts the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and multiethnic character of Bosnia at risk... Republika Srpska can only exist inside Bosnia-Herzegovina," Murphy wrote. [Radio Free Europe]

Dodik further proclaimed that it was no longer feasible for Serbs to live "with those who violate the Dayton agreement," the peace deal marking the end of the Bosnian War 1992-1995. [Balkan Insight]

Dodik earlier warned that the entity "will withdraw from the decision-making process in Bosnia" in the event the UN passed the resolution to commemorate the 1995 Srebrenica as genocide. [Radio Free Europe]

(zh/gc)

Vatican ready to facilitate swap of Russian and Ukrainian PoWs

Pope Francis has reiterated calls for an exchange of all prisoners of war between Ukraine and Russia, saying that the Holy See remains ready to facilitate such a swap.

The comments were made by the pope on May 12 during a general audience at the Vatican.

The leader of the world's Catholics has appealed for a prisoner exchange between the two warring countries several times over the past months, including most recently at the Vatican's Easter Mass.

A prisoner exchange programme is part of a Ukrainian proposal that Kyiv calls a "Peace Formula Philosophy", which will be a focus at an upcoming Global Peace Summit in Switzerland on June 15 and 16.

The summit is being co-hosted by Ukraine and Switzerland, with over 160 nations invited. Russia is not among them. [Vatican News] [Reuters] [Kyiv Independent]

(ar/pk)

Ireland, Spain, Norway recognize Palestinian state, Israel furious

Ireland, Spain and Norway have formally recognised a Palestinian state, prompting an angry response from Israel which said the move amounted to a “reward for terrorism” and recalled its ambassadors from the three nations.

With their decision on May 28, the three countries hope to encourage other European nations to follow suit, in a diplomatic drive that could help secure a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages held by Palestinian militant group Hamas. [BBC]

Dublin, Madrid and Oslo said they recognised a Palestinian state based on borders established before the war in 1967, with Jerusalem as the capital of both Israel and Palestine. [BBC]

Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris told lawmakers in his country’s parliament: “I hope (this) sends the Palestinian people a message of hope that – in this their darkest hour – Ireland stands with them.” [AP]

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said in a televised address that “this is a historic decision that has a single goal, and that is to help Israelis and Palestinians achieve peace.” [AP]

Sanchez added that the move also reflected Spain's "outright rejection of Hamas, which is against the two-state solution" and whose October 7 attacks last year led to the Gaza war. [France24/AFP]

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz responded that Spain was “being complicit in inciting genocide against Jews and war crimes.” [AP]

Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said it was “regrettable that the Israeli government shows no signs of engaging constructively,” adding: “The international community must increase its political and economic support for Palestine and continue the work for a two-state solution.” [CNN]

Meanwhile, the Palestinian ambassador to Madrid thanked the three European nations for taking this "very important step". [AFP]

Most countries around the world recognize Palestinian statehood, and reaffirmed that stance in May in a United Nations resolution in support of Palestinian membership that passed with the support of 143 nations. [CNN]

Of the 27 members of the EU, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden have recognised a Palestinian state.

France has said that the time is not right for recognition while Germany joined Israel's staunchest ally, the United States, in rejecting a unilateral approach, insisting that a two-state solution can only be achieved through dialogue. [Al Jazeera]

(pk)

EU foreign ministers urge Israel to comply with ICJ ruling

At their monthly meeting on May 27, the foreign ministers of EU member states resolved to intensify pressure on Israel to comply with the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

On May 24, the ICJ ruled that Israel should "immediately halt its military offensive in Rafah". [BBC] An airstrike two days later on a tent camp in Rafah that killed at least 45 people, as well as the ongoing fighting over the city, cast doubt on whether Israel would comply with the ICJ ruling. [AP]

The EU foreign ministers unanimously decided to convene the Association Council with Israel to discuss human rights compliance under the EU-Israel Association Agreement, the legal basis of the joint trade relations. Spain and Ireland have been advocating for this course of action for three months.

The EU plans to utilise the Association Council as a forum to directly urge the Israeli government to comply with the ICJ judgement.

Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which stipulates that cooperation is based on respect for human rights and democratic principles, could be used as leverage against Israel. According to some sources, the possibility of imposing sanctions on Israel was openly discussed for the first time at this meeting of foreign ministers.

While Ireland and Spain, which recognised Palestine as an independent state on May 28, are pressing ahead with demands for sanctions, member states such as Germany and Austria prefer to give Israel an ultimatum first. [euronews] [Politico]

Furthermore, the EU is contemplating the revival of the Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Rafah. This

mission has been inactive since 2007, following the militant Islamist Hamas takeover of Gaza.

The potential reinstatement of EUBAM could facilitate the passage of humanitarian aid and personnel into Gaza. The border crossing between the city of Rafah and Egypt has been closed for several weeks following the Israeli military's seizure of it.

Previously, the crossing served as a main land route for humanitarian aid. However, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has noted the necessity for collaboration with the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Israel to successfully implement this initiative. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the EUBAM will be revitalised before the hostilities around Rafah have ended. [Reuters]

In March, EU leaders unanimously called for a ceasefire in Gaza for the first time since the outbreak of the war, presenting a unified stance by the EU after months of disagreement among European countries on this issue (see EiR No. 4, April/2024).

(fg)

Bulgarian gas company seeks over EUR 400m in damages from Gazprom

Bulgarian state-owned gas company Bulgargaz is seeking over EUR 400 million in damages from Russian gas monopoly Gazprom after the suspension of natural gas supplies in April 2022.

The suspension of gas supplies to Bulgaria in 2022, a result of the country's refusal to pay Gazprom in rubles due to EU sanctions, had significant implications for the nation's energy security and economic stability. [Economic.bg]

Gazprom justified the gas suspension in Bulgaria, citing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decree that gas must be paid for in rubles.

Energy Minister Vladimir Malinov, a key figure in this dispute, has stated that the Russian company will be given a one-month period to settle the claim voluntarily. If no agreement is reached, an arbitration case will be filed in Paris. [Euractiv]

Malinov said that the claim is based on international law firms' legal and financial analysis.

