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Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 8, August/2024

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Dear Readers,

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

I wish you an informative read. 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 to expand Europe in Review. 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

Almost 400 arrests as far-right riots spread across United Kingdom in the wake of child murder

The United Kingdom has been convulsed by violence since July 30, following the murders of three young girls in a mass stabbing on July 29 in Southport, a seaside town north of Liverpool. Anti-immigration demonstrations, fueled by conspiracy theories and AI-generated images on social media, turned violent in several UK towns and cities, including Hull, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, Blackpool, and Belfast. Far-right protesters clashed with police, leading to nearly 400 arrests and several injuries, at the time of writing on August 6.

The riots began after misinformation about the attacker's identity – who was actually a British-born individual of Rwandan descent – spread across England and Northern Ireland. The far-right's mobilization was spurred by influential figures like

Tommy Robinson and Andrew Tate, who called for nationwide protests. [BBC 1] [NBC News]

In response, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has taken a strong law-and-order approach, promising to crack down on the rioters and deploying additional police and security personnel to protect vulnerable communities. So far, this strategy has garnered bipartisan support, with even opposition leaders backing his firm stance against the violence. Despite this, Starmer faces ongoing challenges due to an already overburdened criminal justice system, with full prisons and court backlogs complicating the swift prosecution of those involved in the riots. [BBC 2] [The Independent]

The government has announced plans to expedite hearings and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice quickly. However, diminished public trust in the police and prior cuts to community policing make managing the unrest more difficult. Analysts point out that while the immediate focus is on restoring order, there is also a need for longer-term strategies to promote community cohesion and address the underlying issues fueling division and unrest in British society. [The New York Times]

In particular, agitators are exploiting ongoing tensions over immigration and the increasing number of migrants crossing the English Channel in inflatable boats. These concerns were pivotal in the recent election, with former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak vowing to stop illegal immigration by deporting migrants to Rwanda. After winning a landslide victory, current Prime Minister Starmer canceled this plan but has pledged to reduce immigration by collaborating with other European nations and expediting the removal of failed asylum-seekers.

Voter frustration was further fueled by the previous government's policy of housing asylum-seekers in hotels at a cost of GBP 2.5 billion (USD 3.2 billion) last year, amidst struggling public services and budget constraints. [Associated Press]

(ts/gc/lm)

Pace of Russian advance in Donetsk accelerates as EU draws down frozen funds for first time

Fighting in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region intensified in July as Russian units continue to find success against a Ukrainian defense that is stretched-thin and hard-

pressed. Russian forces attack and damaged a Ukrainian children's hospital, the latest in a series of outrages committed by its air force against civilian targets. Hungary has grabbed headlines by launching a Quixotic 'peace mission' – and by condemning Kyiv's move to block Russian oil from passing through its pipelines.

Russian forces accelerate Donetsk advance and attack children's hospital

As Europe in Review has previously reported, the fall of Avdiivka in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region was followed by a sudden Russian through the nearby town of Ocheretyne in late April after a series of mistakes by Ukrainian commanders. Over the course of the last three months, Kyiv has been unable to staunch the bleeding and blunt the Russian advance – which now threatens a vital supply line.

Over the course of July, Russian units advanced from Ocheretyne and into the villages of Prohres and Vovche. The speed of this advance was unusual in a war defined by static, positional fighting and glacial advances and very nearly resulted in the encirclement of between 50 and 100 Ukrainian troops. While the units were able to evacuate, the incident has stirred up serious ocmplaint among Ukrainian troops. According to the Deep State war reporting group, failures of leadership similar to that witnessed at Ocheretyne were responsible.

Russia, for its part, continues to deploy the same tactics that have won it territory for over a year – aerial bombardment followed by mass, often casualty-heavy infantry assaults. The goal is to exhaust Ukrainian units and erase the settlements they defend – and the events at Prohres indicate that, in the Kremlin's estimation, the tactic may be worth the cost. To Prohres' east is the vital settlement of Pokrovsk and Russian forces now find themselves just five kilometers from the T0504 – an arterial road that supplies many Ukrainian-held settlements in the Donbas. That Russian forces are so close to cutting this road is a disaster – and Ukraine's ability to hold the Donbas may depend on reversing these advances.

Elsewhere in the Donbas, Russian forces advanced considerably around the settlement of Niu-York and the city of Toretsk. Evacuations of the Ukrainian civilians who still remain are underway as Russia turns its artillery and glide bombs on the settlements. Hard fighting is ongoing – and is likely to continue.

While the progress of Russia's offensive is not earth shattering, and there is a considerable distance

between the frontline and Russia's goal of taking the entirety of the Donbas region, the situation is deteriorating for Ukrainian units. With mass Russian assaults frequently finding success against depleted Ukrainian lines, it remains to be seen if a reversal of fortunes is in the cards.[Associated Press] [BBC News] [Euronews] [Forbes] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

The resolve of Ukrainians to continue resisting Russian occupation was hardened on 8 July, when a Russian Kh-101 cruise missile slammed into the Okhmatdyt Children's Hospital in Kyiv. The missile responsible was part of a volley of launched at military and civilian targets across Ukraine, resulting in around fifty deaths and nearly 200 injuries, amid one of the largest single strikes of the War. According to officials in Kyiv, five wards of the hospital were damaged. The Kremlin, despite images emerging in the aftermath of the Kh-101 in flight, has falsely attributed responsibility for the strike to a wayward Ukrainian air defense missile. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Economist] [Reuters]

Ukraine's NATO perspective 'irreversible' as EU transfers tranche of frozen Russian funds to Kyiv

NATO member states gathered for a three-day summit in Washington on 9 July, which – although somewhat overshadowed by the domestic pressure on US president Joe Biden – continued to address the war in Ukraine.

Allies committed to supplying a least EUR 40 billion in military aid to Ukraine, a vital lifeline for Kyiv's defense. While more hawkish NATO member states – supported by Jens Stoltenberg, the outgoing Secretary-General – sought a multi-year commitment, this was not to be. The coalition of countries giving military aid to Ukraine had previously been coordinated through the so-called "Rammstein format", named after the US air base in Germany. At the Washington Summit, it was decided that NATO would take over this role.

Ukraine's membership continued to be a matter for the future, with NATO reaffirming that it will only invite Ukraine to join the alliance "be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance when allies agree and conditions are met".

NATO states also addressed their own direct defense needs, with the US committing to the placement of intermediate missiles in Germany. The declaration issued by the alliance at the end of the summit also hit China as a 'decisive enabler' of Russia's war in Ukraine, owing to its purchase of Russian oil in record numbers and the increased sales of goods with both military

and civilian uses to Moscow. [Associated Press] [Euronews] [Euractiv] [Financial Times] [Reuters]

After years of speculation – and months of preparation – the European Union waded into unknown waters in July by transferring EUR 1.5 billion in profits from frozen Russian financial assets to Ukraine.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, approximately EUR 192 billion in Russian financial assets are frozen in Euroclear, a Belgium-based financial clearing house. The EU, and the United States, have been discussing how best to apply these funds to aid Ukraine. While an outright seizure remains of the table, agreement was reached in May on using the profits generated by the those assets for Kyiv's benefit. The profits have also been used to secure a USD 50 billion loan to Ukraine.

The vast majority of the funds will be used to acquire military hardware. Even the use of the profits is controversial, with some member states arguing that to seize the assets would undermine confidence in EU's viability for international investors. While Moscow has decried the use of the profits as 'theft', a not unexpected reaction, other states like China, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia have also cautioned restraint – and found an audience with Germany in particular. [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Euronews] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

Hungarian, Slovak relations with Ukraine at new low as Orbán embarks on 'peace mission', rues Lukoil sanctions

In June, Hungary assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, amid serious disputes with member states and the EU institutions over its hostility to Ukraine aid and democratic backsliding. In July, that dispute worsened as Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán launched a one-man 'peace mission'.

The first week of July was a busy one for the Hungarian prime minister as he visited Kyiv, Moscow, Beijing and the Florida residence of former US president Donald Trump to discuss the war in Ukraine.

As to what Orbán has accomplished, there is a dearth of evidence. According to reporting by *POLITICO Europe*, the result of the 'peace mission' was a letter from Orbán to European Council president Charles Michel, which appeared to advocate for settlement of the war on the Kremlin's terms. Orbán is said to have argued that the Russian president is 'open' to a ceasefire and pointed to the vastly inflated numbers of Ukrainian casualties presented by the Russian Ministry of Defence to bolster his argument. The Ukrainian

Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, also weighed in shortly after the visits by saying that Kyiv would reject peace initiatives that were "based on Russia's narratives"

The initiative has worsened Hungary's dispute with the EU institutions. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced that Budapest will no longer host meetings of the bloc's foreign and defence ministers to discuss Ukraine – a right Hungary enjoyed as president of the Council. Michel reprimanded Orbán in his response, saying that the Hungarian presidency "…has no role in representing the Union on the international stage and received no European Council mandate to engage on behalf of the Union". [Associated Press] [BBC News] [Euractiv] [Guardian] [POLITICO Europe]

Hungary has received support in its endeavors from Slovakia which, after prime minister Robert Fico's victory in the country's September 2023 elections, has opposed aid to Ukraine, expressed support for Russia's narrative on the conflict, and run into disputes with the EU institutions over democratic backsliding. In the weeks following Orbán's voyage, both nations have become embroiled in a dispute with Kyiv over Russian oil supplies.

In June, Ukraine expanded its sanctions regime to include Russian oil firm Lukoil, which exports significant amounts to Europe through pipelines that run through Ukraine. Kyiv's reasons for doing so are obvious – oil and gas revenues are the bedrock of Russia's state revenue, which funds the war. Inna Sovsun, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament's energy committee, said that "…it's actually absurd to allow them to make this money by transporting this oil through Ukrainian territory, if the money is then being used to kill us."

Most European nations have cut their purchases from Russia since the invasion in 2022, However, Hungary and Slovakia benefit from an exemption to bloc-wide sanctions on Russian oil. This exemption was given in view of the reliance by some states on Russia for their energy needs. Since the invasion, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have taken some steps to reduce their dependence – while Hungary has increased energy purchases from Russia. The Slovakian and Hungarian governments have reacted to the sanctions with fury, with Budapest accusing Kyiv of 'blackmail'. The sanctions pose a real threat to Hungary and Slovakia. Hungary relies on Russia for 70 percent of its oil imports – and prices are expected to surge following the sanctions. Slovakia, for its part, is heavily reliant on the pipeline connection and would struggle to import oil outside of the existing pipeline system. Given that

both nations have frequently obstructed the EU in its efforts to support Ukraine, Kyiv is unlikely to be moved by these pleas.

