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

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

A left-wing alliance has won the most seats in the French parliament after tactical voting on July 7 in second-round election thwarted Marine Le Pen's far-right party from winning the most seats, though it didn't win enough to form a government by itself. [CNN][BBC]

Meanwhile, mainstream political forces have retained their majority in the EU's legislature, but a surge by the far-right in the June 6-9 European elections could sway the bloc to adopt a harder line on migration and a softer stance on green policies.

Amid Russia's incursion into the northern Kharkiv region of Ukraine, Switzerland hosted a Peace Summit led by Kyiv which lacked key participants. Meanwhile, Moscow has deepened its alliance with North Korea.

At the same time, Russia continued its assault against Ukrainian infrastructure – which is developing into a

full-blown crisis.

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

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

Warm regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor-in-Chief

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Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Mainstream parties retain majority in EU elections, despite far-right surge

Mainstream political forces have retained their majority in the EU's legislature, but advances by the far-right in the June 6-9 European elections could sway the bloc to adopt a harder line on migration and a softer stance on green policies.

The centre-right European People's Party (EPP) - which topped the polls in countries including Germany, Spain, and Poland - maintained its position as the largest grouping in the new European Parliament.

Compared to the 2019 election, the EPP gained 12 seats, and now has a total of 188 deputies in the 720-seat legislature. [Economist 1][The New York Times] [Politico] [BBC] [CNBC][Radio Free Europe][Europe Union] [AP news] [European Union 2] [FT]

That victory has put the EPP's lead candidate, Ursula von der Leyen, in pole position for a second term as European Commission president.

Von der Leyen reaffirmed that the EPP's only allies would be the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the centrist Renew grouping, despite talk of the EPP working with right-wing groups that include the far-right. [BBC 2]

The S&D remains the second-strongest political family with 136 seats, despite losing three places.

Blow for liberals

The pro-business, centrist Renew Europe, a big tent for liberal parties including French President Emmanuel Macron's Renaissance, suffered aswirt series of major blows.

It lost 27 seats and then also its status as the third-biggest grouping in the European Parliament after the Czech centrist ANO party decided to leave. [European Union 2][euro news] [BBC 2] [Aljazeera 1] [CNN]

ANO, headed by Czech billionaire and populist former Prime Minister Andrej Babis, announced on June 21 that it would withdraw its seven lawmakers from Renew because of the latter's pro-EU policies. [Politico 2][Euractiv]

The move means that the hard-right European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group is now the third-largest political force in the European Parliament.

After ANO's decision, Renew has 76 seats in the legislature, while the ECR has 84.

Far-right surge

Populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic parties won nearly a quarter of seats in the EU Parliament, underlining a swing to the right in many European countries. [Aljazeera 2] [FT]

Observers said that, unlike in previous elections, radical parties aim to influence the EU from within rather than echoing past calls to leave the bloc. [Reuters]

Over the next five years, far-right groupings will have a bigger hand in policymaking after capitalising in the EU elections on voters' concerns over migration, inflation, the cost of green reforms, and the war in Ukraine.

Critics said, however, that radical-right politicians across the bloc would have to overcome deep-seated differences between themselves, including over support for Ukraine, to wield real clout in EU policies. [BBC 3] [Reuters 2]

Still, the rightward shift in the European Parliament could block or slow new legislation needed to respond to climate change, security challenges and migration, as well as raising discontent over aid to Ukraine.

(yl/pk)

Left-wing alliance wins French elections

A left-wing alliance has won the most seats in the second round of French parliament elections on July 7 that thwarted Marine Le Pen's far-right party from winning. The far-left coalition, though, didn't win

enough seats to form a government by itself, a development that could lead to greater political uncertainty in Europe's third largest economy .[CNN] [BBC]

The New Popular Front, a grouping of several parties ranging from the far-left France Unbowed Party to the more moderate Socialists and the Ecologists, won 182 seats in the National Assembly. President Emmanuel Macron's centrist alliance came in second, after his centrists and the leftists both campaigned against Le Pen's far right, which won 143 seats. [AP]

Following losses by Macron's centrist Renaissance party in the June 6-9 European Parliament elections, he called a surprise snap election with two rounds of voting on June 30 and July 7. It was a risky political move, one that didn't benefit Macron's party and now leaves France's political landscape divided and complicated.

Manfred Weber, president of the European People's Party, said on social media that "far from clarifying the political situation, Macron plunged France into confusion, strengthening the extremes."

Political Limbo

With the far-left falling short of the 289 seats out of 577 required for an absolute majority in parliament, France will be left in political limbo. The split lower house will require lawmakers to build consensus across parties to agree on government positions and a legislative agenda. [AP]

Macron has asked his prime minister, Gabriel Attal, to remain in his post "for the time being to ensure the country's stability." Attal, who led the president's Ensemble alliance's election campaign, handed his resignation to Macron a day after the election, only for the president to refuse. [BBC]

The New Popular Front has argued that as the leading group in the next National Assembly it has earned the right to choose a prime minister.

Le Pen will also be a thorn in the side of any coalition government. While not winning the election, as some had expected, her National Rally party has gained popularity in recent years. "In just two years, progress has been incredible and makes victory for us inevitable in the short term," said Le Pen, thanking the 10 million voters who backed RN and its allies. "The number one party for numbers of votes and MPs." [BBC]

Far-Ranging Implications

These early differences underscore the challenges that the eurozone's second largest economy, which is also the EU's biggest military power, faces with no clear roadmap, less than three weeks before it hosts the Olympic Games and with an economy already struggling. [TheGuardian]

Political deadlock could have far-ranging implications for the war in Ukraine, global diplomacy and Europe's economic stability. Still, at least one leader said the results were a relief. [MSN]

Macron has been a huge presence on the European front, whether by reshaping the EU's trade agenda, pushing for a more ambitious industrial defence and competitiveness agenda, or eyeing more strategic autonomy ahead of a potential second Donald Trump presidency. [Politico]

Economic Risks

Outgoing Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire warned that the country was facing an immediate risk of financial crisis and economic decline. The leftist alliance is not known for its fiscal caution. As early as this summer, leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon has said that decrees could be issued to repeal Macron's pension reform and increase France's minimum wage. [Euronews]

The group also wants to implement a 10% pay rise for civil servants, raise housing subsidies by 10%, and hire more teachers and healthcare workers. Extra measures will mean progressively boosting public spending by EUR n150 billion. The party says this will be financed by greater taxes for the wealthy. [Euronews]

Standard & Poor's (S&P) has downgraded France's credit rating for the first time in more than a decade due to deterioration in the European country's budgetary position, landing a hard blow on the government of Macron. The rating agency delivered the rebuke, saying that it had downgraded France's long-term sovereign debt rating to "AA-" from "AA". [PressTV]

It cited expectations that higher-than-expected deficits would raise the debt ceiling in the euro zone's second-biggest economy. [PressTV]

Macron's government had pledged to bring the deficit to under 3% of national output by 2027, which would allow it to stay in line with EU goals. In March, France announced deficit figures for 2023, with public accounts showing a fiscal shortfall of 5.5% of economic output. This is up from 4.8% the previous year and

significantly more than the government's target of 4.9%. [PressTV]

According to a senior French official, the main concern now is the government's fiscal position "We just don't know how we're going to pass the finance bill in this political context, despite the risk of the EU triggering an excessive deficit procedure against France." [Politico]

(gc)

Labour wins UK election with historically low turnout

The British Labour Party swept aside 14 years of Conservative rule in a landslide victory in elections that witnessed low voter participation amid widespread economic dissatisfaction among the British public.

The centre-left Labour won a massive majority in the 650-seat parliament with 411 seats, almost matching the number received by former Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1997, compared with the 121 seats for the Conservatives in parliament. MSN] [UKParliament]

Rishi Sunak's Conservatives suffered the worst performance in the party's long history as voters punished them for a cost of living crisis, failing public services, and a series of scandals. The party lost 244 seats, including a record number of senior ministers and former Prime Minister Liz Truss. [MSN] [UKParliament]

According to the BBC, only 60% of eligible voters participated in the election, making it one of the lowest turnouts in British history since 1885. The only lower turnout in recent times was in 2001, when Blair secured a second term with roughly 59% voter participation. [AA]

Polls have suggested that there is little enthusiasm for Prime Minister Keir Starmer or his party. Labour's triumph was achieved with fewer votes than it secured in 2017 and 2019 - the latter its worst result for 84 years. Labour only received 34% of the vote, compared to 24% for the Conservatives and 14% for Reform UK, which gained five seats in parliament. [NYT][MSN]

Starmer, who won 17,000 fewer votes than in 2019, vowed to rebuild Britain as its next prime minister. [NYT]

"We did it," Starmer said in a victory speech. "Change begins now ... We said we would end the chaos, and we will, we said we would turn the page, and we have. Today, we start the next chapter, begin the work of change, the mission of national renewal and start to rebuild our country." [MSN]

Starmer Promises

Starmer has promised to improve relations with the European Union to resolve issues created by Britain's split from the bloc. He will also have to work with former President Donald Trump if he wins November's US presidential election. Trump has already sent congratulations to Nigel Farage, the head of the anti-immigration Reform UK party, via his social media platform Truth Social.[NYT]

Starmer has pledged to not raise taxes for "working people" and has walked back some of Labour's more ambitious plans, such as its green spending pledges. [MSN]

He also plans to scrap the Conservative's controversial policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda, but with migration a key electoral issue, he will be under pressure himself to find a way to stop tens of thousands of people arriving across the Channel from France on small boats. [MSN]

Starmer will travel to Washington this week for a NATO summit, where he will be alongside President Biden, President Emmanuel Macron of France, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany. [NYT]

Reform Party

The Reform UK party won more than four million votes. While it secured only five lawmakers, it has gained Conservative support, which will make Farage a thorn in the side of the two major parties. In many seats around the UK, Reform UK came second to Labour. [MSN]

Farage became a member of Britain’s parliament on his eighth attempt after winning with 46.2% of the vote in the heavily pro-Brexit Clacton, a seaside town on England’s southeastern coast where Reform UK had polled well. [CNN]

Farage has been critical of the UK’s immigration party. He has warned supporters of an “invasion” of asylum seekers, and last month he sparked outrage from political opponents after saying the West “provoked” Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. [CNN]

Farage said the “Labour government will be in trouble very, very quickly and we will now be targeting Labour votes. We’re coming for Labour – be in no doubt about that.”

Economic Dissatisfaction

The elections took place against a backdrop of dissatisfaction among the British public about the health of the economy. A survey published on June 20 by the Pew Research Center showed that 78% of those polled said the economy was in poor shape.[ECI][PEW]

None of the four major British political parties – the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative Party and Reform UK – in the survey of 1,017 British adults received net positive ratings, the centre said. [ECI][PEW]

“Britons are more negative about their country’s economy than people in most of the other countries we surveyed this year,” the Pew Research Center said.

Goldman’s Upgrade

Goldman Sachs upgraded its growth forecast for the UK after the Labour Party’s victory, saying in a note that it expected the centre left’s fiscal policy to provide a “modest boost to demand growth in the near-term.” It raised its gross domestic product forecasts for the UK by 0.1% in both 2025 and 2026. [ECI]

“Reforms to the planning system could boost housebuilding and productivity; higher public sector investment could lift potential output; and closer trade ties with the EU could mitigate some of the costs of Brexit,” Goldman Sachs economists said in the note. [ECI]

The British pound rose on the election results, climbing 0.15% against the US Dollar and 0.05% against the Euro. The UK 10-year Gilt bond yield declined by 0.03%, reaching 4.166% by the first hour of the London trading session. [ECI]

(gc)

Von der Leyen nominated for second term as EU Commission president

In the aftermath of European Parliament elections which saw a victory for centrist parties but a historic rise of right-wing populist groups, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has been

nominated by EU leaders for a second five-year term as the head of the bloc's executive.

Along with Germany's Von der Leyen, centre-right Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas was chosen to replace Josep Borrell as the bloc's foreign affairs chief for the next five years.

Former Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa, a socialist, was elected to replace Charles Michel as head of the European Council, where he will chair summits of EU leaders setting the bloc's political agenda. [BBC] [Reuters]

To remain at the helm of the bloc's executive body, von der Leyen will need to be elected with a majority of 361 votes in the European Parliament. She could secure this on a thin margin with the backing of three political groupings within the bloc: the centre-right European People's Party, the Socialists and Democrats, and the liberal Renew Europe.

However, national delegations within these groups may vote against her, so von der Leyen is also seeking support from other camps like the Greens. [Euractiv]

Von der Leyen has notably faced resistance from Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy is part of the third-largest grouping in the European Parliament, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

The ECR and Meloni were not consulted in the negotiations that led to von der Leyen and Kallas' nominations and Costa's election, and the Italian leader expressed her discontent by voting against all three candidates. [The Guardian]

Should she secure re-election, von der Leyen will need to approve Kallas' appointment as the bloc's top diplomat, a formality. Then both leaders, along with all of the bloc's newly-appointed commissioners, will face a consent vote in the European Parliament before their official appointment.

Costa will not need to go through this process, as the head of the European Council is elected only by member state leaders.

Costa stepped down as Portugal's prime minister in November 2023 over a corruption investigation of his government's handling of multiple large investment projects, but he has denied wrongdoing and was never charged with a crime. [BBC]
[Europe Monthly December 2023]

His chief of staff was also briefly arrested, but the case against Costa has largely fallen apart after a judge dropped the corruption charges against several people involved, and Lisbon's Court of Appeal said the investigation targeting Costa was based not on evidence, but on "deductions and speculation". [Reuters]

(qv/pk)

Russia opens new front as Western nations resupply Ukraine

Ukraine attained partial success on the battlefield in June as it continued to roll back Russia's recent incursion into its northern Kharkiv region. On the international stage, Switzerland hosted a Peace Summit led by Ukraine which lacked key participants, while Russia deepened its alliance with North Korea.

Meanwhile, Russia continued its assault against Ukrainian infrastructure – which is developing into a full-blown crisis.

Russians struggle to hold Kharkiv gains

In May, Russia launched an assault on Ukraine's northern Kharkiv region. While observers differ on what the aim of this attack was, it appears to have stalled less than ten kilometres from the Russo-Ukrainian border.

The Russians advanced quickly at the beginning of their assault, taking several deserted villages under control. However, they reached a Ukrainian defence line at the town of Vovchansk. Over the course of late May and early June, the town was reduced to a ruin as Russian forces advanced on foot into the built-up areas.

By mid-June, it appeared the assault had stalled – and then Russian forces suffered a blow as a Ukrainian counterattack managed to cut off a large group of Russian soldiers, trapping them in the town's aggregate plant.

According to reporting from *Forbes,* as many as 400 soldiers may have been trapped – though Ukrainian sources dispute that figure. While many have surrendered, a few remain entrenched in the plant. Russian troops remain within the town's northern quarters, though reports indicate that they have begun withdrawing units from the area.

The battle of Vovchansk has also highlighted Ukraine's improved air strike capacities, with French supplied "Hammer" glide bombs playing a role in preventing Russian soldiers from entrenching in the town.

The battles in the Kharkiv region are certain to stretch on, but they illustrate the difficulties faced by both sides in capturing and holding territory. More often than not, battles in Ukraine degenerate quickly into "meat grinders" – where heavy casualties are exchanged for minor advances. Kharkiv is proving no exception. [BBC News] [France24] [Forbes] [Guardian] [Newsweek] [NPR] [Telegraph] [Washington Post]

Elsewhere on the frontline, Russia continued to advance slowly to the west of Avdiivka and Bakhmut, with continued assaults against the town of Chasiv Yar – where Ukrainian troops have been forced to retreat west of the canal that divides the settlement.

Despite this, large-scale territorial gains are yet to manifest in that direction. Ukraine has launched counter-offensives in the forests near the north-eastern city of Kreminna, which Russia has held since the early days of the invasion. While Ukraine has been able to press forward, it is unclear how significant these advances will be. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press] [Business Insider] [NPR] [POLITICO Europe]

Ukrainian peace summit fails to rouse 'big neutrals'

The Summit on Peace in Ukraine, hosted by Switzerland and planned by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, was held from June 15 to 16.

The goal of the meeting for Ukraine was to rally a coalition of nations behind Kyiv's vision of peace and to agree a foundation for this. The final declaration of the summit gave form to this vision, highlighting in particular the return of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant to Ukrainian control, the ruling out of the use of nuclear weapons or the threat of same, the importance of securing Ukrainian grain exports in the context of global food security, and the return of prisoners of war as well detained or displaced Ukrainian civilians and children. Ninety states and organisations have signed up to the declaration.

Russia was, unsurprisingly, not invited. Oleksandr Merezhko, head of the Ukrainian parliament's foreign relations committee, told *POLITICO Europe* that Russian President Vladimir Putin "never honestly tried to achieve a result" in prior talks and that negotiations with his government "do not make sense".

Putin reiterated his country's terms mere hours before the summit, which demanded Ukraine surrender vast swathes of territory and abandon its aspirations of joining NATO before Russia would agree to a ceasefire – propositions which were dismissed out of hand.

While Kyiv took heart at the number and variety of the states represented at the gathering, it will be disappointed that large neutral powers like Brazil, India, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia did not endorse the summit.

China was also absent and had been actively lobbying against the summit. This led to a rare rebuke from Zelensky at the start of June, when he accused Chinese diplomats of doing "everything to disrupt the peace summit".

The meeting and its fallout illustrates the enormous distance between the Ukrainian and Russian positions – and again showcased the increasing disinterest of countries outside the collective West in aiding Ukraine. [BBC News] [Diplomat] [Financial Times] [Foreign Affairs] [Irish Times] [New York Times] [POLITICO Europe]

Russia deepens ties with North Korea

Putin made a rare visit to North Korea in June, showing favour to one of the Kremlin's strongest backers in its war on Ukraine.

He met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in the isolated state's capital of Pyongyang. North Korea has provided Russia with significant material support, mostly in the form of artillery shells and ballistic missiles. Russia has come to rely on these imports and has embraced the Kim regime as an ally, with Putin's visit officially sealing the deal.

On June 19, Russia and North Korea concluded a mutual defence agreement, whereby both nations agreed to assist the other in the face of "aggression". Though details are light, Kim described the pact as the "strongest ever treaty" between the two states. Reports have emerged that North Korea is considering deploying its own citizens to Ukraine in non-combat roles, though this has yet to materialise.

Russia has much to offer North Korea, as the pariah state faces intense United Nations sanctions over its nuclear weapons program and legendary human rights violations – sanctions Russia can disrupt as a veto-holding member of the UN Security Council. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described the pact

as further evidence that "authoritarian powers are aligning more and more."

While the Kremlin will be pleased to have Kim's backing, it risks drawing North Korea's neighbours into the war in Ukraine.

South Korea and Japan have both limited their support to Ukraine, with South Korea sending only humanitarian and financial aid. In the interest of avoiding Russian support to Seoul's northern neighbour, popular opinion has favoured staying out of the conflict in Ukraine.

However, Russia's growing alliance with Pyongyang may force a rethink. *Voice of America* quoted a South Korean presidential official as saying Seoul will be considering "...whatever steps Russia would find most painful". South Korea hosts an enormous military-industrial complex and significant artillery reserves – the supply of which to Ukraine could undermine Russia's war effort. It remains to be seen how willing Seoul is to react. [Associated Press] [CFR] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters] [Voice of America]

Assault on Ukrainian infrastructure reaches critical levels

While Ukrainian soldiers at the frontline are receiving Western-made artillery shells for the first time in several months, anti-air gunners behind the lines continue to go hungry – and Russia has taken advantage.

Over the last few months, Russia has been able to improve on the accuracy of its strikes and, combined with a lower chance of interception from Ukraine's depleted anti-air batteries, has been able to destroy vital targets with greater efficiency.

Civilian casualties accompany these attacks. Russian forces have also engaged in "double-tap" strikes – a tactic which sees a second missile launched at the same target, with the aim of killing first responders and survivors of the first strike.

In June, further damage was dealt to Ukraine's power generation and transmission capabilities as missiles continue to get through. While Ukraine has shown the ability to quickly repair its damaged grid, and its allies have proven willing to fund this, these efforts are futile if the facilities cannot be defended.

Ukraine is more reliant on its Western allies in the area of anti-air systems than in any other. Despite frequent pleas from Zelensky, Kyiv is paying the price for delays.

While short-range anti-aircraft systems, such as Stinger and Igla missiles, are plentiful in Ukraine, they lack the range or payload to intercept Russian cruise missiles, most of which are launched by aircraft within Russian airspace.

Specialised radar and missile systems like the Western-made IRIS-T and Patriot systems perform this role for Ukraine, but have been supplied in limited numbers. US-made Patriot systems have performed a key role in defending Ukrainian cities but ammunition has steadily run low as supplies from the US were held up.

Russia sustained and escalated its missile attacks against Ukrainian energy infrastructure in July. As a result, damage has been inflicted on Ukraine's energy infrastructure at a level not seen since Russia's first concerted missile assault during autumn and winter 2022.

By inflicting blackouts on Ukraine, Russia hopes to grind Ukrainian society to a halt and destroy its will to fight. In the absence of a strong Ukrainian air-defence system, this is becoming an achievable goal. [Al Jazeera] [Bloomberg] [Deutsche Welle] [Euractiv] [Euronews] [Financial Times] [Guardian] [Irish Independent] [POLITICO Europe] [PBS] [RFE/RL] [Reuters] [RUSI] [UP] [Washington Post]

(wb/pk)

Biden's debate flop worries Europe

A disastrous debate performance by 81-year-old Joe Biden on June 27 has triggered mounting concerns in European capitals over his mental acuity and ability to beat Donald Trump in America's upcoming November presidential elections.

In the first televised confrontation between the two candidates for the election, Biden repeatedly stumbled on his words, lost his train of thought and delivered incoherent responses, on occasion appearing to mix up his talking points on different issues. [BBC] [WaPo] [Politico]

The incumbent US president's performance left members of his camp in a state of panic, many major news outlets reported, stoking fears he would be unable to defeat Trump. [AP] [CNN] [NYT]

Across the Atlantic, European leaders and media also showed concern over Biden's ability to prevent

Trump's return to office, a prospect which is viewed by some as a geopolitical menace to Europe.

Trump had previously threatened to make NATO protection conditional on member states meeting their spending targets for the organization, and during his time in office imposed tariffs on the EU, which have been suspended under Biden's presidency. [BBC]

Britain's The Economist labelled Biden's performance an "unmitigated disaster", and said his desire to seek re-election was a "reckless endangerment of the democracy he claims to want to protect".

France's Le Monde called the octogenarian's showing a "shipwreck", and Swedish broadcaster SVT declared it "near catastrophic", while Poland's Onet said the debate was a "carnage" that was "sad to watch". [Politico]

Elected officials and government ministers across Europe have also weighed in. Poland's Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski said "it's important to manage one's ride into the sunset", appearing to draw a parallel between Biden's succession and the decline of the Roman Empire. [Politico]

Norbert Röttgen, a German MP from the centre-right CDU party and foreign policy expert, said that "the Democrats have to switch their candidate now". [FT]

This is not the first time European officials have noted Biden's noticeable deterioration over his term as president. Several European diplomats at the G7 summit held in mid-June in Italy, where Biden skipped the formal summit dinner, anonymously voiced concerns to the Financial Times about Biden's apparent lack of focus and physical limitations.

In a 22-minute televised interview aired on July 5, Biden said he would not drop out, and that only "the Lord almighty" could push him to leave the presidential race. He also repeatedly refused to commit to undergo a neurological or cognitive test. [The Guardian]

(qv/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgian nationalist parties come out ahead in federal elections

Belgian voters went to the polls on June 9 for national, regional, and European elections, resulting in significant gains for Flemish nationalist parties and a notable defeat for incumbent Prime Minister Alexander De Croo's liberal party, OpenVLD.

Despite expectations that the far-right, anti-immigration Vlaams Belang would dominate, the right-wing nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) retained its lead with 22% of the votes, followed by Vlaams Belang with 17.5%.

De Croo's party garnered less than 7%, trailing behind far-left parties. [POLITICO] [AP] [Euronews]

In Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region, the N-VA maintained its dominance with 24.5% of the vote, while Vlaams Belang secured 22.8%. In Wallonia, the traditionally left-leaning southern region, the liberal Reformist Movement (MR) took nearly 30%, overtaking the long-dominant Socialist Party (PS), which received 22.6%. [POLITICO] [Euronews]

The election results indicate a shift toward right-wing policies, with both N-VA and MR advocating for economic reforms and greater regional autonomy. N-VA leader Bart De Wever emphasised Flanders' choice for more self-governance, while MR leader Georges-Louis Bouchez highlighted the need for change and reform in Wallonia. [Euronews] [AP]

Prime Minister De Croo accepted the loss, stating it was a difficult night for his party. Following protocol, he resigned to King Philippe, who will initiate coalition talks. Forming a new government is expected to be complex, given Belgium's history of protracted negotiations due to its linguistic and regional divisions. [Al Jazeera] [AP]

While Vlaams Belang's expected landslide did not materialise, the party made historic gains, winning 20 seats in the federal parliament. However, N-VA's strategy of marginalising Vlaams Belang proved effective, preventing the far-right from achieving the top position. [Brussels Times] [AP]

The election also saw a decline in support for green parties in both Flanders and Wallonia. MR's victory marked a significant shift in Wallonia, breaking the Socialist Party's long-standing dominance.

The election reflected a change in Belgium's political landscape, with voters leaning towards centre-right and right-wing parties amid economic and security concerns. [Euronews] [Brussels Times]

As coalition talks commenced, De Croo remained the caretaker prime minister. Political analysts anticipate that forming a government may be faster this time, though it could still take several months.

The new government will face the challenge of addressing Belgium's budget deficit and implementing necessary reforms to stabilise the country's finances. [Al Jazeera]

(gvc/gc)

Farming organisations boycott Belgian right-wing farmer protests

Mainstream Belgium farming organisations, including the Walloon Federation of Agriculture and Boerenbond, Belgium's largest farming associations, opted out of the June 4 protest led by hard-line farming associations and allegedly in cooperation with far-right groups.

They criticised the protest's political agenda. Farmers from the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, and Germany tracked manure through the streets of Brussels to protest against Brussels' climate policies. [Reuters] [Brussels Times]

"We came from Poland, because we know that the source of our problem is in Brussels," Polish crop farmer Damian Murawiec said. "We want to change, deeply change, the Green Deal." [Reuters] [Brussels Times]

The Farmers Defence Force (FDF), a Dutch group founded to combat animal rights activism, and MCC Brussels, a think tank linked to Hungary's right-wing

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, were key organisers. MCC denies claims that right-wing groups are orchestrating the protests. [Reuters] [Brussels Times]

FDF demands the scrapping of the EU Green Deal, opposes non-EU agri-food imports, and resists restrictions on livestock farming. [Reuters] [Brussels Times]

(gvc/gc)

German-speaking Belgians first to form new government

On June 13, just four days after the federal elections, the German-speaking Community of Belgium formed a new government.

The coalition comprises the regionalist ProDG party, the Christian Democratic CSP, and the liberal PFF, securing a majority with 16 out of 25 seats in the Community's Parliament. [vrt]

Oliver Paasch, leader of ProDG, continued as the Minister-President of the German-speaking Community, a role he has held since 2014. Paasch, who also oversees Finance and Spatial Planning, leads the coalition that sees the Socialist Party move to the opposition for the first time since 1990. [Brussels Times] [vrt]

French-speaking Wallonia, represented by parties like the liberal Reformation Movement and centrist Les Engagés, is still in government formation. However, the process is not expected to take long, as the two parties comprise a clear majority and have expressed a desire to form a coalition. [Brussels Times]

The German-speaking Community, encompassing nine municipalities in eastern Belgium with about 80,000 residents, holds a unique position within the country's political landscape.