(km/gc)

Bulgarian president says North Macedonia risks EU accession over recent statements

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev said on May 13 that Bulgaria does not accept North Macedonia's behaviour, which contradicts the Friendship Treaty signed between the two countries in 2017.

The statement came after the inauguration of North Macedonia's new President, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, elected on May 8. Siljanovska-Davkova sparked controversy when she said she would "conscientiously and responsibly carry out the duties of the President of Macedonia" rather than using the internationally agreed title "Republic of North Macedonia."

The country's official name, "North Macedonia", was adopted with the Prespa Agreement in 2018 with Greece. Siljanovska has said that she does not intend to use this name. [Novinite]

The move prompted warnings from Greece and the European Commission regarding North Macedonia's European integration.

Radev said: "I am convinced that the European perspective of the Republic of North Macedonia depends on the strict implementation of the international treaties to which it is a party, as well as on the negotiating framework, approved by the European Council in July 2022." [BTA]

Caretaker Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev echoed these views: "We are convinced that the European perspective of the Republic of North Macedonia will depend entirely on its comprehensive implementation of the July 2022 agreements approved by all," [Euractiv]

(km/gc)

Work starts on new border crossing between Croatia and Bosnia

Construction of a new border crossing between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina along a bridge over the Sava river began in early May.

The crossing, near the city of Gradiška, aims to relieve pressure on existing border points and to allow the opening of a new, fast road connection from the Croatian capital, Zagreb, to the northern parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. [Total Croatia News] [ICV.HR]

The bridge over the Sava, costing EUR 20 million, was built several years ago with financial help from the European Union.

The border crossing on the Bosnian side was completed along with the bridge and has long been ready for use.

(mr/pk)

Czechs summon Russian envoy over alleged cyberattacks on infrastructure

The Czech government has summoned Russia's ambassador over a series of cyberattacks which Prague claims were orchestrated by a hacking group with links to the Kremlin's military intelligence service.

Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky said on May 6 in a post on X that he decided to summon Russia's envoy to Prague in relation to online attacks targeting Czech institutions and critical infrastructure.

"We have called on the Russian Federation to refrain from this behaviour, which is contrary to UN standards and its own obligations," said Lipavsky.

The Czech foreign ministry said the attacks were launched by a hacking group called APT 28, also known as Fancy Bear or Pawn Storm, which Western countries have said is controlled by Russia's GRU military intelligence service. [Barron's/AFP] [Radio Prague International] [Bloomberg 1]

The ministry added that the unit exploited "a previously unknown vulnerability in Microsoft Outlook from 2023". [The Telegraph] [Tass]

APT 28 has been operating on a worldwide scale since at least 2004, focusing primarily on cyber-espionage, according to cyber-security specialists. [Reuters] [GOV.UK]

The EU condemned Moscow for carrying out "irresponsible" cyber campaigns against the Czech Republic and other member states across Europe, including Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Sweden. [The Guardian]

Russia has faced increasing accusations of engaging in hacking and spying activities in Europe, especially after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In March, Czech intelligence services said they had uncovered a Moscow-funded propaganda network, Voice of Europe, trying to spread anti-Ukraine stories and widen the Kremlin's political influence across Europe. [Politico] [Barron's/AFP] [Reuters] [DW]

The Czech government subsequently said it had imposed sanctions on a Prague-based company using the network as a vehicle to pay politicians from Germany, Poland, France, Belgium, Hungary and the Netherlands to interfere with the June European parliament elections. [Bloomberg 2] [BBC]

(yl/pk)

EU to end rule of law proceedings against Poland

The European Commission is set to end legal proceedings against Poland after the country's government made assurances that it will address longstanding concerns over the rule of law. [Reuters] [Euronews] [The Guardian] [Politico]

The Commission launched the proceedings in 2017, when Poland was ruled by the eurosceptic nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party. [POLITICO]

The procedure, known as Article 7, had been brought against Warsaw in response to sweeping changes made by the PiS government to the Polish judiciary. The EU said these had undermined the independence of judges and violated the rule of law. [POLITICO] [Euronews]

Under Article 7, Poland could have been blocked from voting in the European Council – though this "nuclear" option was not used. However, Brussels had long blocked billions of euros in cohesion funds earmarked for Warsaw over the dispute. [POLITICO]

Parliamentary elections saw Law and Justice ousted from power last year, with an EU-friendly coalition government – led by former European Council President Donald Tusk – taking its place. [The Guardian]

Tusk's government has since taken steps to restore judicial independence in Poland, as well as recognising

the primacy of European Union law, the EU said in a statement. [Reuters]

In February, Warsaw unveiled nine draft laws as part of an action plan to reverse the contentious judicial overhauls made by the previous government. [Euronews]

Posting on social media about the decision to end the sanctions, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: "Today marks the opening of a new chapter for Poland. After more than six years, we believe that the Article 7 procedure can be closed." [POLITICO]

She added: "It is the result of their hard work and determined reform efforts. The ongoing restoration of the rule of law in Poland is great for the Polish people and for our Union as a whole." [Euronews]

Polish Justice Minister Adam Bodnar said: "Great news from Brussels... Poland is consequently bringing back rule of law. We are determined and devoted to our common European values." [Reuters]

Steps taken by Tusk's government – including the action plan unveiled in February – have already reaped rewards for Warsaw, with Brussels having released the first payment of EUR 6.3 billion in frozen loans and grants in April. [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

EU agrees to sanction four Russian propaganda outlets

EU ambassadors agreed on May 15 to place four Russian media outlets on a sanctions list, accusing them of pumping out propaganda, despite Moscow warning that Western journalists may be targeted in response. [Reuters] [TVP World]

Vera Jourova, the Commissioner for Values and Transparency, said that the European Union had also banned Russian funding of EU media, non-governmental organisations and political parties. [Reuters]

"Four Kremlin-linked propaganda networks [have been] added to the sanctions list: Voice of Europe, RIA Novosti, Izvestija and Rossiyskaya Gazeta," Jourova added. [Euractiv]

While the EU did not immediately specify the measures that will apply to the outlets, Russian media previously sanctioned over propaganda, such as state-owned Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today), lost their broadcasting rights in the bloc. [Euractiv]

The new measures are part of a planned 14th package of sanctions against Russia over its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The latest move was announced just hours after Moscow warned that Western journalists would be targeted in response to sanctions.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said: "I want to remind all those Brussels hotheads that there are dozens of journalists from EU countries who live very nicely and comfortably in Russia.