In an ironic twist, the two nations have had to ask the European Commission to step in to mediate a growing dispute with Kyiv over Russian oil supplies. Reports indicate that the Commission is not predisposed to assist the two, with one official telling *POLITICO Europe* that the fault lay with Hungary and Slovakia's lack of "of determination to get rid of dependencies", adding that "...many EU members took costly but necessary efforts to get rid from dependence on Russian gas and oil ... mainly because it stinks of blood." Another official said that they "don't think the Commission is eager to help Hungary," and that the two nations "should have not gone to Moscow". That dispute is certain to rage on. [Associated Press] [Euractiv] [Fitch] [POLITICO Europe] [Reuters]

(wb)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgium swears in new government of French-speaking community

One month following the Belgian federal elections on June 9, the new government of French-speaking Wallonia was formed with notable alacrity. The liberal Mouvement Reformateur (MR) and centrist Les Engages had announced their intentions to work together immediately following the elections and

reached an agreement about the coalition's main points on July 11. In a joint statement, leaders Georges-Louis Bouchez (MR) and Maxime Prevot (Les Engages) promised: "We will implement priority reforms for the socio-economic recovery to the benefit of all citizens and future generations." [Brussels Times] [Brussels Times] [RTBF]

The newly constituted Walloon Government comprises eight ministers led by Minister-President Adrien Dolimont, with five members from MR and three from Les Engages. Dolimont was previously the Minister of Budget, Finance, Airports and Sports Infrastructure in the Walloon Government. The cabinet achieves gender parity with four men and four women. Many ministers hold dual roles in the regional government and the French-speaking Community Government. [Brussels Times] [RTBF]

The coalition agreement promises priority reforms for socio-economic recovery, focusing on public happiness, enthusiasm, and optimism. Bouchez highlighted the importance of change and maintaining public support, focusing on collaborative and transparent reforms. [Brussels Times]

Prevot echoed these sentiments, stressing the need for progressive and proactive changes without causing disruption. He emphasised the party's commitment to modernising Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, with key achievements including fiscal reforms, eco-friendly initiatives, social and territorial transitions, and improvements in public services. "We will be progressive and proactive, but never offensive. Our goal isn't to disrupt, but to modernise," said Prevot before a Les Engages conference. [Brussels Times]

The agreement also saw the appointment of Willy Borsus (MR) as President of the Assembly. "Our institution must continue its efforts and its work to regain the trust of citizens." Borsus said. "I shall also ensure that this Presidency is conducted in a balanced manner, allowing everyone to express their views, to make proposals, and sometimes to disagree or even criticise." [Brussels Times]

The eight ministers took their oaths and were officially sworn into the Walloon Parliament on July 15. Outgoing Prime Minister Alexander De Croo offered his congratulations in a social-media statement: "The Walloon Region is at a crossroads and faces multiple challenges. I congratulate Adrien Dolimont on his appointment as Minister-President and wish his entire government every success in the years to come." [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Belgian Jews report a rise in antisemitism

Recent reports highlight a significant increase in antisemitism in Belgium, with the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) urging the country to intensify efforts against Jew-hatred. This follows a comprehensive study involving 8,000 Jews from 13 EU member states, including 688 from Belgium. According to the study, nearly all Belgian Jews (97%) have experienced antisemitism, with 7 out of 10 sometimes concealing their identity for safety reasons. This sense of insecurity extends to social interactions, with 40% avoiding Jewish events. Almost half of the respondents have considered emigrating in the past five years due to antisemitism. [Brussels Times] [Le Soir]

Unia, Belgium's equal opportunities centre, corroborated these findings, highlighting incidents such as the desecration of graves in Wallonia and antisemitic vandalism on a monument in Brussels. Towards the end of 2023, Minister of Justice Paul Van Tigchelt confirmed the rise in antisemitic threats, establishing the Interfederal Coordination Mechanism for Combating Anti-Semitism in response. [De Standaard]

The FRA survey also revealed that 84% of Belgian Jews view antisemitism as a significant problem, with 49% experiencing harassment in the past year and 9% being physically attacked in the last five years. Online antisemitism is prevalent, with 68% encountering hate speech, particularly on platforms like Facebook. [Brussels Times] [Le Soir]

"Europe is witnessing a wave of anti-Semitism, partly driven by the conflict in the Middle East," FRA Director Sirpa Rautio said. "This severely limits Jewish people's ability to live in safety and with dignity." Rautio emphasised that European governments, particularly Belgium, must “build on existing laws and strategies to protect communities from all forms of hate and intolerance.” [Brussels Times] [Le Soir]

(gvc)

Flemish nationalist party leader Bart De Wever appointed as federal formateur

Bart De Wever, leader of the Flemish-nationalist party New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), has been appointed by King Phillip of Belgium to lead formal coalition talks following his party's victory in the recent elections. De Wever's N-VA, which emerged as the largest party in the country, is negotiating to form a centre-right federal government with the Christian Democratic and Flemish (CD&V), social democratic Vooruit, liberal Reformist Movement (MR), and centrist Les Engages parties. [NOS] [POLITICO]

This appointment sets De Wever on track to become the next Prime Minister of Belgium, and the first Flemish nationalist to do so. Upon his appointment, he stated: "Before the elections, I clearly said that I was a candidate to become Prime Minister. Now I am trying to make that ambition come true. I assure you that it will be a government for all the citizens of our country." [Brussels Times] [POLITICO]

De Wever, also the mayor of Antwerp, has set the deadline for the process as September 20. The urgency in forming a federal government is partly due to Belgium needing to submit a multi-year budget plan to the European Commission by September 20, addressing its excessive deficit, which reached 4.4% of GDP last year. The coalition discussions have revealed significant differences, especially regarding healthcare expenditures, with Vooruit advocating for maintaining current growth and N-VA and MR seeking budget constraints. [POLITICO] [NOS]

Despite challenges, De Wever remains optimistic about meeting the September 20 deadline, coinciding with local elections in October. "The challenges are enormous. The budget process is an enormous task and we have to get to work on it. Restructuring the budget, reforming healthcare, pensions, the labour market, it is a gigantic job," he said. "But I have the impression that the five parties have the ambition to start that work." [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Belgian Audi site announces restructuring plans, putting 3,000 jobs at risk

German carmaker Audi has announced a significant restructuring of its Brussels production site, potentially leading to its complete shutdown and putting over 3,000 Belgian jobs at risk. Following a crisis meeting at Audi's headquarters in Ingolstadt, Germany, the company cited a global decline in demand for its

electric luxury SUVs, particularly the Q8 e-tron models produced in Brussels. [Brussels Times]

The Brussels Forest site, which has been manufacturing the Audi Q8 e-tron and Q8 Sportback e-tron since 2022, faces structural challenges due to its location and high logistical costs. The company plans to trigger the "Renault procedure," a mandatory consultation period with workers to explore solutions, although a complete shutdown remains a possibility. [Brussels Times] [L'Echo]

Union members and workers reacted with shock and disappointment. Vicky Schelhout, a union activist and long-time employee at the site, expressed little hope for the factory's future, stating: "I thought I would end my career here, but that won't be the case. I have little hope that the factory will stay open. You could see with those low production volumes that the situation was untenable.". Union leaders pointed out that Audi Brussels is a modern factory and its closure would impact not only direct employees but also many more working for suppliers. [De Standaard]

Belgian officials, including Minister for Economy and Labour Pierre-Yves Dermagne, assured that all potential ways to save jobs would be thoroughly examined. Prime Minister Alexander De Croo and Finance Minister Vincent Van Peteghem had previously reached out to Audi's board in a year-long attempt to retain operations in Belgium. [Europe in Review Jun 2024] [Brussels Times]

Despite the news, Audi Brussels CEO Volker Germann emphasised that a final decision has not yet been made and stressed the importance of a transparent and constructive dialogue moving forward. The plant is currently closed for a two-week period of temporary unemployment, followed by annual leave. [De Standaard]

(gvc)

Belgium faces severe budget deficit

Belgium is grappling with a severe budget deficit, projected to reach 46.6 billion euros (6.5% of GDP) by 2029, according to the Monitoring Committee. This deficit, up from an estimated 44.7 billion euros in March, will increase the debt rate from 106.9% of GDP to 119%. King Philippe, in his National Day speech, emphasised the urgency of addressing the budget crisis and called for a unified national plan, urging political cooperation and reforms to enhance public

service quality and foster civic engagement. [Le Soir] [Brussels Times]

Infrastructure maintenance in Flanders alone requires 10.66 billion euros over the next decade, with much of the existing infrastructure nearing the end of its economic life. Without significant funding changes, the situation is deemed untenable. Accordingly, the European Commission has mandated Belgium to follow a consolidation path to address the escalating deficit. [Brussels Times] [Le Soir]

Political tensions are high, with parties like the far-left Worker's Party and environmentalist Ecolo criticising the majority for inadequate measures. Walloon Prime Minister Adrien Dolimont defended the coalition's efforts, highlighting the need for drastic deficit reduction and denouncing opposition parties for their historical budget mismanagement. Dolimont stressed the importance of courage and clear vision in tackling these challenges, emphasising that ignoring the problems will only worsen the situation. [De Standaard]

The Monitoring Committee claimed that the federal government is primarily responsible for the worsening budget situation. Federal deficits are expected to rise from 20.9 billion euros in 2025 to 41.6 billion in 2029, while regional deficits are projected to decrease. Major reforms, particularly in social security and federal spending, are necessary to meet European Commission requirements. However, regional governments' willingness to assist in federal budget relief remains uncertain, with potential state reforms and changes to the financing law being contentious issues. [De Standaard] [De Standaard]

(gvc)

Only mothers have legal say in abortion cases, Swiss court rules

(lm) Switzerland's highest court has ruled that only mothers have the legal authority to make decisions regarding abortion. This decision came after a man sued his ex-partner for terminating a pregnancy at an advanced stage. While abortions are legal in Switzerland within the first twelve weeks, later-term abortions are allowed only if the mother is in an emergency situation. The public prosecutor dropped the man's case after doctors confirmed the woman was in psychological distress.