Officially recognized as German-speaking, it includes the cantons of Eupen and Sankt-Vith, along with Malmedy and Weismes, which have facilities for German speakers. [vrt] [Brussels Times]

(gvc/gc)

Belgian NGOs sue the state for authorising toxic pesticides

Three Belgian environmental NGOs have filed an appeal with Belgium's Council of State, challenging the government's use of "highly toxic" pesticides that allegedly exceed EU regulations. [Brussels Times]

A report published in 2023 emphasised Belgium's high pesticide usage in Europe despite commitments to reduce reliance on these chemicals. They criticise the current administration's pesticide reduction efforts and call for greater support for farmers to transition to sustainable practices. [Brussels Times]

Virginie Pissoort from the Nature and Progress NGO highlighted that while EU law defines a greenhouse as a sealed environment, Belgium has introduced its "protected cultivation" concept, allowing more permeability like windows and entrances. This departure, the NGOs argue, undermines EU pesticide regulations. [Brussels Times]

This legal action follows previous challenges against agricultural practices in Belgium, when Agriculture Minister David Clarinval was sued in March 2023 by the same NGOs for non-compliance with pesticide regulations. [Brussels Times]

(gvc/gc)

Belgian PM urges Audi to continue operations in Brussels

Belgium Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and Finance Minister Vincent Van Peteghem have taken proactive steps to secure the future of Audi's Brussels factory amid uncertainties surrounding its operations. [Brussels Times]

In collaboration with various stakeholders, the Belgian government presented a letter of intent to Audi's board. The initiative aims to persuade the German car manufacturer to maintain its operations in Belgium despite plans to cease production of the electric SUV Q8 e-tron from 2027 and potentially relocate to Mexico, jeopardising around 3,000 jobs. [Brussels Times] [Brussels Times]

The letter of intent outlines several measures designed to incentivise Audi to stay, including tax deductions for investments in sustainable vehicle production, support for employee training, and research and development funding. It also addresses logistical needs, such as daytime access to railway infrastructure and smoother processes for obtaining necessary permits. [Brussels Times]

Meanwhile, Belgium's motor industry faces broader challenges, exacerbated by the bankruptcy of Flemish coachbuilder Van Hool, jeopardising over 1,500 jobs. The potential closure of Audi's Forest plant, a bastion of Belgian automotive heritage since 1948, further emphasises the industry's fragile state. [Brussels Times] [Brussels Times]

De Croo's task force continues exploring financial incentives and structural reforms to secure the plant's future beyond immediate economic pressures.

Discussions include revising investment deduction initiatives to support greener technologies and addressing supply chain vulnerabilities in Europe's automotive sector. [Brussels Times] [Brussels Times]

(gvc/gc)

Activists pressure Olympic Committee to repeal French public institutions' hijab ban

Human rights and sports organisations have called on International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach to help overturn France's ban on athletes wearing hijabs.

In September, the IOC announced that all athletes would be free to wear hijabs inside the 2024 Paris Olympic Games' Athlete Village. However, French Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera has prohibited all French athletes from wearing the hijab during the Games, telling France 5 in a TV interview, "The France team will not wear the headscarf." [The Independent]

The Minister's edict follows France's national laws to guarantee the Republic's long-held values of "laïcité." In the name of preserving state neutrality, the Republic's laicite laws expressly exclude displays of religious symbols and practices from the operation of state and public institutions. With the Olympic Games funded by French tax dollars, French athletes are therefore prohibited from wearing hijabs and other religious accoutrements as they perform. [The Independent]

The Minister's proclamation has reignited a long-running debate over the ban on headscarves and hijabs, drawing claims that the ban enforces gender and ethnic discrimination against Muslim athletes. Amnesty International and ten other activist groups penned a May 24 letter to International Olympic

Committee President Thomas Bach, urging him to help overturn the hijab ban:

"As Leader of the Olympic Movement, use your considerable leverage in advance of Paris 2024 to publicly call on French sporting authorities to overturn all bans on athletes wearing the hijab in France—at all levels of sport, " the activists said in the letter. "Women and girls in France who wear the hijab have been and are being prevented from playing multiple sports, including football, basketball, judo, boxing, volleyball and badminton – even at youth and amateur levels."

They added: "The hijab bans in sports have resulted in many Muslim athletes being discriminated against, invisibilised, excluded and humiliated, causing trauma and social isolation." [The Independent]

France's laicite laws have routinely been the subject of controversy, with some critics arguing that the laws are weaponised to target Muslim communities.
Proponents say that the laws ensure the Republic's separation of religion and state. Laicite laws enjoy widespread popular support in France.

(ts/gc)

Macron suspends New Caledonia voting reform bill amid local riots

French President Emmanuel Macron suspended on June 13 a voting reform bill set to take effect in the New Caledonia territory.

The proposed bill, which would grant voting rights to non-indigenous residents of the Pacific Territory, prompted violent unrest in May. Nine people died, and hundreds were injured. [CBS News]

Protestors against the bill feared that expanded participation of non-citizens with closer ties to France and Europe would undermine political efforts to gain New Caledonia's autonomy and independence. [AP News]

The bill's passage through the early voting stages of the French Parliament resultantly sparked widespread political unrest that triggered a National Emergency and even prompted Macron to visit the country and call for peace personally.

In addition to protestors' vehement opposition, the unexpected snap elections, which further threatened

the bill's viability, uprooted the French government's normal procedures.

While both houses of the French Parliament approved the bill in April, its final approval vote was slated for June 30. However, the dissolution of the assembly for France's snap elections upended the process, leaving confusion about whether the bill would go into effect without a formal signature.

In a statement announcing the bill's suspension, Macron said, "There can be no ambiguity during this period." In response to Macron's announcement, the Kanak Liberation Party, representing Caledonia's Indigenous people, announced that "our priority now must be rebuilding peace and social ties." [CBS News]

(ts/gc)

S&P downgrades France's credit rating from A.A. to A.A.-

The Standard & Poor's credit rating agency has downgraded its rating of the European Union's (EU) second-largest economy. The agency cited the nation's outsized budget deficit, which is larger than the desired 3% of GDP.

Explaining their reduced outlook on May 31st, the agency noted the nation's 2023 budget deficit stands at 5.5% of GDP, which was "significantly higher than we previously forecast."

The government's national debt is forecast to increase to 112% of GDP by 2027 from around 109% in 2023, potentially posing a significant economic challenge. [S&P Global]

Decreased credit ratings can scare off investors, hindering efforts to pay off national debt.

Moody's and Fitch credit rating agencies notably chose not to downgrade their rating of France. Furthermore, the S&P still maintains a "stable" outlook for France given "expectations that real economic growth will accelerate and support the government's budgetary consolidation." [Le Monde]

(ts/gc)

Germany: Bavaria court upholds monitoring of state's far-right AfD

The Munich Administrative Court has upheld the monitoring of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in Bavaria by the state's domestic intelligence agency, dismissing a lawsuit by the AfD. The court ruled that extensive evidence indicates the AfD's anti-constitutional orientation, justifying surveillance, including the use of undercover agents and intercepted communications.

The Bavarian Office for the Protection of the Constitution had previously announced the monitoring in 2022 but had refrained from deploying agents or wiretaps until a judicial decision was reached. The AfD plans to appeal the ruling. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany: Citizenship law changes take effect

Germany's new citizenship reforms, effective June 27, make it easier for long-term residents to gain citizenship by allowing dual nationality and speeding up the naturalisation process. The reforms enable applicants to retain their original nationality and apply for citizenship after five years of lawful residence, instead of the previous eight.

Special achievements in integration can further reduce this period to three years. Children born in Germany to foreign parents will automatically acquire German citizenship if one parent has been a lawful resident for over five years. The guest worker generation from the 1960s can now obtain citizenship by proving oral language skills without needing to take a naturalisation test.

Applicants must prove they can support themselves, though guest workers from the 1960s are exempt from this requirement. All applicants must commit to democratic values and anti-racism, with exclusions for those with antisemitic, racist, or other inhumane views. These reforms aim to increase naturalizations and promote faster integration, while opposition parties argue that these changes devalue the German passport. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany’s new law backs deportations for terrorism praise

Germany's government has agreed on a draft law to simplify the deportation process for individuals who promote terrorist crimes, including actions as minor as liking terrorist content on social media. This legislation, intended to counter Islamist and anti-Semitic hate crimes, would allow deportation without a criminal conviction if someone is found to have approved of a single terrorist offence. Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Interior Minister Nancy Faeser emphasised the need for tough measures against those who glorify terrorism, stating such actions undermine victims and democratic order.

The proposed law is a response to online celebrations of terrorist acts, such as the Hamas attack on Israel. Critics, however, argue that it excessively restricts freedom of speech and resembles tactics used by authoritarian regimes. The law, which needs parliamentary approval, reflects growing concerns about migration and security amid rising support for the far-right Alternative for Germany party. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany: Annual discrimination report logs 22% rise in cases

In 2023, Germany's government agency combating discrimination logged a record 10,772 complaints, marking a 22 percent rise from the previous year. Around 40 percent of these complaints related to racism, while approximately 25 percent concerned disabilities or chronic illnesses. Ferda Ataman, the commissioner heading the ADS, highlighted the increasing societal polarisation and radicalization.

The most common sources of discrimination complaints were the workplace, daily life settings, public and government agencies, and the police or justice system. Ataman urged the government to expedite reforms to Germany's anti-discrimination laws (AGG), which were promised in 2020 but have yet to be finalised. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany finds population less than previously thought

A recent census revealed that Germany's population, at 82.7 million, is 1.4 million fewer than previously

assumed. The population grew by 2.5 million between 2011 and 2022, less than expected. Women outnumber men, with 42.05 million women and 40.72 million men.

The census also found fewer foreigners than anticipated, with 10.9 million compared to earlier estimates. Some reasons for this discrepancy include unregistered departures and high refugee mobility following Russia's attack on Ukraine. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

German Constitutional Court orders return of extradited left-wing extremist from Hungary

A German suspected left-wing extremist, who was extradited to Hungary on June 28, must be brought back to Germany, according to the Federal Constitutional Court's ruling. The individual was handed over to Austrian authorities for transfer to Hungary. The Berlin Court of Appeals had initially deemed the extradition permissible.

Following the Constitutional Court's decision, Berlin's judiciary must now arrange the individual's return. The reason for the ruling was not disclosed. The suspect is under investigation for aggravated assault, allegedly involved in attacks on right-wing extremists in Budapest in February 2023, where several people were severely injured. [Deutschlandfunk, in German]

(lm)

Germany's centre right gets tough on Ukrainian refugees

Germany's centre-right parties, particularly the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), are pushing for stricter measures for Ukrainian refugees. These measures include reducing benefits and imposing job requirements to encourage employment. A

Alexander Dobrindt, the CSU's parliamentary leader, suggested that after more than two years of war, Ukrainians should either take jobs in Germany or return to safer areas in western Ukraine. This stance has been criticised by migration researchers and the

German Foreign Ministry, which maintains that there are no safe areas in Ukraine.

The call for tougher measures has been echoed by the Free Democratic Party (FDP), a minor coalition partner in Chancellor Olaf Scholz's centre-left government. FDP General Secretary Bijan Djir-Sarai proposed that new Ukrainian refugees should receive benefits under the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act, which offers lower financial support than the current citizens' income, to incentivize them to find jobs. This proposal aims to address labour shortages in various sectors, including hospitality, construction, and healthcare.

Critics, including economists and other political parties, have dismissed these demands as populist and potentially harmful to the job market. Marcel Fratzscher, president of the German Institute for Economic Research, argued that cutting benefits would not improve anyone's situation and emphasised the need for comprehensive integration measures, such as language courses and job counselling.

Government figures from March 2024 indicate that approximately 1.3 million Ukrainian citizens live in Germany, most of whom are women and children. The Federal Interior Ministry reported that about 260,000 Ukrainian men, aged 18 to 60, are among them. Currently, over 700,000 Ukrainians receive basic job seeker benefits, with 185,000 employed and contributing to social security. However, the integration of Ukrainian refugees into the labour market has been slower compared to other EU countries, where a higher percentage of Ukrainians have found employment.

Despite the push for stricter measures, Scholz's coalition partners, the Social Democrats and the Green Party, have rejected these proposals. They emphasise the importance of maintaining the current support system, which provides immediate social benefits, education, and work permits to Ukrainian refugees without requiring them to undergo lengthy asylum procedures.

Experts highlight that most Ukrainian refugees are eager to work but face barriers such as language acquisition and qualification recognition. She advocates for reforms to remove these institutional barriers to improve labour market integration for all refugees. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany: Right-wing AfD meets as protesters clash with police outside

During the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party congress in Essen, protests outside escalated, resulting in violent clashes with police and the serious injury of one officer.

The far-right party reelected Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel as joint leaders for another two years. Chrupalla received 82.72 percent support, while Weidel garnered 79.77 percent, both unopposed and with increased support compared to the previous congress. The congress took place amidst growing support for the AfD, which now boasts 46,881 members, with expectations to surpass 50,000 by fall.

As delegates voted inside, tens of thousands of protesters gathered outside. Demonstrators clashed with police, leading to the use of pepper spray and batons. One officer was seriously injured from kicks to the head, necessitating hospitalisation. Several arrests were made as protesters, some hooded, attacked security forces.

Despite Essen authorities' attempts to prevent the congress, the event proceeded following a court ruling. Around 100,000 protesters were expected, with significant security measures involving thousands of police officers to prevent disorder. Authorities warned against violence, appealing for peaceful demonstrations.

The AfD is under surveillance by Germany's domestic intelligence agency (BfV) as a suspected right-wing extremist organisation. The agency warns that the party poses a racist, antisemitic, and anti-democratic threat. Despite this, the AfD has seen a surge in support, coming second in Germany's recent European Parliament elections and leading in several eastern states. The party aims to capitalise on this momentum as Germany prepares for federal elections in the fall of 2025. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Germany blocks sanctions on Russian gas

Two years after the decision to stop developing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with Russia, Germany has decided to block new sanctions on Russian gas.

According to several European diplomats, Germany blocked new sanctions against the Russian liquefied

natural gas (LNG) sector. Chancellor Olof Scholz has tried to negotiate a diplomatic deal with Russia and seeks to secure his domestic standing in an increasingly fraught election outlook for his party. [Japan Times], [Politico]

The potential sanctions would ban countries from re-exporting LNG from Russia to European Union ports. Berlin feared that any new sanctions would harm the pocketbooks of its citizens, who recently went to the polls and gave the ruling SPD-led coalition a bloody nose in European Union elections. [Japan Times], [Politico]

(js/gc)

Swiss voters reject limits on healthcare spending

Swiss voters have decisively rejected two initiatives designed to address the escalating healthcare costs in the country. On June 9, the "Premium Relief Initiative," proposed by the left-wing Social Democratic Party, failed to gain sufficient support, with 56 percent of voters opposing it. This initiative aimed to ease the financial burden on households by providing subsidies when health insurance premiums exceeded 10 percent of their disposable income. The rejection was notably influenced by concerns over funding the subsidies, which became a pivotal argument during the campaign. The strongest support for the initiative came from the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Similarly, the "Cost Brake Initiative" put forward by the Centre Party was also turned down, with 63 percent of voters voting against it. This proposal sought to mandate government intervention when healthcare spending increased by 20 percent more than wages in a single year. Despite the intention to control spiraling costs, the initiative did not resonate with the majority of voters.

Both initiatives were responses to the rapidly increasing healthcare costs that have significantly impacted Swiss households. Over the past 20 years, health insurance premiums have more than doubled, and in 2024 alone, premiums rose by an average of 8.7 percent. The voter turnout for this ballot was lower than the previous vote on pensions in March.

In contrast, Swiss voters showed strong support for a new electricity law, with 69 percent voting in favor. This law, approved by parliament in September 2023 and subject to a referendum, aims to boost renewable

energy production and ensure the security of the country's electricity supply, especially during winter. Environmental groups had opposed the law, arguing it could harm the environment by easing the construction of renewable energy installations, but their concerns did not sway the majority of voters.

Additionally, an initiative launched by a libertarian movement to ban compulsory vaccination and prevent social or professional disadvantages for those refusing vaccination was overwhelmingly rejected by 74 percent of voters. This initiative, born out of the Covid-19 pandemic, faced strong opposition, reflecting the public's preference for maintaining current vaccination policies.

(lm)

Switzerland defines key targets for new asylum strategy

Switzerland is formulating a new asylum strategy involving the federal government, cantons, cities, and municipalities. An asylum committee has identified six key action areas, including communication, the return of refugees to their home countries, and enhancing the resilience of the asylum system. This initiative follows the successful restructuring of the asylum system after the revised Asylum Act took effect on March 1, 2019. However, adjustments are deemed necessary due to the high number of asylum applications. The committee is led by Christine Schraner Burgener, State Secretary for Migration, and Christoph Amstad, Vice President of the Conference of Cantonal Directors of Social Affairs (SODK). [SWI]

(lm)

State Street replaces UBS as custodian bank for Swiss government fund

State Street, a U.S. bank, has been appointed as the new custodian bank for the Swiss federal government's AHV/IV/EO (old-age and survivors' insurance, disability insurance, income compensation scheme) compensation fund, replacing UBS. The decision, made in December after a two-year tender process, involves transferring the multibillion-dollar fund, valued at over CHF 40 billion (USD 44.48 billion), by the end of the year. Compenswiss, which manages the public pension fund, clarified that the custodian bank handles

administrative tasks and does not manage the funds. In Switzerland, UBS will continue to manage the fund's Swiss assets as a sub-custodian under State Street. [yahoo!finance]

(lm)

Swiss State Secretary warns against cutting development aid

Helene Budliger, head of Switzerland's State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), cautioned against the Swiss Senate's plan to redirect CHF 500 million (USD 557 million) annually from development aid to military spending. She highlighted the importance of development aid for Switzerland's global reputation and warned that cuts could have negative impacts. The Senate's justification for the cuts includes claims of ineffective aid projects and increasing funds for development aid. The House of Representatives will decide in September.

Budliger also defended the government's decision to allocate a third of Swiss aid to Ukraine for Swiss companies operating there, ensuring these companies contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction and vocational training. Critics argue this approach could raise aid costs and limit Ukraine's ability to choose cheaper suppliers. Budliger acknowledged the criticism but emphasized the need for rapid reconstruction and job creation in Ukraine. The government plans to finalize an international treaty with Ukraine to regulate this aid, pending parliamentary approval.

(lm)

Germany celebrates first Veteran's Day since WW2

Long a taboo, Germany celebrated Veterans Day on June 15. The day of celebrations also coincides with a German Navy deployment, which saw combat in the Red Sea, and a military rebuilding after years of cuts. [CNN]

(js/gc)

Dutch coalition finalises ministerial appointments

A Dutch coaltion has installed a new cabinet about a year after the previous government resigned on failing to reach a deal on restricting immigration, a development triggering new elections that anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders's party won in November. [Reuters]

The coalition government consists of Wilders' Party for Freedom, the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, the populist Farmer Citizen Movement and the centrist New Social Contract Party. Wilders will not be part of the new government, but his presence will loom large as he continues to lead his Freedom Party from parliament.

Wilders, who was convicted of discrimination after he insulted Moroccans at a campaign rally in 2014, only managed to strike a coalition deal with three other conservative parties in May after he gave up his bid to become prime minister. Instead, the coalition agreed on Dick Schoof, a former intelligence chief, who took over from long-serving Prime Minister Mark Rutte. [MSN]

It took the coalition nearly six months to reach an agreement on a cabinet. Wilders said, "We're out and you'll find out the rest later." Political reporter Albert Bos noted that the parties had maintained a strict radio silence during the negotiations, making the announcement somewhat surprising. [Reuters] [ABC] [NOS]

The new coalition quickly faced criticism of its marquee anti-immigration policies — by its own party members, as well as opposition groups. Protesters gathered in front of the palace where the ceremony took place, with one woman carrying a sign asking: "Are we democratically getting rid of our democracy?" [MSN]

Facing challenges

Since Wilders's party won national elections in November, it took 223 days to form a government. Wilders had to withdraw his initial candidate for minister of asylum and migration after a national security screening. The replacement candidate, Marjolein Faber, prompted urgent discussions due to her past hard-right comments, though she was eventually appointed.

These issues highlighted the political differences within the coalition, including Wilders' far-right ideology, a populist pro-farming party, and the centrist VVD and NSC parties. [ABC] [NOS]

"There is a commotion about my statements that I made in the past as a member of the opposition," Faber said. "I understand that. As a member of the cabinet, I will of course express myself within the lines of the Outline Agreement and the rule of law declaration." [NOS]

The VVD, the only party in the coalition with previous national government experience, nominated Sophie Hermans for climate and green growth minister. Ahead of the appointment, Hermans met with candidate Schoof to discuss her role, expressing her commitment to addressing the challenges facing the Netherlands. [ABC] [NOS]

Netherlands King Willem-Alexander approved the cabinet on July 2. [MSN]

Budget Controversy

The coalition has already sparked significant controversy with its proposed budget cuts, which could lead to the closure of 34 Dutch embassies and consulates and threaten the country's global position in research and innovation. [NL Times]

During a debate in the lower Parliamentary house, MPs from various parties, including VVD, voiced unease about the potential closure of numerous diplomatic posts. Official documents from the new coalition indicate that these cuts could significantly weaken the Netherlands' international position. [NL Times]

MP Kati Piri from the social democratic Green-Labour alliance warned that such drastic reductions would undermine the country's diplomatic clout. Democrats 66 member Jan Paternotte highlighted China's growing influence, stressing the importance of maintaining a solid network of embassies and consulates. Other parties, including CDA, ChristenUnie, and Volt, echoed these concerns. [NL Times]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs faces additional budget cuts, including a reduction of 2.4 billion euros in development cooperation funds by 2027. Outgoing Minister Hanke Bruins Slot acknowledged the significant challenges ahead for her ministry, with MP Caspar Veldkamp of the centre-right New Social Contract likely to succeed her. Veldkamp, a former ambassador to Israel and Greece, will inherit these pressing issues. [NL Times]

Backlash from research and education

The new coalition's austerity measures also threaten the Netherlands' top global position in research and

innovation. Planned budget cuts at universities will result in the loss of hundreds of lecturer and researcher positions, according to an open letter signed by around 80 top scientists. [NL Times] [Vox]

The austerity plans include cutting 215 million euros per year allocated by a management agreement during the previous government. This agreement funded 1,200 newly appointed young scientists and supported critical research areas such as quantum computing, climate crisis solutions, and AI in medical science.

The scientists described the cuts as a "breach of trust" between science and politics, noting that universities had created these jobs in consultation with the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science. [NL Times] [Vox]

In response to the proposed cuts, Dutch universities are considering legal action against the new cabinet. Ruben Puylaert, spokesperson for the university association UNL, emphasised that universities have been quick to fulfil their obligations under the management agreement.

However, the new cabinet's decision to withdraw this funding has raised concerns about the government's reliability and the potential breach of contract. [NL Times] [Vox]

Prospective Minister of Education Eppo Bruins has indicated that he sees no immediate problems despite the potential layoffs of young scientists. [Vox]

(gvc/gc)

Dutch municipalities to continue receiving asylum seekers

Several Dutch municipalities are committed to supporting asylum seekers despite the new Dutch coalition's promise to impose "the strictest-ever asylum regime."

The municipalities in Utrecht, including Houten and De Bilt, have their position in response against restrictive immigration policies supported by voters. De Bilt is additionally exploring additional accommodations for unaccompanied minor foreigners from countries like Syria, Eritrea, and Yemen. [NOS] [Dutch News]

This move reflects left-wing discontent in the metropolitan Randstad region in response to the recent right-wing victory in the 2023 Dutch elections,

during which Utrecht emerged as a bastion of the social-democratic Green-Labour alliance. [POLITICO]

"With or without the dispersal law, we will continue to accommodate people," said Rachel Streefland, Utrecht's alderman, reinforcing Utrecht's identity as a "human rights city." Baarn, another municipality, echoed this sentiment, asserting that their position would remain unchanged regardless of the law's status. [Dutch News]

The dispersal law, in effect since February 1, compels municipalities to provide temporary shelter for asylum seekers, thus easing the burden on permanent registration centres. [Reuters]

(gvc/gc)

British anti-monarchy group accuses police of using human rights convention to halt protests

The anti-monarchy Republic group claimed that the Metropolitan Police used human rights law to block their planned protest at King Charles' Trooping the Colour parade.

The Republic group advocates replacing the monarch with a directly elected head of state. Trooping the Color commemorates the monarch's birthday and is held annually at the Horse Guards Parade grounds near Buckingham Palace.

In a statement on June 11, the Republic claimed that the Met reversed its earlier "relaxed" reception of its demonstration plans, in which it reportedly announced "no issue with where you want to protest." [The Republic]

In the days before the June 15 event, the Republic claimed that the Met police had displaced them to a site removed from media coverage and the parade. The group alleged that the Met Police had cited the European Convention on Human Rights to dislocate their protests. [BBC]

In a letter to the Republic, the Met police wrote: "You are absolutely entitled to protest and this engages rights protected by the European convention on human rights. We are, however, seeking to balance those rights and the rights of those present both taking part in the event and those who come to spectate and enjoy their rights under the convention as well".

In response, the Republic and its director condemned the move.

Republic wrote that the Met police used "the very law designed to protect the right to protest as justification for closing down protest." [The Guardian]

Republic's Chief Executive Graham Smith further proclaimed, "The argument that a protest is infringing on the rights of others to enjoy an event is particularly dangerous, opening up the possibility of banning any number of political protests on the most spurious grounds".

The Metropolitan police drew criticism last year when officers arrested demonstrators hours before they could protest the King's coronation.

(ts/gc)

Ransomware cyberattack cripples several London hospitals

Multiple London hospitals spent June navigating operational paralysis induced by a ransomware attack coordination against NHS hospitals around London.

The attacks have mainly targeted blood centres, hindering transfusion operations and resulting in the online leakage of sensitive pathology results from 300 million affected patients. [ABC News]

The Russian cybercriminal group Qinlin led the June 3 attack against the NHS provider Synnovis, primarily operating hospitals in South East London. The group reportedly demanded $50 million. [Bloomberg]

With fears of information compromise remaining, operations in Synnovis hospitals remain severely burdened. Clinicians are resorting to handwritten notations of blood work results. [NY Times]

Non-essential pathology tests have been transferred to other hospital systems.

The National Crime Agency is investigating the crime but warns that the complex nature of examining encrypted files will require many months of investigation. A helpline and website have been established to help those who feel their information may be leaked. [AP News]

(ts/gc)

Slowing UK wage growth offers prospect of future rate cuts

A survey closely monitored by interest rate regulators has revealed that British employers anticipate a slowdown in wage growth over the next 12 months.

The implications of this data bolster the case for potential future rate cuts.

On July 4, the Bank of England's "Decision Maker Panel Survey" revealed that employers' expected year-ahead wage growth has dropped by 0.3% to a three-month moving-average basis of 4.2% in June. This figure represents the lowest rate of expected wage growth since May 2022. [Reuters]

The Bank of England highlighted the changes in the results from previous data.

"Annual wage growth was 6.0% in the three months to June, unchanged from the three months to May," the Bank of England said. "Firms therefore expect their wage growth to decline by 1.8 percentage points over the next 12 months based on three-month averages." [Bank of England]

The Bank of England's "Monetary Policy Committee," which determines interest rates, is closely monitoring the survey. Next month, the survey's potential for rate cuts could significantly help the new Starmer-led government.

British Interest Rate futures are currently pricing a 60% chance of rate cuts when the Bank's "Monetary Policy Committee" meets on August 1st. [Bloomberg]

(ts/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Estonia: Ruling party nominates the climate minister as the new prime minister

Estonia's ruling party has nominated Climate Minister Kristen Michal to become the new prime minister, replacing outgoing leader Kaja Kallas. The Reform Party's unanimous decision was made during a closed-door meeting shortly after Kallas was proposed as the EU's new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Michal's nomination requires approval from the Estonian President and parliament. He has been Minister for Climate Affairs since April 2023 and a long-time member of the Reform Party. [EuroNews]

(lm)

Estonian Prime Minister in turmoil after resignations over military budget

Estonia’s outgoing Prime Minister Kaja Kallas faced controversy last month after the resignation of a senior Defence Ministry official over the government's inaction on the arms budget. Kusti Salm, the Defence Ministry’s Permanent Secretary, resigned, citing the need for an additional EUR 1.6 billion for ammunition. General Martin Herem, the outgoing head of the Defence Forces, had also pushed for increased ammunition stocks.

Kallas, who was proposed as the EU's new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, claims she only learned of the issue through the press and described the accusations as exaggerated. Opposition leader Urmas Reinsalu accused Kallas of lying and called for her resignation, stating that the

matter had been previously discussed within the government. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Estonia plans to allow foreign volunteers into its Defense League

(The Estonian Ministry of Defense is drafting legislation to allow long-term foreign residents to join the Defense League, a voluntary unit of the national armed forces, and undergo military training.