"If such measures are adopted against Russian journalists and media by the EU or by individual countries, then Western journalists will feel our response." [TVP World]

(pk)

EU, Serbia slam Kosovo for closing minority Serbian banks

The European Union and Serbia condemned on May 20 Kosovo's closing of minority Serb banks.

An EU statement said the move was "escalatory" and harmed the normalisation of relations between two peoples with a fraught history.

In echoing the EU's statement, Serbia's Director of the Office for Kosovo, Peter Petkovic, said the move was "a violent attack on the dialogue itself." [Independent], [Balkan Insight]

The police-enforced closure on May 20 threatens to worsen already testy relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Just last September, Serb gunmen engaged in a shootout with Kosovo police that resulted in 4 people dying. Serbia and Kosovo seek to join the European Union, but Brussels will only allow the pair in once they have discarded their post-war antagonism. [Independent], [Balkan Insight]

(js/gc)

Macron seeks to start ‘debate’ about nuclear deterrent in Europe

French President Emmanuel Macron wants to discuss deploying French nuclear weapons as a deterrent against aggression toward Europe.

In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the French president has taken an increasingly more challenging posture. France has around 300 warheads.

In 2020, Macron made the first indication of a potential move when he asked for a "strategic dialogue" on "the role of France's nuclear deterrent in [Europe's] collective security."

This was an attempt to start a conversation with Germany, which is home to US nuclear weapons.

Berlin has yet to accept the French president's offer.

However, Manfred Weber, the leader of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and a member of the Bavarian CSU, which is currently part of the German opposition, told POLITICO in January that Europe should "take up Macron's offer."

In an interview with regional newspapers from the Ebra press group, Macron stated, "I am in favour of opening this debate, which has to include missile defence, long-range weapons firing, nuclear weapons for those who have it or who have American nuclear weapons on their soil." [POLITICO]

(fe/gc)

Germany says Russia's cyberattack ‘intolerable’ and warns of repercussions

Germany accused Russia of orchestrating a significant cyberattack against its ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD) and various industries, branding the action as "intolerable" and pledging consequences.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock confirmed on May 3 that an investigation traced the attack to APT28, a notorious hacker group known for its sophisticated cyber operations and links to Russia's military intelligence service (GRU), during a press conference in Adelaide, Australia. [Al Jazeera]

The cyberattack, which targeted the SPD and critical sectors, including defence, aerospace, and information technology, exploited a significant vulnerability in Microsoft Outlook, a widely used email client. German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser stated that the campaign started as early as March 2022, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, and saw SPD emails accessed from December that year. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

In response to the attack, Germany, through its Federal Foreign Office, summoned the acting charge d'affaires of the Russian embassy in Berlin. A spokesperson for the office emphasised the severe threat posed by Russian cyber activities to European security and peace. Meanwhile, Russia's embassy in Germany has dismissed the allegations as unfounded and groundless. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

The Czech Republic reported similar cyberattacks targeting its institutions, also attributed to APT28. The European Union and NATO condemned the alleged campaign, highlighting its threat to national security and democratic processes. NATO specified that other affected countries included Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden, indicating a broad and coordinated cyber offensive. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

NATO's North Atlantic Council declared a resolute commitment to employ necessary capabilities to deter and defend against such cyber threats, suggesting potential coordinated responses among member states. This unified stance was echoed by the United States and the United Kingdom, which joined in condemning the attacks and supporting efforts to hold perpetrators accountable, providing a reassuring message about global security efforts [Al Jazeera] [Reuters].

Germany's Interior Ministry stated that the objective of these attacks was to compromise individual entities and undermine confidence in democratic institutions, potentially leading to a destabilisation of the country's political landscape and a weakening of its national security.

The ministry underscored the seriousness of the threat by pointing out that the campaign targeted critical infrastructure and various industries crucial to national security [Reuters].

(ha/gc)

Greek and Turkish leaders meet to improve bilateral relations

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis visited Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on May 13 in Ankara. The two leaders saw “no unsolvable problems” between the countries. [Al Jazeera]

For years, maritime boundaries and conflicts, as well as disputes over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea, and the division of Cyprus, have been persistent sources of tension between Greece and Turkey, underscoring the complexity of their relationship. [Al Jazeera]

Following their joint conference, Mitsotakis expressed a hopeful sentiment, saying “we showed today that alongside our proven disagreements, we can chart a parallel page of agreements.” He specifically referred to the ongoing dispute over maritime boundaries and the potential for joint exploration of energy resources as areas of disagreement and agreement, respectively. [Al Jazeera]

Turkey and Greece have long been at odds over issues including maritime boundaries, energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean, flights over the Aegean Sea, and the division of Cyprus.

Since their re-election last year, both leaders have been actively and visibly engaged in a concerted effort to improve ties, a promising and hopeful sign for the future of Greek-Turkish relations.

“Despite disagreements, we focus on a positive agenda by keeping our dialogue channels open,” Erdogan told a joint news conference with Mitsotakis. [Al Jazeera]

(al/gc)

Kosovo approves deal to rent jail space to Denmark

Kosovo’s parliament approved a deal on May 23 to rent jail space to Denmark for 10 years to help deal with overcrowding in the Nordic country’s prisons.

Under the agreement, 300 jail cells in a prison near Gjilan in eastern Kosovo will be used to hold foreigners convicted in Denmark. Danish nationals, people convicted of terrorism or war crimes, and mentally ill prisoners will be excluded from the deal. [AP News]

Danish authorities have said their prisons are short of up to 1,000 places.