The man argued that as the father, he should be considered a "victim" under the law. However, the court disagreed, stating that the ban on late-term abortions is intended to protect the unborn child, not the father. Since a fetus does not have legal personality before birth, the father cannot be regarded as a victim and thus cannot lodge a complaint. [SWI]

(lm)

Non-believers, Muslims significantly underrepresented in Swiss parliament

Non-religious people are significantly underrepresented in the Swiss parliament. Although they constitute the largest group in the Swiss population at around 34 percent, they only hold about 23 percent of the seats in parliament. Roman Catholics, who make up roughly 40 percent of the parliamentary seats, are the largest group, followed by the Protestant Reformed at about 32 percent. Muslims are also notably underrepresented; despite being nearly 6 percent of the population, they only comprise about 1 percent of parliamentarians. [SWI]

(lm)

Human trafficking cases on the rise in Switzerland

The Swiss platform against human trafficking, Plateforme Traite, recorded 197 victims last year, an 11 percent increase from 2022. While the number of male victims rose, women still comprised the majority at 75.5 percent. The rise in male victims is attributed to heightened awareness and checks in male-dominated sectors. Labor exploitation cases also increased, with 47 percent of victims subjected to such conditions, including forced illegal activities like theft or drug trafficking. The platform noted that many victims are not recognized as such, lacking access to their rights and often facing prosecution and deportation, whereas perpetrators are seldom prosecuted.

In total, Plateforme Traite assisted 488 people in 2023, including both new and previously identified victims from 55 countries. Most victims originated from African countries (56 percent), followed by Europe (17 percent), Latin America (14 percent), and Asia (12 percent). The most common countries of origin for

newly identified victims were Hungary, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Somalia. [SWI]

(lm)

Swiss government investigates historical treatment of Yenish people

The Swiss government has commissioned an investigation to examine its historical treatment of the Yenish community, specifically focusing on potential genocide or crimes against humanity. This inquiry, confirmed by the Swiss Federal Department of Home Affairs, aims to provide a legal opinion on Switzerland's role in the controversial “Kinder der Landstrasse” (Children of the Country Road) programme. This program, managed by the Pro Juventute aid organization and state-financed, forcibly removed Yenish children from their families for decades. Yenish associations have described these actions as a “cultural genocide” and are seeking official recognition of the harm done.

The expert report is expected to be completed in the autumn, with the Swiss Federal Council anticipated to respond by the end of the year. [SWI]

(lm)

Majority of shareholders approve sustainability reports of major Swiss companies

At their annual general meetings, shareholders of the largest Swiss companies overwhelmingly approved sustainability reports, with an average approval rate of 97 percent, according to an analysis by news agency AWP. This year is the first time these reports, mandated by new legislation, required shareholder approval. The reports cover CO2 emissions, energy consumption, and workforce gender diversity.

However, proxy advisors were more critical. The shareholders' association Actares rejected two-thirds of the reports, and the Ethos Foundation rejected half, mainly due to a lack of transparency and insufficient climate protection strategies. Despite the high approval rates from shareholders, these organizations highlighted significant areas needing improvement. [SWI]

(lm)

French President Macros rejects left bid to name prime minister before Olympics

Gabriel Attal on July 16 officially resigned as France's Prime Minister but will continue to lead a caretaker government as President Macron has decided not to appoint a new government until after the Paris Olympics. He rejected a proposal from a left-wing coalition, the New Popular Front (NFP), which had put forward Lucie Castets as their candidate for prime minister. [abc news]

The recent parliamentary elections have left France without a dominant political bloc, leading to a split among the NPF, Macron's centrist allies, and the far-right National Rally. The NFP, consisting of four parties, controls 182 of the 577 seats, more than Macron's Ensemble or the National Rally – but not enough for a simple majority.

Against this backdrop, in a televised interview on July 23, Macron defended his decision to disregard Castet's nomination, nodding to the NFP's lack of a formal majority and explaining his delay in terms of building a majority consensus around a fitting successor. Macron stated that the issue was not about the candidate's name but about forming a majority in the National Assembly. [Le Monde 1]

However, his refusal has sparked criticism from NFP members, who accuse him of denying the election results. [BBC]

Macron-supported candidate re-elected as lower house president

In a test for potential alliances in the fragmented parliament, Yaël Braun-Pivet, supported by President Macron, was re-elected as President of Parliament's lower house, the Assemblée Nationale. She secured 220 votes in the third round, defeating left-wing candidate Andre Chassaigne with 207 votes and far-right candidate Sebastien Chenu with 141 votes. Braun-Pivet, the first woman to hold this position since her initial election in 2022, received backing from Macron's centrist allies and some conservative lawmakers.

Macron congratulated her on social media, emphasizing her commitment to respecting diverse opinions. Chassaigne criticized the result, accusing an

"unnatural alliance" between Macron's camp and the right of stealing the vote. [Le Monde 2]

President Macron meets with top business executives

Ahead of the Olympics, President Macron and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire hosted lunch with some of the world's most influential business executives. As uncertainty regarding who will govern the nation looms, Macron sought to reassure that France will remain a top investment destination and that French policy will not change. Largely due to generous subsidies, France has proven strong in attracting foreign investors. [Politico]

(ts/lm)

France's former first lady, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, charged with witness tampering

Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, France's former first lady, has been charged with witness tampering and other violations related to an election funding scandal from 2007, involving money from Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi. She faces charges of hiding evidence, associating with wrongdoers to commit fraud, and attempting to bribe Lebanese judicial personnel. Bruni-Sarkozy has been placed under judicial control and barred from contacting the other accused individuals except her husband, former President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Nicolas Sarkozy is set to go on trial next year over allegations that he took money from Gaddafi to finance his 2007 presidential campaign. He faces charges of corruption, illegal campaign financing, benefiting from embezzled public funds, and membership in a criminal conspiracy. Sarkozy has denied all charges.

The investigation began in 2013 after Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, accused Sarkozy of taking millions from his father. Lebanese businessman Ziad Takieddine later supported these claims, stating he had proof of the payments, but he retracted his statement in 2020, raising suspicions of witness tampering. Carla Bruni-Sarkozy allegedly deleted messages exchanged with a French businesswoman involved in the case.

Nicolas Sarkozy, who lost his re-election bid in 2012, has faced multiple criminal investigations since then. In 2023, he received a suspended prison sentence for attempting to bribe a judge and was found guilty of illegally funding his 2012 re-election campaign earlier this year. [BBC]

(lm)

Lavish state banquets tip French presidency into the red, auditor says

French President Emmanuel Macron's office significantly overspent its budget last year due to lavish state banquets, including a high-profile dinner for Britain's King Charles and Queen Camilla. The extravagant dinner, held in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, featured blue lobster and Bresse French poultry and cost the state EUR 475,000, with EUR 166,000 spent on catering alone. Another costly state dinner was held in honor of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Louvre, amounting to EUR 412,000. In contrast, a state dinner with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Elysee Palace cost only EUR 138,000.

The French public audit office, Cour des Comptes, reported that these high expenses contributed to a 6.5 percent increase in the presidency's costs, totaling EUR 117.2 million for the year and resulting in a budget shortfall of EUR 8.3 million. The audit also noted the rising cost of Macron's international trips, particularly the use of an Airbus A330, which costs over EUR 23,000 per hour. This news contrasts with the government's message about the need to control public spending amid France's high levels of expenditure relative to its economy. [Reuters]

(lm)

French economic growth will outperform 1 percent forecast, reiterates finance minister

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire reiterated that France's economic growth in 2024 will likely exceed the government's forecast of 1 percent. Speaking on France 2 TV, Le Maire expressed confidence that the actual growth rate will surpass expectations. Recent data indicated that France's economy grew slightly faster than anticipated in the second quarter, driven by a boost in exports from the delivery of a cruise ship, which offset flat consumer spending. [Reuters]

(lm)

France facing rise in all types of racism human rights commission warns

France is experiencing a significant rise in racism, as warned by the French human rights commission, CNCDH, in its annual report. This increase is driven by the conflict in Gaza and the influence of far-right ideologies in public discourse. Following Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, antisemitic incidents surged by 284 percent. The report highlights a general decline in tolerance towards all minorities.

The report precedes critical elections in which the far-right National Rally (RN) has gained a lead. RN, led by Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, promotes anti-immigration policies, including the controversial "national preference" plan that prioritizes native-born French citizens for jobs and social benefits. Despite 69 percent of respondents opposing this plan, the RN's growing support has pushed more extreme policies into the legislative arena.

The report also reveals that 51 percent of the French population feels alienated in their own country, up from 43 percent last year. This sentiment is even higher among RN supporters. Immigration is perceived as the main cause of national insecurity by 43 percent of the general population and 83 percent of RN supporters.

As the RN leads the elections, Bardella might become the Prime Minister in a "cohabitation" government with President Macron. This situation could lead to significant political and social shifts in France, emphasizing the deepening divide and rise of far-right influence in the country. [INDEPENDENT]

(lm)

SNCF Restores Rail Services After Arson Attacks Disrupt Travel

France's national rail operator, SNCF, has said that it has finished repairing infrastructure which was damaged in a coordinated arson attack. These attacks were designed to paralyze three high-speed lines running to and from Paris. As a result, hundreds of thousands were disrupted shortly before the Olympic Opening Ceremony. Rail workers are also reported to have foiled a fourth attack which intended to destroy safety equipment. The Paris prosecutor has opened a criminal investigation into the attacks. [BBC News]

Six British lawmakers announce they are running to lead defeated Conservative Party

Six British lawmakers have announced their intentions to lead the Conservative Party after its significant election defeat. The candidates, who include former Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and centrist lawmaker Tom Tugendhat, are positioned to potentially steer the party towards the political center ground. From the right of the party, former Home Secretary Priti Patel and ex-Business Secretary Kemi Badenoch are also running. Additionally, former immigration minister Robert Jenrick and lawmaker Mel Stride have secured the necessary support of 10 Conservative lawmakers.

Badenoch, who was a prominent candidate in the party's last leadership election in 2022, emphasized the need for a renewal centered on capitalism and a smaller state. Following a devastating election defeat where the Conservatives lost votes to parties on both the right and left, the party is divided between moderates wanting to reclaim centrist voters and hard-liners who advocate for tougher migration and law and order policies to counter the Reform U.K. party led by Nigel Farage.

Former Home Secretary Suella Braverman, a notable figure on the party's right, has opted not to run but has suggested integrating Farage and Reform U.K. into the Conservative ranks. She expressed frustration with her colleagues, who she claims dismissed her views.

The Conservatives faced a historic loss in the July 4 election, ending 14 years of power under five prime ministers and reducing their representation to 121 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons. The party's turbulent time in office was marked by economic shocks and internal scandals, including Boris Johnson's scandal-ridden tenure and the economic turmoil during Liz Truss's brief leadership.