Currently, foreigners can only enlist in specific situations such as mobilisation or martial law, and they can be supporting members of the Defense League without participating in operations or training during peacetime. The proposed changes would let them sign voluntary service contracts, enhancing their participation in national defence.

The ministry said that the amendments aim to attract foreigners residing, studying, or working in Estonia, particularly those with specialised skills in areas like engineering, IT, and physics. This initiative intends to integrate valuable expertise into the Estonian Defense Forces (EDF) and improve defence planning predictability. The proposal also includes expedited border-crossing procedures for eligible individuals, inspired by the involvement of foreign volunteers in conflicts like the one in Ukraine. [TVP World]

(lm)

Russia court orders arrest of Yulia Navalnaya, opposition leader's widow, if she returns from abroad

A Russian court has ordered the arrest of Yulia Navalnaya, widow of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, if she returns to Russia. The Basmanny District Court in Moscow ruled to arrest Navalnaya on charges of alleged involvement in an extremist group during a hearing conducted in her absence. Navalnaya, who currently lives abroad, would face arrest upon her return.

Alexei Navalny, a prominent critic of President Vladimir Putin, died in February 2024 while serving a 19-year sentence on charges of extremism. His death, which occurred in an Arctic penal colony, has been

surrounded by controversy and lack of detailed information from authorities. Navalny had been imprisoned since January 2021, following his return to Russia from Germany, where he was recovering from a 2020 nerve agent poisoning he attributed to the Kremlin.

Yulia Navalnaya has accused Putin of her husband's death and vowed to continue his work. She mocked the court's arrest order on social media, calling for Putin to be prosecuted instead. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz supported Navalnaya, denouncing the court's ruling as an attack on freedom and democracy.

The specific charges against Navalnaya appear to be linked to the designation of Navalny's Foundation for Fighting Corruption as an extremist organization in 2021, which led to many of Navalny's associates fleeing Russia. The Kremlin's crackdown on opposition figures, independent journalists, and critics has intensified since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [TIME] [Al Jazeera]

(lm)

Wall Street Journal reporter in court as spy trial starts in Russia

Evan Gershkovich, a reporter with the US-based Wall Street Journal, has gone on trial in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on espionage charges after being detained for nearly fifteen months. He faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted. Gershkovich, his employer, and the U.S. government strongly deny the charges, claiming he is being used as a bargaining chip by Russia. The trial is being conducted behind closed doors.

Gershkovich was arrested in March 2023 while reporting in Yekaterinburg. The Kremlin alleges he was gathering classified information on a Russian tank manufacturer for the CIA. Washington called the charges "bogus" and criticized the lack of due process in Russian courts. The Wall Street Journal and press freedom advocates view the trial as a sham, with an extremely low chance of acquittal.

The case has drawn international condemnation and is seen as part of a broader crackdown on opposition and independent journalism in Russia, particularly following the invasion of Ukraine. Other Americans, including former Marine Paul Whelan and teacher Mark Fogel, are also imprisoned in Russia on similar charges, often viewed as political hostages for potential prisoner swaps. Russian President Vladimir

Putin has hinted at the possibility of such exchanges but has not specified demands. [bbc]

(lm)

Playwright and director sentenced to six years in prison by Russian court for 'justifying terrorism'

A Russian court has sentenced playwright Svetlana Petriychuk and theater director Zhenya Berkovich to six years in prison for "justifying terrorism" through their play "Finist, the Brave Falcon," which explores the theme of Russian women marrying Islamic State fighters.

Both Berkovich and Petriychuk denied the charges, asserting that the play aimed to condemn and prevent terrorism. They highlighted that the play was supported by the Russian Culture Ministry and won the prestigious Golden Mask theater award. Additionally, a 2019 performance at a women's prison in Siberia received positive reviews from Russia's state penitentiary service.

Berkovich emphasized that the play portrays women as victims of evil and that understanding their plight does not equate to justifying terrorism. The defense plans to appeal the verdict.

[Washington Post] [Voice of America]

(lm)

Russian court convicts US citizen of drug-related charges

Robert Woodland, a Russia-born U.S. citizen, was convicted by a Moscow court of attempted trafficking of large amounts of illegal drugs as part of an organized group. On July 4, he was sentenced to 12.5 years in a maximum-security penal colony. His lawyers announced plans to appeal the verdict, arguing that his guilt was not proven and that his mental health issues were not considered by the court.

Woodland, who was adopted by an American couple at age two and moved to Russia to find his biological mother, holds both U.S. and Russian citizenship. His arrest in January came amid increasing tensions between Moscow and Washington, with the U.S.

accusing Russia of using its citizens as political bargaining chips. The U.S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow have acknowledged Woodland's detention but have refrained from further comment due to privacy considerations. [bbc] [Le Monde]

(lm)

Human rights defender arrested for displaying ‘extremist’ Facebook logo

Aleksei Sokolov, a prominent Russian human rights defender, has been arrested in Yekaterinburg for displaying the Facebook logo, which Russia deems an “extremist symbol.” Sokolov, head of the "Legal Foundation," was charged under Article 282.4 of the Criminal Code for “repeated demonstration of prohibited symbols” following a raid on his home.

This charge follows his earlier five-day administrative arrest in October 2023 for the same offense after Meta, Facebook's parent company, was banned in Russia in March 2022. The arrest also involved heavy-handed tactics, including alleged ill-treatment of Sokolov and threats to his family members. Amnesty International has condemned the actions as part of Russia's broader effort to suppress dissent and silence human rights activists. [Amnesty International]

(lm)

Russia: Over 20 dead in Dagestan terror attacks

More than 20 people were killed in the Russian republic of Dagestan in the North Caucasus in a terror attack.

The victims include 16 law enforcement officers and five civilians, one of whom was a Russian Orthodox priest. At least five of the perpetrators were also killed.

The attacks took place in religious buildings in the cities of Derbent and Makhachkala – two Orthodox churches, two synagogues, as well as a police checkpoint. There was a three-day national mourning period from June 24 to 26 for those killed.

No group has come forward to claim responsibility for the attack. [The Guardian]

(ik/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albanian population shrinks

Albania's 2023 census has revealed a significant decline in population, dropping by approximately 409,000 people, or 14 percent, since 2011, when the country housed 2.8 million residents.

According to data of the Elsa Dhuli of the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the current population stands at 2,412,113, residing in 755,950 families across 1,082,529 homes. [Balkan Insight]

(dql)

Court decision ends strife within Albania's main opposition party

A strife with Albania's main opposition Democratic Party has been resolved after a court has order to place the party under the control of the faction that has the most support among voters and that is led by former Prime Minister Sali Berisha. This decision shifts the party's seal and funding from Lulzim Basha's minority faction to Berisha's, confirming Berisha's leadership since December 2021. Berisha hailed the ruling as crucial for preserving political pluralism against state interference.

The rift began when Basha expelled Berisha from the parliamentary group, citing U.S. corruption allegations. [Tirana Times]

In 2021, the U.S. barred Berisha and close family members from entering the country because of alleged involvement in corruption. He was accused of using his power for personal gains and enriching political allies and family members as well as of interfering in the judiciary. [Department of State, USA]

(dql)

Bosnia and Herzegovina's election commission approves coalitions and independent candidates for local elections

On June 21 the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CIK BiH) has certified applications for 55 coalitions and all five registered lists of independent candidates for the upcoming October local elections.

Four additional coalitions have been given a deadline to rectify deficiencies for certification. Those failing to meet requirements must address deficiencies by June 24.

The Commission also announced that it accepted Suzana Soldar's resignation as councilor in Sokolac Municipal Assembly, appointing Nenad Stuparušić to the mandate. [Sarajevo Times]

(dql)

Bosnia and Herzegovina's election watchdog investigates People's Power Party

The Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina has initiated an ex officio investigation into the People's Power party, led by Minister of Internal Affairs Ramo Isak. The investigation follows the release of a video deemed to constitute an offense of premature campaigning for the upcoming October municipal elections.

The video, posted on social media platforms under the party's name, features Isak alongside his sons Arnel Isak, a member of the Federal Parliament, and Rusmir Isak, director of the Penal and Correctional

Department institute in Zenica, together with wartime commanders Naser Orić and Sefer Halilović from the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. [Sarajevo Times]

(dql)

Bulgaria holds parliamentary elections

The GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party, led by former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, won the June 9 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, securing 22.7 percent of the vote. The ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) surprisingly came in second with 17.1 percent, followed by the pro-Western reformist bloc led by the We Continue the Change (PP) party with 14.3 percent. Four other parties also gained seats in the 240-seat chamber.

This election, with a 31.8 percent turnout, marked Bulgaria's third legislative election within six years and the second-lowest voter turnout. [The Loop]

Despite ongoing corruption scandals, including sanctions under the Magnitsky Act against DPS and GERB officials, voters continue to support these parties. GERB's campaign emphasized stability and security. Borissov led the country from 2009 to 2021 before losing power amid massive anti-corruption protests. This left Bulgaria in political instability with fragile coalition governments.

The reformist PP, founded to oppose Borissov's corruption-tainted government, announced it would not support a cabinet involving GERB, suggesting difficult coalition talks ahead. This indicates that reforms in key sectors such as the judiciary, anti-corruption efforts, healthcare, and education are unlikely. [Radio Free Europe] [Al Jazeera] [Balkan Insight]

A recent poll shows the newly elected parliament has an approval rating of just nine percent and a disapproval rating of 68 percent. [The Sofia Globe]

(dql)

Protests against gender-based violence held in Bulgaria

On June 25, a protest addressing gender-based violence in Bulgaria took place in front of the Palace of

Justice in Sofia. Held under the slogan "Not One More," activists voiced their concerns about four recent killings, with rights organizations reporting that nine women have lost their lives under similar circumstances since the beginning of the year. They called for societal rejection of patriarchal violence and harassment, emphasizing the need for solidarity and institutional support. Organized by the feminist collectives 'Feminist Library' and 'Levfem,' the protest drew several hundred people.

During the Sofia protest, another took place in Pernik. The events echo a protest wave from summer 2023, which led to amendments to Bulgaria's Law against Domestic Violence following a brutal knife attack on a young woman in Stara Zagora.

Despite increased awareness, observers contend that institutional response to gender-based violence remains ineffective in the country. In January, Sofia's Center for the Study of Democracy reported that 20 women were killed in 2023, with over 1,400 registered cases of domestic violence.

Resistance from conservative parties has hindered the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe treaty opposing violence against women and domestic violence. [Balkan Insight]

(dql)

Georgian parliament considers legislative package against 'LGBTQ propaganda'

On June 27, the Georgian parliament gave preliminary approval to a legislative package composed of 19 bills that impose significant restrictions on LGBTQ rights, including prohibitions on promoting same-sex relationships and undergoing gender reassignment surgery.

The main bill is titled "On Family Values and Protection of Minors," and the other 18 bills are offshoots of this primary legislation. [Reuters] [Georgia Today]

Proposed by the ruling Georgian Dream party, the legislative package, approved by a majority of deputies in parliament with 78 votes in favour and none against, could go as far as banning Pride events and the public display of LGBTQ rainbow flags if it passes two additional readings before being enforced. [Reuters]

Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili referred to the opposition MPs who were primarily absent from the

session, stating, "Yesterday, we postponed the vote until today so that the opposition would have an opportunity to consider whose side they are on: are they on the side of Georgia, Georgian society, or are they influenced by propaganda and external political groups, and therefore choose not to participate in this vote." [Civil Georgia]

The draft legislation is anticipated to exacerbate concerns in the European Union and the US about Georgia's political direction. This comes subsequent to their criticism of the "foreign agents" law, which critics view as Russian-inspired and repressive. [Reuters]

(zh/gc)

Greek prime minister reshuffles Cabinet after disappointing EU parliament election result

In response to a disappointing performance by his center-right New Democracy party in the European Parliament elections, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis reshuffled his cabinet on June 14. Although his center-right New Democracy party secured 28.3 percent of the vote, it fell short of the 33 percent target and was significantly below the 40 percent achieved in the national elections in June 2023.

Mitsotakis appointed Takis Theodorikakos as the new development minister and moved Niki Kerameus from the interior ministry to the labor ministry. Former defense minister Nikos Papanagiotopoulos was appointed as the new migration minister.

Papanagiotopoulos' appointment as migration minister signals a shift towards a more right-wing policy amid ongoing migration challenges, as Greece remains a key entry point to the EU for migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

In an attempt to tackle the cost-of-living crisis in the country, while ensuring policy continuity, he retained Finance Minister Kostis Hatzidakis and Foreign Affairs Minister George Gerapetritis.

Mitsotakis attributed the protest vote to the high cost of living, vowing to combat rising food prices within budget constraints, ruling out a sales tax cut. He also promised to reduce employers' social security contributions to boost hiring and address the still-high unemployment rate. He also acknowledged that a recent reform allowing same-sex marriage had

alienated traditional party voters but reaffirmed that he would not reverse the policy.

The prime minister ruled out a snap election, with his term ending in 2027. [Reuters]

(dql)

Greece: PASOK leadership election to be held in fall

Amid internal turmoil after the June 9 European Parliament elections, the opposition socialist PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) party is gearing up for leadership elections, likely to be proposed for October by current leader Nikos Androulakis at Sunday's central committee meeting. He aims to address the instability and challenges to his leadership by expediting the elections, countering Athens Mayor Haris Doukas's call for November polls.

Androulakis, Doukas, and Pavlos Geroulanos are the main contenders, with recent polls showing close preferences among PASOK voters. Additional candidates, such as Michalis Katrinis and Milena Apostolaki, may also emerge. Androulakis seeks a "clean solution," preferring a non-parliamentary leader. [Ekathimerini]

PASOK disappointed in the European Parliament elections garnering only 12.8 percent of the votes and leading to discussion on Androulakis' leadership. [The National Herald]

(dql)

Greek parliamentary committee greenlights programmes for military procurement

Greece's parliamentary armament committee approved on June 27 four military procurement programmes for the Air Force and Navy, as unveiled by Defense Minister Nikos Dendias.

Under the programmes, the Air Force will acquire twenty F-35 Block 4 fighter jets worth EUR 3.47 billion, covering technical support, pilot and technician training, additional engines, and simulators based at Andravida Air Base in the Peloponnese. The Navy will join the US Navy's Constellation-class frigate program,

influencing the design of these next-generation warships at a cost of EUR 2 million. Additionally, EUR 40 million is earmarked for four Camcopter S-100 UAVs for surveillance and reconnaissance on FDI frigates. Finally, EUR 16 million is allocated for overhauls of engines on the LASOS and KAVALOUDIS missile boats to ensure operational readiness.

These procurements await final approval from the Government Council for Foreign Affairs and Defense (KYSEA) before contracts are signed by the General Directorate for Defense Investments and Armaments. [Ekathimerini]

(dql)

Montenegro's ex special chief prosecutor under investigation for war crimes

Montenegrin former prosecutor Milivoje Katnic, already in custody on charges of being part of an organized criminal group, is now under investigation for war crimes during the siege of Dubrovnik, the military clash from October 1991 and May 1992 between the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Croatian forces defending the city of Dubrovnik and its surroundings during the Croatian War of Independence.

The Montenegrin Special State Prosecutor's Office has initiated this investigation based on evidence from Croatian authorities and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals.

Katnic, a former officer of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), is suspected of inhumane treatment of civilians near Cavtat, close to the Montenegrin-Croatian border, during the 1991-1992 conflict. The prosecution alleges that he violated the Fourth Geneva Convention by attacking, torturing, and degrading Croatian civilians.

Katnic denied the accusations during a recent hearing, asserting his innocence.

Katnic has been in pre-trial detention since April 14 for unrelated charges, suspected of being part of a criminal organization linked to the Kavac drug gang. [Balkan Insight]

(dql)

Montenegro's cybersecurity laws need strengthening

Montenegro's legislative framework on cybersecurity has progressed, but its implementation remains weak due to financial constraints, limited human resources, and insufficient training for enforcement bodies, according to an analysis of Belgrade-based Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a network of local non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values.

Published on June 24, BIRN's report [Report] highlights that this gap between legislation and enforcement heightens the country's vulnerability to cyberattacks. It calls for enhanced educational and information campaigns to increase awareness about data protection, digital rights, and cybersecurity. It also notes that 55 percent of organizations reported no cyber incidents, possibly due to underreporting or inadequate detection capabilities, emphasizing the need for comprehensive education programs.

The analysis further points out deficiencies in the government-proposed Law on Information Security, emphasizing that it lacks clear division of responsibilities among authorities tasked with cybersecurity. [Balkan Insight]

(dql)

New North Macedonian government elected

North Macedonia's parliament approved on June 23 a new nationalist-dominated 20-ministry government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, the country's 13th prime minister since its independence in 1991. The ruling coalition consisting of Mickoski's VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) party, the Albanian alliance VLEN and the ethnic Macedonian splinter group ZNAM from the Social Democrats, secured 77 votes in favour and 22 against in the 120-seat parliament.

Mickoski, in his first term as premier, emphasized the need to address the country's problems immediately, promising swift reforms, investment attraction, tax cuts, and increased pensions and wages. In addition, Mickoski committed to support for Ukraine's defence against Russia and European integration.

However, Mickoski rejected a previously agreed deal to amend the constitution to recognize a Bulgarian minority, stating it would not pass under his leadership. He also referred to the country as Macedonia, not North Macedonia, potentially reigniting disputes with Greece, which could impact the country's EU bid. [Reuters]

In the May 8 parliamentary elections, VMRO-DPMNE won 58 seats, three short of a governing majority which Mickoski secured after striking a deal with VLEN and ZNAM, which together have 20 seats. [AP News]

(dql)

Jugdes of North Macedonian Constitutional Court receive death threats

On June 24, Darko Kostadinovski, President of the North Macedonian Constitutional Court, reported threats against the judges' lives and safety to the Ministry of Interior. The threats were directed at judges handling a specific case. [Net Press]

In response, the Ministry filed criminal charges against Samka Ibraimovski, leader of the Party for Total Emancipation of Roma, for endangering safety by posting threats and calls for violence against a Constitutional Court judge on Facebook. [MIA]

Sitel Television had previously identified Ibraimovski as the source of the threats, reportedly due to the Court's decision to allow enforcement agents to resume debt collection. [Skopje Diem]

(dql)

Ruling parties win local elections in Romania

Romania's ruling parties, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), secured a combined 73 percent of seats in county councils in the June 9 After the June 9 local elections in Romania.

Out of 1,338 mandates across 41 county councils, PSD obtained 521 seats (39 percent) and PNL 412 seats (31 percent), with an additional 42 seats from their electoral alliance.

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) emerged as the main opposition with 159 seats (12 percent), followed by the Hungarian Democratic Union UDMR with 104 seats (7.8 percent) and the United Right Alliance USR-PMP-FD with 78 seats.

PSD now holds 24 county council presidencies, PNL 11, and two councils are led by the PSD-PNL alliance. UDMR secured four presidencies in counties with Hungarian communities.

Post-election, tensions rose between PSD and PNL over the scheduling of presidential elections, with PNL favouring a later date in September and PSD pushing for an earlier vote, reflecting the higher polling of PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu compared to PNL's Nicolae Ciuca. [Romania-Insider.com]

PSD and PNL collectively hold 186 out of 330 seats in Romania's Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the bicameral parliament, and 85 out of 136 seats in the Senate, the upper house.

(dql)

Far-right party nominates Senator Șoșoacă for presidential election in Romania

The National Committee of far-right party SOS Romania has unanimously endorsed Senator Diana Iovanovici-Şoşoacă as their presidential candidate for the upcoming election.

The election will be held on November 24 (first round) and December 8 (runoff) following an agreement between the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), the two ruling coalition parties. [Euractiv]

Şoşoacă, who leads the party and recently became a Member of the European Parliament after the June 9 elections, parted ways with the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) due to strategic disagreements. AUR's leader, George Simion, will also be running for president.

Meanwhile, other contenders include Justice Minister Ana Birchall, running independently, and potential candidates from major parties like Marcel Ciolacu and Nicolae Ciucă of PSD and PNL respectively. The Save Romania Union (USR), Romania's main opposition party, is expected to announce its candidate soon. [Romania-Insider.com]

A latest poll published by Inscop on July 4 showed current NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană, who has not yet announced his candidacy, leading with 26.7 percent. He is followed by PSD President and Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu at 17.8 percent and USR leader Elena Lasconi at 14.3 percent. [Euractiv]

(dql)

Serbia's ruling SNS party secures electoral victory in Belgrade

Aleksandar Vucic, the populist president and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), secured victory on June 3 in Belgrade and almost all other municipalities throughout Serbia.

"We had a majority even after December 17 in Belgrade. But we felt that wasn't enough legitimacy because some others didn't want to form a coalition with us. Now, we will have 62 or 63 seats" out of 110 on the city council, Vucic announced following the elections on June 2. [France 24]

The Kreni-Promeni (Move-Change) centre-right movement, led by lawyer Savo Manojlovic, has emerged as a significant force, securing second place with 17.2%. The leftist green party, Biram Beograd (I Choose Beograd), followed in third with 12.5%. [Reuters]

The election occurred after protests following the parliamentary and partial local elections in December 2023, which sparked political tensions and allegations that Vucic's party manipulated the voting process.

International observers, along with Serbia's opposition and human rights organisations, documented electoral irregularities, including vote-buying and cases of violence. [Reuters] [AP News]

Vucic is officially pursuing Serbia's membership in the European Union, yet his approach has diverged from pro-EU democratic principles, fostering strong relationships with Russia and China. [AP News]

(zh/gc)

Rallies in Belgrade advocate for unity backed by Russia's support

Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and Bosnian Serb separatist leader Milorad Dodik held a large nationalist rally in Belgrade, raising concerns in neighbouring states with their calls for Serb unity.

The All-Serb Assembly, a significant event, drew thousands of Bosnian Serbs and participants from neighbouring countries to "Belgrade. Under the slogan “One People, One Gathering,” the assembly underscored the call for unity. [AP News]

The gathering occurred in the wake of a UN resolution establishing July 11 as an international day of remembrance for the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. The resolution has provoked significant opposition from both Serbs in Serbia and Bosnian Serbs. [AP News] [Radio Free Europe]

Following his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Bosnian Serb separatist leader Milorad Dodik reiterated his stance that the Bosnian Serb-administered part of Bosnia should separate from the federation and join Serbia. [AP News]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov implicitly endorsed the Bosnian Serb separatists in Belgrade, stating, "Russia will never close its eyes to any injustice towards the brotherly Serbian people, and attempts to demonise them, trampling on their legitimate rights." [AP News]

Western officials believe Russia aims to destabilise the Balkans to divert focus from its conflict in Ukraine. While Serbia is formally pursuing EU membership, it has declined to join Western sanctions against Russia. [AP News]

(zh/gc)

Turkey's highest court rules Erdogan's firing of Central Bank Chief unconstitutional

On June 4th, Turkey's Supreme Court struck down part of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decree authorising him to fire governors of the country's central bank. Erdoğan has fired five central bank chiefs over the last five years to exert greater control over Turkey's economy.

The court's ruling was based on the violation of the separation of powers principles outlined in the Turkish constitution by Erdogan's executive order, which enabled him to dismiss the central bank governors.

The judges noted in their decision statement that only legislation could grant the president such authority. [Arab Gulf Business Insight]

The court's decision is likely to reassure foreign investors, as it signals a potential end to Erdogan's past interventions when he dismissed Central Bank chiefs for lowering interest rates too slowly. Since 2023, Erdogan and his administration have adopted 'rational policies' to curb inflation, leading to a significant hike in interest rates to 50%.

The court's ruling presents a rare challenge to Erdogan in Turkey. While holding office for the last 30 years, Erdogan has appointed many of the court's judges. Last year, Erdogan criticised the court for ordering the release of a lawyer who had been elected to parliament while imprisoned for political activities. Erdogan called for a criminal investigation into the justices in response to the ruling. The lawyer remains in jail.

Erdogan has not commented on the recent ruling, but a close advisor wrote on social media platform X that the court refuted the legality of using an executive order to grant such authority, not the president's overall authority to fire central Bank chiefs. [Financial Times]

(ts/gc)

Kurdish leader jailed by Turkey court for 42 years over 2014 deadly riots

A Turkish court has sentenced over 20 Kurdish politicians, including former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş, for their involvement in the 2014 riots that erupted as the Islamic State group attacked the Syrian town of Kobane. The riots, which occurred from October 6 to 8, resulted in at least 37 deaths across 32 Turkish cities. The politicians were accused of inciting the protests through social media posts and political speeches, with Demirtaş receiving a 42-year prison sentence.

The trial, known as the "Kobane trial," saw HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ sentenced to 30 years, former Diyarbakır mayor Gültan Kışanak to 12 years, and Mardin mayor Ahmet Türk to 10 years. Thirteen defendants, including Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ, were ordered to remain in detention, while 12 others were acquitted.

Human Rights Watch criticized the trial as a politically motivated attempt to remove elected Kurdish representatives and undermine democracy. The charges included attempts to "destroy the unity and integrity of the state," "membership of a terrorist organization," and "murder." The evidence was primarily based on the HDP's social media posts and speeches.

The crackdown on Kurdish politicians intensified after peace efforts between the Turkish government and the PKK broke down in 2015. In 2016, parliamentary immunity was controversially lifted, leading to the arrest and jailing of HDP members. Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ have been imprisoned since then, and the HDP faces a potential closure case before Turkey's Constitutional Court. [msn]

(lm)

Turkey's top court finds academic's right to freedom of expression was violated

Turkey's Constitutional Court ruled that the rights of Mahiye Sevin Bayraktar, an Ankara University lecturer, were violated when she faced disciplinary action for distributing leaflets and hanging posters. Bayraktar, a member of a labor union, claimed her freedom of expression was infringed, which the court upheld. However, the court did not recognize the incident as related to union rights. Bayraktar was awarded TRY 20,000 (USD 611) in non-pecuniary damages, TRY 446.90 (USD 13.60) for court fees, and TRY 18,000 (USD 550) for legal expenses.

This case highlights the broader decline in academic freedom in Turkey, which ranks 164th out of 179 countries. The decline intensified following the 2016 coup attempt, leading to the dismissal of over 30,000 teachers and 7,000 academics. President Erdoğan's 2016 decision to abolish intra-university elections for university rectors, replacing them with direct presidential appointments, further undermined academic independence. [Stockholm Center for Freedom]

(lm)

Turkish court releases 10 in case of ex-ultra nationalist leader murder

In the murder case of Sinan Ateş, former head of the ultra-nationalist Gray Wolves group, an Ankara court has released 10 defendants under judicial control and imposed a travel ban on them. The next hearing is scheduled for July 19.

Ateş was shot and killed on December 30, 2022, by a gunman outside his office in Ankara. The case has received extensive media coverage, with prominent political figures attending the first hearing, which began on July 1 and lasted five days. Critics have highlighted the one-year delay in preparing the indictment, asserting that the murder was politically driven. [Daily News]

(lm)

Fitch revises Turkey's banking sector outlook higher

The international credit rating agency Fitch revised on June 25 its assessment of the Turkish financial sector from 'neutral' to "improving" following the country's central bank's adoption of more conventional economic policies.

Fitch highlighted in its June 25 statement investor confidence and the success of financial risk mitigation measures, citing Turkey's expanded foreign exchange reserves, reduced dollarization, and greater external financing opportunities. [MENA]

Fitch noted that Turkey has assumed $6.5 billion in foreign currency debt in 2024, improving bank liquidity and reducing foreign investment reliance. Fitch further highlighted that Turkey's debt issuance has expanded access to foreign capital. [MENA]

"The recent surge in Turkish bank debt issuance has reduced external financing pressures and suggests that international investors have regained confidence in the sector. Since Turkey's policy shift, banks have seen reduced risk premiums, and access to external markets has improved significantly."

Nevertheless, Fitch checked optimism about expanded access to foreign capital: "FC liquidity continues to face risks due to still-high, although lower, FC deposits and FX-protected deposits [a combined 52 percent of total deposits, and significant reliance on external funding."

Fitch further cautioned about Turkey's overall macroeconomic trends. Fitch highlighted uncertainty about sustained inflation reduction in Turkey: "Failure

to improve policy consistency, for example, through tighter fiscal and income policies or premature monetary easing, could reduce investor confidence."