Danish Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard said: “This is crucial for us to secure more Danish prison places and will help bring our hard-pressed prison system back into balance. At the same time, it sends a clear signal to criminal foreigners that their future is not in Denmark, and therefore they should not serve their time here.” [Reuters]

The plan was first announced in 2021 but was met with concerns over the treatment of prisoners in Kosovo.

Rights groups in Denmark have voiced worries over violence between prisoners, corruption and lack of medical care in Kosovo’s prisons. [DR]

In December 2023, the UN Committee on Torture urged the Danish government to cancel its plans to transfer prisoners to Kosovo due to concerns over potential human rights violations. [UNRIC]

Denmark has said that it will treat such prisoners the same as those being held in the Scandinavian country.

Kosovo is expected to receive EUR 210 million from Denmark over the next 10 years as payment for the 300 prison places.

Kosovo’s government has said it will use these funds to improve its own prisons and to invest in renewable energy.

Kosovo’s Economy Minister Artane Rizvanoll said: “The aim of this treaty is to further strengthen existing relations between Kosovo and Denmark taking into consideration... the benefits that Kosovo will enjoy from this treaty.” [Balkan Insight]

(km/pk)

Latvia contributes EUR 100,000 in communication equipment to Ukraine

Latvia has donated communication equipment worth approximately EUR 100,000 to Ukraine as part of the IT Coalition. This donation will bolster the operational efficiency of Ukrainian brigades amid the ongoing conflict with Russia. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence emphasised this contribution's critical role in enhancing frontline communications.

Deputy Minister of Defence for Digital Transformation, Kateryna Chernohorenko, stated, "Thanks to our partners, we continue to meet the tactical needs of our units. This new batch of equipment from Latvia will aid

in establishing communication along the frontline." [Euromaidan Press]

The IT Coalition, a collaborative effort led by Estonia and Luxembourg, is dedicated to supporting Ukraine's Defense Ministry and Armed Forces in IT, communications, and cybersecurity. Latvia, in a previous instance, provided laptops to modernise logistical processes and deploy SAP-based systems, demonstrating the coalition's shared commitment to Ukraine's defence sector. [Pravda]

The recent addition of the Netherlands to the coalition, contributing advanced unmanned technology to enhance Ukraine's offensive capabilities, is a testament to the growing international support for Ukraine's defence sector. In February, coalition members signed a cooperation agreement to build Ukraine's IT capabilities, further solidifying this optimistic trend.

(ha/gc)

Lithuanian president urges expedited German troop deployment

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at a military training area near Vilnius, emphasising the need for a faster deployment of German troops to Lithuania.

"Our strategic security environment requires an even faster pace. We do not have the luxury of wasting a single minute," Nauseda stated, advocating for the German brigade to deploy sooner than planned.

Discussions on the German brigade's deployment began after Russia invaded Ukraine, with Germany committing to the deployment in June 2023. The brigade's initial command element has already arrived in Lithuania, and around 5,000 military and civilian personnel are expected by 2027. [LRT]

Chancellor Scholz, in a show of solidarity, reiterated Germany's unwavering commitment to NATO's security, underlining the deployment as a pivotal component of Germany's evolving security policy.

"Germany recognises its security responsibilities within NATO, which is why we are deploying a full brigade here in Lithuania," Scholz said. He also observed the large-scale Exercise Grand Quadriga 2024, which involves over 3,000 German troops and is the largest Bundeswehr exercise since the Cold War. [LRT] [Delfi]

Scholz reiterated Germany's resolve to bolster its military for the safety of NATO, reaffirming the deployment's crucial role in deterring potential threats on NATO territory. [LRT] [Delfi]

(ha/gc)

Lithuania to debut HIMARS missile exercises to deter Russia

Lithuania is set to conduct its first-ever live-fire exercises using the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) to deter Russian aggression, according to Defence Minister Laurynas Kasciunas. [MSN]

On May 9, during the Swift Response 24 exercise, the U.S. Marine Corps and the Lithuanian Armed Forces launched HIMARS missiles at the Brigadier General Povilas Plechavicius Training Area in Kairiai, targeting areas in the Baltic Sea. This exercise is a precursor to Lithuania receiving eight HIMARS units in 2025.

The live-fire exercise is part of the larger NATO exercise, Steadfast Defender 2024, involving over 90,000 troops from 32 allied nations. Chief of Defence General Valdemaras Rupsys emphasised the importance of such joint training exercises in maintaining credible deterrence against potential threats.

The HIMARS system, developed by Lockheed Martin, is a highly mobile artillery system capable of firing rockets and missiles up to 300 kilometres. Lithuania's purchase agreement, signed in 2022, includes both live and inert ammunition, with the first deliveries expected in 2025. [Army Recognition]

The exercise underscores NATO's commitment to security on its northern and eastern flanks, highlighting the alliance's capability to execute complex multinational defence operations. Minister Kasciunas emphasised that this demonstration of combat capability serves as an important deterrent against potential aggression. [Army Recognition] [MSN]

(ha/gc)

Putin visits Minsk

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Minsk, Belarus, in late May for a two-day meeting with the country's

leader, Alexander Lukashenko, to discuss deepening economic and defence cooperation.

Since Russia's deployment of troops into Ukraine in February 2022, the alliance between Russia and former Soviet Belarus has remained robust. Belarus has been instrumental in supporting Russian troops entering northern parts of Ukraine, although Belarusian soldiers have not openly engaged in the conflict. [Euronews]

Lukashenko — long dubbed "Europe's last dictator" — kicked off the meeting by praising Putin for noticing the Belarusian "military" with his "experienced eye". "This is nice," he said, as quoted by Russian news agencies. Before the start of the meeting on M, a ceremony was held at the Palace of Independence late on May 23. [Euronews]

"As we agreed yesterday, we always have two parts. Security and economic issues. We have always postponed economic issues for consideration by our governments," Lukashenko said. [Euronews]

During Putin's visit, they also discussed tactical nuclear weapon exercises. These exercises, which are not to be taken lightly, are supposedly intended to dissuade the West from sending further aid to Ukraine. They carry significant strategic implications that could potentially disrupt the delicate balance of power in the region.