The contest to replace former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak will span over three months, with Sunak remaining as acting leader until his successor is announced on November 2. Conservative lawmakers will narrow down the field through a series of votes, culminating in an online vote by Conservative members across the country after the party's annual conference in early October. The party's previous leadership election in mid-2022 saw Liz Truss win over Sunak, only for her to resign after 49 days due to her tax-cutting plans causing financial instability. Sunak

was subsequently chosen to replace her. [Independent]

(lm)

Lord Heseltine has Tory whip restored after backing Lib Dems over Brexit in 2019

(lm) Lord Michael Heseltine, the former deputy prime minister of the UK, had the Tory whip restored on July 9, 2024, after five years. He was initially suspended in May 2019 for publicly stating he would vote for the Liberal Democrats in the European elections due to his opposition to Brexit. This suspension was a result of his vocal criticism of the Conservative Party's stance on Brexit, which he described as "the biggest act of economic self-harm ever undertaken by a democratic government."

The Conservative Party's decision to reinstate the whip for Heseltine aligns with the party's broader moves to restore ties with some of its members who had been penalized for their opposition to a no-deal Brexit. A similar suspension occurred in September 2019 when 21 MPs lost the Conservative whip for rebelling against the government to avoid a no-deal Brexit. While some MPs had the whip restored shortly after, others, including former justice secretary David Gauke, remained excluded from the party for longer periods.

Heseltine, a long-standing pro-European politician who joined the Conservative Party in 1951, had his suspension reviewed and subsequently lifted on the condition that he would support Conservative candidates in future elections. His reinstatement is seen as a reconciliation move within the party as it navigates the ongoing political landscape post-Brexit. [Independent]

British government delays university free-speech fines

The British government has delayed the implementation of new powers under the Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act, which would have allowed universities and student unions to be fined for not upholding freedom of speech. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson stated that this postponement allows time to consider potentially repealing the law. She emphasized that the Office for Students (OfS)

should focus more on the financial stability of universities.

The Higher Education Freedom of Speech Act, passed last year, mandated universities to secure and promote free speech and allowed the OfS to fine institutions for breaches. However, concerns arose that the law could enable Holocaust deniers to speak on campuses, which critics labeled an "anti-Semite charter."

Despite the delay, universities are still legally required to uphold free speech under existing legislation. Phillipson expressed that campus culture wars should end and underscored the importance of financial stability over cultural conflicts. A review of the OfS by Sir David Behan recommended that the regulator narrow its focus to monitoring financial sustainability, ensuring quality, protecting public funds, and regulating in students' interests.

The review found that the number of universities in deficit and announcing redundancies is likely to increase, presenting significant challenges. Phillipson reiterated that universities are expected to manage their budgets without relying on bailouts. The review also highlighted the ongoing impact of digital technology and AI on education, recommending a policy review on the government's non-interventionist stance.

Universities UK supported the review's focus on financial sustainability. Sir David Behan was appointed interim chairman of the OfS following the resignation of Lord Wharton, and the OfS expressed eagerness to work with him on prioritizing the highlighted areas. [SKY News] [BBC]

(ts)

Puberty blockers ban is lawful, says High Court

In the United Kingdom, the High Court has ruled that a ban on puberty blockers for children and young people with gender dysphoria, introduced by the previous government through emergency legislation, is lawful. The decision was challenged by the trans campaign group TransActual UK, which argued that there had been a failure to consult patient groups and that the emergency process was misused.

This decision aligns with the earlier findings of the Hilary Cass Review, which highlighted a lack of

evidence supporting the safety and effectiveness of puberty blockers for those under 18. Consequently, NHS England decided in March to restrict the use of puberty blockers to clinical trials only.

TransActual UK condemned the High Court's decision and expressed plans to appeal. They raised concerns about the safety and welfare of young trans individuals in the UK, criticizing the review process for excluding trans researchers and questioning the motivations behind the emergency ban. [BBC]

(lm)

New British government cuts billions of pounds of spending to fix 'unsustainable' finances

Britain's new finance minister, Rachel Reeves, announced a series of substantial spending cuts to address an inherited budget overspend of GBP 21.9 billion (EUR 25.62 billion) left by the previous Conservative administration. In an immediate response, Reeves introduced cuts totaling GBP 5.5 billion (EUR 6.44 billion), with plans for an additional GBP 8.1 billion (EUR 9.49 billion) in cuts for the next financial year. She also hinted at the possibility of future tax increases, which will be detailed in a full budget announcement on October 30.

Despite these austerity measures, Reeves committed to granting above-inflation pay rises to public-sector workers, totaling GBP 9.1 billion (EUR 10.65 billion). This decision follows recommendations from independent pay-setting bodies that the previous Conservative government had ignored. Reeves emphasized that the current state of public finances was unsustainable and posed a risk to economic stability if left unaddressed.

The new Labour government, which won a landslide victory on July 4, has spent its initial weeks in power highlighting the severity of the financial situation across various public policy areas. Reeves inherited an economy characterized by sluggish growth, the highest public sector net debt since the early 1960s, and a tax burden nearing an 80-year high. The previous government also faced widespread industrial action in the public sector, which Reeves addressed by accepting the pay rise recommendations for workers such as teachers and healthcare staff.

In her statement to parliament, Reeves accused the former Conservative government of concealing the

true state of public finances and making promises they knew could not be fulfilled, such as unfeasible road and public transport projects, and hospital renovations. To curb the budget deficit, she announced cuts to numerous projects, including road building and railway restoration, and a review of the hospital rebuilding scheme. Additionally, she set a target for government departments to save over GBP 3 billion (EUR 3.51 billion) from their budgets and proposed stopping annual heating payments to higher-income pensioners, saving around GBP 1.5 billion (EUR 1.76 billion) per year. [Financial Times]

Reeves' announcement was met with criticism from the Conservatives, who accused Labour of using the financial review as a pretext for planned tax hikes and spending cuts. Jeremy Hunt, the former finance minister, claimed that Labour's actions were politically motivated rather than economically necessary. Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, noted that some of the funding pressures appeared greater than expected and raised difficult questions for the previous government.

The Office for Budget Responsibility, which scrutinizes government tax and spending plans, will review the preparation of Hunt's last budget, acknowledging the serious concerns raised. Despite the challenges, Reeves stressed her intention to stick to Labour's election campaign commitments not to raise the rates of income tax, value-added tax, and other main taxes. Any other tax changes will be addressed in the October budget statement, which will include a new set of non-negotiable fiscal rules aimed at ensuring financial stability. [Reuters] [Independent]

Bank of England announces interest rate cuts for first time in four years

On August 1st, the Bank of England announced the first rate cut from its highest rate since 2008.

In a narrow 5-4 decision, the Bank of England's monetary policy committee (MPC) announced a rate cut from 5.25% to 5%. With inflation remaining steady at the Bank's target of 2% for the past two months, Andrew Bailey, the Bank of England governor, said inflationary pressures had "eased enough" to cut the rates for the first time in 4 and a half years. [AP News]

Persistent service sector price increases and wage growth particularly temper the prospect of significant rate cuts in the coming months. Further contributing to continued concern for economic cooling, the MPC also

warned that headline inflation is predicted to rise to 2.75% within the coming months, above the Bank's 2% target. However, the Bank forecasts a dip in inflation to a 2% target in 2026 and 1.5% by 2027. [Reuters]

Given remaining concerns about critical inflation gauges and the U.K.'s overall economic condition, the MPC announced that it would maintain "restrictive" levels to regulate economic activity even after cutting the rates. "Monetary policy will need to continue to remain restrictive for sufficiently long until the risks to inflation returning sustainably to the 2% target in the medium term have dissipated further," it said. [The Guardian]

(ts/gc)

British Labour government tries to attract clean energy contracts with record EUR for auction

The UK Labour government has announced a record increase in funding for clean energy projects, raising the value of its summer subsidy auction by 50 percent to GBP 1.5 billion (EUR 1.77 billion). This move aims to boost investment in the UK's clean energy industry, following the previous government's failure to award any new offshore wind contracts in 2023.

Energy Secretary Ed Miliband highlighted that the increased funding would create high-quality jobs, protect household bills from fossil fuel price rises, and reestablish the UK as a leader in green technologies. Offshore wind projects will now compete for up to GBP 1.1 billion (EUR 1.29 billion), potentially resulting in 6-7 gigawatts of offshore wind capacity, enough to power nearly 5 million homes. Onshore wind and solar projects will have access to GBP 185 million (EUR 219 million), while funding for emerging clean energy technologies, such as floating offshore wind and tidal power, will more than double to GBP 270 million (EUR 320 million).

This announcement follows industry concerns about the Labour Party's ambitious clean energy targets, including doubling onshore wind, tripling solar power, and quadrupling offshore wind by 2030. Industry leaders have emphasized the importance of developments in the next 18 to 24 months for achieving these targets.

The contracts guarantee set prices for each unit of clean electricity generated, paid through energy bills. However, these contracts are designed not to raise

consumer costs; if market prices fall below the agreed contract price, households will face additional charges. Conversely, as renewable energy costs have fallen below market prices, these contracts have often resulted in savings for consumers.

Official data for 2023 revealed a record year for renewable energy in the UK, with renewables providing 46.4 percent of electricity, compared to 36.7 percent from fossil fuels. Wind power was the largest source of clean energy, generating a record 28.1 percent of electricity, with offshore wind contributing 17 percent and onshore wind 11.2 percent. [The Guardian]

(lm)

Housebuilding targets could force councils in England to build on 'grey belt'

The UK Labour government has set out plans to significantly increase housebuilding with a proposed shake-up of planning rules. This new framework could force councils in England to build on low-quality green belt sites if they fail to meet mandatory construction targets. Deputy Prime Minister and Housing Secretary Angela Rayner announced these changes, highlighting the need for urgent action following the Conservative government's previous decision to make local targets voluntary, which allowed many projects to be blocked.

The overall target for new homes will rise from 300,000 per year to 370,000, contrasting with forecasts that fewer than 200,000 homes will be completed this year, with little more than 100,000 of these being affordable. Rayner emphasized the necessity of addressing the housing crisis, asserting that all must contribute to the solution.

The new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England will impose a duty on local authorities to build more homes, with ministers stepping in if councils fail to present a clear plan. A contentious element of the plan is the provision for councils to review local green belt land and identify "grey belt" sites, areas within the green belt but deemed to contribute little to it. Housebuilding companies can propose developments on these grey belt areas if councils do not adequately identify them.

The NPPF defines grey belt land as developed areas or those contributing little to green belt purposes, such as edges of towns, former petrol stations, or car parks. Any green belt projects will require that at least 50 percent of the homes be affordable. Rayner denied

that the mandatory targets would override local decisions, asserting the need to meet the government's mandate of building 1.5 million homes.