The Turkish central bank held its key policy rate at 50% on June 27, even as inflation continued to rise. This is the third consecutive time it has held rates at this level. It raised the policy rate by 500 basis points to the current level in March. [CentralBank]

Year-on-year inflation climbed to 75.45% in May, up from 69.8% in April, according to the Turkish statistical institute. However, independent economists estimate it at much higher levels. Ena-Grup, an inflation research group, puts it at 120.6%

Governor Fatih Karahan told Reuters on July 3 that Turkey's central bank is determined to combat soaring prices and will stick patiently to its tight policy stance. A series of aggressive rate hikes is starting to bring down sky-high inflation. [Reuters]

"We will maintain tightness and wait for data and expectations to get in line with our disinflation path. We think we still have some way to go in this regard," Karahan said in the interview.

(ts/gc)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Intra-Cypriot talks ruled out by Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) Ersin Tatar has ruled out negotiating a peace deal with the Greek Cypriot administration, citing the lack of a common ground. Tatar told reporters on June 10 that negotiations are pointless as long as the Greek Cypriots do not accept TRNC's sovereignty. He emphasised the existence of two separate states and democracies on the island while praising Türkiye's support in raising awareness about Cyprus.

Cyprus has been divided since 1974 when Türkiye intervened following a coup aimed at Greece's annexation of the island. The TRNC was founded on November 15, 1983. It is recognized only by Türkiye. Despite the cessation of violence, tensions remain, particularly over the island's offshore economic zone, where Türkiye claims over 40 percent following recent natural gas discoveries. Türkiye does not recognize the Greek Cypriot administration and maintains 35,000 troops in the TRNC.

Efforts for peace have seen intermittent progress, with a significant 2017 initiative in Switzerland failing. The Greek Cypriot administration joined the European Union in 2004. [Daily Sabah]

(dql)

European election results bolster Italian PM Meloni's position

Giorgia Meloni’s hard-right Brothers of Italy party secured victory in the European elections held in Italy on June 10, reinforcing the prime minister’s position both domestically and on a broader European level.

Meloni's party garnered 28% of the vote, an increase from the 26% obtained in the 2022 general elections, further establishing its dominance in Italian politics. [AP News]

The election results are a substantial boost for Meloni, who has been in power for nearly two years. Her success mainly came at the expense of her coalition partners. Matteo Salvini’s hard-right League, which won the 2019 European elections with over 34% of the vote, experienced a massive decline, capturing only 8.5%. Forza Italia, another coalition partner, took just over 9%, surpassing the League for the first time. [Sky TG24]

In the opposition camp, the centre-left Democratic Party secured 24.5%, maintaining a strong presence despite the rise of far-right parties. The populist Five

Star Movement, however, saw a notable decrease, dropping to 10.5% from its previous 17.5% in the 2019 elections.

Meloni's party now holds 24 seats in the European Parliament, a marked increase from the six seats it had following the 2019 elections. This shift positions Meloni as a key figure in European politics, particularly among the hard-right factions gaining influence across the continent.

Her enhanced role is expected to influence the balance of power within the European Union, especially against leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. [Euronews]

Meloni's electoral success strengthens her government as it faces considerable challenges, including Italy's fragile public finances and the looming 2025 budget. Her strengthened mandate is seen as crucial for navigating these issues and maintaining stability within her administration.

As Meloni leverages this victory, her influence within the EU and her ability to shape future policies will be closely watched.

(vm/pk)

Lawmakers in scuffle over regional autonomy in Italy

A physical scuffle broke out in Italy's lower house on June 13, triggered by a controversial government proposal aimed at expanding regional autonomy, highlighting deepening political and local divides within the country.

Opposition lawmaker Leonardo Donno of the 5-Star Movement was taken to hospital after the altercation. [ABC news] [Sky TG24]

The contested proposal, spearheaded by Roberto Calderoli, the Regional Affairs Minister from the co-ruling League party, seeks to extend the autonomy currently enjoyed by five regions to additional areas.

These regions, including Veneto and Lombardy in the north, benefit from reduced tax contributions to the central government in Rome.

The opposition argues that such a move will exacerbate economic disparities, particularly affecting the poorer southern regions of Italy.

The altercation began when Donno attempted to hand Calderoli an Italian flag, symbolising opposition to the decentralisation plan.

Violent reaction

This gesture provoked an immediate and violent reaction from other lawmakers, culminating in Donno being struck on the head and chest and subsequently requiring hospital evaluation. The incident underscored the intense emotions and stakes involved in the debate over regional autonomy. [Politico]

Currently, Italy's autonomous regions include Trento-South Tyrol, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Aosta Valley, Sardinia, and Sicily. These enjoy significant administrative and fiscal independence, a model that the League party aims to extend to more northern territories.

However, critics argue that such measures will entrench the north-south divide, disadvantaging economically weaker southern regions which already struggle with higher unemployment and lower income levels.

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani, speaking on the Sky TG24 news outlet, expressed dismay at the violent turn of events, emphasising the need for rational discourse over physical confrontation in resolving political disagreements.

The government’s proposal continues to face staunch opposition, highlighting the complexities of balancing regional autonomy with national unity in Italy. [Sky TG24]

(vm/pk)

Tragic Mediterranean shipwrecks off Italian coast

At least 11 people died, and dozens more were reported missing following two shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea off the Italian coast on June 17.

The first incident involved a wooden boat 40 miles south of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Rescuers discovered ten bodies on the lower deck while managing to save 51 people. The boat is believed to have departed from Tunisia. [The Guardian][Euronews]

In a separate event, another shipwreck occurred in the Ionian Sea, some 100 miles off the coast of Calabria in southern Italy. A sailing boat, which had left Turkey

several days earlier, was carrying passengers of Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian nationality. Reports indicated that 66 individuals, including at least 26 children, were missing.

A merchant ship rescued 12 people, but one, a woman, later died after reaching the port of Roccella Ionica, a coastal town in Calabria. [NBC news]

Italy, particularly its southern regions such as Calabria and the island of Lampedusa, is a primary landing point for migrants attempting to reach Europe via the perilous central Mediterranean route. This route is notorious for being one of the world's most dangerous, with the United Nations recording over 20,000 deaths and disappearances there since 2014.

The shipwrecks have reignited discussions on the need for more robust measures from European and national authorities to address and mitigate the risks associated with migration routes, particularly those from Turkey. The recent events have drawn parallels to past tragedies, such as a February 2023 shipwreck off Cutro, another coastal area in Calabria, which resulted in 94 fatalities.

(vm/pk)

Chairman of state-controlled shipbuilder dies

Claudio Graziano, chairman of the Italian state-controlled shipbuilding company Fincantieri, was on June 17 found dead at his residence in Rome.

Graziano, aged 70, was a former general in the Italian army and had been serving as Fincantieri's chairman since 2022.

The company, in a statement, expressed its sorrow over his sudden passing but did not provide further details on the circumstances of his death. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

Fincantieri is a major player in the global shipbuilding industry, known for constructing a wide range of vessels, including cruise ships, naval vessels, and submarines.

Sources with knowledge of the situation indicated that there were indications suggesting the possibility of suicide. This theory was echoed by Lucio Malan, a senator from the Brothers of Italy party, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

Graziano's death follows the loss of his wife to illness the previous year, which may have contributed to his state of mind. [ANSA]

Graziano's illustrious military career included serving as the Chief of Staff of the Italian Defence Forces from 2015 to 2018 and as chairman of the European Union Military Committee from 2018 to 2022.

The news of his death has elicited responses from high-ranking officials and colleagues, who praised his professional dedication and personal integrity.

The impact of Graziano's death on Fincantieri and its operations is yet to be fully understood. As a leading shipbuilder, the company plays a crucial role in Italy's industrial landscape, and Graziano's leadership was integral to its recent strategic directions. The company's future leadership and direction will now be closely monitored. [France24]

(vm/pk)

Horrific accident sparks anger at worker conditions in Italian farms

Italian police have arrested a farm owner following the death of an Indian labourer in an accident that has ignited outrage and calls for reform within the country's agricultural sector.

Labourer Satnam Singh, who was working without legal documentation, had his arm severed by a nylon-wrapping machine.

Instead of seeking immediate medical assistance, the farm owner, Antonello Lovato, allegedly abandoned the severely injured worker, resulting in Singh's death from extensive blood loss.

Lovato was arrested on July 2. Forensic analysis indicated that prompt medical attention could have saved Singh's life, leading prosecutors to upgrade the charges from manslaughter to homicide with "malice aforethought." [Economic Times]

The incident took place in Latina, a predominantly agricultural province south of Rome. ABC news]

It has brought renewed focus to the "caporalato" system prevalent in Italy's agricultural industry. This involves the exploitation of underpaid migrant labourers, who often work under hazardous and inhumane conditions.

Protests by unions

Singh's death has prompted protests from unions and farm workers demanding better working conditions and an end to exploitative practices.

The incident also drew condemnation from Italy's President Sergio Mattarella, who labelled the treatment of workers like Singh as cruel and their working conditions as "inhuman."

Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera reported that witnesses of the accident, including Singh's wife, who also worked on the farm, claimed that the property's owner refused to call an ambulance, asserting that Singh was already dead.

It was a neighbour who eventually contacted emergency services. Singh was pronounced dead at San Camillo Hospital in Rome two days later. [Corriere] [ANSA]

(vm/pk)

Labour exploitation claims as subcontracting by luxury-goods firm probed

An Italian subsidiary of the French luxury conglomerate LVMH was placed under court administration on June 11 after a probe alleged that it had subcontracted work to Chinese-owned firms accused of exploiting workers. [Reuters]

This marks the third such intervention by a Milan court this year, highlighting a troubling pattern within Italy's fashion industry, where similar alleged issues were previously identified in a subsidiary of the Giorgio Armani fashion group.

The court's decision reflects a broader scrutiny of the luxury sector's supply chains, particularly in Italy, which is a major hub for global luxury goods production. The country is renowned for its high-quality leather goods industry, especially in the Tuscany region, where many manufacturing firms are operated by Chinese immigrants.

The court's ruling pointed to systematic exploitation within the industry, driven by the pursuit of higher profits. In this instance, workers employed by small suppliers to Manufactures Dior SRL - a company owned by LVMH - were found to be living and working in substandard conditions.

Inspections conducted by Italian police between March and April uncovered that some of these employees were working without the necessary documentation and even residing in the workplace to ensure a continuous supply of manpower. [La Stampa]

LVMH, which holds a substantial stake in the global luxury market, faced immediate financial repercussions following the court's decision, with its shares declining by 2.2% on the day of the ruling.

The Italian subsidiary of LVMH is responsible for producing Dior-branded handbags.

The investigation did not directly implicate Dior in criminal activities, but it highlighted significant lapses regarding the working conditions and operational practices of its subcontractors. [Investing]

(vm/pk)

Maltese opposition party seeks 2/3 majority for national police chief election

Opposition Leader Bernard Grech announced on June 30 that his Nationalist Party will propose a bill in Parliament to change the appointment process of the Police Commissioner, requiring a two-thirds majority approval.

In an interview following the confirmation of Police Commissioner Angelo Gafa for another four years, Bernard Grech criticised Gafa for failing to independently investigate the Vitals deal, despite its annulment by the court. The controversy centres on corruption allegations involving the sale of public hospitals to a private company.

Grech argued that Prime Minister Robert Abela is too weak to take necessary actions, such as removing Gafa, and accused the government of protecting criminals. He emphasised the need for a Police Commissioner who prioritises justice and the interests of the Maltese and Gozitan people, comparing the proposed appointment method to that of the President of Malta, which also requires a two-thirds majority. Grech accused the government of abusing its power in appointing officials and stressed that a change is needed to ensure impartiality. [Malta Independent]

(dql)

Malta urged to intensify efforts against discrimination

While acknowledging Malta's progress in combating discrimination and promoting equality, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) emphasised that more efforts are needed.

ECRI, an independent human rights body established by the Council of Europe, commended in a recent report Malta for its regularly updated strategies and action plans for LGBTI equality and its significant efforts to provide quality healthcare for transgender persons, including the establishment of the Gender Wellbeing Clinic.

Additionally, Malta has strengthened the relationship between police and the LGBTI community by recruiting LGBTI police officers. The report highlighted the adoption of Malta's Anti-Racism Strategy 2021-2023, which led to the formation of the Anti-Racism Platform and the Victim Support Agency to assist victims of hate speech and hate-motivated violence. Furthermore, Malta has improved the integration and inclusion of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees through the "I Belong" integration program and support for Ukrainian families arriving since 2022.

However, ECRI expressed concerns about several issues. The lack of counselling for parents of intersex children, incomplete data on racist or LGBTI-phobic hate crimes, stereotypical media reporting on migrants, and mistrust in the police among migrant communities due to alleged abuses were noted as areas needing improvement. [Malta Independent] [European Commission against Racism and Intolerance]

(dql)

Malta defies EU warnings, maintains energy subsidies

Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela reaffirmed in an interview on June 30 that Malta will not eliminate energy and fuel subsidies, contrary to the European Commission's recommendation. Abela emphasised the government's intention to engage with the Commission to explain Malta's specific energy challenges.

While underscoring the importance of continuing policies that support individuals and businesses

through energy subsidies, the minister reaffirmed Malta's commitment to reducing its deficit by 0.5 percent annually and to ongoing efforts to align with EU fiscal targets.

He defended Malta's fiscal position, noting that despite subsidies, the country maintains manageable public debt levels. Abela also mentioned upcoming budget incentives aimed at bolstering the middle class. [Malta Today]

In an earlier move, the European Commission advised Malta to gradually phase out energy subsidies and address issues such as traffic congestion while promoting renewable energy initiatives. This recommendation was part of a broader warning issued due to excessive budget deficits affecting member states including Belgium, France, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania.

The Commission aims to initiate excessive deficit procedures in July for these countries. EU Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis emphasised the need for national fiscal plans that reduce debt and deficit levels in accordance with EU targets.

The Commission specifically urged Malta to submit a medium-term fiscal plan promptly, maintain prudent government debt levels, and reduce emergency energy support measures by winter. Furthermore, it called on Malta to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy projects and enhance public transport efficiency to alleviate traffic congestion. [Malta Independent]

(dql)

Portugal tightens immigration rules

Portugal's centre-right minority government has announced a new migration policy to limit the number of arrivals.

The new measures bring to an end a former rule that permitted immigrants from outside the European Union to move to Portugal without a job contract and later apply for residency after paying social security contributions for a year. [DW]

From now on, migrants will be required to have an employment contract before moving to the country. [DW]

“We want to put an end to some mechanisms that have become an excessive abuse of our willingness to receive,” recently-elected Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro said. [Euronews]

The Portuguese government also announced it intended to strengthen border security, invest in centres to assist in meeting the urgent needs of migrants living under difficult conditions, and create a structure to deal with an estimated 400,000 pending residency applications. [Bloomberg] [Euronews]

Portugal’s foreign population has doubled in the past five years, reaching one million in 2023, according to government data. That represents 10% of the total Portuguese population. [DW]

(fs/pk)

Portugal to modify ‘golden visa’ scheme

Portugal has announced it aims to change its “golden visa” scheme so that foreigners seeking residency rights can invest in affordable housing for local residents or accommodation for migrants. [Reuters]

The new scheme, labelled the “solidarity visa”, will complement an existing programme which offers wealthy non-EU citizens who invest in Portugal the right to live in the country. [Reuters]

According to the Portuguese government, one of the aims of the new rules is to “create an instrument for channelling private capital for social investment in immigrant integration projects.” [TPN]

(fs/pk)

Ex-economy minister and former bank chief convicted of graft in Portugal

A Lisbon court on June 6 sentenced Ricardo Salgado, the former president of the Espírito Santo (BES) bank, to six years and three months in prison for bribing ex-economy minister Manuel Pinho, who was sentenced to 10 years. [Reuters]

Salgado was found guilty of corruption and money laundering, while Pinho was accused of corruption, tax fraud and money laundering. Pinho had worked at BES before becoming the minister of economy between

2005 and 2009 under a Socialist government led by José Sócrates. [El País]

It is the first time in more than 50 years of democracy that a former Portuguese government minister has been sentenced to prison. [El País]

Pinho's wife, Alexandra, was sentenced to four years and eight months in jail, accused of tax fraud and money laundering. [Diario de Noticias]

The court said in a ruling that Pinho "acted in pursuit of Ricardo Salgado's interests and not public interests." [Diario de Noticias]

Both defendants have denied the accusations and said they would appeal the convictions.

(fs/pk)

Portugal plans crackdown on corruption

Portugal's centre-right minority government has approved new measures to crack down on corruption.

The aim is to carry out a "relentless fight against corruption in Portugal", Prime Minister Luis Montenegro said. [Jornal de Negocios]

The new rules will allow a suspect's assets to be confiscated if a court is convinced these are linked to graft, without the need for a guilty verdict. A criminal conviction was previously required to do so. [Reuters]

Other measures include the regulation of lobbying, protection for whistleblowers and greater scrutiny of public appointments. [Portugal Resident]

The head of the centre-right, opposition Liberal Initiative Party, Mariana Leitao, criticised the measures, arguing they undermine the presumption of innocence and the right to private property. [Reuters]

The rules need parliamentary approval to enter into force.

Portugal was ranked 34th out of 180 countries in the latest Corruption Perception Index from Transparency International. More than 90% of Portuguese citizens think corruption is widespread in the country. [Reuters]

(fs/pk)

Spanish parliament passes controversial Catalan amnesty law

Spain's parliament has greenlighted a bill granting amnesty to hundreds of Catalan separatists who took part in a unsuccessful 2017 secession bid.

The bill pardons separatists who were accused of terrorism and sedition due to their participation in an unlawful independence referendum in 2017 and the protests that followed.

Amnesty was a requirement from Catalan pro-independence parties to grant parliamentary support to the ruling Socialist Party, allowing the government to stay in power. [Europe Monthly April 2024] [Al Jazeera]

The bill passed on May 30 with 177 votes in favour and 172 against.

It received the support of the left-wing coalition government, comprising the Socialist Party and Sumar, two Catalan separatist parties and other smaller left-wing parties. The opposition conservative People's Party (PP) and far-right Vox voted against it. [AP News]

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez celebrated the outcome of the vote in a post on X (former Twitter), saying that "in politics, as in life, forgiveness is more powerful than rancour," and that "today Spain is more prosperous and united than in 2017". [Politico]

Right-wing parties strongly opposed the bill. A People's Party spokesman announced that it planned to do everything possible to overturn the law, whether through "appeals to the Constitutional Court or social pressure on the street". [Al Jazeera]

PP leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo said the law was the "death certificate of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party". [Politico]

The law will likely face legal challenges and will be reviewed by higher courts. Some experts question its constitutionality, arguing that it would lead to inequality among Spanish citizens by favouring some over the rest. [AP News]

(fs/pk)

Spanish PM's wife summoned to court in corruption probe

A Spanish court has summoned the wife of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as part of a corruption probe.

The summons is related to the "alleged offences of corruption in the private sector and influence peddling," the court said. [Politico]

An investigation started in April when Manos Limpias (Clean Hands), an anti-graft non-governmental organization with links to the Spanish far-right, filed a complaint against Sánchez's wife, Begoña Gómez, based on media reports. [Al Jazeera]

The allegations caused Sánchez to take the unprecedented decision to suspend his public duties and consider resigning in late April. After five days, he announced he had decided to stay on as prime minister. [Al Jazeera] [Europe Monthly May 2024]

Reacting to the summons, Sánchez published a letter on social media platform X on June 4, insisting his wife was innocent and denouncing what he said was a mudslinging campaign orchestrated by the conservative opposition People's Party and the far-right Vox grouping. [Euronews]

(fs/pk)

New party comes out of nowhere to finish fourth in Spain's European election

A new far-right, anti-establishment grouping called The Party is Over (SALF) has burst onto Spain's political scene, finishing in fourth place in elections to the European Parliament.

The party was established just two weeks before the European vote. Its leader, Alvise Pérez, told supporters: "I'm not here to reform anything; I'm here to bust the system."

SALF secured three European Parliament seats, the same number as Spain's far-left Sumar, which is part of the governing coalition, and more than Podemos, a far-left opposition party, which won two.

Pérez has promised to crack down on criminals and corruption, and has said he wants to reinstate forced labour for prisoners and build a huge jail on the outskirts of Madrid.

The SALF leader has been investigated and convicted several times for spreading lies on social media about his opponents. [EFE] [eldiario.es]

(dmf/pk)

Spanish police take down Islamic State media network

Spanish police have dismantled one of the largest media networks linked to the Islamic State, in an operation conducted with Europol and the FBI. [Euronews]

Europol said that servers used by the militant group were also taken down in the US, with Spanish authorities arresting nine people. [Europol]

Such servers supported numerous media outlets associated with the Islamic State, and were used to spread worldwide propaganda and messages inciting terrorism in at least 30 languages, according to Europol. [Euronews]

Among the materials were files that emphasised the need to spread radical messages. [El Confidencial]

The network also published messages encouraging its supporters to attack a bus carrying Real Madrid football players and their fans. The UEFA Euro football championship and the 2024 Paris Olympics were also among the targets of the terrorist group, Spanish newspaper El Confidencial reported.

The operation was part of a larger initiative by European judicial and law enforcement agencies to combat terrorist propaganda and communications on the internet, particularly on social media. [Euronews]

(fs/pk)

Spain plans new law to protect minors online

Spain has announced a new bill to increase protection for children against the harmful effects of social media.

It is the first time that the rights of minors in digital environments have been enshrined in Spanish law. [RTVE]

Technological devices such as mobile phones or tablets will be required to include parental controls by default, as well as “effective and mandatory” age verification systems. [RTVE]

Minors under 16 will not be allowed to access or create an account in social media applications, and underage people will not be able to access digital spaces that use “lootboxes” - reward mechanisms that give virtual prizes to the player on a random basis. [El País]

The creation of “deepfake” AI-generated images involving sexual content and the sharing of pornographic material with children will be criminalised. [Reuters]

"We want to give families the peace of mind that when their children are in a digital environment, they can be sure that the government of Spain cares for them," Justice Minister Félix Bolaños said. [Reuters]

Bolaños added that the rules will be reviewed every three years and are expected to be updated based on advice from experts. [RTVE]

The bill still needs to be approved by parliament in order to become a law.

(fs/pk)

Spains starts legal action to close Francisco Franco Foundation

The Spanish centre-left government has started judicial proceedings to shut down the Francisco Franco Foundation, a non-profit organisation founded by supporters of the late dictator, saying that it fails to comply with legislation that forbids exaltation of the Francoist regime.

A so-called democratic memory law, introduced in 2022 by the Socialist government, prohibits the glorification or promotion of the Francoist dictatorship. It intends to bring “justice, reparation and dignity” to all the victims of the Spanish civil war (1936-1939) and the subsequent dictatorship (1939-1975). [The Guardian]

"This is something we've owed for quite some time to the victims' associations, who were asking us to begin this procedure," Culture Minister Ernest Urtasun said. [Reuters]

According to historians’ estimations, around 150,000 people were killed by Franco’s dictatorship, while

450,000 were forced to flee the country. [Reuters]

Established in 1976, the Franco Foundation says it "disseminates and promotes the study of the life, thought, legacy and work" of the man who "governed Spain's destiny between 1936 and 1977". [The Guardian]

The foundation issued a statement saying the decision of the government was "absurd" and "an attempt to silence those who disagree" with the Socialist administration and its "Bolivarian-style dictatorship". [The Guardian]

Amid fears it would be made illegal, the Franco Foundation modified its original statutes in order to include a passage claiming that, from now on, it will act with the "maximum respect for every victim during the period between 1931 and 1977". [La Vanguardia]

(fs/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Date of legislative elections in Austria announced

Austria's government has announced that the next parliamentary election will be held on September 29, as it nears the end of its five-year term.

This follows a narrow victory by the far-right Freedom Party over Chancellor Karl Nehammer's conservative Austrian People's Party in the recent European Parliament election. The Freedom Party secured 25.4

percent of the vote, surpassing the People's Party's 24.5 percent.

Recent polls forecast a wider lead for the Freedom Party in the upcoming general election. The last national election in 2019 ended the coalition between the People's Party and the Freedom Party after a scandal involving the Freedom Party's leader Heinz-Christian Strache. In a video he appeared to offer government contracts to a purported Russian investor. [AP]

(dql)

Austrian environmental minister accused by coalition partner of violating law

Environment Minister Leonore Gewessler of The Greens has been accused by ruling coalition partner Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) of illegally voting in favour of the EU nature restoration law, allegedly against the Chancellery's legal advice.

On June 17, EU countries approved the nature restoration law, marking the first major green policy passed since the recent European Parliament elections and mandating member states to restore nature on 20 percent of their land and sea by 2030. The approval came after Gewessler supported the policy, providing the necessary votes for its passage. [VOA]

The ÖVP contends that Gewessler disregarded instructions from Austria's nine regional states, which oversee environmental issues, to vote against the law. In an eight-page legal document, the ÖVP alleges Gewessler's actions could constitute a misuse of authority, carrying a potential jail term of up to ten years.

Gewessler maintains she acted within the law and long-standing practice, dismissing the legal threat. [Euractiv]

(dql)

Hungarian parliament votes down impeachment bid against president

On June 10, the Hungarian parliament voted against initiating impeachment proceedings to remove President Tamás Sulyok from office in a secret ballot, with 41 votes in favour and 132 votes against.

Earlier, the regional investigative prosecutor's office in Szeged, southern Hungary, dismissed a criminal complaint filed by the opposition Democratic Coalition (DK) against Sulyok.

The complaint, filed by Klára Dobrev, MEP and DK's shadow prime minister, accused Sulyok of improperly receiving his salary as a constitutional judge from 2014 to 2019 without disclosing a conflict of interest, alleging fraud and abuse of office.

The prosecutor's office concluded that Sulyok had informed the chamber of lawyers in Szeged of his suspension of legal activities upon his nomination to the Constitutional Court.

During an inquiry in 2019, Sulyok reiterated that he was not actively practising law, with his previous cases managed by a deputy. Prosecutors determined that Sulyok did not engage in legal practice during his tenure at the Constitutional Court, thus he lawfully received his salary without committing fraud or abuse of office. [XpatLoop]

(dql)

Hungarian police interrogate 14 human trafficking suspects

The Hungarian police questioned 14 Hungarian nationals suspected of human trafficking and forced labour, procuring for income, facilitating prostitution, and living on the earnings of prostitution.

The interrogation followed a week-long campaign early in June, conducted in cooperation with Europol,

Interpol and Frontex, the National Bureau of Investigation of Hungary's Rapid Response Police (KR NNI).

Participated by some 40 countries, the campaign was held within the framework of the European

Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) between June 3 and 9. It aimed at identifying and eliminating instances of human trafficking. [The Budapest Times]

(dql)

Poland's centre-right ruling party comes top in EU election

EU parliamentary elections in June saw Poland's ruling centre-right Civic Coalition receive the largest share of the vote, even as support for the far-right surged. [AP] [Notes From Poland] [Euronews]

Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition defeated the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party in an election outright for the first time in a decade. [AP] [Euronews]

Tusk's EU-friendly grouping – which has been in power leading a coalition government since Polish parliamentary elections last year – won 37.06% of the vote, with the eurosceptic Law and Justice taking second place with 36.16%. [European Parliament] [Polish National Electoral Commission]

Addressing voters following the election, Tusk said: "This might be one of the most important moments in our history. Poland is deservedly becoming a leader in the European Union thanks to your efforts and stance over the past ten years, especially in recent months." [TVP World]

"Today, we demonstrated that we are a beacon of hope for Europe," added Tusk, a former European Council president. [TVP World]

Observers have said that Tusk's position and influence in European politics has been strengthened because his camp was one of the few governing parties across the bloc's largest countries to emerge victorious. [Politico] [German Council on Foreign Relations]

Reflecting trends across the continent, however, the far-right also made gains in Poland – performing better than either of Civic Coalition's two junior partners in government. [AP]

The far-right Confederation alliance will be represented in the European Parliament for the first time after winning 12.08% of the vote, translating into six seats. [Polish National Electoral Commission] [European Parliament]

Meanwhile, government coalition partners Third Way and The Left came away with 6.91% and 6.30%, respectively. [Polish National Electoral Commission] [European Parliament]

The European Parliament election was marked by low voter turnout in Poland, with 39% of eligible voters casting ballots, down from 45.7% in 2019. [Euronews]

(ek/pk)

Poland creates exclusion zone at border with Belarus amid migrant crisis

Poland has reintroduced an exclusion zone in areas along its border with Belarus following a series of violent incidents amid an ongoing migrant crisis there. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters] [Notes From Poland]

The new measures make it illegal for most people to enter buffer areas within a certain distance of the border – up to two kilometres in some places. [Notes From Poland]

Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced the move after a series of violent clashes between Poland's border services and migrants, which saw the stabbing death of one officer in May. [Notes From Poland]

Poland's interior ministry said in a statement: "The proposed solutions – by limiting the presence of outsiders in the area of official operations – are aimed at ensuring the safety of both outsiders as well as police officers, border guard officers and soldiers, and limiting the activities of smuggling groups facilitating illegal migration." [Notes From Poland]

The plan has been met with concern from business owners in and near the exclusion areas, who fear the measures will drastically reduce tourism revenues as visitors are left unsure about which areas they can enter. [Reuters]

Tourism hit

Despite insisting that tourists are safe and that the situation is being overblown by government officials and the media, business owners have seen reservations being cancelled during the height of the tourist season. [DW News] [Reuters]

The new exclusion zone is similar to one put in place by Poland's previous nationalist government in 2021. That plan was at the time criticised by Tusk's centre-right Civic Coalition, when it was the main opposition grouping. [Notes From Poland]

Poland's border with Belarus has been the site of tensions between the two countries since that year, 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 June 2024]

Under both the previous right-wing and the current centrist government elected late last year, Poland has taken steps to fortify its borders by boosting troop numbers, building a wall along the Belarusian frontier, and investing billions of euros in border security. [Europe Monthly June 2024]

(ek/pk)

Close ally of Ukraine-sceptic PM sworn in as Slovakia's president

Peter Pellegrini, a close ally of Russia-friendly populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, has been sworn in as Slovakia's new head of state, vowing to unite the increasingly polarised country.