The exercises are meant to simulate preparations for launching the weapons, such as smaller nuclear warheads meant for use on battlefields. Regarding the two nations' collaboration, Putin said, "everything is stable and going well for us." [Reuters]

Satellite images

Satellite images of a munitions depot in Belarus show that new security features have been incorporated, including an air defence system, a security checkpoint, and a triple fence around a bunker. [The New York Times]

According to analysis from the New York Times, this shows Russia is building facilities that could be used to house nuclear weapons. Putin referred to the construction of the site last year, calling it a “special storage for tactical nuclear weapons” [The New York Times]

The partnership between Belarus and Russia has been confirmed by both Lukashenko and Putin, and Belarus has aided Russia’s invasion by allowing soldiers to access northern Ukraine via the Belarusian border. If this munitions facility is used to house nuclear

weapons, it would be the first time Russia has stored them outside of their own borders since the fall of the Soviet Union. [The New York Times]

(ik/gc)

Russian spy ships suspected of espionage in Belgium and Netherlands

Russian spy ships suspected of espionage have been sighted in the waters of Belgium and the Netherlands, according to the Belgian Maritime Security Unit (CMB). [The Brussels Times]

Over the past six months, five non-military Russian vessels potentially involved in espionage activities have been identified in the North Sea. [The Brussels Times]

The CMB has underscored the daunting challenge of detection, revealing that these ships often disguise themselves as merchant or fishing vessels, adding to the complexity of the situation. [The Brussels Times] [NOS]

While concrete evidence is yet to be found, the focus of speculation in the Netherlands is primarily on Russian fishing company Norebo, which has a history of being linked with espionage, and whose ships dock near a military area, adding to the gravity of the situation. [NOS]

These concerns follow the 2023 annual report from the Dutch Military Intelligence and Security Service, which concluded that the threat of espionage was “current” after increasing geopolitical tensions with Russia. [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

Russia removes Estonian buoys at border, raising concerns in Baltic region

Russian border guards are said to have removed more than 20 buoys from the Narva River, which serves as a natural border between Russia and Estonia, eliciting concern from EU leaders and Estonian officials. The move has been interpreted as provocative, with EU chief diplomat Josep Borrell calling it part of a broader pattern of hybrid actions by Russia in the Baltic Sea region.

The annual installation of buoys on the Narva River serves to demarcate the border between Estonia and Russia. Disputes over buoy placements arose in 2023 when Russia expressed disagreement with Estonia's chosen locations. Despite agreements established in 2022, Russia removed approximately half of the buoys shortly after their installation in May.

Estonian authorities have labelled Russia's actions as provocative and have summoned the Russian ambassador to provide an explanation. The incident follows other concerning developments in the region, including Russia's proposal to revise its maritime borders in the Baltic Sea, which was later retracted.

Observers interpret the measure as a provocation by Russia against the Baltic states and thus also NATO, in order to push the Alliance's red line. [Associated Press] [Deutsche Welle] [Politico] [Reuters]

(ms)

Spain signs security deal with Kyiv, pledges military aid

Spain signed a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine on May 27, during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's first official visit to Madrid.

Spain committed to providing Kyiv with more than EUR 1 billion in military aid this year, in addition to pledging around EUR 5 billion until 2027, Zelensky said. [POLITICO]

"The most important thing is to help Ukraine as quickly as possible, and that is what Spain is doing," Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez told reporters at a joint news conference with Zelensky. [Bloomberg]

The aid package will include US-made Patriot air defence missiles, second-hand German-produced Leopard tanks and some Spanish-made weapons like artillery shells and anti-drone gear. It will be the biggest single contingent of military assistance ever given to another country by Spain. [Reuters] [El País]

In contrast to Madrid's previous military support to Kyiv, most of the equipment will not come from Spain's military arsenal, but will be manufactured by Spanish industry. [El País]

Madrid will try to fully finance the package by using EU funds earmarked for the European Peace Facility, which is an off-budget instrument established in 2021

aimed at preserving peace, preventing conflicts and strengthening international security. [El País]

The security agreement with Spain is one of a string of similar deals that Ukraine has reached with its allies as part of its efforts to secure long-term support while it waits to be admitted to NATO. [POLITICO]

(fs/pk)

Sweden to give Ukraine billions more in military support

The Swedish government on May 22 agreed on an additional EUR 6.36 billion in military aid for Ukraine.

The support will be distributed over the next three years and will include defence equipment, financial contributions and financial aid help for the procurement of defence gear. [Reuters]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky responded on social media platform X, saying: "I am grateful to Swedish PM Ulf Kristersson and the entire Swedish people for their unwavering support for Ukraine." He added that the decision "demonstrates Sweden's practical solidarity with Ukraine in our struggle for freedom."

With the new money, Sweden's military aid to Ukraine will amount to over EUR 8 billion. [TVP World]

Energy aid

Meanwhile, Sweden on May 28 unveiled a new aid package worth some EUR 57 million to help Ukraine's energy sector, which has been weakened by Russian strikes.