Councils will need to have new local plans in place by next year, as currently, two-thirds have plans over five years old. The new regime will also eliminate the stipulation for developments to be "beautiful," deemed too subjective by officials. The revised housing targets show significant increases in several regions, though London's target is reduced from nearly 100,000 to 80,000 to make the plan more achievable.

The government is also reviewing the right-to-buy scheme, which allows council tenants to purchase homes at a discount, thereby reducing available social housing. Potential changes include limiting eligibility and stopping the sale of new social homes. Other changes include doubling the cost for planning applications and streamlining planning committees to focus on larger projects.

Shadow Housing Secretary Kemi Badenoch criticized the removal of the "beautiful" requirement and questioned the reduction of London’s building targets. Meanwhile, the government announced Sir Michael Lyons would chair the New Towns Taskforce, which will lead to the creation of new towns, with locations to be announced within the next 12 months. [The Guardian]

(lm)

King's Speech outlines Labour's plan to renationalize railway system

On July 17th, in his second King's Speech before Parliament, King Charles announced the Labour Party's flagship plan to renationalize the U.K.'s railway system. The Labour Party aims to pass two bills to nationalize the railway system by the end of Parliament's five-year term. The move would mark the first nationalization of the U.K.'s railway system in 31 years.

Labour officials argue that while railways were formerly privatized to encourage private sector competition and usher efficiencies and price reductions for railway users, fragmentation, bureaucracy, and legal battles have instead burdened privatized operations. Labour leaders further claim that an exit from profit-minded operations will help resolve labor disputes that have long plagued U.K. rail systems. Private companies argue that nationalization will lead to increased fare prices. [The Independent]

To facilitate the transfer of ownership, Labour intends to establish the Great British Railways, a publicly owned authority which would absorb the contracts of private carriers as they either expire over the years or when the terms of the contract are breached. All contracts are set to expire within the next four years, but lawyers could expedite ownership transfer with proof of contract breach. [The Guardian]

(ts/gc)

In a sign of cooling inflation, the British Pound reaches a year high against the U.S. dollar

With June inflation figures slightly above expectations, the British pound reached its one-year high against the U.S. dollar on July 17. At 2 percent, the Office for National Statistics consumer price data rose narrowly above experts' predicted 1.9 percent figure for June, prompting some bettors to withdraw bets that the Bank of England will cut back rates next month. Following the figure's release, speculators set a roughly 33 percent chance of a rate cut compared to the previous percentage of roughly 50 percent. [Reuters]

The point reached a USD 1.3044 valuation before falling to USD 1.3007 by market closes.

The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee has signaled a willingness to reduce inflation rates from a 16-year high of 5.25 percent. Persistent consumer services price growth, held as a revealing indicator of inflation, has undermined confidence in fully controlling price pressures. Consumer services inflation rates of 5.7 percent in June held higher than the analyst predicted a decline to 5.6 percent. [Financial Times]

(ts)

Ireland’s Council of State convenes to advise president on bill introducing changes to Defence Forces

President Michael D. Higgins has signed the Defence (Amendment) Bill into law after consulting the Council of State to evaluate its constitutionality. The bill which passed all stages of the Irish parliament this month, provides legal underpinnings for a new oversight body in the Irish Defence Forces and allows Defence Forces

personnel to associate with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. It was only the fourth Council of State meeting in Higgins' thirteen-year tenure. The Council's role is advisory, with the President ultimately deciding on the Supreme Court referral, which would render the law unchallengeable if deemed constitutional. [The Irish Times]

The controversy arises from the amendment that members of the Defence Forces "shall not question or express an opinion on the merits of any policy of the government or a minister of the government or on the merits of the objectives of such policy". The Defence Forces, however, must always be politically impartial due to Ireland's neutral stance. However, some members believe that this would limit members of the Defence Forces to have an opinion to any political organisation or grouping. The President's office issued a statement that said, "The president's decision to sign this legislation thus does not close off any actions sought by any member of the Defence Forces, or their representative association, to challenge the provisions of the bill in the future ." [BBC]

Despite concerns from the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers (RACO) about the lack of consultation with Defence Forces representative associations, they were reassured by Deputy Prime Minister (Tánaiste) and Minister of Defence, Micheál Martin. RACO thanked the President for his careful consideration and appreciated the Council of State's deliberations, as well as the support from Oireachtas members who opposed the bill's deficiencies. [RTE]

(nm)

Ireland security at risk, new defence review says

According to the new Defence Policy Review 2024, Ireland is increasingly vulnerable to cyber-attacks, espionage, and threats to critical infrastructure from hostile states and criminal gangs. This assessment, the first since 2019, prioritizes maritime security and cyber and hybrid security. The review, published by the Department of Defence, highlights significant changes in Ireland's security environment, heavily influenced by global events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As an EU member with close ties to the US and UK, Ireland faces similar threats and challenges as other countries. [Irish Times]

The document notes that Ireland's geographic position and military neutrality no longer mitigate these threats

effectively, making the country more susceptible to hybrid tactics aimed at undermining its security and democracy. [Irish Examiner]

Despite maintaining military neutrality, Ireland is committed to supporting international security and European defence efforts. The review condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine and nuclear rhetoric, noting potential maritime or hybrid threats to critical infrastructure in the North Atlantic. Defence Minister Micheál Martin emphasizes the importance of maritime security, citing increased foreign military activity in Ireland's Exclusive Economic Zone. The report stresses the vulnerability of undersea fibre optic cables crucial to international communications and the security of energy infrastructure. It also highlights the Government's commitment to increasing defence spending to €1.5 billion by 2028 under LOA 2, addressing Ireland's relatively low defence expenditure compared to similar states. Other key elements include a new military radar system and the necessity to maintain increased defence funding. The review, the first since the White Paper on Defence Update 2019, acknowledges a reduction in Defence Forces personnel from 9,140 in 2015 to 7,477 currently. [Irish Examiner]

(nm)

Migration takes center stage in upcoming Irish election

As Ireland approaches its next general election set for March 2025, migration has emerged as a pivotal issue for the leading political parties. Sinn Féin, Ireland's leading left-wing party, which has recently seen a decline in poll numbers, is shifting its focus to immigration to regain voter support and address key concerns. Sinn Féin has proposed new measures for managing international protection centres, including auditing local resources before site selection and not placing them in working class areas. This policy tries to balance the distribution of centres and address community concerns. However, this has sparked debate amongst politicians, arguing that the Government already considers resource availability when choosing sites. McDonald's proposals also include reforms to the international protection system and preparations for changes affecting Ukrainian applicants. [RTE]

Ireland's Justice Minister has emphasized the need for flexibility and regular assessments to adapt to shifting migration patterns and maintain the effectiveness of the immigration system. The Department of Justice has

expanded its resources, including doubling staff and opening a new processing asylum centre. However, the number of deportation orders has also risen significantly, reflecting a 90% increase from the previous year. [Irish Independent]

On the European front, Ireland's decision to join seven legal acts under the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum has been noted by the European Commission, highlighting the importance of this issue. This Pact aims to enhance migration management through improved border security and fair procedures. Ireland's involvement reflects its commitment to European values and efficient migration management, with significant EU funding already allocated and additional support expected as new legislation is implemented. [European Commission]

Housing remains a critical issue intertwined with the migration debate. In June, 2,000 asylum seekers were sleeping in Dublin's city centre due to shortage of accommodation. The Minister for Housing has emphasized the Government's commitment to addressing homelessness, which saw a record high of 14,009 people in emergency accommodation as of April, including 4,206 children. Despite significant efforts, including a surge in new home constructions and legislative measures to prevent bulk-buying of properties by investment funds, Dublin continues to struggle with acute housing shortages. [Irish Times] [Irish Examiner]

(nm)

Asylum seekers to stay put in Ireland despite violent protests

Minister for Integration Roderic O'Gorman has confirmed that plans to use two properties in Coolock, Dublin, and Dundrum, Co Tipperary to house asylum seekers will proceed despite local opposition. The Coolock site, a former Crown Paints plant, will accommodate up to 500 people, while the Dundrum House Hotel will house around 300 asylum seekers, maintaining its current capacity previously used for Ukrainian families. [Irish Times]

The Coolock site has faced significant unrest, including arson attacks and violent protests, resulting in injuries to three gardaí. Despite these incidents, O'Gorman emphasized the importance of the site for housing International Protection families, citing the Northside Partnership's community engagement proposal as a positive step forward. [RTE]

In Dundrum, ongoing protests since May have led a group to seek a High Court injunction against using the hotel for asylum seekers. O'Gorman, however, reiterated the government's commitment to utilizing the hotel for International Protection Applicants. [Irish Times]

(nm)

LGBTQ+ groups respond to parliament over 'homophobic' petition

A petition calling for a ban on teaching LGBTQ+ themes to minors in schools reached the required 4,500 signatures in just three days, qualifying it for parliamentary debate in Luxembourg. The petition's timing, coinciding with Luxembourg Pride month, was seen as significant, especially after past incidents of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, such as the attack on drag storyteller Tatta Tom.

Against this backdrop, LGBTQ+ rights groups and human rights associations expressed shock and outrage at the petition's swift progress. Nicolas Van Elsué, president of Rosa Lëtzebuerg, criticized the petition, labeling it as homophobic despite its claims otherwise, and emphasized the importance of teaching children about diversity. By contrast, far-right Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR) MPs welcomed the petition's success, with MP Tom Weidig describing it as support for parents against LGBTQ influence, and ADR president Fred Keup noting its strong impact. [Luxembourg Times 1]

Counter-petition demands that more LGBTQ+ subjects be taught

In response, a counter-petition has been submitted demanding more LGBTQ+ subjects be taught. This counter-petition emerged two weeks after the initial one gained significant traction, reaching 6,900 signatures in five days and close to 8,750 signatures by July 31. [Luxembourg Times 2]

(lm)

NGO sector's compliance rules under scrutiny over Caritas case

The investigation into a EUR 61 million fraud at Caritas Luxembourg has raised concerns about the effectiveness of compliance rules within the NGO

sector. Questions have emerged about how such a large sum could go missing and whether stricter regulations might have prevented the fraud.

The government has provided Caritas with EUR 21 million so far this year, with total funding expected to reach €EUR 5 million by the end of 2024. The exact financial impact remains unclear due to co-financing from EU funds and donations for some Caritas projects abroad.

While only the banking and insurance sectors in Luxembourg are legally required to follow stringent compliance rules monitored by the main financial regulatory authority, the CSSF, other sectors, including charities, rely on internal governance measures. These measures include internal and external audits, the four-eyes principle, requiring multiple signatures for financial transactions, and competent boards of directors to oversee operations.