His inauguration ceremony took place on June 15 under heightened security following an attempted assassination of Fico, who was shot multiple times at close range on May 15 while greeting his supporters. [Europe Monthly June 2024] [Telegraph] [euro news] [Slovak Spectator] [BRNO Daily] [TVP world] [DW]

Pellegrini said in a speech that Slovakia was divided by a "high mental wall".

In a reference to the assassination attempt on Fico, he added: "Today, that wall is splattered with blood. And if we don't want more blood added, we need to knock this wall down together."

Pellegrini is a former parliamentary speaker who heads the centre-left Hlas party in Fico's three-party ruling coalition.

Fico did not attend the swearing-in ceremony at the Slovak Philharmonic in Bratislava as he is still in the process of recovery. Officials said the man who attacked him was angered by Fico's policies, including ending military aid to Kyiv, abolishing Slovakia's anti-graft prosecution office, and overhauling the public broadcaster.

Pellegrini, who favours a strong role for the state, has become Slovakia's sixth president since Czechoslovakia broke up into two nations in 1993. [euro news] [BRNO Daily]

Pellegrini succeeds Zuzana Caputova, Slovakia's first female head of state and a standard bearer for liberal

politics. She said she decided not to seek a second term in office and planned to leave the “political arena” to work in academia. [Slovak Spectator]

Caputova had been repeatedly criticised by Fico over her staunch support for Ukraine. She has taken legal action against him after she and her family received a death threat echoing Fico’s accusation of her being an “American agent”.

Although performing a largely ceremonial role, Slovakia’s president has the right to swear in the new government, appoint top judges, and pick the prime minister after parliamentary elections. The president also serves as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and is tasked with ratifying international treaties.

Fico’s growing grip on power

In a presidential runoff round on April 6, Pellegrini secured 53% of the vote, defeating pro-Western career diplomat Ivan Korcok, who scored not quite 47%. [Europe Monthly May 2024]

Fico’s leftist Smer party, which pledged an immediate end to military aid for Kyiv, enjoys a majority in the legislature after winning parliamentary elections last September.

Observers have voiced concerns that Fico would abandon Slovakia’s pro-Western trajectory and align with Hungary in opposing the EU’s military support for Ukraine. [Europe Monthly October 2024]

Pellegrini's victory and the success of Fico’s Smer party have consolidated the populist prime minister’s grip on power, allowing Fico and his allies to dominate executive powers and key posts in parliament and government.

Liberal opposition politicians fear that, as head of state, Pellegrini could issue presidential pardons for former prosecutors and government officials implicated in bribery and corruption linked to Fico’s Smer party.

Pellegrini’s presidency has triggered alarm bells in the EU and NATO. Critics are worried that, with a close ally as head of state, Fico will crank up his pro-Russia rhetoric and drive Slovakia to international isolation.

Fico, who blamed “Ukrainian Nazis and fascists” for sparking the war with Russia, has soured ties with Ukraine after questioning its sovereignty and calling for peace talks with Moscow.

Bid to soften Czech-Slovak rift

After taking office, Pellegrini on June 26 made his first official trip abroad to the Czech Republic, following a convention established after the 1993 dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Pellegrini and his Czech counterpart Petr Pavel, a pro-Western former NATO general, tried to soften a rift between the two nations. In March, the two countries broke off bilateral talks after the Slovak foreign minister held a meeting with his Russian counterpart amid Moscow's war against Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2024] [BRNO Daily 2]

Pellegrini has previously blamed Pavel and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala for "supporting the killing in Ukraine" by delivering more arms to Kyiv. [Euractiv]

Despite differing views on military aid to Ukraine, Pellegrini and Pavel discussed issues related to energy security and defence industry cooperation.

(yl/pk)

Slovak PM blames pro-liberal opposition for his assassination attempt

Slovakia's populist Prime Minister Robert Fico has blamed the pro-liberal opposition, independent media and non-governmental organisations for fostering a climate of hatred, saying this led to an assassination attempt on him.

In his first public appearance since he was shot by a gunman, Fico said that his assailant was a "messenger of evil and political hatred" whipped up by a "frustrated" opposition. [Bloomberg] [FT] [Barron's/AFP] [BBC] [AP] [FT] [The Times] [The Guardian] [Aljazeera]

"On May 15, a Slovak opposition activist tried to assassinate me in Handlova because of my political views," Fico said in a Facebook video released on June 5.

In the 14-minute message, the Slovak strongman called the assailant an "activist of the Slovak opposition", but at the same time said he bears no malice toward the gunman.

He added that there was no reason to believe the attack was an act of a "lone lunatic".

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, suggested he was targeted for his position on the Ukraine war, which sharply differs from the European mainstream. [AP] [Aljazeera]

He claimed that Slovakia's liberal opposition continues to receive support from the West because the EU and NATO believe that the Ukraine war "must continue at any cost in order to weaken the Russian Federation". [Reuters] [Bloomberg] [FT]

The populist leader also laid the blame for his shooting on Slovakia's foreign-funded NGOs and "anti-government media", which he claimed were financed by companies linked to US philanthropist George Soros, who has been a target of the far-right for his support of liberal causes. [Balkan Insight] [The New York Times] [The Telegraph]

Fico was critically injured after being shot multiple times 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. [Europe Monthly June 2024] [Politico] [Reuters]

The 59-year-old is understood to have undergone several rounds of operation before he was later taken to his apartment in Bratislava to continue his recovery.

The alleged assailant, identified by prosecutors as 71-year-old Juraj Cintula, was apprehended at the scene and was later taken into custody.

The suspect, who allegedly told authorities he disagreed with Fico's Kremlin-friendly stance, has been charged with attempted premeditated murder. If convicted, he could face up to life in prison. [Europe Monthly June 2024] [Politico]

Liberals deny links to attacker

Liberal opposition parties have denied all links with the attacker. Michal Simecka, who heads the largest opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) party, said he strongly condemned the shooting but expressed disappointment at Fico's comments.

"The prime minister blamed the media, the opposition, artists, the EU, and our foreign partners," Simecka said in a Facebook statement published on June 5.

"Unfortunately, nothing has changed in his politics," said Simecka.

The attack has not spurred Fico to soften his combative approach. He vowed to stick to his controversial policies when he returns to resume his duties.

Milan Nic, a Slovak analyst from the German Council on Foreign Relations, said Fico disregarded an ongoing investigation to blame his political foes for the shooting, which in turn would foster hatred and deepen tensions in an already-divided society. [FT]

The shooting of the Eurosceptic leader highlighted the escalating polarisation that has plagued the central European country for years. Since Fico's comeback last October, Slovakia has repeatedly seen mass anti-government protests in response to his controversial reforms.

Fico's populist administration has faced criticism from the EU for rewriting the criminal code to dismantle the country's anti-graft efforts and for replacing the public broadcaster with what critics call a government mouthpiece. [Europe Monthly June 2024]

(yl/pk)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Denmark to impose first carbon tax on agriculture

The world's first agricultural carbon tax will be implemented in Denmark, where cattle farmers will

pay for the greenhouse gas emissions produced by their livestock.

Farmers will be required to pay 120 Danish kroner (€16) per metric ton of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions starting in 2030. This fee will increase to 300 kroner (€40) from 2035 onwards. [Politico]

According to Taxation Minister Jeppe Bruus, the programme aims to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Denmark by 70% by 2030. “We will take a big step closer in becoming climate neutral in 2045,” Bruus said, adding that Denmark “will be the first country in the world to introduce a real CO2 tax on agriculture”. [Euronews]

The deal was reached between the government and representatives of farmers and unions. [Euronews]

The centre-left prime minister of Denmark, Mette Frederiksen, said she hoped the tax would "pave the way forward regionally and globally" for initiatives of a similar nature. [Financial Times]

The European Commission is studying ways to implement an agricultural emissions trading scheme across the EU, including making landowners and farmers pay for their emissions directly. [Financial Times]

(fs/pk)

Man charged over assault on Danish PM

A Polish man has been charged with assaulting Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen in June.

The 39-year-old man, whose identity has not been disclosed, allegedly pushed Frederiksen hard as she was passing Kultorvet Square, one of the main locations in Copenhagen. Frederiksen suffered a “minor whiplash injury” in the attack. [DW]

The man was charged with assault against a civil servant or a person carrying out a public duty, his lawyer said. He faces fines or up to eight years in jail if found guilty. [AP News]

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said that “an attack on a democratically elected leader is also an attack on our democracy”. Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, condemned what he described as a “cowardly act of aggression”. [Euronews]

According to Danish media, the attacker was most likely under the influence of drugs at the time of the incident. The police dismissed the idea that the attack was politically motivated. [AP News] [DW]

(fs/pk)

Danish underwater tunnel inaugurated

Danish King Frederik X on June 17 inaugurated the first element of the Fehmarnbelt tunnel, an 18-kilometre tunnel under the Baltic Sea that will reduce travel times between Scandinavia and central Europe. The world's longest underwater rail and road tunnel will connect southern Denmark to northern Germany.

Set to open in 2029, the Fehmarnbelt link will reduce the current 45-minute ferry crossing to just seven minutes by train. Connecting Roedby in Denmark to Puttgarden in Germany and facilitating road and rail connections to Central Europe and the Nordic countries, the tunnel will comprise 89 concrete elements. The first element was cast in May.

The project's cost stands at EUR 4.8 billion and will be financed by Danish users, with toll charges determined by the Danish government later. [euronews.]

(dql)

Committee of Finnish MPs backs contested plan to halt migrants at Russian border

The Finnish parliament would be able to approve a proposal by the government to temporarily refuse entry to asylum seekers arriving from across the border with Russia provided certain amendments are made, a committee of legislators has said. [Reuters]

The announcement by the head of parliament's constitutional committee is expected to facilitate the approval of the controversial law in an upcoming plenary vote. [Reuters] [TVP]

Finland has alleged that Russia has been weaponising migration by urging hundreds of people from nations like Somalia and Syria to cross the border last year, a claim that the Kremlin denies. [Europe Monthly June 2024]

Helsinki suspects that Moscow is encouraging such border crossings in retaliation for Finland last year joining NATO, which supports Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. [Reuters]

After closing all land crossings with Russia late last year to halt regular travel, the Finnish government introduced legislation in May permitting border guards to prevent migrants from seeking asylum upon arrival. [TVP]

The proposed new law allows authorities to restrict asylum applications at specific border sections. Additionally, it permits the use of force to prevent entry without considering individual circumstances. [Helsinki Times] [Europe Monthly June 2024]

Eve Geddie, Director of Amnesty International's EU Office, cautioned that the legislation weakens the principle of “non-refoulement”, which under international human rights laws guarantees that individuals are not sent back to a country where they would face torture, inhumane or degrading treatment, or other serious harm. [Helsinki Times] [United Nations] [Amnesty International]

Geddie said that the new Finnish government proposal "significantly weakens protections against forced returns and the right to seek asylum in Finland. It risks becoming a green light for violence and pushbacks at the border.” [Helsinki Times] [Amnesty International]

Heikki Vestman, who chairs the Finnish parliament’s constitutional committee, told reporters that though the plan contravenes international human rights agreements, it is justified as a provisional emergency measure. [Reuters] [TVP]

Vestman, a member of the ruling centre-right National Coalition Party, said that for the legislation to be approved, it must include a process that allows rejected asylum seekers the opportunity to appeal the decision. [TVP]

Before voting, the committee consulted 18 experts, all of whom were against passing the legislation. However, 15 out of 17 members of the committee eventually supported the legislation, with only the opposition centre-left Green Party and the socialist Left Alliance dissenting. [Reuters]

"For the first time the Finnish state explicitly ignores the human rights system and European Union legislation," said Anna Kontula, a lawmaker from the Left Alliance. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Suspected racially motivated stabbings in Finland spark condemnation

Two knife attacks have taken place in less than a week in the city of Oulu in northern Finland and are suspected to have been racially motivated, prompting condemnation from the country's politicians. [Reuters] [BBC]

On June 13, Sebastian Lama, a 33-year-old former member of **a** banned neo-Nazi group, the Nordic Resistance Movement, allegedly assaulted and severely injured a 12-year-old boy of foreign descent at a shopping centre in Oulu and attempted to attack another 14-year-old. He was later taken into custody over his suspected involvement. [BBC]

A second incident took place on June 18 at the same location, where a 15-year-old allegedly stabbed a man of foreign background. [BBC] [Reuters]

"He has had very strong feelings against immigrants and a desire to act in some way. This partly stems from following anti-immigrant discussions and broadcasts online," said the boy's attorney, Kari Eriksson. [Yle]

"The preliminary information suggests that the motive for the act would be racist. There is also indication that the act may have been copied from last week's shopping centre stabbing," Oulu police said in a statement . [Reuters]

Police added that the victim of the second attack was hospitalised for injuries on his upper body and is not in a life-threatening condition. [BBC]

'No place for racism'

The attacks have elicited widespread condemnation from Finnish politicians. [Reuters]

"There must be no place for racism or racist violence in Finland at any level," Finnish President Alexander Stubb wrote on the social media site X (formerly Twitter). [Yle] [X]

"The news about the stabbings in Oulu is disgusting. And likewise, their possible racist motives. Racism has no place in Finland. Violence is always condemned," Prime Minister Petteri Orpo said in a post on X. [Yle] [X]

Interior Minister Mari Rantanen from the ruling far-right Finns Party expressed shock over the attacks and advocated for expanded police powers to stop and search individuals to curb violence. [Yle]

The centre-left opposition Social Democratic Party has requested an urgent debate on far-right violence. The move has been supported by all parliamentary parties except the far-right Finns Party. [BBC] [Yle]

Finland has seen a rise in hate crime statistics in recent years, though violent incidents such as the recent stabbings in Oulu are still uncommon. [Yle]

According to Statistics Finland, the country's national statistical institution, some 350 hate crimes took place in 2023 which affected the victims' lives or health, making it the highest count since 2006. [Yle]

(rs/pk)

New president elected in Iceland

Halla Tómasdóttir has won the June 2 presidential election in Iceland. With 34.3 percent of the votes the 55-year-old businesswoman and CEO of B Team, a nonprofit organization working to create new norms of corporate leadership, defeated former Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir and Arctic scholar Halla Hrund Logadottir, who garnered 25.2 percent and 15.1 percent, respectively.

Tómasdóttir will succeed President Gudni Johannesson, who decided not to run for a third term. She first rose to prominence in the country during the financial crisis 2008-2011. She was the co-founder of financial service company Audur Capital, which was one of the few Icelandic firms that survived the upheaval.

Tómasdóttir will assume her new, largely ceremonial role on August 1. [euronews.]

(dql)

Iceland's government faces backlash over new whale hunting licence

Iceland's government has issued a licence to the country's sole whaling company, Hvalur, allowing the hunting of 128 fin whales during the 2024 season. The licence grants the company permission to hunt 99

whales in the Greenland/West Iceland region and 29 whales in the East Iceland/Faroe Islands region.

The decision is said to align with the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute's 2017 advice and considers the International Whaling Commission's ecosystem factors. Most of the whale meat is exported to Japan.

This decision has been condemned by animal welfare groups, including the Humane Society International, which cited evidence of significant animal suffering from past hunts. According to an independent report by the Icelandic Food and Veterinary Authority some whales in the 2022 hunts took up to two hours to die, with 41 percent suffering for an average of 11.5 minutes, violating the country's Animal Welfare Act.

Iceland, along with Norway and Japan, is one of the few nations permitting commercial whaling. The practice has sparked protests from conservation groups, as fin whales are considered vulnerable to extinction. A recent survey indicated that 51 percent of Icelanders oppose commercial whaling. [BBC]

(dql)

Norway to strengthen defences

Norway is set to boost its defence capabilities after the government and opposition on June 4 unanimously agreed to order a sixth submarine and to install an anti-air defence system to protect the Oslo region.

This aligns with plans previously announced by the centre-left government under Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre to increase the country's defence budget by 83% to USD 57 billion over the next 12 years.

The government pointed to the increased danger and unpredictability of neighbouring Russia, with which Norway shares a 198-kilometre land border in the Arctic and a sea border in the Barents Sea. The country expects its defence budget to reach 2% of GDP this year, meeting NATO's minimum target.

NATO member Norway initially proposed ordering five new frigates, a fifth submarine, anti-air missiles, deep strike weapons, maritime surveillance drones, and helicopters. The minority government required opposition support to advance the plan. On June 4, all parliamentary parties, from the far-right to the Communist party, backed the plan with some modifications. [Alarabiya News]

(dql)

Sweden proposes tougher citizenship rules

Sweden's government has proposed tougher immigration laws which would make it more difficult for migrants to obtain citizenship of the Nordic country. [Sveriges Radio] [Schengen News]

The planned changes would increase the residency requirement from five to eight years before immigrants could apply for citizenship, and would require prospective citizens to pass a language and culture test. They would also have to be able to support themselves financially. [Schengen News]

Sweden's migration minister, Maria Malmer Stenergard, said: "The value of Swedish citizenship must be respected and safeguarded more than it is at present. Citizenship, like the Swedish language, unites people in Sweden regardless of their background." [Schengen News]

Stenergard added: "By enhancing the value of citizenship, we will create incentives for people to do their part. It will also create a sense of community and an opportunity to become part of society." [Schengen News]

The proposed changes come amid an increasing shortage of skilled labour in Sweden, with business groups accusing the government of not doing enough to attract qualified workers. [Dagens Nyheter]

Sven-Olov Daunfeldt, chief economist at the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, which represents businesses in the country, said there were not enough highly educated and qualified labourers to meet demand. [Dagens Nyheter]

(ek/pk)

Swedish PM plans to increase mass surveillance as shooting deaths rise

Sweden's prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, has announced the government wants to double the number of surveillance cameras to be set up in his country, from 2,500 to 5,000. [Kristeligt Dagblad]

The move comes amid an increase in the number of annual shooting deaths in Sweden, from 10 in 2010 to over 60 in 2022. Sweden has the highest rate of firearm-related homicides in Europe relative to its population. [Kristeligt Dagblad]

Kristersson plans to change the law so that Swedish regions and municipalities will be able to install security cameras without special permission. The police will also have easier access to cameras owned by government agencies, businesses and public transportation. [TNT]

Kristersson dismissed criticism about measures being too invasive, saying that "nothing is more invasive than being the victim of a serious crime. When murders remain unsolved and witnesses do not dare testify, the cameras will make life safer for ordinary people". [SVT]

The proposal has been inspired by the way the New York police use cameras in crime fighting, Kristersson said. [SVT]

The justice minister, Gunnar Strömmer, pointed out that the presence of cameras deters crime. [TNT]

(fs/pk)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Le Pen joins Orban as hard-right forms third largest European Parliament group

Marine Le Pen's French far-right opposition National Rally (RN) party has allied with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's right-wing populist Fidesz to build a hard-right grouping that will be the third largest in the European Parliament.

The alliance, called Patriots for Europe, unites 13 similar-minded parties in a push for stricter measures to curb illegal immigration and an increase of member state sovereignty in the bloc. [Politico]

The alliance has swallowed and replaced the former Identity and Democracy (ID) group within a week, propelling itself on July 8 to become the third largest political grouping in the European Parliament with 84 MEPs, dethroning the liberal Renew group from that position.

The National Rally, which dominated the ID group previously, is the largest party to join the Patriots. The new grouping elected RN leader Jordan Bardella as its president.

The formation of Patriots for Europe was announced on June 30 by its three founding members: Hungary's Fidesz, Czechia's populist ANO party, and Austria's Freedom Party (FPO). [TVP]

Before Le Pen's RN publicly joined the effort, the group had already rallied lawmakers from Spain's Vox, Portugal's Chega, the Dutch PVV, Belgium's Vlaams Belang, and the Danish People's Party, poaching these members from the ID and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groupings. [Euronews]

In a manifesto signed by the Patriots' three founding members, the group called out the European Green Deal—a set of EU climate policies for a carbon-neutral 2050—and pledged a strong commitment to peace and dialogue in war-torn Ukraine.

Orban, who has just returned from a visit to Moscow, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, has a reputation for being friendly to the Kremlin. Hungary is also blocking a EUR 6.6 billion package of EU military assistance to Ukraine, which may explain why the new group was unable to convince Poland's right-wing populist opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party to join its cause. [BBC]

Warsaw is one of Kyiv's staunchest defenders. Poland has hosted over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees, and has pledged around EUR 3 billion in military aid to its eastern neighbour. [DW]

PiS rejected Patriots for Europe's advances and chose to stay in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, in which Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy party is in the majority. [Euronews]

Another absentee is the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which has not been invited to join Patriots for Europe. Prior to June's European elections, the AfD was facing multiple corruption scandals and was expelled from the ID pan-European group after its lead candidate said that members of the Nazi SS were not necessarily criminals. [Politico]

(qv/pk)

CSTO seeks clarity from Armenia on membership status

The Secretary-General of the Russian-led military alliance Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Imangali Nurgaliuly Tasmagambetov, announced that the organisation expects Armenia to clarify its membership status, a crucial event in the current situation. [Hetq]

"We expect that the political leadership of the republic will clarify the prospects of its relations with the CSTO," Tasmagambetov said. "It would be beneficial for all participants of our union, first, for the full planning of future joint activities." [Hetq]

The Secretary General of the CSTO added: "Nevertheless, quite basic mechanisms of interaction are functioning. The Republic of Armenia remains a full member of the organisation, all obligations towards that country are fully maintained." [News AM]

In May, Armenia asserted its financial contribution to the military alliance organisation. The government has repeatedly criticised CSTO for failing to comply with its security responsibilities. [Hetq]

Moscow proclaims that despite the Armenian government opting to end its membership in CSTO temporarily, the country still needs to abide by its financial obligations to the organisation. [Hetq]

Armenia's financial contribution to the organisation was determined at $598,000. [Hetq]

(zh/gc)

Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia extend controls at internal borders

Slovenia has extended the temporary reintroduction of controls at its internal borders with Croatia and Hungary until December 21. This decision aims to manage the impact on travellers, the environment, the economy, and local border communities. The Government of Slovenia issued this extension through an ordinance on June 19. [Government, Slovenia]

(dql)

Georgia denounces 'elections' in Russian-occupied South Ossetia/Tskhinvali

The Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region's parliamentary elections, held on June 9, have been heavily criticised by the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Georgia called on Russia to fulfil "its undertaken international obligations inter alia the EU mediated August 12 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, and withdraw its forces from Georgia's territory." It called on Russia "to cease the actions that violate Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

US Assistant Secretary of State Jim O'Brien said on X: "The United States condemns and will not recognise sham parliamentary elections in Russia-occupied South Ossetia being conducted without Georgia's consent. We fully support Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders." [Civil Georgia]

The Chair of the Delegation for Relations with the South Caucasus and the European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Georgia have issued a joint condemnation, vehemently criticising the illegitimate parliamentary elections held in Georgia's Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

They further emphasised that holding sham elections in territories under Russian occupation violates the EU-mediated ceasefire agreement from August 2008, reaffirming their support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. [Civil Georgia]

(zh/gc)

Georgian president presents country's EU action plan

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili presented the Georgian Charter on May 26, an action plan designed to ensure the country's European path.

The Charter focuses on repealing laws that hinder this course, establishing an independent justice system, rebuilding trust, improving the electoral system, and reshaping the political landscape. [Georgia Today]

Several opposition parties have signed the document, though some have opted not to at this stage due to doubts about some issues outlined in the Charter. [Georgia Today]

During her address to the opposition at the Presidential palace, Zurabishvili stressed the need for election mobilisation. She made it clear that victory in the upcoming elections is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Georgian Charter. [Civil Georgia]

Zurabishvili asserted that the agreement concerning the "Georgian Charter" does not mandate or suggest creating a unified list or any other compulsory alliances among the parties involved. [Georgia Today]

The Georgian Charter urges all signatory parties to commit to its objectives given they receive a mandate in the upcoming parliamentary elections and to schedule early elections for fall 2025 to guarantee free and fair elections. [Civil Georgia]

The President has repeatedly criticized the ruling Georgian Dream party for enacting controversial laws and employing "aggressive, anti-European, and anti-Western rhetoric." [Civil Georgia]

(zh/gc)

Former Dutch PM Rutte to take over as NATO Secretary General

Former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte will become the next Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. He will succeed Jens Stoltenberg when his term ends in October.

Rutte's only rival, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, withdrew his candidacy, which cleared the path for Rutte's appointment. [NOS] [NOS] [BBC]

Rutte's candidacy garnered strong endorsements from key NATO members, including the US, UK, France, and Germany. His support for Ukraine and extensive political experience have been significant factors in securing these endorsements. [Guardian]

Initial resistance came from Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, necessitating diplomatic efforts to win their support. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who had reservations due to past criticisms from Rutte, ultimately endorsed him following assurances that Hungary would not be required to provide military support to Ukraine.

Similarly, Slovak President Peter Pellegrini expressed support after discussions ensured that Slovakia's interests, particularly in strengthening its air defence, would be addressed. [BBC] [Guardian] [NOS]

Rutte, a prominent figure in Dutch politics for 14 years, expressed excitement about his new role but plans to take a three-month break before officially starting. Rutte has stated that he aims to continue the practical work of his predecessor, Jens Stoltenberg, and does not intend to implement drastic changes. [Guardian] [NOS]

Rutte's successor, Dick Schoof, took over as the Dutch Prime Minister after the new cabinet was approved. The transition marked the end of an era for Dutch politics, with Rutte having led four coalition governments and becoming known for his straightforward, no-nonsense approach. [BBC] [NOS]

(gvc/gc)

New NATO multinational battle group to be created in Finland

NATO member states have given political support to the creation of a new multinational battle group in Finland, tasked with defending the alliance’s longest border with Russia. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

"I'm pleased to state that... all NATO member states have given their political consent to Finland's key goals in its NATO integration," said Finnish Minister of Defence Antti Hakkanen. [Reuters]

Finland joined the military alliance last year in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023]

The Nordic nation is set to become the ninth country to host a forward land forces contingent following approval by NATO defence ministers in Brussels on June 14. The decision also involves establishing a command unit for land forces, the Finnish government said. [Finnish Government] [Bloomberg]

“NATO’s multi corps land component command and the presence of land troops in Finland scaled to fit the security situation create a very strong deterrence and defence in Northern Europe, the Baltic Sea and the whole of NATO,” said Hakkanen. [Bloomberg]

He added that the NATO command in Finland will be responsible for directing land warfare operations in Northern Europe and Scandinavia. [Reuters]

Hakkanen declined to disclose the exact location of the command or the number of NATO troops to be stationed in Finland, adding that detailed planning was still in progress. [Reuters]

In NATO's new command structure, all Nordic countries will be placed under the U.S.-based Joint Force Command Norfolk, which focuses on North Atlantic defence. This means that new members Finland and Sweden will shift from the east-oriented Brunssum command in the Netherlands. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

"With these decisions, the security of Finland and at the same time the security of Northern Europe is strengthened, and they significantly benefit the security of the entire alliance,” said Hakkanen. [Reuters]

(rs/pk)

Norway, Finland, Sweden to allow troops to move between them in case of military threat

Norway, Sweden and Finland have agreed to the establishment of a military transport corridor, allowing troops to move between the three Nordic nations more freely in the event of a military threat by Russia.