The package will be allocated toward generators, transformers, solar cells and spare parts. [The Local]

Swedish Aid Minister Johan Forssell said: "Access to energy is essential for Ukrainian society, the economy and businesses to continue to function." He added: "Russia is increasingly focusing its attacks on Ukraine's energy system in a bid to knock out important infrastructure." [Barron's/AFP]

(km/pk)

UK, Finland sign partnership agreement to combat Russian threat and aid Ukraine

The UK and Finland have signed a partnership agreement pledging ongoing support for Ukraine and identifying Russia as the “most significant and direct threat” to European peace. [Yle] [UK GOV]

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron and his Finnish counterpart, Elina Valtonen, endorsed the Strategic Partnership during an event in London on May 20. [Yle] [UK GOV]

“As we stand together to support Ukraine, including through providing military aid and training, we are clear that the threat of Russian aggression, following the war it started, will not be tolerated,” Cameron said in a statement issued by the UK foreign ministry. [UK GOV]

A joint declaration by London and Helsinki states that Russia's war against Ukraine has fundamentally altered Europe's security landscape. The partnership between the UK and Finland is crucial in countering Russian disinformation and malicious cyber activities and supporting Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts, the declaration added. [Yle]

Finnish Foreign Minister Valtonen said in a statement: “A strategic partnership will strengthen Finland’s and the UK’s broad-based cooperation founded on shared interests and values. It is important for us to intensify cooperation in the area of security and defence, but in other areas as well.” [Finnish Government]

Finland joined the NATO military alliance last year in the wake of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and has largely closed its border with Russia. Meanwhile, Britain is a major military supporter of Ukraine. [VoA]

(rs/pk)

Italy resumes funding for Palestinian relief agency UNRWA

Italy has reinstated funding for the United Nations Palestinian relief organisation UNRWA as part of a EUR 35 million aid package.

This decision was announced on May 25 during a meeting in Rome between Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani and Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa. [Reuters] [Aljazeera]

The funding includes EUR 5 million for UNRWA projects, with the remaining money designated for the "Food for Gaza" initiative. Italy had halted aid to UNRWA following accusations that some of the agency's staff were involved in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni reaffirmed Rome's call for a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza, the release of Israeli hostages, and enhanced humanitarian aid for Gaza residents.

Restoring the funding aligns with moves by other countries such as Germany, which have resumed cooperation with UNRWA after verifying the agency's adherence to neutrality principles. [Bloomberg]

(vm/pk)

Spain denies stopover to ship loaded with weapons for Israel

Spanish authorities have denied a ship carrying weapons to Israel permission to dock at the south-eastern port of Cartagena.

The Danish-flagged vessel, the Marianne Danica, had departed from India carrying around 27 tonnes of explosives, and requested permission to call in at Cartagena on May 21, El Pais newspaper reported. [Reuters]

Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares said a similar decision would be taken with every ship carrying arms to Israel that wants to stop over at a Spanish port, given that "the Middle East does not need more guns, but more peace". [DW]

Several days earlier, members of Spain's leftist Sumar party, with whom the Socialists form a minority administration, urged the government to deny entry to another ship, the Borkum, as it was also suspected of carrying weapons to Israel. [Euronews]

However, that ship was ultimately allowed to dock [YES?] since its final destination was the Czech Republic rather than Israel, according to Transport Minister Óscar Puente. [Euronews]

Spain has been among the European nations most critical of Israel. It stopped selling weapons to that country soon after the start of Israel's war with Hamas last year. [YES?] [DW]

(fs/pk)

UK imposes sanctions on West Bank settler violence-linked extremists

The UK government has announced new sanctions against extremist groups and individuals involved in inciting and perpetrating violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank. This move follows a significant rise in settler violence over the past year, with the UN documenting at least 800 incidents since October.

Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron revealed that the sanctions target two groups and four individuals known for their involvement in violent activities. The groups sanctioned include Hilltop Youth, a hardline nationalist Israeli youth group that establishes illegal settler outposts, and Lehava, which promotes violence against Arab and Palestinian communities.

"Extremist settlers are undermining security and stability and threatening prospects for peace," Lord Cameron stated. "The UK will not hesitate to take further action if needed, including through additional sanctions".

The individuals sanctioned include Noam Federman, a former leader of the now-defunct Kach party known for training settler groups in violent tactics; Neria Ben Pazi, responsible for constructing illegal outposts and participating in violence against Bedouin and Palestinian communities; Eden Levi, involved in multiple assaults and intimidation campaigns against Palestinians; and Elisha Yered, an unofficial spokesperson for Hilltop Youth known for inciting religious hatred and violence.

These measures impose financial restrictions and travel bans on the entities and individuals involved. The sanctions package is part of the UK's attempt to address the impact of settler violence in the West Bank, with a previous package announced in February 2024.

The UK government has emphasised the need for Israeli authorities to take action against those responsible for such violence, underscoring the UK's attempt to mitigate conflicts in the region. [GOV]

(ha/gc)

Banning arms to Israel would strengthen Hamas, Cameron says

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron stated that banning arms sales to Israel would only serve to strengthen Hamas. Cameron made these comments during an interview with the BBC on May 12.

The UK is facing mounting pressure from both the Parliament and the public to halt arms sales to Israel.

Cameron and other members of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government argue that British arms make up just 1% of the weapons supplied to Israel, and therefore, stopping these sales would have minimal impact.

However, opponents of British arms sales to Israel argue that the United Kingdom, being one of the leading global powers, could exert significant influence over allies, particularly the United States.

The Biden Administration has already suspended certain military shipments to Israel due to concerns that the weapons could be used in the densely populated city of Rafah.

(js/gc)

Belgian PM received by Biden in White House

Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo met with US President Joe Biden at the White House on May 31 to discuss support for Ukraine, Middle East conflicts, and European Union-US trade relations. De Croo highlighted the importance of the US-Belgium partnership and Belgium's strategic role in Europe. [De Standaard][WhiteHouse]

"The relationship between the US and Belgium is more important than ever and our country is a bridgehead to the EU," De Croo said. "The meeting with the American president confirms Belgium's status as a valued strategic partner of the US."

De Croo seized the opportunity to advocate for the interests of European industry and Belgian companies during the visit. He also urged Biden to attend a peace summit in Switzerland, a crucial platform for discussing the seizure of Russian assets, demonstrating Belgium's proactive stance.

White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said the leaders "reaffirm the close partnership between the US and Belgium to address global challenges. They will discuss their shared commitment to continue supporting Ukraine, including our efforts to make the best use of frozen Russian assets. President Biden will also recognize Belgium's contribution to Transatlantic security and the defence of Belgium." [White House]

This visit to the White House by the Belgian prime minister, the first since 2006, is a historic moment that underscores the importance of the US-Belgium relationship and Belgium's role in international affairs. [De Standaard]

(gvc/gc)

Bulgaria, US strengthen strategic energy cooperation

Following a visit to Washington in May, Bulgarian Energy Minister Vladimir Malinov engaged in discussions with the US State Department, reaffirming strategic energy cooperation between the two countries.