The case of Caritas is not isolated; other institutions like the Luxembourg Science Center and health insurer CMCM have also faced scrutiny over financial governance issues. This has prompted CSV MP Laurent Mosar to question if there should be legally mandated governance rules for organizations receiving public funds. [Luxembourg Times]

(lm)

Luxembourg gets stricter on Afghan asylum seekers

Luxembourg has increased its rejection rate for Afghan asylum seekers in 2024, with 13 out of 65 applications for international protection denied so far. Home Affairs Minister Léon Gloden cited a slight stabilization in Afghanistan's security situation since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 as a reason for this stricter approach. Gloden noted that Afghanistan is no longer experiencing armed conflict with indiscriminate violence that endangers all civilians.

In 2023, 90 out of 124 Afghan applicants were granted refugee status, while 19 were refused. For 2024, 49 applications have been approved, and 13 rejected, with three cases transferred to other jurisdictions.

Despite the stricter stance, Gloden acknowledged ongoing threats from Daesh and other Islamist militants, and the severe human rights situation in Afghanistan, especially for women, girls, minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. He emphasized that no forced

returns to Afghanistan have been carried out by Luxembourg since August 2021, although three Afghan nationals voluntarily returned in recent years. [Luxembourg Times]

(lm)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Universal health coverage to come into full effect in 2027 in Armenia

Armenian Healthcare Minister Anahit Avanesyan has announced plans to implement a comprehensive healthcare insurance system over the next three years.

Avanesyan stated that a phased introduction will help the system gradually prepare for increased admissions. She highlighted that ongoing investments, capital constructions, systemic changes, and quality control measures will support the insurance system's development.

The comprehensive healthcare insurance system is expected to be fully operational by 2027. [Armenpress]

(dql)

Number of candidates for Azerbaijan parliamentary elections announced

On August 1, Mazahir Panahov, Chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC), announced that

481 candidates for parliamentary seats have been registered for the September 1 snap parliamentary election in Azerbaijan.

The CEC points out that 25 of the 26 registered parties are participating in the elections. Among the total of 1,489 candidates which have been nominated, there are 459 from 25 political parties and 1,029 individual applicants. Among the individual applicants there are 958 non-party candidates and 531 party members.

On June 28, Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan signed a decree to dissolute the sixth Azerbaijani Parliament and scheduling a snap election for September 1. [Trend]

(dql)

Prominent opposition figure in Azerbaijan stands trial

Tofig Yagublu, a leading Azerbaijani opposition figure, faces up to 13 years in prison due to various fraud charges.

Yagublu is accused of having taken cash payments of about EUR 5,880 from an Azerbaijani asylum seeker to whom he promised to arrange asylum in Germany. The supposed asylum seeker sent money to Yagublu via an individual named Elnur Mammadov who testified in trial.

Mammadov testified that Yagublu is engaged in a side business of arranging asylum status to asylum seekers. Yagublu denied those accusations with the justification that the witness has long been a government operative being used to set up alleged crimes of government opponents. He asserts that the accusations against him are politically motivated.

In a report about the government's treatment of Yagublu by Trial Watch which operates on behalf of the Clooney Foundation for Justice, various procedural deficiencies were revealed. Trial Watch pointed out that Yagublu was deprived of his fair trial rights. Particularly, the judgement failed in view of the assessment of evidence whereby the testimonies were partly contradictory, and the witnesses could not withstand the inquiries by the court.

Yagublu is only one of a dozen prominent journalists and government critics who were arrested at the end of last year in course of the preparations for the presidential elections. Opponents of President Ilham

Aliyev's government claim that the wave of arrests served to silence criticism of his regime during his re-election campaign. No cameras are allowed in the courtroom at Yagublu's trial, which Yagublu says has not been the case at other recent high-profile trials. [Eurasianet]

(nl)

Estonian Prime Minister Kallas resigns to be succeeded by Climate Minister Michal

On July 15, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas resigned to assume the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In late June, Kallas was appointed as the European Union's new foreign policy chief, succeeding Josep Borrell.

Kallas has been a vocal supporter of Ukraine and a critic of Russia's actions. Under her leadership, Estonia, a country with a population of 1.4 million, became one of the highest per-capita military donors to Ukraine. In February, Russia issued an arrest warrant against her for her role in removing Soviet-era monuments in Estonia. [Reuters]

In a smooth transition, the Estonian parliament elected on July 22 Minister of Climate Kristen Michal as the new Prime Minister. Michal, from the centrist Reform Party, will continue the majority coalition with Reform, Estonia 200, and the Social Democrats. Estonian President Alar Karis appointed the government of Michal to office on the same day. [Politico] [Postimees 1]

The three-party coalition presented its cooperation agreement on July 19. Michal announced the introduction of a national defense tax comprising increased VAT, income tax, and corporate profit tax. VAT and income tax will rise by 2% from 2025 and 2026, respectively, with corporate profits also taxed by 2% for national defense, aiming to raise an additional €3 billion. These taxes will be temporary, lasting until the end of 2028.

The coalition commits to maintaining national defense spending at a minimum of 3% of GDP, plus the costs of hosting allies, and plans to invest in long-range weapons systems and munitions. The agreement lacks provisions for a teachers' salary increase but promises to reform vocational education and make higher

education more flexible. In healthcare, the coalition aims to enhance the use of health data and personalized medicine, streamline digital medical solutions, and create a unified support system for people with reduced work ability.

The new government also plans to raise excise duties on alcohol, tobacco, and gasoline, and increase the number of rental apartments to stabilize rental prices. The coalition will maintain pensions without reductions or freezes and prioritize teachers, defense personnel, and internal security providers. [Postimees 2]

(bw/dql)

Georgian civil society organizations and media challenge “foreign agents” law in Constitutional Court

On July 17, more than 120 Georgian civil society and media organizations have brought a case before the Constitutional Court contesting the “Foreign Agents” law in an attempt to repeal it. [Caucasus Watch]

In an earlier move, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili filed a lawsuit challenging the "foreign influence" law on July 15. Subsequently, other opposition members submitted a separate constitutional complaint.

These complaints emphasized that the law conflicts with Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which mandates that all constitutional bodies take steps to support Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO while also safeguarding constitutional rights to freedom of association and expression. [Caucasus Watch]

Civil society organizations, along with the media, expect the Constitutional Court to promptly suspend the implementation of the law prior to its final ruling and claim to prepare a separate complaint for the European Court of Human Rights.

The controversial foreign agents law passed on May 28 and enacted on June 3 classifies civil society organizations and media outlets that obtain at least 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources as entities serving the interests of a foreign power. The law, enacted in the midst of widespread protests and exceptional international pressure, has been referred to as the "Russian law" due to its resemblance to a 2012 Russian statute that has since suppressed dissent in Russia. [Civil Georgia] [EiR No. 6, June/2024]

(zh)

Three additional opposition groups uniting in preparation for upcoming general elections in Georgia

Three opposition groups, including the Lelo for Georgia Party, the Ana Dolidze's For People Party, and the newly launched Freedom Square movement, declared on July 17 that they are joining forces coming together in preparation for the parliamentary elections set for October in Georgia.

The formation of the alliance occurred as opposition groups worked to consolidate their efforts against the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has been accused of actions that have hindered the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. On July 9, three other opposition parties—Ahali, Girchi-More Freedom, and Droa—revealed their plan to present a unified election list for the upcoming elections.

Meanwhile, on July 8, Tina Bokuchava, Chair of the opposition United National Movement, unveiled a new political platform called "Unity – to Save Georgia," which platform brings together the UNM and Strategy Agmashenebeli—two parties that have been in coalition for a year—as well as members from other parties, civil society, and academic circles. [Civil Georgia]

(zh)

Georgian President Zurabishvili launches 'Vote for Europe' movement

On July 11, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili established the "Vote for Europe" movement 11 to unite representatives of Georgia's civil society aimed at securing Georgia's European future.

Starting on July 18 and concluding on election day, October 26, the "100 Days to Victory" campaign will strive to engage Georgian citizens across the country and the diaspora abroad in an attempt to mobilize pro-Western voters. [Civil Georgia] [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

The President declared that the 100-day campaign would go against the government's efforts to diverge from Georgia's current alignment with the European

Union, emphasizing that the October elections will play a crucial role in shaping the country's future direction. President Zurabishvili describe the upcoming elections as a competition between the Georgian society and the government, which he accused of having usurped the country's future.

Security expert Khatuna Lagazidze, one of the founders of the "Vote for Europe" movement, further warned that the process of joining the European Union has halted, pointing to the fact that the recent NATO summit declaration was silent on a partnership with Georgia (see article in this edition). [Civil Georgia]

(zh)

International Republican Institute to commence international observation mission for parliamentary elections in Georgia

American nonprofit organization International Republican Institute (IRI) is initiating an international observation mission for the October 26 parliamentary elections in Georgia.

According to the information provided by the organization and considering their long-term engagement with electoral and political stakeholders as well as the international community, 20 long-term IRI observers will monitor electoral districts across the country several months prior to the elections. [Georgia Today]

As reported by the IRI, these elections will be critical for Georgian democracy. "The need for a transparent and reliable election process, which will give citizens a variety of choices, is one of the 9 reservations issued by the European Union to Georgia, which the country received at the end of 2023 after being granted the status of a candidate country of the European Union," the organization announced. [Georgia Today]

The IRI observation team will implement its monitoring activities in compliance with the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers. Findings and recommendations will be derived from Georgia's laws, international election standards, and the commitments outlined in the upcoming Political Party Code of Conduct. [International Republican Institute]

(zh)

Lithuanian President Nausėda sworn in for second term, Šimonytė approved as prime minister

On July 12, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda began his second term in office, taking the presidential oath at the Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament.

In his speech, he highlighted achievements over the past five years, including economic resilience and efforts to reduce social exclusion. Nausėda emphasized national security, vowing to make Lithuania a model for NATO defense by 2029. He underscored the importance of a strong foreign policy, continued support for Ukraine, and addressing climate change, education, and technological advancements. [Delfi 1]

In the May presidential election, Nausėda secured his reelection for a second term, prevailing over Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė with a clear majority of 74.5 percent of the votes. The electoral process, culminating in the May 26 run-off election, saw both candidates vying for the presidency amid heightened concerns over national security, particularly in the context of Russia's assertive actions in the region. Nausėda's victory reflects his consistent advocacy for Lithuania's sovereignty and his commitment to strengthening the country's defence capabilities. [EiR No. 6, June/2024]

Days later after Nausėda was sworn in, Šimonytė, nominated by the president, was elected on July 16 as prime minister, securing 69 votes in favor of her candidacy, 30 voted against and 25 abstentions. [Delfi 2]

In a latest development, Šimonytė presented the new Cabinet lineup to Nausėda on August 2 for appointment, proposing replacements for two out of 14 current ministers. Minister of Agriculture Kęstutis Navickas and Health Minister Arūnas Dulkys will be replaced by MP Kazys Starkevičius and Deputy Health Minister Aurimas Pečkauskas, respectively.