The agreement would allow the three NATO countries to more quickly coordinate a potential military response by using Norway’s sea ports to move troops into Sweden or Finland.

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre said: “In the past, we have thought North-South when planning

the transport of military personnel and equipment. Now we will think more West-East." [Euractiv]

He added: "We can work together to defend each other in a completely different way now that we are all in NATO."

Sweden and Finland – the latter of which shares a long land border with Russia – joined the NATO military alliance following the Kremlin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, ending a longstanding policy of military neutrality. [Euractiv]

Norway has been a NATO member since the alliance's founding in 1949.

The new military transport corridor will run through the north of the three Nordic countries.

(ek/pk)

Russian war plane enters Swedish airspace, Finland suspects violations

Swedish and Finnish authorities have reported separate incidents of Russian military aircraft violating their airspace, prompting swift reactions from both Nordic NATO members. [Reuters]

Swedish fighter jets intercepted a Russian military aircraft on June 14 after it briefly breached Sweden's airspace east of the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, the country's armed forces reported. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Sweden's Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom condemned the violation as "unacceptable" and said that Russian embassy officials in Stockholm would be summoned to address the incident. [Reuters]

"We are in close contact with allies and partners about the events in our immediate area," Billstrom said in an email to Reuters. [Reuters]

According to Sweden's armed forces, Gripen jets were deployed to intercept the Russian SU-24 aircraft after it did not respond to a radio warning from air traffic controllers. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Swedish air force chief Jonas Wikman said the incident demonstrated "a lack of respect" for Sweden's territorial sovereignty. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

"We followed the entire chain of events and were in place to intervene," he added. [Reuters]

The breach occurred as Sweden, NATO's newest member, conducted naval exercises in the Baltic Sea with several allied nations. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, Finnish border guards reported suspicions that four Russian military planes violated the country's airspace on June 10. [Reuters]

Border guards revealed on June 14 that two bombers and two fighter jets were believed to have entered Finnish airspace near the city of Loviisa. [Reuters] [Yle]

"Of course, if these kinds of airspace violations happen, and if they are deliberate and serious, we react to them but the investigation is ongoing and the Border Guard is in charge of it," said Finland's chief of defence, Janne Jaakkola. [Reuters]

Finland and Sweden joined NATO in April 2023 and March 2024 respectively following Russia's war against Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2023] [Europe Monthly April 2024]

(rs/pk)

Ukraine peace summit offers support but no new developments

Almost one hundred delegates from various international organisations and nations met in Switzerland from June 15 to 16 for the Ukraine peace summit. [Atlantic Council]

The summit intended to mobilise worldwide support for the Ukrainian vision of a peaceful, sustainable, and just settlement to the crisis precipitated by Russia's invasion in 2022. Some analysts have called it "the largest diplomatic effort" in Ukraine's history. [Atlantic Council]

The event produced some positive signs and clarified how the Russian invasion impacted the international community as a whole, but there were no significant diplomatic advances. The conference signified a minor yet noteworthy advancement in what appears to be an even more protracted peace process. [Atlantic Council]

The summit's potential influence was significantly diminished by the absence of some powerful countries from the Global South, indicating that Ukrainian

diplomats still have a lot of bilateral work ahead of them.

Notably, essential participants, including Saudi Arabia, Brazil, India, and South Africa, declined to sign the formal summit communiqué endorsing Ukraine's territorial integrity.

All of these nations have been reluctant to support Ukraine or publicly denounce Russia's invasion since 2022. [Atlantic Council]

(fe/gc)

Denmark to take 200 quota refugees from Rwanda, Eritrea, Afghanistan

The Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration announced in late June its decision to continue Denmark's annual quota of receiving 200 refugees in 2024. Selected by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), these refugees are expected to primarily come from camps in Rwanda and include Eritrean and Afghan nationals.

Minister of Immigration and Integration, Kaare Dybvad Bek, emphasized Denmark's commitment to the UN quota system, emphasizing that the number of accepted refugees is key to allowing for effective integration. Quota refugees are individuals unable to receive adequate protection in their initial country of asylum and who cannot return home. [en.365Nyt]

(dql)

Armenia ready to finalize draft peace treaty with Azerbaijan within July, foreign minister says

Armenia is prepared to finalize a draft peace treaty with Azerbaijan within this month, according to Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan. During a joint press conference with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis on June 20, Mirzoyan highlighted Armenia's progress in restoring regional relations and efforts to achieve lasting stability in the South Caucasus. He emphasized the ongoing border delimitation process with Azerbaijan, based on the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, and reaffirmed the mutual recognition of territorial integrity.

Mirzoyan stressed the urgency of completing the peace treaty, stating that Armenia has submitted numerous constructive proposals to Azerbaijan but has not yet received a response. He also expressed concerns over Azerbaijan's introduction of new agendas, questioning its commitment to peace. Additionally, Mirzoyan discussed with his Lithuanian counterpart the importance of regional communications and presented Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" project, emphasizing economic development and regional connectivity. ARMENPRESS 1]

Armenia and Azerbaijan's delimitation and border security commissions exchange draft regulations

Armenia and Azerbaijan's delimitation and border security commissions have exchanged draft regulations as part of ongoing efforts to agree on joint activities for state border demarcation and security. According to the office of the Deputy Prime Minister of Armenia, Mher Grigoryan, as of July 1, 2024, the commissions have routinely shared draft regulations and engaged in several discussions. Negotiations are proceeding constructively, and the approval process is expected to be completed soon. [ARMENPRESS 2]

(lm)

Czech government approves purchase of 77 German Leopard tanks

The Czech government has approved a plan to buy up to 77 Leopard 2A8 battle tanks.

The defence ministry in Prague is expected to finalise the purchase conditions from the German-French maker KNDS by the end of the year. [TVP World] [Global Defense News] [The Defense Post]

“The government has approved... joining an agreement on the joint purchase of Leopard tanks which will replace Soviet equipment in our warehouses,” Prime Minister Petr Fiala said on June 12. [Reuters]

The Czech Republic is interested in purchasing 61 Leopard 2A8 tanks with an option for another 16 vehicles. The Defence Ministry estimates the cost for the 77 new 2A8 tanks might reach EUR 2.1 billion. [Global Defense News] [The Statesman]

Defence Minister Jana Cernochova said the Czech army would begin receiving 2A8 tanks in 2027 and, by 2030, would have a total of 122 Leopards of all versions. [TVP World] [The Defense Post]

Additionally, Fiala added the Czech Republic would allocate 2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defence, a spending guideline agreed upon by NATO leaders. [The Defense Post]

The Czech Republic, a staunch supporter of Ukraine, has provided Kyiv with 62 T-72 tanks, 16 air defence systems, six helicopters and 131 infantry fighting vehicles since the outbreak of Russia's war on Ukraine.

(yl/pk)

Czech PM says foiled arson attack part of Russia's 'hybrid war'

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has blamed Russia for orchestrating a failed arson attack on Prague city buses, calling it part of Moscow's "hybrid war" against European countries.

Following a meeting of the country's security council, Petr Fiala said it is "highly probable" that the attack on June 6 was organised and financed by Russia. [Reuters] [Telegraph] [Bloomberg] [Barron's/AFP] [Radio Prague 1] [BBC]

"It's part of the hybrid war that Russia is waging against us, and which we must defend ourselves against and stop," Fiala said in a televised briefing on June 10.

He added that the attempt was part of the Kremlin's repeated efforts to "sow unrest and undermine citizens' trust in our state". [Radio Prague 1]

Moscow has denied any involvement in the incident.

Police confirmed they arrested a 26-year-old man of South American origin on June 8 who attempted to set fire to buses at a depot owned by the Prague city public transport company.

A spokesperson for the company said the damage was estimated at 200,000 Czech crowns. [expat.cz]

Police chief Martin Vondrasek said the assailant is charged with terrorism and could face as long as life in prison if convicted. [Bloomberg] [Barron's/AFP] [Radio Prague 2] [AP news] [expat.cz]

Meanwhile, the prime minister said that a spate of arson attacks was witnessed across the bloc, including in Poland and Lithuania, which authorities believe are linked to Moscow or its proxies.

The Czech intelligence service BIS has confirmed it has uncovered information about the Kremlin's attempt to recruit foreign individuals to "create fear" and "destabilise" society across the bloc. [expat.cz]

In 2014, the Czech Republic, a staunch supporter of Ukraine, blamed the Russian intelligence service for plotting a series of explosions at a Czech arms depot that killed two people. [Radio Prague 1]

(yl/pk)

Denmark detains suspected Russian spy

Danish authorities have announced the arrest of a Russian woman for suspected espionage.

The Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) said the woman was suspected of "enabling a foreign intelligence service to operate in Denmark." [TMT]

The agency said that the woman, who resided in Denmark, was being questioned on suspicion of breaking part of the penal code related to influence operations. [Reuters]

PET stressed that the case was "not related to the recent European Parliament elections", but instead concerned media reports about a Russian sovereign wealth fund. The fund, which was established by Russian authorities, is suspected of funding projects spreading misinformation. [TMT]

According to Danish broadcaster DR, the woman is a "central figure in the Russian community in Denmark" who has allegedly received money from the state fund. [AP News]

The Russian ambassador in Copenhagen, Vladimir Barbin, called for the immediate release of the woman. He insisted her detention was linked to "false materials" published in the Danish media and called it a "brazen and shameless provocation by the Danish security services aimed at intimidating our compatriots, discrediting their non-profit groups for keeping in touch with the Motherland." [AP News]

(fs/pk)

Greece lashes out against Macedonia over "irredentism"

The Greek Foreign Ministry has criticized North Macedonia's leadership for allegedly exhibiting irredentism. This follows a post by North Macedonia's President, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, referring to "Aegean Macedonia," part of Greece's Macedonia region.

Siljanovska highlighted the plight of 30,000 refugee children from this area. Greece's Foreign Ministry condemned these actions, citing a return to irredentist behavior and historical ignorance. Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis has raised the issue with the EU Foreign Affairs Council and on an international level, emphasizing that North Macedonia's actions undermine good-neighborly relations and international law. [Ekathimerini]

(dql)

Top European court finds Russia guilty of rights violations in Crimea after 2014 takeover

On June 25, Europe's top human rights court ruled that Russia is responsible for numerous human rights violations in Crimea since its 2014 annexation. The European Court of Human Rights cited breaches of freedoms of expression, religion, and assembly, and international humanitarian law violations by imposing Russian laws on Crimea.

The court also found that Russia's persecution of Ukrainian political prisoners, activists, and religious leaders amounted to torture, including beatings, electric shocks, and mock executions.

Despite Russia's expulsion from the Council of Europe and the court's lack of enforcement power, the ruling may support individual claims for reparations. Russia denies the allegations, claiming legitimate annexation through a local referendum, which most Western governments and Ukraine reject as illegal. [Associated Press] [Al Jazeera] [The Irish Times]

(lm)

ECHR hears case of 15-year-old Afghan boy ‘forced’ on to raft and left to ‘drift at sea’

The European Court of Human Rights heard a case involving a 15-year-old Afghan boy allegedly forced

onto an inflatable raft and left to drift at sea by Greek authorities. The boy, known as GRJ, was expelled in a life-threatening manner, a practice termed “drift-backs” by the Hellenic Coast Guard. The case, which also included testimony from a woman asylum seeker, marks the first time Greek pushbacks have been brought before the court.

The court was told that GRJ, who had made clear his intention to seek asylum, was detained, robbed, and abandoned at sea by Greek officials. The Greek government denied the allegations, calling the evidence "not credible."

The court’s ruling on the GRJ case is expected in the coming months. [The Irish Times]

(lm)

Top European human rights court rules countries can’t be forced to introduce assisted suicide

On June 13, the European Court of Human Rights upheld Hungary's laws prohibiting assisted suicide, affirming that the 46 member states of the Council of Europe are not required to legalize it. The court found no basis for member states to provide access to assisted suicide, citing risks of error, abuse, and societal implications. Hungary's law was deemed protective of the disabled and terminally ill, promoting care and support instead of encouraging death.

ADF International, which intervened in the case Karsai v. Hungary, argued that society should provide care, not assisted suicide, to protect vulnerable populations. Hungarian lawyer Daniel Karsai, who has a neurodegenerative condition, had argued that prohibiting assisted suicide violated human rights protections.

Only a few Council of Europe countries, including Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain, have legalized assisted suicide. The decision reinforces a 2012 resolution by the Council of Europe assembly that euthanasia must always be prohibited. [Catholic News Agency]

European Court of Human Rights upholds Belgium’s halal, kosher slaughter ban

On July 3, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) upheld Belgium’s ban on halal and kosher slaughter, rejecting an appeal by Islamic and Jewish

organizations. The organizations argued that the ban violated religious freedom, but the court found no grounds for review. The decision supports the stance of Belgium's animal rights organization GAIA, which maintains that the ban does not infringe on religious freedom.

The bans were enacted in the Flemish region in 2017 and the Walloon region in 2018. Currently, halal slaughter is only permitted in the Brussels-Capital Region. Both Muslim and Jewish communities view these practices as central to their religious observances and argue that they are humane when performed correctly. The bans are perceived by many as an infringement on religious freedom and a reflection of broader societal prejudices against Muslims. [Morocco World News]

(lm)

Russia imposes ban on websites of over 80 European media outlets

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on June 25 that it would block the websites of 81 media outlets from 25 European countries, declaring that the move comes in response to the European Council's earlier move to block access to four Russian media sites accused of spreading pro-war propaganda within the EU. Russia denounced the EU's action as politically motivated and stated that it was imposing proportional countermeasures.

"Responsibility for these developments rests solely with the EU leadership and the countries of this association that have supported this decision," Moscow insisted.

The Ministry accused the European outlets of disseminating false information regarding the conflict in Ukraine, which Russia refers to as a "special military operation." The list of banned European media includes prominent newspapers like Germany's *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*, Italy's *La Stampa* and *La Repubblica*, France's *Le Monde* and *Libération*, and the Netherlands' *Algemeen Dagblad*.

Additionally, websites of television channels and news agencies such as RAI, LCI, RTE, RTP Internacional, Nos, ORF, Radio France, Sveriges Radio, AFP, Agencia EFE, and Agence Europe were also blocked. [International Press Institute] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia]

(dql)

Venice Commission urges Georgia to halt constitutional amendments on family values

On June 26, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe advised Georgian authorities against proceeding with constitutional amendments related to the "protection of family values and minors." The proposed amendments, tabled by the ruling Georgian Dream party, include clauses to enforce the 2017 definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman and to prohibit LGBT propaganda in educational institutions.

The Commission urged reconsideration of the legislative proposal, highlighting that some amendments contradict European and international standards and could fuel hostility against LGBTI people in Georgia. The Commission also noted the timing of the proposal, amidst mass protests and political tensions ahead of the October parliamentary elections, as inappropriate. It recommended a thorough analysis involving societal and minority representatives, with public disclosure and an unbiased consultation period. [Agende 1]

Speaking against this backdrop, Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili stated that the Venice Commission's opinion on the proposed constitutional amendments does not align with the aspirations of the Georgian public.

Papuashvili criticized the Commission for recommending the legalization of same-sex marriage or recognition of similar unions, contrary to Georgian public sentiment. He expressed regret over the Commission's assessments, which he claimed encouraged LGBT propaganda and legal changes that the amendments aimed to restrict. [Agende 2]

(lm)

EU will penalise France unless budget deficit gap narrows

The European Commission (EC) declared on June 19 that France and six other nations would face sanctions for having budget deficits that exceeded EU standards. [Reuters]

The EC will announce the deadline for closing its budget gaps. The action taken by the EC will limit the French government's intentions for more spending after the June 30 and July 7 elections.

This would make it harder for Marine Le Pen's National Rally to implement its promises of more public spending and a lowered retirement age.

The EU will invoke its excessive deficit procedure for the first time since suspending its fiscal regulations in 2020 due to states grappling with the effects of COVID-19. Since then, the framework has been modified to account for the increased post-pandemic debt and new economic realities.

The Commission projects that France's public debt will rise to 112.4% of GDP this year and 113.8% in 2025, from 110.6% of GDP in 2023. That is almost three times the EU's 60% cap.

Paris and the Commission will negotiate how soon France's debt and deficit will be lowered in the following months. This will happen when the EU executive puts a seven-year plan in place to reduce debt to Paris. [Reuters]

(fe/gc)

Finland makes first NATO deployment in Romania

Finland on June 11 made its first NATO deployment since joining the alliance in April 2023, dispatching F-18 fighter jets to a military base in southeastern Romania, where they will join the British and Romanian air force in NATO's air policing missions. [Reuters] [Royal Air Force]

The first-time contingent will consist of seven aircraft and more than a hundred personnel from the Karelia Air Command in Siilinjärvi, Finland. [Reuters] [Royal Air Force]

According to a Finnish air force commander, participating in the mission will accelerate the country's integration into NATO. [Reuters]

"I'm sure that during this enhanced air policing, air shielding mission, our integration into NATO will take a big leap forward," said Johan Anttila, commander of Finland's Karelia Air Wing, addressing soldiers at the Mihail Kogalniceanu base in Romania. [Reuters]

The air policing mission is on standby to launch Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) intercepts of Russian aircraft approaching NATO airspace at a moment's notice. [Royal Air Force]

Finland's accession to NATO approximately doubled the length of the border that the military alliance shares with Russia. This move strengthened NATO's eastern flank amid Moscow's ongoing war in Ukraine. [Reuters] [Europe Monthly April 2023]

Romania, which joined NATO in 2004, was one of the first alliance members to approve Finland's accession. Sharing a 650km border with Ukraine, Romania has experienced multiple incidents of Russian drone fragments entering its territory as Moscow continues to target Ukrainian ports across the Danube River. [Reuters]

The NATO Allied Air Command facilitates peacetime operations by conducting air policing and air shielding missions, which include monitoring and quick-response training. [Defense Post]

In recent operations, they have intercepted unregistered Russian aircraft approaching allied airspace. [Defense Post]

(rs/pk)

Finland unveils new military aid package for Ukraine

Finland has announced its 24th military assistance package for Ukraine, comprising defence materials worth some EUR 159 million, bringing its total military assistance to EUR 2.2 billion. [The Kyiv Independent] [Finnish Government]

"Finland is committed to supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia's unjustified attack. This is not only about Ukraine but ultimately about the right of all free peoples to exist," said Antti Hakkanen, the Finnish defence minister. [Finnish Government]

The specifics of the aid package and its delivery schedule were not disclosed. [Finnish Government]

In April, Finland and Ukraine entered into a 10-year security agreement, which President Volodymyr Zelensky described as a "strong document" demonstrating Helsinki's commitment to supporting Kyiv in its battle against Russian aggression." [The Kyiv Independent] [Europe Monthly May 2024]

(rs/pk)

Germany, Sweden arrest eight over suspected war crimes in Syria

German and Swedish authorities have arrested eight men suspected of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity during Syria's civil war. In Germany, four stateless Syrian Palestinians and a Syrian national were detained for allegedly killing and abusing civilians, including a violent crackdown in Al Yarmouk in July 2012, where six people were killed.

The suspects have ties to the Free Palestine Movement and the Syrian Military Intelligence Service. In Sweden, three individuals were arrested for similar crimes in collaboration with German authorities. The arrested men in Germany are expected to appear in court soon to face charges. This follows previous instances of Germany prosecuting Syrians for war crimes. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Hungary not to block NATO military aid to Ukraine

Hungary will not participate in NATO's plan to assist Ukraine, but it will not block the alliance's efforts either. This agreement allows NATO to proceed with coordinating security assistance to Ukraine.

Speaking in Budapest on June 12, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed the arrangement with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, noting Hungary's non-participation while ensuring it will not hinder NATO's support for Kyiv. [Politico]

The agreement comes as Hungary assumed the EU presidency on July 1.

In May, Stoltenberg called on NATO members to commit to providing Ukraine at least EUR 40 billion euros annually in military aid, aimed at ensuring long-term support as war with Russia continues. Orbán was quick to oppose Stoltenberg's plan. [France 24]

(dql)

Hungary fined EUR 200m over asylum policy

The European Court of Justice has fined Hungary EUR 200 million for failing to comply with the union's asylum policies, with an additional penalty of EUR 1 million per day until it changes its policy.

The EU's top court found Hungary guilty of violating a 2020 ruling by forcing asylum seekers to travel to Belgrade or Kyiv to apply for entry permits. It argued that Hungary's actions deliberately avoided EU policy, unlawfully detained asylum seekers, and undermined EU solidarity.

A new EU asylum policy, adopted in April, requires member states to either accept migrants from frontline nations or provide additional support.

Hungary has vowed not to accept any irregular migrants despite the new policy. Since 2015, Hungary has taken a hard stance on migrants, erecting border fences and detaining asylum seekers.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán condemned the court's decision, calling it "outrageous and unacceptable." [BBC]

(dql)

Hungarian military receives Turkey-made Gidran armoured vehicle

Defence Minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky on June 12 announced Hungary's acquisition of 13 Gidrán combat vehicles from Turkey.

These vehicles are destined for deployment with the Klapka György 1st Armored Brigade in Tata, following installation of radios, info-communication equipment, and software. [Hungary Today]

(dql)

Lithuania, Ukraine sign 10-year security agreement

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nauseda and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky have signed a 10-year bilateral security agreement. The agreement emphasises the importance of long-term commitment

to security cooperation, irrespective of political changes in either country. Key components include regular strategic and political dialogue on Ukraine's defence, Lithuania's support for Ukraine in military, humanitarian, and financial areas, and efforts to strengthen Ukraine's economic and energy stability.

The pact also covers cooperation in cyber security, intelligence, combating chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear risks, as well as defence industry collaboration, hybrid threat resilience, anti-corruption efforts, and reform of Ukraine's law enforcement and justice systems. [Delfi]

(lm)

Norway, Germany reach out to Canada for submarine cooperation

Canadian Defence Minister Bill Blair has disclosed that German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius, along with Norwegian Defence Minister Bjørn Arild Gram, have proposed a potential trilateral defence and security partnership between the three nations for the North Atlantic and the Arctic. He confirmed that discussions on this partnership are going on and that it could include wide-ranging defence-industrial cooperation, particularly on submarine projects.

Canada's Liberal government recently outlined plans to "explore options" for replacing its ageing Victoria-class submarines, emphasising that acquiring new submarines is inevitable. Germany and Norway are currently building six 212CD submarines, based on the German Type 212A design, with plans for a second batch in 2026. They have invited Canada to join this initiative.

This proposed partnership comes as Canada faces criticism for not meeting NATO's 2 percent defence spending benchmark. The inclusion of new submarine acquisitions could help address this shortfall. [CBC]

(dql)

Poland demands answers as German police take migrant family across border

Polish authorities demanded answers from Berlin after a German police vehicle transported a family of migrants across the Poland-Germany border. [DW News] [Notes From Poland] [The Telegraph]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk called the incident "unacceptable" and spoke to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz about it at an informal gathering of EU leaders in Brussels last month. [DW News]

Poland's border service criticised German authorities for the move, calling it an arbitrary decision and adding: "The transfer of foreigners to Poland by the German police was carried out in violation of the principles of cooperation between the two services and against the transfer-of-persons law." [DW News] [Notes From Poland] [The Telegraph]

According to German law enforcement, the Afghan family of two adults and three children had entered Germany illegally, but were found to be refugees with asylum status in Poland. [DW News] [Notes From Poland]

German authorities said that they had tried to contact their Polish counterparts about the detained family, but were left waiting for hours for a response. [DW News]

German police spokesperson Gero von Vegesack said: "Since there was no reaction from the Polish side for several hours, the officers decided to take the family to the Polish-German border... in order to release them to Poland." [Notes From Poland]

Video shown in local media outlets purports to show a German police van on the Polish side of the two countries' shared border, dropping the family off near the village of Osinow Dolny in western Poland. [The Telegraph]

Germany set up checks on its border with Poland last year after an increase in the number of illegal migrants crossing over from its eastern neighbour – most of whom had first illegally entered Poland from Belarus. [Notes From Poland]

Poland, for its part, has seen a renewed increase in illegal migration attempts from Belarus, with several incidents of violence between Polish border guards and migrants having occurred this year, leading to the establishment of an exclusion zone along the Polish-Belarusian border. [Notes From Poland] [Bloomberg]

Poland's frontier 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 its ally Russia. [Europe Monthly June 2024]

(ek/pk)

Russian court designates Georgian Legion as a terrorist organisation

On June 14, Russia's Southern District Military Court labelled the Georgian Legion, which is supporting Ukraine in its conflict, as a "terrorist" organisation, Russian media reported, citing the Federal Security Service press service. [Radio Free Europe]

"Based on the evidence collected by FSB, the military court declared the paramilitary group Georgian National Legion as a terrorist organisation," the FSB stated. "On the basis of this decision and the federal law on combating terrorism, the group was put on the unified federal list of organisations recognised as terrorist organisations in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation." [Georgia Today]

According to a report from Russia's intelligence service, members of the Georgian Legion have been accused of torturing Russian military personnel and causing civilian deaths. The report further indicated that the group was established in 2014 and comprises former Georgian military and police officers alongside foreign fighters. [Radio Free Europe]

The Georgian National Legion consists primarily of ethnic Georgian volunteers fighting alongside Ukraine in the Donbas region. The unit was integrated into the Ukrainian Army in 2016 as part of the 25th Mechanised Infantry Battalion "Kyiv Rus." [Georgia Today]

(zh/gc)

Serbia, Kosovo leaders fail to meet in Brussels

EU High Representative Josep Borrell announced on June 26 that "there was no trilateral meeting" between him, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Brussels,

It was another failed attempt to move forward with the EU-facilitated Pristina-Belgrade dialogue and the implementation of previous agreements. [BalkanInsight]

"We have done a lot, many problems have been solved, but the normalisation process can only move

forward as fast as parties want. They have to normalise among them and not with us," Borrell told the media.

He noted that the failed meeting came more than one year after the so-called Ohrid Agreement on normalising relations and annexe, which was supposed to set implementation in motion.

Vučić and Kurti were scheduled to meet in Brussels on June 26 for another round of EU-mediated talks focused on normalising relations.

The meeting was supposed to prioritise the implementation of the normalisation agreements. [Radio Free Europe]

"At the invitation of the High Representative of the European Union, Josep Borrell, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, will participate in the next meeting. The main focus of this meeting will be the implementation of the basic agreement and its annex, as well as the way forward," the office of Prime Minister Aljbin Kurti stated. [Radio Free Europe]

The last meeting between Vučić and Kurti occurred on September 14 to discuss the 2023 agreement. However, this and subsequent meetings have stalled due to repeated disagreements. [Radio Free Europe]

The incident in Banjska last year, where clashes between Serbs and Kosovo police resulted in the deaths of one police officer and three Serbian attackers, further destabilised the region and complicated the dialogue between the two countries. [Balkan Insight]

(zh/gc)

Serbia and EU agree on Frontex border deployment deal

Serbia and the European Union's border agency, Frontex, have agreed to deploy guards along Serbia's border with Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, aiming to manage and deter illegal migration and cross-border crime. [Reuters] [Balkan Insight]

Annually, thousands of people from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa utilize the Balkan route, passing through Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia to reach Western states. [Reuters]

Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dacic announced that deploying Frontex personnel along the borders "will significantly contribute to our joint fight against cross-border crime and irregular migration."

"With joint forces, we are strengthening the path to preserving public order and peace in our territory, but with it, we will also preserve the borders of Europe," Dacic said. [Balkan Insight]

Under the 2019 EU regulation, Frontex is authorised to aid countries it enters agreements with within their territories, including conducting border checks and registering individuals.

The new border deployment deal will replace the 2021 agreement between Serbia and Frontex that permitted joint operations at Serbia's borders alongside EU members Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. [Reuters]

Frontex data from January has highlighted the Central Mediterranean and Balkan Routes as the most active pathways for migrants and refugees entering the European Union, leading to Frontex's extensive engagement in nearly all states along the "Balkan Route." [Balkan Insight]

(zh/gc)

Serbia will extradite anti-Lukashenko activists to Belarus

Serbia will extradite activist Andrei Gnyot to Belarus following a court decision.