Malinov and US Ambassador James O'Brien discussed advancing critical projects like the construction of new nuclear facilities at the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in northern Bulgaria and a project to expand the underground gas storage facility Chiren in northwestern Bulgaria. [Ministry of Energy]

The two also discussed the development of the Vertical Gas Corridor, a trans-Balkan gas pipeline that would transport natural gas across the region.

Malinov also discussed with Kimberly Harrington, Deputy Secretary of the US State Department. Harrington reiterated US support for the Vertical Corridor as an essential route for delivering US liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Southeast Europe. [Novinite]

Malinov said: "We are confident that with continued institutional and legislative support the Vertical Gas Corridor will be built in the shortest possible time, ensuring the energy security of the region,"[BTA]

(km/gc)

US surpasses China as Germany's largest trading partner

The United States has officially surpassed China as Germany's largest trading partner, with the trading relationship totalling around EUR 63 billion in imports and exports.

This surge in trade is driven by increased demand in the United States for high-quality German automobiles, machinery, and pharmaceuticals, Reuters first reported on May 9. [CNBC]

The reasons behind this new development are multifaceted. One key factor is the increased demand in the United States for German products. Another significant aspect is Germany's ongoing process of "derisking" or reducing dependency on a single trading partner, as tensions between it and the West continue to grow. [CNBC]

Trade between Germany and China came to just below 60 billion euros, according to CNBC calculations.

(js/gc)

Biden to travel to France for Normandy commemoration

US President Joe Biden will travel to France to mark the 80th anniversary of the allied invasion of Normandy, and will then hold an official state visit in Paris. Biden will depart for France on June 5 and meet US military veterans the following day in Normandy during D-Day commemoration ceremonies. [AA]

He will also deliver remarks at Pointe du Hoc on the northwestern coast of Normandy on June 7. Biden will depart Normandy for Paris on June 8, and will be hosted by French President Emanuel Macron for an official state visit. [AA]

"The State Visit will reflect the enduring and comprehensive relationship between the United States and France, our oldest ally, founded on shared democratic values, economic ties, and defence and security cooperation. President Biden and President Macron will have the opportunity to discuss a wide range of global challenges and bilateral issues," the White House said.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will also France to mark the 80th anniversary of D-Day by participating

in several commemorative events. [USEmbassySingapore]

(gc)

Serbia signs contract for former Yugoslav military building development with Trump's son-in-law

Serbia's Minister of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure of Serbia, Goran Vesic, signed on May 15 a contract with US investment firm Affinity Global Development to redevelop the former Army General Headquarters in Belgrade. [Radio Free Europe]

Asher Abehsera, director of the investment firm Affinity Global Development, owned by Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of former President Donald Trump, signed the agreement.

"The Government of Serbia has chosen a reputable American company as a partner in this venture, which will invest in the revitalization of the complex of the former Federal Secretariat for National Defense," a written release of the ministry announced. [Ministry of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia]

Going back to 1999, the historical essence of the site, in particular, amid the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia after the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, intense emotions of the Serbian people have been evoked revolving around the investment of a US company in the renewal of a memorial complex dedicated to the bombing victims. [Politico]

Following the contract formed, more than 22,000 people in Serbia signed a petition urging the preservation of the buildings designed by Nikola Dobrovic, a Serbian architect, between 1957 and 1965. [Reuters]

(zh/gc)

Spain withdraws ambassador from Buenos Aires in diplomatic crisis

Madrid has withdrawn its ambassador from Buenos Aires after Argentinian President Javier Milei made derogatory comments about the wife of Spain's prime minister.

Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares said Madrid had “no interest in nor desire for any escalation, but it's the government's obligation to defend the dignity and sovereignty of Spanish institutions, especially when the aggression occurs in the capital of Spain.” [Reuters]

The sharp reaction came after comments made by Milei during a far-right rally in Madrid on May 19, when he accused Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez’s wife, Begoña Gómez, of corruption. He also called socialism “cursed and carcinogenic”. [The Washington Post] [AP News]

During his visit to Spain, Milei also snubbed the usual protocols of meeting the king and prime minister. [Reuters]

In an interview for Argentinian TV channel Todo Noticias on May 21, Milei – an outspoken right-wing libertarian – continued his offensive against the Spanish government. He said that the withdrawal of the Spanish ambassador to Buenos Aires was “typical nonsense of an arrogant socialist”. [El País]

Milei had previously claimed that Madrid should apologise to him after Spanish Transport Minister Óscar Puente suggested that he was a drug user. [Reuters]

(fs/pk)

Sweden open to hosting foreign nuclear arms ahead of defence deal with US

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on May 13 that his country is open to hosting foreign nuclear weapons during wartime.

The announcement came as the Swedish legislature prepares to vote on a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States. The deal was announced in late 2023 and would grant the US military the use of 17 Swedish army bases.

The proposal has attracted criticism from Sweden’s left-wing opposition Left Party among others for giving too much power to the US military.

Meanwhile, the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Association has called for the government to include a ban on nuclear weapons on Swedish soil in the DCA agreement. [Barron's/AFP]

Kristersson said that the conditions of the agreement would only apply in wartime and any decision to station nuclear weapons in Sweden would be on "Swedish terms." He added: "It is Sweden that decides over Swedish territory. That is crystal clear."[Sveriges Radio]

The Swedish legislature is set to vote on the agreement on June 18. [DN] [Euractiv]

Sweden, which has no nuclear weapons of its own, joined NATO in March after a long history of military non-alignment in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

(km/pk)

Sint Maarten's government falls just 17 days after taking office

A four-party coalition led by Sint Maarten Prime Minister Luc Mercelina of the anti-capitalist Unified Resilient St. Maarten party was sworn in on May 3, following January elections that relegated former Prime Minister Silveria Jacobs of the social-democratic National Alliance (NA) to the opposition.