Šimonytė expressed her trust in all current ministers, noting that they could have continued their work until the end of the Government’s mandate. However, she agreed on the changes with Navickas and Dulkys, appreciating their work despite significant challenges and criticism.

Under Lithuania's constitution, the cabinet is being re-appointed the prime minister is obliged to resign during the inauguration of the new president. During the presidential election campaign Nausėda demanded a government reshuffle, with Dulkys and Navickas were among the most criticised by the president and his team lately. [LRT]

(bw/dql)

Law on converting Russian language schools to Latvian upheld by Latvian constitutional court

In two decisions rendered on July 10 and 12, the Latvian Constitutional Court upheld a law requiring that all schools use Latvian as the language of instruction. The court found that the law complies with Latvia's legal framework and international obligations.

Latvia, which gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, has a significant Russian-speaking minority, but Latvian is the official language as per Article 4 of the Constitution. The Education Law of 1998 and the General Education Law of 2000 mandated Latvian as the primary language in public schools, though some private schools used Russian. In 2018, an amendment extended this requirement to all educational institutions, including private ones.

This reform sparked controversy among Russian speakers, leading to a 2023 petition challenging the law as a violation of minority education rights. The original court upheld the law, and the Constitutional Court has now confirmed this decision.

A 2020 Venice Commission report noted that while the law aligns with international standards, Latvia should consider a more inclusive approach for minorities. The ruling coincides with other measures affecting the Russian-speaking community, such as new language exam requirements and the closure of border crossings with Russia in October 2023 for security reasons. [Jurist News]

(dql)

Latvia's State Security Service executes search warrant of former EP member

On July22, the Latvian State Security Service executed search warrants at two residences linked to former European Parliament member Tatjana Ždanoka. These actions are part of a criminal investigation into her suspected collaboration with Russian intelligence services, prompted by her loss of parliamentary immunity. The searches resulted in the seizure of storage media, notes, and documents for further analysis.

The investigation began in mid-March 2024, following allegations that Ždanoka had communicated with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) since 2004, as revealed by leaked emails. Despite her denial of cooperation with Russian intelligence, the Security Service is scrutinizing her activities, emphasizing that her previous parliamentary immunity had facilitated her alleged support for Russia's geopolitical interests. [Baltic News]

(bw)

Latvia to tighten control over intellectual property theft

The Latvian government has approved changes to the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) aimed at combating intellectual property theft and protecting legal media operations, including film and music industries.

Previously, enforcement against intellectual property theft was limited, but the new regulations will allow for blocking illegal movie websites and addressing unauthorized downloads of programs, e-books, and games.

Under the new law, NEPLP will have the authority to restrict access to websites that infringe on copyrights, without requiring individual court actions. Authors or their representatives can now file complaints directly with NEPLP, which will then have 15 days to verify the legality of the content. If violations are confirmed, NEPLP can order the removal of illegal content and restrict access to offending websites.

The legislative move as the Baltic nation has struggled with high rates of intellectual property theft, with a significant portion of its population engaging in illegal content consumption, causing losses estimated at EUR 30 million annually. The amendments are pending review by the Saeima, Latvia’s parliament. [Baltic News Network]

(dql)

Moldavan parliament approves new energy sector law

On July 31, the Moldavan parliament enacted a new law on regulatory sandboxes for the energy sector. This legislation introduces a special testing regime to foster innovation in energy production, distribution, and consumption. The regime allows companies to test new solutions with exemptions from certain regulations, including fiscal ones, for up to seven years, with a possible extension of five additional years.

The law aims to support Moldova's goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. It covers areas such as grid flexibility, electric energy storage, integration of low-carbon gases, electric mobility, energy communities, smart grids, renewable energy sources, and energy tariffs.

The initiative, developed by the Ministry of Energy with support from UNDP Moldova and funding from Denmark, Luxembourg, South Korea, and Sweden, will facilitate Moldova's integration into the EU and the Energy Community, and help achieve Sustainable Development Goal 7 by 2030. It also aims to attract investments and increase the share of renewable energy to 27% by 2030. [UNDP]

(dql)

Former anti-corruption prosecutor to run for Moldavan presidency

Victoria Furtună, a former anti-corruption prosecutor, has announced her candidacy for President of Moldova.

Furtună's agenda includes pursuing proactive diplomacy to protect Moldova from conflict, combatting corruption, crime, and drug abuse, and emphasizing the rule of law. She has underscored the importance of the country's traditions, viewing them as crucial to national identity. She also plans to visit European countries and engage with Moldovan communities in Italy and Romania to strengthen international ties.

Criticizing President Maia Sandu's leadership, Furtună argues that Moldova faces imminent economic, political, and diplomatic crises under Sandu's rule. She

contends that adherence to European values does not align with Sandu's actions.

Furtună began her career as a prosecutor in 2006 and worked in various capacities, including the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office. In 2021, she was a candidate for interim Prosecutor General. This year, after exposing document falsification involving state institutions, Furtună was deemed a national security threat and resigned from the prosecution service. She now leads a non-governmental organization dedicated to defending individual rights against state entities. [Eureporter]

The presidential elections, along with a referendum on Moldova joining the EU, will be held on October 20.

(dql)

American journalists sentenced to prison in Russia

On July 19, a Russian court sentenced Alsu Kurmasheva, a Russian-American journalist, to six and a half years in prison for spreading false information about the Russian army. Her trial was held behind closed doors.

Kurmasheva, a journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) based in Prague, was detained in October 2023 for allegedly failing to register as a foreign agent while visiting her mother in Russia. She was formally accused of spreading false information in December. [CNN]

On the same day, Evan Gershkovich, a journalist with *The Wall Street Journal*, was sentenced to 16 years for espionage. Gershkovich was accused of gathering information for the CIA tank factory in the region where he was arrested. He was investigating one of Russia's leading arms manufacturers, which produces T-90 tanks used in the Ukraine war. [Telegram]

The Kremlin hinted at a possible prisoner exchange, without giving details, that would free Gershkovich (see article in this section). [Wall Street Journal]

Meanwhile, Russian investigators claim that French researcher Laurent Vinatier has confessed to criminal charges for collecting sensitive military information. Vinatier admitted to failing to register as a foreign agent while illegally gathering military intelligence, according to the Investigative Committee of Russia.

He was arrested by the Federal Security Service (FSB) in June. The FSB stated that Vinatier, who worked for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) NGO in Russia, had collected military and technical information potentially harmful to Russian security. Vinatier faces a potential five-year prison sentence if convicted. [Al Jazeera]

(hs/dql)

Russia to tighten law on foreign organizations

On July 23, the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, passed amendments to the 2015 law on "undesirable organizations", which will take effect once approved by the Federation Council and signed by President Vladimir Putin.

The amended law deems organizations undesirable if their activities threaten the constitutional order, defense, or state security. It prohibits these organizations from conducting financial transactions, disseminating information, establishing legal entities, and implementing programs. Previously, the law primarily targeted non-governmental organizations, particularly opposition groups, human rights organizations, and environmental associations.

The new amendments extend this to any foreign organization whose founders or stakeholders include foreign state bodies, regardless of the organization's structure.

Collaborating with such organizations is now criminalized. Initially, participating in their activities, either in Russia or abroad, is considered an administrative offense, punishable by fines up to EUR 1,600). Repeat offenders face fines up to EUR 5,300 or imprisonment for up to four years, while founding or leading these organizations can result in up to six years in prison. [DW]

(dql)

Dagestan attack repercussions

On June 23, Trinity Sunday in Dagestan's Derbent, known as "the city of three religions," gunmen attacked a church and synagogue, killing at least 15 police officers and four civilians, including an Orthodox priest. Suspected to be linked to Islamist extremism,

these attacks highlight Dagestan's ongoing insurgency issues. [BBC] [CNN]

Though security in the region had improved in recent years, Dagestan has been influenced by Islamic fundamentalism and the radical Chechen rebel movement in the 2000s, which aimed to create a unified Islamic state in the Caucasus and northern Russia. In response to a recent incident, Islamic authorities in Dagestan temporarily banned women from wearing the niqab, a full-face veil. The Dagestan Muftiate announced the ban on Telegram following an appeal from Russia's Ministry of Nationality Policy and Religious Affairs. Reports indicated that a gunman planned to escape using a niqab. The ban will remain in effect until the threats are eliminated and a new theological conclusion is reached. The niqab, originating from the Arabian Peninsula, gained popularity in Dagestan after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. [Reuters]

Russian officials blamed Ukraine and NATO for the incident, reflecting broader Kremlin narratives amid the Ukraine conflict. This aims to position Kyiv and the West as primary threats, diverting focus from Islamic extremism. However, some Russians, including Senator Dmitry Rogozin, questioned this narrative. Rogozin warned against blaming Ukraine and NATO for every terrorist attack, suggesting it could lead to greater problems despite his usual anti-Western rhetoric. [BBC]

(hs)

President Zelenskiy signs law Ukraine's external debt payments

On July 31, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has signed a law that allows the government to suspend foreign debt payments until October 1, potentially leading to a sovereign default. This follows a preliminary agreement with Ukraine's main bondholders to restructure nearly $20 billion in international debt, prompted by Russia's 2022 invasion.

This would be Ukraine's second debt restructuring in a decade, following a similar arrangement after the 2014 Crimea invasion. A two-year moratorium on bond payments expires on August 1.

A short-term default under these terms would be less damaging to Ukraine's long-term borrowing prospects than a default without a restructuring deal. The

proposal includes a 37% nominal reduction on Ukraine's international bonds, saving Kyiv $11.4 billion in payments over three years, aligning with its IMF program. Ukraine also owes a $34 million coupon payment on its 2026 Eurobond due August 1, with a 10-day grace period. [Reuters]

(dql)

Ex Ukrainian lawmaker Iryna Farion assassinated in Lviv

Iryna Farion, former Ukrainian MP and linguist, was shot near her home in Lviv. She was sent to the St. Panteleimon Hospital afterward but still died from the injuries. [Euronews]

60-year-old Iryna Farion was a linguistic professor and former Ukrainian MP who was known for her controversial nationalistic stance. She believed that true Ukrainian should not speak Russian which is the language of the aggressors.