Gnyot helped organise an alliance of athletes opposing the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko. In a telephone interview from Belgrade, Gnyot said “by extraditing me, the Serbian court is sending me to a painful death.”

His work as an opposition activist was exposed when three Belarusian athletes confirmed his involvement in the SOS BY network—a network of sportspeople who oppose Lukashenko.

SOS BY issued letters signed by the athletes to pressure international sporting bodies to cut ties with Lukashenko’s regime. [The Guardian]

(ik/gc)

Cyprus reaffirms neutral position after Hezbollah threat over war in Gaza

On June 19, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to target Cyprus if it allows Israeli forces to use its airports and bases in a potential war between Israel and Lebanon. This marked the first time Nasrallah has threatened Cyprus, an EU member about 125 miles from Lebanon, which has conducted joint military exercises with Israel since 2014.

Cyprus' President Nikos Christodoulides responded, stating Cyprus is not involved in the conflict and aims to be part of the solution.

Hezbollah's threat came after Israel warned of an imminent "all-out war," with Nasrallah boasting of Hezbollah's growing capabilities and threatening to "shake the pillars" of Israel if war ensued. Tensions have escalated since the October 7 Hamas attacks and subsequent Israeli military actions in Gaza, leading to increased cross-border attacks. [CNN]

Meanwhile, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan warned Cyprus not to become involved in the Israel-Gaza conflict, claiming Cyprus is being used as an "operation centre." In an interview with Turkish newspaper HaberTurk, Fidan suggested intelligence reports indicate the Greek Cypriot Administration is being used by certain countries for operations in Gaza, although he did not provide details. He cautioned that involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts could have repercussions for Cyprus and Turkey, advising them to stay away from the conflict.

Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, which has been divided between Turkish and Greek Cypriots since 1974. Fidan accused the Greek Cypriot administration of allowing British bases on the island to be used for U.S. arms shipments to Israel. Both Cyprus and the UK have stated that the bases are only used for humanitarian purposes, a claim Fidan dismissed. []

(dql)

Estonia, Saudi Arabia working to develop political, economic coordination

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan announced that a new deal for political consultations with Estonia will enhance coordination and cooperation between the two nations. The agreement

aims to develop economic, cultural, and technical cooperation, increase trade and investment, and promote innovation. Bilateral trade between the countries reached USD 72 million last year, with Saudi exports at USD 21 million and imports from Estonia at USD 51 million.

During a joint press conference in Tallinn with Estonian Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna, Prince Faisal discussed common challenges, the Gaza conflict, and finding a peaceful solution to the Russia-Ukraine war. He praised Estonia's support for Palestine's UN membership, highlighting its importance for a two-state solution.

In meetings with Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Prince Faisal conveyed greetings from Saudi leaders and discussed enhancing bilateral cooperation and addressing regional and international developments. A memorandum of understanding on political consultations was signed to advance joint relations. The meetings included Saudi Arabia's non-resident ambassador to Estonia and other officials. [Arab News]

(lm)

Hungarian foreign minister reaffirms support for Israel

During a joint press conference on June 17 with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó condemned the rise of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic sentiments in Western Europe and the United States, asserting that such attitudes are "absolutely unthinkable" in Hungary.

Szijjártó expressed concern over the increasing anti-Israel bias in international organisations and pledged that Hungary would continue to advocate for fair treatment of Israel, opposing biased statements.

He emphasised Hungary's strong support for Israel and vowed to enhance EU-Israel cooperation based on mutual respect during Hungary's EU presidency, which began on July 1. This includes organising an EU-Israel Association Council meeting. [Hungary Today]

(dql)

Serbia sends weapons to Israel

An Israeli military plane reportedly flew in and out of Belgrade airport in early February to transport a shipment of weapons needed to wage combat in Gaza, Balkan Insight reported on June 10.

The plane likely carried half a million euros worth of arms from Serbia's state arms company Yugoimport-SDPR. Since Hamas' attack in October, Serbia has sent close to 20 million euros worth of weapons to Israel as it wages an increasingly bloody and polarising war in Gaza. [Balkan Insight], [Haaretz]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called President Aleksandar Vucic "a true friend" shortly after receiving a weapons shipment from Belgrade.

Due to the high frequency of combat in Gaza and the ongoing artillery exchange with Hezbollah in the North, Israel is running low on ammunition. This is where Serbia comes in, as the country is a well-known producer of 155mm artillery ammunition. [Balkan Insight], [Haaretz]

(js/gc)

Swedish security service accuses Iran of using criminal networks in Sweden

Sweden's intelligence service (Säpo) has said Iran is using notorious Swedish gangs as "proxies" in order to commit violent crimes against other nations, groups and individuals.

According to Säpo, Tehran has attempted to act against Iranian dissident organisations and individuals living abroad, as well as against the interests of other states, particularly Israel. [Reuters]

Daniel Stenling, head of the Säpo, said at a news conference that "the Security Service can now confirm that criminal networks in Sweden are proxies that Iran uses."

He added: "A regional conflict has spread and now includes Sweden as an arena." [AP News] [Financial Times]

Iran has also been accused by other European nations, such as the UK and the Netherlands, of using local criminal gangs to carry out violent attacks, including assassination attempts, against Tehran's adversaries. [Financial Times]

Säpo said the assessment of the terrorism threat level in Sweden is still at 4 out of 5, having been raised in 2023 when some people in Sweden burned Korans, infuriating Muslims around the world and triggering threats from jihadists. [Reuters]

(fs/pk)

Sweden and Iran exchange prisoners

Sweden and Iran on June 15 carried out a prisoner swap that resulted in the release of a European Union diplomat and another Swedish citizen in exchange for an Iranian convicted of war crimes in Sweden.

Hamid Nouri, arrested in Sweden in 2019 for his role in the 1988 mass executions in Iran, was exchanged for Johan Floderus, a diplomat, and Saeed Azizi, a Swedish citizen. Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson criticised Iran for using the Swedes as bargaining chips to secure Nouri's release, describing their detention as "hell on earth."

Nouri, upon his return to Iran, was welcomed by his family and proclaimed his freedom on state television. Oman mediated the swap, coinciding with Eid al-Adha, a time when prisoner releases are customary.

Nouri was sentenced to life in prison by a Swedish court in 2022 for his involvement in the 1988 mass executions ordered by Iran’s then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini. These executions followed the Iran-Iraq war and targeted political prisoners and militants.

Floderus was arrested in April 2022 at Tehran airport, while Azizi was sentenced to five years in prison in Iran on charges of "assembly and collusion against national security." Both landed in Stockholm late Saturday night and were greeted by Sweden's prime minister.

The swap did not include Ahmadreza Djalali, a Swedish-Iranian expert detained by Iran since 2016 and facing possible execution after being convicted of "corruption on Earth" in 2017 in what Amnesty International called a "grossly unfair trial."

(dql)

Swiss Parliament committees approve UNRWA payment

The Swiss parliament's foreign affairs committees have conditionally approved a CHF 10 million (USD 11.2 million) donation to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). The Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee voted 7-5 in favor, following a similar decision by the House of Representatives' committee. The funds are designated for urgent needs in Gaza, in response to UNRWA's emergency appeal for CHF 1 billion.

A proposal to redirect the funds to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the UN World Food Program (WFP) was rejected, as these organizations lack sufficient staff in Gaza. The majority of the committee argued that only UNRWA could effectively address the crisis, while a minority cited trust issues with UNRWA, suggesting other organizations could also help.

UNRWA faced scrutiny earlier in the year due to accusations of incitement and involvement in a Hamas attack, leading to temporary suspension of payments by several states. However, a UN investigation affirmed UNRWA's general neutrality. The Swiss government's decision to proceed with funding followed this investigation and consultations with other donors. This donation is in addition to CHF 56.2 million approved in April for Middle Eastern humanitarian needs. [SWI]

(lm)

Turkish defence contractors establish new partnerships with Saudi SAMI

On July 4, the State-Owned Saudi Arabia Military Industries announced three strategic agreements with Turkish defence contractors.

These agreements are designed to 'support the localization of defence industries 'within the Kingdom, indicating a significant shift in the defence industry dynamics.

In a statement announcing three memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Turkish companies, the Saudi group pledged to "establish manufacturing capabilities" and support technology system development for Turkish contractor Baykar's unmanned aerial vehicle production within Saudi Arabia. [The Jerusalem Post]

SAMI further announced an agreement with Turkish contractor Aselan to pursue efforts to manufacture

electronic defence technologies within Saudi Arabia. [Daily Sabah]

(ts/gc)

Turkey's Erdogan renews push to restore ties with Syria that were severed over a decade ago

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has renewed his efforts to restore diplomatic ties with Syria, which were severed over a decade ago due to the Syrian civil war. Speaking on a flight from Germany on July 7, Erdogan extended an invitation to return to past relations with Syrian President Bashar Assad, highlighting their once-close ties.

Diplomatic relations between Turkey and Syria were cut off over 12 years ago when Turkey supported armed opposition groups in Syria's northwest aiming to oust Assad. However, recent signs indicate both leaders are ready to end tensions and normalize relations.

Erdogan's push for reconciliation comes amid growing pressure within Turkey to repatriate millions of Syrian refugees due to an economic downturn and rising anti-refugee sentiment, recently leading Turkey to close its main border crossing into northwest Syria, the Bab al Hawa, along with the Bab al Salam and other smaller crossings. This closure, affecting over 3 million people, was prompted by anti-Syrian riots sparked by allegations of a Syrian man assaulting a young girl in Kayseri. The violence has spread to multiple provinces, resulting in at least 474 arrests and seven deaths. [TIME] [The Express Tribune]

Despite high-level talks last year between Turkish and Syrian officials in Moscow, facilitated by Russia and Iran, no substantial progress was made. Nonetheless, recent moves to open a crossing between government and opposition-held areas in Aleppo have increased tensions among Turkish-backed opposition groups in Syria. The Idlib-based "salvation government" of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a formerly al-Qaida-linked insurgent group, has urged Turkey to uphold its responsibilities to protect Syrian refugees. [abc news]

Against the backdrop of the recent unrest, Özgür Özel, the chairperson of Türkiye's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), plans to visit Syria this month to meet with Syrian leader Bashar Assad. Özel announced his intention to lead a party delegation to Damascus through Lebanon but did not specify a date.

He stated that the CHP delegation would be traveling as representatives of Türkiye and claimed President Erdoğan welcomed the initiative. However, the CHP, along with other opposition parties, has previously campaigned for the repatriation of Syrian refugees, blaming them for economic and housing issues. [Daily Sabah]

(lm)

Cyprus, US launch strategic dialogue

Cyprus-U.S. relations have reached a peak with the initiation of a strategic dialogue focusing on defence, security, energy, crisis management, and counter-terrorism as Cypriot Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos was visiting the US to meet U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on June 17.

The annual strategic dialogue, starting this September, will also cover cultural, educational, and investment opportunities. Key Cypriot priorities include fully lifting the U.S. military arms sales embargo, developing a natural gas field licensed to Chevron, and joining the U.S. visa waiver program.

Prior to meeting his Cypriot counterpart, Blinken praised this development as a sign of the deepening partnership between the two countries. He highlighted Cyprus's role as an important regional player and a valued U.S. partner. Kombos also emphasised the strengthened ties, noting Cyprus's reliability in a tumultuous region.

Cyprus's contributions include the Cyprus-Gaza maritime corridor, used for shipping humanitarian aid to Palestine, and a U.S.-funded centre in Cyprus training personnel on maritime safety and security.

Kombos underscored that Cyprus is no longer viewed solely through the lens of its unresolved ethnic division since 1974 but as a strategic ally of the West, especially the U.S. This shift became more pronounced after Cyprus distanced itself from Russia following Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. [AP] [Department of State, USA]

(dql)

Indonesia urges Austria to consider recognizing State of Palestine

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has urged Austria to recognize the State of Palestine, emphasizing the importance of this step in supporting a two-state solution. During her visit to Vienna on June 25, Marsudi communicated Indonesia's hope to Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, acknowledging Austria's complex position but stressing that recognizing Palestine would demonstrate consistent support for peace. Currently, Austria doesn't recognize Palestine as a state but supports a two-state solution for peace in the Middle East. [Antara 1]

Moreover, the two ministers discussed cooperation on recruiting skilled Indonesian workers to address Austria's labor shortage, educational collaboration, and tourism. They highlighted a new MoU on worker recruitment and appreciated Austria's support for vocational training centers in Indonesia.

The ministers also agreed to expand higher education partnerships and explore sustainable tourism initiatives, while welcoming the upcoming Indonesia-Austria Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue in Bandung. [Antara 2]

(si)

China protests EU sanctions on Chinese companies over Russia-UK war

On June 25, China lodged a formal protest with the European Union following the EU's imposition of sanctions on 19 Chinese companies accused of supporting Russia's military efforts in Ukraine. The sanctions, announced in the EU's Official Journal on June 24, target firms involved in the sale of "dual-use goods and technology" that could bolster Russia's defence and security sectors. [EUR-Lex, European Union]

China’s foreign ministry criticised the sanctions as "unilateral" and lacking a basis in international law. Beijing emphasized that normal business exchanges between Chinese and Russian companies do not target third parties and urged the EU to revoke the sanctions. The ministry also indicated that China would take necessary measures to protect the legitimate interests of its enterprises. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC]

The sanctions are part of the EU's 14th package against Russia, adding 61 new entities to a list that now totals 675 firms. Among the newly sanctioned are two major Chinese satellite companies accused of supplying

satellites and imagery to Russia's Wagner mercenary group.

An October investigation by AFP, a news agency, revealed a USD 30 million contract between Wagner and Beijing Yunze Technology Co Ltd, signed in November 2022, for the purchase of two high-resolution satellites from Chang Guang Satellite Technology. Head Aerospace Technology, a Chinese company, was sanctioned for selling satellite images to Wagner by the EU on June 24 and was previously listed on a US sanctions list in 2023. [European Commission]

(jm)

EU announces provisional tariffs on Chinese EV imports

On June 12, the European Commission announced new import duties of up to 38.1 percent on Chinese electric vehicles (EV) starting in July. The European Commission investigation concluded that excessive subsidies in the China's battery electric vehicles (BEV) value chain pose a risk to BEV manufacturers in the EU. More specifically, the commission announced a tariff of 17.4 percent for BYD, 20 percent for Geely, 38.1 percent for SAIC, 21 percent for BEV producers that cooperated in the investigation, and 38.1 percent for the BEV producers did not cooperate. The EU's provisional duties will apply starting July 4, with final duties possibly being imposed by November 2. [European Commission]

This decision follows Washington's plan to significantly increase duties on Chinese EVs (see AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3). The new tariffs will impact companies by adding substantial costs amidst slowing demand and falling prices in their domestic market.

European automakers are facing competition from lower-cost Chinese EVs, which have gained a significant market share in the EU. According to the chief Europe economist at Capital Economics, Andrew Kenningham, the Commission's action marks a significant shift in EU trade policy, aiming to prevent a repeat of the collapse experienced by European solar panel manufacturers due to limited action against Chinese imports a decade ago.

In response, China has criticized the EU's decision, labeling it as protectionism and warning of potential damage to China-EU economic cooperation. The Chinese government has vowed to take necessary

measures to safeguard its interests. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC]

Despite this, the Chinese Passenger Car Association expects minimal impact on most Chinese firms, highlighting the continued potential for development in Europe to circumvent tariffs.

European carmakers, particularly those with significant sales in China, expressed concerns about the negative effects of the tariffs. Companies like Volkswagen and BMW argue that the tariffs could harm the German automotive industry more than benefit it.

The EU imported approximately 440,000 EVs from China from April 2023 – April 2024, worth around EUR 9 billion (USD 9.7 billion). Frank Schwope, an automotive industry lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences FHM Hannover, described the measures as disastrous for European car buyers and German car manufacturers, emphasizing China's significance as a key sales market for German carmakers. [Reuters 1]

Furthermore, following the European Commission's decision, shares of major European automakers fell amid concerns over potential Chinese retaliation. The STOXX carmakers index experienced a decline, with Volkswagen and BMW shares dropping between 1 percent and 1.8 percent. Luxury German manufacturer Porsche Holding saw a significant drop of over 7% due to ex-dividend trading. However, shares in French group Renault and Franco-Italian-American group Stellantis turned positive in mid-session trading. [Reuters 2]

The Kiel Institute for the World Economy predicts that the tariffs will reduce Chinese EV imports by 25%, which could potentially lead to increased European production. However, the long-term impact will depend on whether China retaliates, or an amicable solution is reached. Meanwhile, Will Roberts, head of automotive research at RHO Motion, believes Chinese manufacturers may absorb some of the tariff costs within their profit margins. [Reuters 3]

(jm)

EU demands compliance details from Temu and Shein

The European Union's technology regulators have mandated Chinese fast-fashion e-commerce companies Temu and Shein to detail their compliance

with EU online content rules by July 12. This comes after consumer body complaints sent to the Commission. The mandate applies to both companies since they are classified as Very Large Online Platforms under the Digital Services Act (DSA). As a result, they are required to intensify efforts to address illegal and harmful content on their platforms. [European Commission]

The European Commission has requested specific information from Temu and Shein The information request must detail how they enable users to report illegal products, their methods for preventing deceptive online interfaces, their measures for protecting minors, the transparency of their recommendation systems, the traceability of traders, and overall compliance by design.

This enforcement action stems from a consumer organization complaint from May 16. [BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation]

Both companies have affirmed their commitment to cooperating with the Commission. Temu stated their dedication to adhering to all relevant laws and regulations in their operating markets, while Shein emphasized their intent to promptly address the Commission's information request. Violations of the DSA can lead to fines up to 6 percent of a company's global turnover. [Reuters]

(jm)

China officially launches anti-dumping probe into EU imports of pork

On June 17, China officially initiated the anti-dumping investigation targeting imported pork and its by-products from the European Union, with particular focus on Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Announced by China's commerce ministry, the investigation, starting on June 17, 2024, and ending June 17, 2025, will scrutinise various pork products intended for human consumption, including fresh, cold, and frozen cuts, as well as pig intestines, bladders, and stomachs. The inquiry follows a complaint from the China Animal Husbandry Association on behalf of the domestic pork industry. [Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, in Chinese]

This move is seen as a response to recent anti-subsidy duties imposed by the European Commission on Chinese electric vehicles, effective from July.

In response to the China's announcement, European pork producers, led by Spain, which is China's primary pork supplier, have expressed willingness to cooperate with Chinese authorities during the investigation period. Spain's Economy and Trade Minister Carlos Cuerpo emphasized the importance of avoiding both a trade war and a subsidy race while protecting European products from unfair trade practices.

Meanwhile, Spain's Agriculture Minister Luis Planas to reporters expressed optimism for negotiation and dialogue to prevent tariffs on agricultural and food products. According to Interporc, Spain's pork producers' association, in 2023, Spain exported EUR 1.2 billion (USD 1.29 billion) worth of pork products to China, which accounts for 13.7 percent of China's total pork exports by value. [The Pig Site] [Reuters 1]

With China's potential restriction on imports from the EU, pork suppliers from South America, the US, and Russia could benefit by gaining market share. Until then, the EU asserts its commitment to rules-based trade practices and readiness to engage with China to ensure compliance with World Trade Organization rules. [Reuters 2]

According to the Chinese customs data, the EU is a significant source of dairy imports for China, second only to New Zealand. According to data from the European Commission's Directorate-General for agriculture and Rural Development, in 2023, products like whey powder, cream, and fresh milk were leading the EU's EUR 1.7 billion (USD 1.8 billion) in dairy exports to China. Countries with substantial dairy export exposure to China include the Netherlands, France, Germany, Ireland, and Denmark. In addition to these nations, Spain, Brazil, and the United States, are also major pork suppliers to China. [Reuters 3]

(jm)

EU, Singapore review and strengthen cooperation during 10th Senior Officials' Meeting

The European Union and Singapore convened their 10th Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) on June 3, reviewing progress in bilateral and regional cooperation. Both sides celebrated the success of the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, which boosted bilateral trade to EUR 130 billion in 2022 and expressed anticipation for the ratification of the EU-Singapore Investment Protection Agreement. They noted positive developments in the EU-Singapore

Digital Trade Agreement negotiations, with five rounds of talks since July 2023, and reviewed the EU-Singapore Digital Partnership, focusing on AI, cybersecurity, and research cooperation.

Emphasis was placed on increased cooperation in science, technology, and innovation, particularly for the green transition, with the EU welcoming Singapore's interest in the Horizon Europe programme. Discussions on climate and environmental issues were held in anticipation of COP 29 and COP 16, with Singapore expressing interest in the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Both parties agreed on further collaboration in climate action and water management.

Transport cooperation was acknowledged, referencing the 7th EU-Singapore Senior Transport Officials Meeting held in April 2024. The meeting reviewed growing cooperation in maritime security, cybersecurity, and combating hybrid threats and disinformation, discussing potential for more structured exchanges on security and defence.

Perspectives on global and regional issues, including Myanmar, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Middle East, were shared, reaffirming the commitment to deepening EU-ASEAN cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

(sm)

Finland, Switzerland hold political consultations with Mongolia

On June 5, the officials of the Mongolian foreign ministry and their Finnish counterparts held the second political consultation meeting.

During their talks, the two sides discussed ways to expand and deepen bilateral relations and cooperation in multiple areas, such as trade, economy, investment, energy, environment, culture, and education.

Discussions also touched upon cooperation possibilities within Mongolia's long-term and medium-term national development policies, the "One Billion Trees" national campaign and the "Mission-2100" Scholarship Program initiated by the Mongolian president. [Montsame 1]

A day earlier, a political consultative meeting was held with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of the Swiss Confederation.

Stressing the 60th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Mongolia and the Swiss Confederation, the meeting discussed high-level visits within the framework of the anniversary, the upgrade of the level of relations, and enriching it with economic content.

The two delegations reached agreement on intensifying talks on draft documents related to expanding cooperation in certain sectors and strengthening the legal framework for bilateral relations. [Montsame 2]

In a separate meeting on the same day, Mongolian State Secretary of the Foreign Ministry Ankhbayar Nyamdorj discussed with a Polish delegation consisting of officials from the foreign and finance ministry as well as from the Ministry of Development and Technology ways to further advance and increase cooperation and speed up the implementation progress in mutually beneficial projects and programs.

The meeting was part of the Polish delegation's working visit to Mongolia to attend the ninth "Ulaanbaatar Dialogue" International Conference on Northeast Asian Security. [Montsame 3]

(dql)

Finland, Nepal hold second meeting of Bilateral Consultation Mechanism

On June 6, Nepal and Finland held the second meeting of their Bilateral Consultation Mechanism in Kathmandu. The Nepali delegation was led by the Chief of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Europe America Division, while the Finnish team was headed by Deputy Secretary of State for International Development, Pasi Hellman.

Both nations reviewed and expressed satisfaction with their current bilateral relations, emphasizing the importance of high-level visits and enhanced partnerships. Nepal thanked Finland for its ongoing support in drinking water, sanitation, education, and climate change.

Finland showed interest in expanding development aid to Nepal, focusing on innovative public sector investment facilities. The meeting also covered mutual cooperation on regional and global issues, including climate change and multilateralism. [My Republica]

(ps)

France, China launch joint satellite

China and France have successfully launched their most advanced satellite yet designed to study distant stellar explosions into orbit.

The satellite, intended to observe gamma-ray bursts among other cosmic events, was launched from the Xichang Satellite Launch Center in Sichuan province using a Chinese carrier rocket. The China National Space Administration stated that this satellite, named the Space Variable Objects Monitor, is expected to play a pivotal role in astronomical research.

The launch has also created an explosion near to a home, where rocket booster was seen to be falling on a populated area with people running for cover. [Spacenews]

This launch marks the first time China and France have collaborated on an astronomy satellite. Their previous joint effort resulted in the China-France Oceanography Satellite, which was launched in 2018.

China's rapid advancements in space technology continue to surpass those of the United States, drawing in partners from Europe and Asia. Recently, China's Chang'e-6 lunar probe carried scientific instruments from the European Space Agency and research institutes in Pakistan, France, and Italy to the moon's far side.

In addition to European collaborations, China is also working with countries like Brazil, Egypt, and Thailand to develop and launch satellites. [Reuters]

(rl)

German Economy Minister visits Beijing to address EU-China trade tensions

From June 21-23, German Economy Minister and Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck visited China amid heightened tensions due to the European Union's (EU) recent proposal to impose tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs).

The EU argues that these tariffs are necessary to counteract substantial government subsidies that give Chinese carmakers an unfair advantage over European manufacturers. In response, China has condemned the proposal, warning of a potential trade war and

considering import taxes on European internal combustion vehicles (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3).

During his visit, Habeck emphasised that the proposed tariffs are not punitive but are intended to level the playing field by compensating for the subsidies Chinese carmakers receive.

During meetings with Zheng Shanjie, Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission, and Commerce Minister Wang Wentao, Habeck reiterated the need for fair market access standards. Wang, for his part, contended that the Chinese EV industry's success stems from innovation and efficient supply chains, not unfair subsidies. [National Development and Reform Commission, the PRC, in Mandarin]

Zheng, meanwhile, criticised the tariffs arguing that such measures would ultimately be counterproductive and benefit no one. Habeck reiterated Europe's readiness to discuss the tariffs and stressed that if China did not support Russia's war, Europe and Germany might not be reducing their dependency on China for raw materials. [Politico] [CGTN]

Habeck also addressed the broader context of Germany's economic relationship with China, acknowledging the need for a cohesive European approach and hinting at an eventual update to Germany's China strategy. He pointed out that while China has been Germany's top trading partner for the past eight years, this trend was disrupted this year as Germany's trade with the US surpassed that with China. Additionally, German exports to China dropped by 14 percent in May, while exports to the US increased by 4.1 percent. [DW]

The EU's provisional duties are expected to take effect by July 4. Habeck suggested that the findings of the EU report on subsidies should be the basis for further discussions and negotiations between the EU and China. [Reuters] [Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, Germany, in German]

The discussions also touched on broader security issues. Habeck accused China of allowing "dual-use" goods, which can serve both civilian and military purposes, to reach Russia, indirectly supporting its war efforts. He called on China to halt such exports to Russia.

As reported by Bloomberg, during the China-Germany High-Level Dialogue on Climate Change and Green Transition in Beijing, Habeck cited China's support for Russia in the Ukraine conflict as a key factor in the

worsening economic relations between Germany and China. He stressed that this support directly affects German and European security interests.

Despite these tensions, both sides expressed a willingness to continue negotiations to prevent a trade war, which German car manufacturers fear could significantly impact their operations in the Chinese market. [VOA]

The visit also aimed to enhance cooperation on climate change and the green transition, with both countries recognizing their responsibility to prevent global warming. China has significantly expanded its renewable energy capacity but still relies heavily on coal for electricity. Habeck acknowledged China's efforts in renewable energy expansion but highlighted the need to consider overall CO2 emissions. [The State Council, PRC]

(jm)

Hungary to strengthen economic initiatives with China

(On June 25, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a phone call. During the call, Szijjártó emphasised China's significance as a partner, highlighting its active advocacy for peace. He supported the Chinese-Brazilian proposal for peace in Ukraine, viewing it as a foundation for ceasefire and peace negotiations. Szijjártó and Wang agreed on the necessity of intensified efforts to achieve peace, noting its importance in preventing further losses for all parties involved. [The State Council, the PRC]

As Hungary prepares for its rotating EU presidency from July 1 to December 31, Szijjártó highlighted the importance of improving European competitiveness. He discussed the importance of strengthening European-Chinese economic relations, asserting that cooperation with China could enhance European competitiveness. He cited Hungary as an example of successful East-West economic collaboration based on mutual respect.

Additionally, Szijjártó criticised the EU's ideological stance and tariffs on Chinese car industry players. He expressed concerns over EU tariffs on Chinese automotive industry players, emphasising that collaboration with these companies is crucial for the electric transition of Western European car manufacturers. He warned that isolating these

industries could lead to environmental and competitiveness challenges.

Hungary aims to foster economic cooperation between the EU and China based on mutual benefits, avoiding tariff and trade wars. Szijjártó highlighted that such conflicts would endanger jobs, advocating for collaborative economic strategies to ensure mutual prosperity. [The Budapest Times]

(jm)

Hungary, Laos deepen diplomatic relations

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó paid an official visit to Laos on June 13-14, at the invitation of Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith. During the visit, Szijjártó inaugurated the Hungarian embassy in Vientiane, making Hungary the fourth EU member state to open an embassy in Laos, joining Germany, France, and Luxembourg.