Just 17 days later, the new government of Sint Maarten, an island constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, collapsed.

This comes after parliamentarian Kevin Maingrette announced his departure from the NOW party and his intention to continue as an independent candidate. A new majority was established after Maingrette announced that he had signed a coalition agreement with the centre-right United People's Party and NA. These two parties led the last government [NL Times].

Governor Ajamu Baly declared that the newly elected parliament members must assume their positions on August 19, following a snap election set for July 18. Additionally, he plans to appoint a mediator to facilitate negotiations to explore the formation of a new coalition in the upcoming months. [NL Times]

NOS correspondent Dick Drayer commented: "The new situation offers opportunities for former Prime Minister [Silveria] Jacobs to resume her premiership and continue to govern. She will only have to take into account the wishes of ship jumper Maingrette, who has now helped her to a majority of one seat." [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

Japan and France begin negotiations on a reciprocal troops pact

France and Japan have decided to intensify military cooperation by initiating official negotiations on a reciprocal troop access agreement in response to growing maritime concerns in the Indo-Pacific area.

Reaching an agreement with France will take a year, according to a statement from the Japanese government. The negotiations are expected to cover various aspects, including the terms of troop access, the sharing of military resources, and the establishment of joint training programs. [Reuters]

France has aimed to increase its influence in the Indo-Pacific area, where it maintains colonies and military outposts. The French presidency also stated that completing the RAA would encourage communication between the two armed forces. Sebastien Lecornu, the French Minister of Defense, said that Paris hoped to reach an agreement with Japan on an RAA. [Reuters]

Amid increasing concerns about China, particularly its pressure on Taiwan, Japan has taken proactive steps to bolster defence relations. Tokyo has also extended its support to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, emphasising the need to uphold the international order based on laws. These shared concerns have underscored the necessity of the ongoing negotiations for a reciprocal troops pact, which would serve as a strategic tool for both nations.

In recent years, the G7 allies have demonstrated their commitment to collective security through several bilateral and group-wide joint military drills. Paris, advocating for almost a year, has proposed negotiations on a reciprocal access agreement.

This agreement, if reached, would not only enhance military cooperation but also provide mechanisms to support the visiting force's admission of foreign troops and equipment, a mutually beneficial arrangement for both nations.

(fe/gc)

Japan's emperor and empress to pay three-day state visit to UK

Japan's Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako will visit Britain at the end of June, spending three days as

guests of King Charles III, Buckingham Palace confirmed on June 4. This visit is a significant step in strengthening the bilateral relations between Japan and the UK. [France24]

The royal couple is due to arrive on June 22 but will spend the first three days in private engagements before beginning the official state visit, which will run from June 25 to 27.

Naruhito, 64, will meet Charles and his wife, Queen Camilla, as well as the monarch's elder son and heir, Prince William and other British royals in the first Japanese state visit to the UK in more than two decades. [France24]

(gc)

Denmark, Kenya collaborate on improving life for refugees

Officials from the Danish government and Danish foundations, together with the UNHCR and UN Refugee Agency, on May 27 launched a joint project with Kenyan authorities that aims to help the African nation build a more inclusive refugee management policy.

Kenya is the fifth-largest refugee-hosting country in Africa, with over 770,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers. [UNHCR]

The joint project, dubbed the new Alliance for Inclusive Refugee Response, includes the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Danish foundations like Novo Nordisk, Grundfos and the LEGO Foundation. [CPH]

The initiative focuses on refugees in Turkana county in north-west Kenya. [Turkana County Government]

The Danish foreign ministry will allocate EUR 6.47 million to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Danish foundations will support the UNHCR with EUR 8.3 million.

UNHCR's representative in Kenya, Caroline Van Buren, said that "crucial support" from donors like Denmark would "support the transition from humanitarian assistance toward socio-economic inclusion of refugees and sustainable development." [UNHCR] [Kenya News Agency]

Jashon Awour, Deputy Commissioner for the Kenyan Department for Refugee Services, said: "This three-year

pilot initiative aims to provide comprehensive support in key areas such as health, water, and education."

(km/pk)

African island nation to seek reparations from Portugal for colonial past

The African country of Sao Tomé and Principe plans to ask Portugal to pay reparations for damages caused during the colonial era, the island nation's minister of education and culture, Isabel Abreu, has said.

The announcement by the tiny country, located off the western coast of central Africa, came after Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa said that his nation was responsible for crimes committed during the colonial period, when slavery was rife, and suggested there was a need for reparations. [DW] [Reuters]

His remarks ignited a national debate and triggered an intense backlash from Portuguese conservative political factions.

Portugal's centre-right government said it would not start any process to pay reparations. [CNN].

Meanwhile, Pedro Comissário Afonso, Mozambique's ambassador to the UN, applauded Rebelo de Sousa's comments and said that confronting the past is "already reparatory", although it would be "even better if we could go beyond that". [Reuters]

José María Neves, the president of Cape Verde, called for more discussions in order to "reach an understanding and consensus on these issues". [CNN]

Cape Verde, Mozambique and Sao Tomé and Principe were among territories under Portuguese control during the colonial period.

(fc/pk)

EU-New Zealand free trade agreement comes into force

A free trade agreement between the EU and New Zealand came into force on May 1. The agreement aims to reduce annual tariffs by EUR 140 million and increase trade between the EU and New Zealand by up to 30% within a decade. It also includes important sustainability commitments, including respect for the

Paris Climate Agreement and fundamental labour rights.

For EU farmers, tariffs on key export products such as wine and pork will be eliminated. For New Zealand, the agreement means significantly improved market access in the EU. From day one, 91% of New Zealand's trade with the EU is duty-free, rising to 97% after seven years of full implementation.

Negotiations for the agreement began in June 2018 and ended with the deal being signed on July 9, 2023. The European Parliament approved the agreement on November 22, 2023, and New Zealand ratified it on March 25 this year. [European Commission] [MFAT New Zealand]

(fg)

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