The visit and the embassy's opening aimed to further enhance the strategic partnership between the two nations, who elevated their 62-year-long relationship to a strategic partnership in 2019. Szijjártó emphasized the successful political and economic cooperation between the two countries, despite the geographical distance, attributing it to mutual respect and dialogue.

Both countries agreed to maintain regular senior-level exchanges, promote tourism and people-to-people connections, and enhance educational exchanges. They also agreed to increase cooperation in areas such as natural resources and the environment, signing a framework agreement for a water treatment project in Vientiane. [Daily News Hungary] [Lao News Agency]

(lvw)

Italian carmaker fined for falsely marketing Chinese made cars as Italian-made

On June 20, the Italian government imposed a USD 6.4 million fine on DR Automobiles for allegedly marketing vehicles manufactured in China as Italian-made. According to Italy's competition regulator, the company misled consumers by branding its cars as

being produced in Italy, while they were largely assembled from Chinese components.

DR Automobiles, based in southern Italy, assembles budget-friendly vehicles using parts sourced from Chinese carmakers such as Chery, BAIC, and JAC. The regulator's investigation revealed that the company's DR and EVO brand cars were predominantly Chinese in origin, with only minor assembly and finishing processes conducted in Italy.

DR Automobiles plans to appeal the fine, arguing that it never claimed its vehicles were entirely manufactured in Italy. [BBC] [HKFP]

(rl)

Italian police uncover Chinese trafficking network exploiting migrants

On June 26, Italian police dismantled a Chinese trafficking network that used luxury vehicles to smuggle Chinese migrants into Italy. The smugglers would confiscate the migrants' passports and subject them to work exploitation, until their travel debts were repaid. Then, the smugglers disguised the migrants as affluent Asian tourists, travelling in luxury cars driven by long-term Chinese residents of Italy.

The investigation began in April when a Chinese citizen was apprehended at the Italy-Slovenia border, transporting four undocumented Chinese migrants. This incident led authorities to uncover a continuous flow of irregular Chinese migrants. These individuals entered Europe primarily through visa-exempt countries like Serbia, then were driven through Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia to Italy.

Upon reaching a safehouse near Venice, migrants stayed for one or two days before being moved to various parts of Italy or other EU countries such as France and Spain. The migrant individuals lived without freedom, medical assistance, or basic necessities.

The police operation resulted in the arrest of nine trafficking network members and the identification of 77 undocumented migrants, including many women and minors aged 15 to 18. [CNA]

(jm)

Italy to strengthen military cooperation with Japan

Rome is deploying its flagship aircraft carrier, the Cavour, to the Indo-Pacific region for joint exercises with Japan's Self-Defense Forces, marking a significant step in bolstering military ties between Italy and Japan.

Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto announced that the Cavour will arrive in Japan in August, accompanied by a contingent of up to 10 advanced F-35B stealth fighters, aiming to ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The growing cooperation between Italy and Japan was solidified at the G7 summit in Puglia, Italy, where Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida emphasised the importance of multinational collaboration for regional stability (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3).

Domestically, Italy's deeper ties with Japan have sparked little concern, with a general positive perception of Japan as a valuable global ally. For Japan, these growing defence relationships provide a hedge against uncertainties like a potential second Trump presidency, reducing reliance on the United States. [DW] [Japan Times]

(rl)

Japan approves treaty for joint fighter jet development with UK and Italy

On June 5, Japan's parliament approved an international treaty to establish an organization managing the joint development of a next-generation fighter jet by Japan, Britain, and Italy.

The treaty received majority approval in the House of Councilors, with support from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Komeito, and the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan. The House of Representatives approved it last month.

The joint project, named the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), will create the GCAP International Government Organization (GIGO), headquartered in London. A Japanese national is set to lead the organization initially. GIGO will handle contracts with companies, streamlining operations across the three countries.

The envisioned sixth-generation fighter jet will succeed Japan's F-2 and aims for completion by fiscal 2035. The countries will continue discussions on the jet's performance and design, with Japan focusing on advanced air-to-air combat and networking capabilities. [Japan Times]

(sh)

Japan and Italy finalise action plan for enhanced cooperation

Japan and Italy reached the final stages of talks to launch an action plan to boost cooperation in seven areas, including diplomacy, defense, and economic security, amid China's growing influence and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The plan, covering 2024 to 2027, will introduce an annual "strategic dialogue" by vice foreign ministers and maintain senior-level security talks and joint defense drills. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is expected to announce the plan during his visit to Italy for the Group of Seven summit June 13.

The seven pillars of the plan also address the economy, cultural exchanges, science and technology, and agriculture. Key topics include supply chains, clean energy cooperation, AI management, and food security.

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni proposed the plan during a February meeting with Kishida in Tokyo. [Kyodo News]

(sh)

Latvia, Mongolia conclude aviation agreement

Mongolian State Secretary of the Ministry of Road and Transport Development S. Batbold and Latvian State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Pelšs signed on June a bilateral aviation agreement under which biotn sides will create opportunities to conduct direct flights and develop tourism.

In addition, the agreement will allow Mongolian air carriers to open new flight routes to Northern European countries and expand their flight network under codeshare principles.

The two sides expect the agreement will substantially support the development of trade and economic relations and cooperation between the two countries.

With diplomatic relations established in 1991, the trade turnover between the two countries stands at USD 2.3 million. [Aki Press]

(dql)

OECD agrees to begin accession discussions with Thailand

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Council has unanimously agreed to begin accession discussions with Thailand, according to the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC).

Thailand submitted its letter of intent to join the OECD in April 2024 (see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2 and AiR No. 12, March/2024, 3) and subsequently participated in a special session with the OECD Council. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The next step involves the OECD Secretary-General developing an Accession Roadmap, outlining the steps and conditions for Thailand's membership. Thailand will need to work with OECD committees to align its legislation, policies, and practices with OECD standards across multiple sectors, including governance, transparency, business conduct, competition, education, labour, regional development, environment, and digitalization. Thailand's successful accession will depend on its ability to comply with OECD legal instruments and meet the organisation's standards. [The Nation]

(bk)

Poland's president visits Chinese counterpart, discusses Ukraine, trade

Polish President Andrzej Duda visited Beijing last month, where he met Chinese President Xi Jingping to discuss trade, the ongoing war in Ukraine, and cooperation between their two countries. [AP] [Notes From Poland] [Euronews]

The pair also discussed the ongoing migrant crisis on Poland's border with Belarus. [Notes From Poland]

Xi referred to his Polish counterpart as an old friend, adding: “Over the past 75 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, bilateral relations have maintained steady development, constantly injecting new vitality into the traditional friendship between the two countries.” [AP] [Euronews]

Duda, meanwhile, said: “I am very happy that, thanks to the fact that President [Xi] calls me a friend, which is a great honour for me, I can contribute to building [Polish-Chinese] relations together with the president.” [Notes From Poland]

The Polish leader added that Warsaw hopes to strengthen trade ties with China under Beijing’s “Belt and Road Initiative”, Xi’s cornerstone infrastructure project to connect global trade partners. [AP]

Duda said that the talks between the two leaders paved the way for increased agricultural exports to China, while Xi removed visa requirements for Polish nationals visiting China for up to 15 days following the meeting. [TVP World]

Security concerns

The two heads of state also talked about Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine, security in Europe, and the ongoing migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, which Western nations accuse Moscow-allied Minsk of facilitating. [AP] [Notes From Poland]

Duda said that his concerns were heard and that Xi made clear Beijing’s desire for peace. [AP]

NATO member Poland has been one of Ukraine’s staunchest supporters in its fight against Russia, while China has given support to Moscow while simultaneously trying to toe the diplomatic line and appear neutral. [BBC News] [Politico]

Duda said: “The war Russia is waging against Ukraine interferes with trade relations with China and hinders the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative.” [Notes From Poland]

“[It is] very important to me that all the difficult war situations taking place today in Europe do not disturb the idea of economic cooperation between Poland and China,” he added. [Notes From Poland]

(ek/pk)

Poland, China strengthen ties on electric vehicles amid EU tariff hikes

China and Poland have agreed to strengthen cooperation in the electric vehicle (EV) sector, despite the European Union's recent decision to increase tariffs on Chinese imports (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3). This agreement is part of a joint action plan for 2024-27, aimed at strengthening the strategic partnership between the two nations. [President.pl]

The announcement followed a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and visiting Polish President Andrzej Duda on June 24 during which the two leaders discussed ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4).

The action plan includes mutual support for investments in electric vehicles, green development, and logistics. This move comes in response to the EU's decision to raise duties on Chinese EV imports by up to 38.1 percent, which led Beijing to launch an anti-dumping investigation into European pork imports. To avoid a trade war, the EU and China have agreed to discuss the anti-subsidy probe.

Meanwhile, on June 28, Polish Minister of State Assets Jakub Jaworowski met with representatives from Chinese automaker Geely to discuss Poland's potential role in the evolving European automotive market. Geely is collaborating with the Polish state-backed firm ElectroMobility Poland to develop an electric car expected to enter mass production in two years. [Motofaktor in Polish]

Additionally, a joint venture between Chinese EV maker Leapmotor and European firm Stellantis has begun car production in Tychy, Poland. Other Chinese automakers are also expanding their European presence: BYD has invested in a plant in Szeged, Hungary, and is considering a second European site, while SAIC plans to introduce new energy technology and green factories to Europe. Chery has acquired a plant in Barcelona through a joint venture with Spanish firm Ebro-EV Motors, marking the first Chinese car production deal in Western Europe. [South China Morning Post]

(rl)

Poland, South Korea confirm weaponry deal in September

Following South Korean Minister of Defense Shin Won-Sik's successful weapon deal with Romania on June 19 (see article above), he travelled to Warsaw, Poland, where he met with Poland's Minister of Defense Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz on June 20 to discuss defence cooperation and funding negotiations.

Both parties reached an agreement to finalise weapon deals as early as September, which includes contracts for the delivery of 180 K2 tanks, K9 tanks, and the border defence system.

Analysts have suggested that amid growing disputes near the Poland-Belarus border, Poland is showing interest in adopting South Korea's border defence system and potentially manufacturing tanks domestically within Poland. [Yonhap News] [Polskie Radio]

(ac)

Russia protests Japan's joint military exercises with NATO

On June 28, Russia lodged a protest with Japan over Japan's plans to hold joint military exercises on Hokkaido with Germany and Spain. The Japanese Defense Ministry announced June 25 that over 30 military aircraft from Germany, France, and Spain will arrive in Japan next month for joint training exercises with the Air Self-Defense Force. This will be the first-ever trilateral air force deployment by these countries to the Indo-Pacific region. [Japan Times]

Russia's Foreign Ministry expressed strong objections, accusing Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of leading the country towards dangerous escalation. The ministry warned that such military activities near Russia's far eastern coast, especially involving NATO members, pose a potential threat to Russian security. [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation]

The protest comes as Japan continues to support Ukraine amidst the ongoing conflict with Russia. The territorial dispute between Japan and Russia over the Northern Territories, known as the Kuril Islands in Russia, remains unresolved, preventing a peace treaty since World War II.

Russia has previously expressed concern over Japan's military cooperation with NATO and its implications for regional stability. The latest military exercises add to

the ongoing tensions between the two nations. [Global Times] [Reuters]

(rl)

Russia, North Korea sign military deal

On June 19, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in North Korea to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un for a bilateral summit. Amid escalating tensions due to UN sanctions and North Korea's inter-Korean border movements (see AiR No. 24, June/2024, 2), both leaders reaffirmed their solidarity against the US-led hegemony.

During the summit, Putin and Kim signed the 'Treaty on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.' This military partnership treaty involves mutual assistance if either country faces aggression. Kim emphasized that North Korea-Russia relations are entering "a new period of prosperity." According to North Korean state media, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the treaty covers areas such as nuclear power, food security, trade, investment, and cultural cooperation. Analysts have noted that the treaty on military aid in the event of conflict mirrors the USSR-North Korea 1961 treaty, which mandated automatic military interventions.

KCNA also released video footage showing both leaders enjoying a ride in a luxury car and exchanging lavish gifts, which critics suggested was intended to highlight the close bond between the two leaders and signify a "new level of alliance."

Kim expressed full support for Russia's war in Ukraine and pledged to strengthen their strategic partnerships. In return, Putin thanked Kim for North Korea's support for Russia and urged the UN to re-evaluate international sanctions against North Korea.

Putin continued his state visit to Vietnam on June 20, after a brief stay in Pyongyang. He warned that South Korea would be making a grave mistake if it decided to supply weapons to Ukraine, indicating potential reprisals.

The renewed connection between Moscow and Pyongyang is founded on shared hostility toward the West. Western observers voiced concerns about the implications of this military alliance for the war in Ukraine. They suggest that the bilateral summit reflected Moscow's urgency to find weapons for its war

in Ukraine, while North Korea sought food supplies in exchange. [Yonhap News] [KBC World] [AP News] [CNN] [KCNA 1] [KCNA 2]

(ac)

Slovenia, Indonesia commit to supporting Palestine

Indonesia and Slovenia agreed to support Palestine during the conflict in Gaza, discussed by Foreign Ministers Retno Marsudi and Tanja Fajon in Ljubljana on June 26. Retno praised Slovenia for recognizing Palestine, joining other EU countries in this stance.

Both countries support a two-state solution and emphasize the need for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid to Gaza. Slovenia, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, backed a ceasefire resolution between Israel and Hamas. They also discussed humanitarian issues in Afghanistan and Myanmar, advocating for women's roles in peace processes. Slovenia and Indonesia are part of a 16-country initiative supporting the UN aid agency for Palestinian refugees, with Slovenia contributing EUR 500,000. [Tempo 1]

The discussion further included expediting the Indonesia-EU Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The ministers focused on increasing trade and investment, using Slovenia's Koper Port as a gateway for Indonesian goods to Europe, and diversifying trade beyond commodities. They also agree to establish educational and consular ties to bolster economic and socio-cultural cooperation. [Tempo 2]

(si)

Sweden, Pakistan pledge to strengthen bilateral ties and enhance economic cooperation

Pakistan and Sweden have agreed to enhance their bilateral cooperation and establish a comprehensive relationship grounded in strong economic ties. This agreement was reached during the 18th round of Bilateral Political Consultations held in Islamabad on June 26. The Pakistani delegation was led by Additional Foreign Secretary (Europe), Ambassador Shafqat Ali Khan, while the Swedish delegation was headed by

Director General of the Global Department of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Dag Juhlin-Dannfelt.

During the consultations, both sides reviewed a wide range of bilateral cooperation areas, including political relations, trade and investment, education, and people-to-people contacts. Both countries expressed satisfaction with the progress of Pak-Sweden relations and agreed to collaborate on issues of mutual interest in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the European Union. The Swedish delegation also informed the Pakistani side about the measures taken to promote interfaith harmony in Sweden. The discussions also covered important regional and global developments. Additionally, Director General Dag met separately with the Foreign Secretary to discuss ways to strengthen the Pak-Sweden bilateral relationship.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Sweden. [Radio Pakistan]

(ss)

Sweden seeks to enhance trade with Bangladesh, to provide USD 1.2 million in humanitarian assistance

Sweden aims to enhance trade relations with Bangladesh, recognizing the country's growing attractiveness as a market and investment destination, and the strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal in the Indo-Pacific region. During the launch of the Sweden Bangladesh Business Guide 2024-25 at the Swedish embassy in Dhaka, Swedish officials highlighted Bangladesh as one of the world's fastest-growing economies with a substantial domestic market and a rising middle class.

The initiative aims to position Sweden as a key partner for Bangladesh's green and digital transition. In 2023, Bangladesh's exports to Sweden amounted to USD 625.19 million, while imports from Sweden were about USD 60.21 million. Over 50 Swedish companies are currently operating in Bangladesh. [The Daily Star 1]

In related developments, Sweden will provide USD 1.2 million in humanitarian assistance to communities affected by Cyclone Remal in southwestern Bangladesh. The aid, facilitated through the Swedish Red Cross, Save the Children, and Islamic Relief, will support over 86,000 people by providing essential supplies such as food, shelter, and livelihood

opportunities. Additionally, 15,000 children will be assisted in returning to school. [The Daily Star 2]

(sg)

Xinjiang officials meet Turkish foreign minister to strengthen bilateral ties

Senior Xinjiang officials, including Party chief Ma Xingrui and regional government chairman Erkin Tuniyaz, met with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his delegation on June 5. The meeting was part of Fidan's three-day visit to China's westernmost province, marking the highest-level trip to the Xinjiang region since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 2012 visit is his capacity as then-prime minister.

Ma welcomed Fidan's visit, noting the positive progress in China-Turkey relations and increasing exchanges between Xinjiang and Turkish regions. He also expressed a desire to deepen cooperation with Turkey to combat separatism, terrorism, and extremism while underscoring Xinjiang's role in the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to enhance trade and cooperation with Turkey.

Fidan, for his part, praised the development and ethnic integration in Xinjiang, reiterating Turkey's stance against terrorism and support for China's territorial integrity, according to the Chinese state media. He emphasized the importance of strengthening anti-terrorism cooperation. Underscoring China role as Turkey's largest trade partner in Asia and third largest in the world, he called for expanding exchanges in trade, agriculture, and civil aviation. [Global Times] [AA]

Fidan's visit to China also included a meeting with his counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing. In their talks, Wang reaffirmed China's willingness to further expand cooperation with Ankara in multiple areas, including economics, trade, energy, infrastructure, and the hi-tech and digital economy.

In a thinly veiled criticism of the US and its allies, he called on the two countries to work closely together under the United Nations and other multilateral frameworks and to "oppose hegemonism and power politics, oppose the monopoly of international affairs by a few countries."

According to the statement of the Chinese foreign ministry, Fidan affirmed China's development as "vital to world peace and prosperity," and Turkey's opposition to bloc confrontation and "the erroneous

act of suppressing and containing China's development." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese] [SCMP]

(rl)

Turkey levies 40% tariff on Chinese vehicle imports

The Turkish Ministry of Trade announced a 40% import tax on all vehicles from China, effective July 7.

Turkish officials are optimistic that the tax will protect domestic brands and attract Chinese companies to invest in production facilities within Turkey, potentially boosting the local economy. [Reuters]

Some analysts argue that the tariffs will hurt consumers with unaffordable price hikes and invoke stagnation within a car market already challenged by high inflation and interest rates in Turkey.

Chinese vehicles are often presented as an affordable alternative to European cars, driving market-wide competition and lowering overall prices but undermining local Turkish brands.

European Union (EU) vehicle manufacturing regulations will further complicate efforts to balance consumer considerations with manufacturing protection efforts. From July 2024, cars manufactured in the EU must possess safety features such as brake assist, invoking greater manufacturing demands likely to increase manufacturing costs and sticker prices further.

Starting on July 8, tariffs on imported Chinese vehicles could total as high as 50%. [Deutsche Welle]

(ts/gc)

Turkey, Malaysia to increase humanitarian aid for Gaza

Malaysia and Turkey have agreed to increase humanitarian assistance, particularly for Gaza, Palestine, announced Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. In an official Facebook post on June 17, Anwar stated that the decision was discussed with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a telephone conversation on the same day.

During the call, Erdogan also reaffirmed his commitment to enhancing cooperation in defense, economy, culture, trade, and investment between the two countries.

Anwar extended an invitation for President Erdogan to visit Malaysia in July or August. The Prime Minister emphasized that the visit would be significant as it coincides with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Turkey and the 10th year of strategic cooperation between the two nations. [Astro Awani] [The Malay Mail]

(ba)

Turkey to construct three warships for the Malaysian Navy

The Turkish government has pledged to construct three warships for the Malaysian government. The deal is part of Turkey's larger "Littoral Mission Ship Batch 2" project.

Turkey's defence industry chief Haluk Gorgan commemorated the agreement alongside Malaysian Defence Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin at a June 10 ceremony: "I wholeheartedly believe that the LMS Batch 2 Project is just the beginning of long-term collaborations on naval platforms between the two countries." [DefenseNews]

Multiple Turkish defence companies, known for their expertise and reliability, will begin to build the ships together this year, with a projected project timeline of three and a half years. [DailySabah]

The purchase marks Malaysia's first-ever government-to-government agreement to procure weapons, a testament to the trust in Turkey's defence capabilities. [DailySabah]

(ts/gc)

UK court orders reconsideration of Xinjiang cotton import investigation

On June 27, a London court has ruled that British authorities must reassess whether to investigate imports of cotton allegedly produced through slave labour in China's Xinjiang region. This decision came after an appeal by the World Uyghur Congress, a global organization representing exiled Uyghur groups,

against the National Crime Agency (NCA) for not initiating a criminal investigation.

The World Uyghur Congress claims the NCA failed to examine whether Xinjiang cotton constitutes "criminal property," given allegations of widespread abuse and forced labor of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. These allegations have been strongly denied by Beijing, which describes them as fabrications by anti-China elements.

Previously, a High Court judge acknowledged evidence indicating that cotton was being produced using detained and forced labor. However, the judge dismissed the case, agreeing with British authorities that a specific link between alleged criminality and individual products was necessary. The Court of Appeal has now overturned this decision, instructing the NCA to reconsider the investigation.

Rahima Mahmut, UK Director of the World Uyghur Congress, called the ruling a significant moral victory and a step toward justice for Uyghurs and other Turkic people subjected to forced labor. [Reuters]

(jm)

Ukraine, Japan sign long-term support agreement

On June 14, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a 10-year agreement on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Italy (see article in this edition), ensuring Japan's continued support for Ukraine amidst Russia's ongoing aggression. The deal includes nonlethal equipment, medical aid, and support for economic recovery, adhering to Japan's non-military aid policies.

Kishida also announced plans to host an international meeting on landmine issues in Ukraine next year. The agreement emphasizes Japan's commitment to aiding Ukraine's recovery and reform efforts and includes a clause for immediate consultations if Russia attacks again.

This agreement follows a G7 declaration for long-term security commitments to Ukraine, with over 30 countries participating. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Since Russia's invasion in February 2022, Japan and G7 members have supported Ukraine and imposed sanctions on Moscow. [Kyodo News]

(rl)

Spain submits intervention in ICJ case on genocide prevention in Gaza

On June 28, Spain submitted a Declaration of Intervention to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case South Africa brought against Israel regarding the application of the Genocide Convention in the Gaza Strip.

The Spanish Foreign Ministry affirmed that this move reflects Spain's commitment to the Genocide Convention and international law, aligning it with other nations such as Colombia, Mexico, and Palestine.

The ministry emphasized the importance of a two-state solution for lasting peace and stability for Palestinians and Israelis and highlighted concerns about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Spain urged the ICJ to address the obligation to prevent genocide and ensure compliance with the Court's precautionary measures. [AA]

(dql)

Turkey mediates between Somalia and Ethiopia over Somaliland naval deal

Turkey has initiated mediation talks between Somalia and Ethiopia concerning a controversial port deal that Ethiopia signed with the breakaway region of Somaliland earlier this year. This agreement, which involved leasing 20 km of coastline from Somaliland in exchange for recognizing its independence, strained relations between Ethiopia and Somalia. Mogadishu deemed the agreement illegal, expelled the Ethiopian ambassador, and threatened to remove Ethiopian troops assisting in combating Islamist insurgents.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan hosted his Ethiopian and Somali counterparts in Ankara, resulting in a joint statement after "candid, cordial, and forward-looking" discussions. Both parties committed to resolving their differences peacefully and agreed to hold another round of talks in Ankara on September 2. Despite these talks, officials expressed scepticism about reaching a resolution, noting Somalia's likely continued demand for Ethiopia to withdraw the agreement.

Somaliland, which declared independence in 1991 but lacks international recognition, was not involved in the talks.

Turkey has been a significant ally to Somalia since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit in 2011, providing training for security forces, development assistance, and signing a defence pact in February to support maritime security.

Turkey's mediation efforts began after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed requested Erdogan's assistance during a visit to Ankara in May. [Reuters]

(dql)

French troops in West and Central Africa to be reduced

France plans to reduce its military presence in West and Central Africa to around 600 troops, aligning with President Emmanuel Macron's strategy to limit the French military footprint in the region. According to discussions with African partners, France will drastically cut its "pre-positioned" forces.

Currently, France intends to retain approximately 100 troops in Gabon (down from 350), 100 in Senegal (down from 350), 100 in Ivory Coast (down from 600), and 300 in Chad (down from 1,000). This reduced presence can be periodically expanded based on the needs of local partners. The French General Staff declined to comment on these plans.

In February, Macron tasked former minister Jean-Marie Bockel with devising the new French military presence in Africa, with conclusions expected in July. Bockel stated that France aims to "reduce its visible presence" while maintaining logistical, human, and material access, and reinforcing actions to meet local aspirations.

The French army plans to establish a Paris-based command dedicated to Africa this summer and is considering "pooling" bases with American or European partners. General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of Staff of France's armed forces, noted that the streamlined structure would help maintain relations with local military authorities, gather intelligence, and continue operational partnerships. French soldiers will primarily provide training and capabilities to partner countries upon request, rather than engaging in combat missions. [France 24]

(dql)

France, African countries launch USD 1 billion vaccine rollout project

French President Emmanuel Macron, alongside several African leaders, has launched a USD 1 billion initiative to expedite vaccine production in Africa. The African Vaccine Manufacturing Accelerator was inaugurated on June 20 and aims to provide financial incentives to vaccine manufacturers.

Many African leaders and advocacy groups argue that Africa was unfairly denied access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatment tools, and testing equipment, which wealthier countries purchased in large quantities following the pandemic's declaration in 2020. To better prepare for future pandemics, WHO, advocacy groups, the European Union, and other stakeholders are supporting Africa's efforts to enhance its vaccine production capabilities.

When the coronavirus pandemic began, South Africa was the only African country capable of producing vaccines, resulting in the continent producing only a tiny fraction of the global vaccine supply.

Speaking at the launch event, Macron highlighted that “Africa produces only 2% of the vaccines it uses,” announcing the goal to increase production to 60% by 2040. Macron reaffirmed the commitment of France and Europe that “have supported this ambition since 2021 with 1.3 billion euros,” and underscored the “need to accelerate it.” [AP News]

(dql)

Australian media outlets targeted by pro-Russian influence campaign, research finds

Australian news outlets, including the ABC, have been targeted by a sophisticated pro-Russian influence campaign, according to researchers. The campaign, named Operation Overload, aims to sway public opinion about the war in Ukraine by directly targeting journalists rather than the general public.

Australian Associated Press, The Daily Aus, The Conversation, and the ABC are among 800 organizations in over 75 countries approached via

email or social media to debunk fabricated content, such as anti-Ukrainian graffiti or fake news clips. The campaign's goal appears to be overwhelming newsroom fact-checking systems.

Check First, a Finnish software company, and Reset Tech, an online safety nonprofit, reported that while the campaign aligns with Kremlin interests, it's unclear if Russia is directly responsible. Clues like stray lines of Cyrillic in emails and URLs linking to Telegram channels named "The Hand of the Kremlin" suggest a Russian connection, but no definitive proof exists.

The operation's scale and sophistication imply significant resources and expertise. Shane Ripley from Recorded Future noted that the effort likely involves multiple experts and extensive resources, indicating a well-organized and large-scale operation. [ABC News]

(dql)

Australia to provide Ukraine with marine boats to bolster river fleet

Australia is sending state-of-the-art inflatable boats to Ukraine as part of a USD 65.6 million military aid package. The Sentinel 830R RHIB (Rigid Hulled Inflatable Boat), designed for various missions across rivers and seas, features customized weapon consoles and surveillance systems.

The 8.3-meter Sentinel 830R can accommodate a crew of 10 and reach speeds of 40 knots (74 kilometers/46 miles per hour). Its speed and agility make it suitable for riverine operations in Ukraine's complex waterways and open sea boarding operations. The boats are rapidly deployable and require minimal maintenance, ensuring high operational availability for Ukrainian forces. The craft will be sent in the coming months along with other pledged equipment.

Russian artillery and explosive-laden drones have damaged and sunk numerous boats of both the Ukrainian Navy and Marines while resupplying the Ukrainian marine corps' narrow bridgehead in Krynky on the left bank of the Dnipro River in southern Ukraine. The boats are also needed for launching raids across the river into Russian-controlled territory. [The Defense Post]

(dql)

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