The case is currently under investigation according to Ukrainian officials and is being treated as an assassination. Although the attacker escaped the crime scene immediately, and the CCTV failed to catch a clear image of the attacker, an 18-year-old man has been arrested as a suspect a few days after Farion's murder.

So far, there is no clear indication of Russian involvement. [BBC]

(ycl)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Albanian protesters demand Prime Minister Rama's resignation

Thousands of opposition supporters protested in Tirana, Albania, on July 11 to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama, accusing him of corruption. The protesters also called for the release of opposition leader Sali Berisha, who has been under house arrest on corruption charges since last year. The demonstrators targeted government buildings with projectiles and caused minor fires, which police extinguished without reports of serious injuries.

Berisha, from his house arrest, claimed his detention was politically motivated and without evidence. Berisha and his son-in-law, Jamarber Malltezi, face allegations of abusing Berisha's position to privatize public land, but both deny the charges, which they allege are politically driven by Rama's Socialist Party. If convicted, Berisha could face up to 12 years in prison. [Euronews] [Shena.tv] [Reuters]

(ak)

Albanian prime minister announces surprise Cabinet reshuffle

In a surprising move, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has announced cabinet changes at his ruling Socialist Party congress, just a year before the next general election. Key positions, including those of interior, finance, and defense ministers, have been replaced with relatively unknown figures.

Elisa Spiropali, formerly the minister of state for parliamentary affairs, has been appointed as the new speaker of parliament, succeeding Lindita Nikolla, who resigned for health reasons.

Taulant Balla, previously the interior minister, will be replaced by Ervin Hoxha from the National Inspectorate for the Protection of Territory. Finance Minister Ervin Mete is succeeded by Petrit Malaj from the National Agency of Natural Resources, and Pirro Vengu, director of Durres Sea Port, is the new defense minister, taking over from Niko Peleshi.

Rama indicated that these changes reflect a broader strategy to bring in new faces and energy ahead of next spring's elections. He emphasized the need for younger, dynamic individuals to revitalize his long-standing government.

The new appointments require presidential approval, a formality expected to proceed smoothly.

The opposition has criticized the reshuffle, accusing the government of attempting to mask corruption and internal conflicts. [Tirana Times]

(dql)

Albania's two largest parties agree on electoral reform

Albania's ruling Socialist Party and the main opposition Democratic Party – the country's two largest political parties - have reached an agreement on a reform of the electoral system ahead of next year's parliamentary elections.

Under the new system, two-thirds of candidate lists will be open for preferential voting, while one-third will remain closed, chosen by party leaders. This means voters can select candidates from a list, but party leaders will still control a significant portion of the list, with over 100 deputies to be determined by party leaders and fewer than 40 seats selected by voters.

The reform has faced criticism for not being sufficiently open, with experts arguing it favors party leaders and fails to address key electoral issues such as vote-buying and voter intimidation. Some critics believe the changes primarily serve the interests of top politicians and do not fully align with democratic principles.

Despite these concerns, the inclusion of postal voting for Albanians abroad is seen as a notable improvement, allowing nearly half of the electorate who live outside Albania to participate. However, experts stress that the process needs further refinement to ensure effective representation and integrity. [Tirana Times]

(dql)

Albania’s governing party secure victory in mayoral poll in town with ethnic Greek minority

Preliminary results from the August 4 mayoral election in Himara show ruling Socialist Party candidate Vangjel Tavo winning with 58.62% of the vote. His opponent, Petraq Gjikuria from the Together We Win coalition, received 41.38%.

The turnout was 37.61%, higher than last year's. The opposition criticized the exclusion of 6,000 voters with expired identity cards, a policy change from previous elections.

The election followed the removal and imprisonment of former mayor Fredi Beleri – a member of the ethnic Greek minority – on vote-buying charges, which has fueled tensions with Greece. Both he and Greece have alleged that the case was politically motivated to control Himara’s property development.

Himara, known for its property disputes and ethnic Greek population, has faced challenges in land ownership since the end of Albania's communist regime in the 1990s. Property that had previously been seized by the state was distributed among residents. However, there have been allegations of ethnic bias in land distribution. [AP] [Ekathimerini]

(dql)

Albania’s former health minister arrested

Albanian former Health Minister and political heavyweight in the ruling Socialist Party Ilir Beqaj, Albania’s former Health Minister and a prominent figure in the ruling Socialist Party, was arrested on August 4 on suspicion of corruption. He is accused of misappropriating funds from the Agency for the Coordination of Foreign Aid and EU Programs while serving as its head.

The (SPAK) announced Beqaj’s arrest. He has a history of corruption investigations and was previously a controversial cabinet member under Prime Minister Edi Rama. His tenure was marked by allegations of massive corruption and questionable concessions in healthcare.

Alongside Beqaj, the Special Prosecution against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) issued arrest warrants for four associates, with two in jail and two under house arrest.

Beqaj, appointed to manage EU funds in 2021, resigned in November after facing restrictions related to an investigation into the sterilization of surgical equipment. This investigation also led to the arrest of former Deputy Minister of Health Klodian Rrjepaj and entrepreneur Ilir Rrapaj.

In March, Beqaj was charged with "abuse of office" related to a concession. Additionally, in December, his residence was searched in connection with alleged misuse of funds from the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR). Investigations revealed fictitious invoices were created for non-existent services to facilitate corrupt activities. [Tirana Times]

(dql)

Albanian authorities arrest 15 in crackdown on high-profile criminal network

Albanian authorities, in collaboration with Europol and law enforcement agencies from Belgium, the Netherlands, and France, have arrested 15 suspects and seized significant assets, including real estate and EUR 1 million in cash.

The criminal network, known for its hierarchical structure and international operations, was composed largely of family members from Albania. The group is linked to numerous contract killings, large-scale drug trafficking, and complex cryptocurrency-based money laundering. Among those arrested was a prominent money launderer serving high-level international criminal groups. [Europol]

(dql)

Bulgaria to hold seventh general elections in three years

Bulgaria is set for its seventh parliamentary election in three years after the latest attempt to form a coalition government failed. This political instability stems from the 2020 anti-corruption protests that led to the fall of

a coalition led by the center-right populist Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party.

The small populist ITN party, holding only 16 out of 240 seats in the parliament, was recently tasked by President Rumen Radev to form a government, returned its mandate due to insufficient support from other parties. ITN needed 121 out of 240 lawmakers but failed to secure the necessary backing. [Reuters]

Toshko Yordanov, ITN's parliamentary group chairman, stated that the parties couldn't reach an agreement on forming a government. Consequently, Radev must appoint a caretaker prime minister and call another snap election.

This ongoing cycle of inconclusive elections has caused frustration and hindered Bulgaria's political stability. GERB, the largest party in parliament, and the reformist We Continue the Change (PP) both failed to form stable coalitions after the inconclusive June elections. GERB won 68 seats, while the PP secured 39. [EiR No. 7, July/2024]

Bulgaria, the European Union’s poorest and one of its most corrupt member states, requires a stable government to improve the flow of EU funds for its infrastructure. [Al Jazeera]

(dql/ak)

Bulgarian parliament approves Labour Code to boost rights of fathers

On July 25, Bulgaria's Parliament unanimously approved amendments to the Labour Code allowing fathers, including adoptive fathers, to take leave for children up to the age of two if the mother is deprived of parental rights or if those rights are vested in the father. The vote passed with 159 in favor and none against.

These amendments aim to enhance child protection by enabling fathers to exercise their rights without requiring the mother's consent in certain cases. Fathers can now take leave in the event of the mother’s death or serious illness. Additionally, fathers can transfer their leave to one of their or the mother’s parents with their consent. [The Sofia Globe]

(dql)

Bulgarian Constitutional Court invalidates constitutional amendments

On July 26, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled to invalidate most of the December 2023 constitutional amendments, especially those affecting the judiciary. Key provisions struck down include the reorganization of the Supreme Judiciary Council into separate bodies for judges and prosecutors and changes to the prosecutor-general's term and investigation mechanisms.

The judiciary reform, strongly supported by the We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (WCC-DB) group in the previous National Assembly, faced challenges after the coalition behind the Nikolai Denkov Cabinet collapsed in April. The collapse occurred due to disagreements within the coalition during the planned rotation of the prime minister's office.

The court was divided on other provisions, such as those limiting the president's power to appoint a caretaker cabinet and allowing dual citizens to serve in Parliament or the Cabinet. As a result, these provisions remain as passed by the National Assembly.

President Roumen Radev and a group of MPs separately challenged the amendments, leading the court to merge the complaints into one case. [The Sofia Globe]

(dql)

Bosnia and Herzegovina marks 1995 Srebrenica Massacre

Thousands gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the 1995 Srebrenica Massacre and to attend the mass burial of 14 newly identified victims at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre in eastern Bosnia on July 11. (Balkan Insight)

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces killed over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in a series of massacres classified as genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. [Balkan Insight]

The Srebrenica massacre was the tragic pinnacle of the Bosnian War, which erupted in the wake of Yugoslavia's disintegration in the early 1990s. In Bosnia the conflict involved three main groups: Bosnian Serbs, who were supported by Serbia, Bosniaks and Croats. [BBC]

6,751 victims of the genocide have been interred at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, while another 250 have been buried in local cemeteries as per the wishes of surviving relatives. Despite these efforts, a National Day of Mourning for Srebrenica is only officially recognized in Bosnia's Bosniak and Croat-dominated Federation entity, with Bosnian Serbs blocking the state-level Council of Ministers from declaring it nationwide. [Balkan Insight]

This year's commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide is particularly significant, as July 11 is being observed for the first time as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration, following a UN General Assembly resolution in May. [BBC]

Following the UN General Assembly's decision in May to establish July 11 as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica, the 29th anniversary is being observed in other countries as well. For the first time, the UN held a high-level event in New York to mark the occasion. [Balkan Insight]

(ab)

Bosnian Minister Konaković calls for vigilance against hatred at UN's First High-Level Srebrenica Commemoration

On July 11, 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Elmedin Konaković, attended the inaugural high-level commemoration at the United Nations to mark the 29th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. This event, organized by Bosnia and Herzegovina's Permanent Mission to the UN, was held in accordance with the General Assembly's resolution designating July 11 as the "International Day of Remembrance and Commemoration of the Genocide Committed in Srebrenica in 1995." [Anadolu Ajansı]

Minister Konaković highlighted the global importance of the UN commemoration in his speech. He noted that the resolution adopted on May 23, 2024, is more than a formal document; it is a pledge to honor the victims of Srebrenica and a commitment to remember these horrors while pursuing justice and reconciliation. [MFA Bosnia and Herzegovina]

(ab)

Bosnian Constitutional Court rules on ban on religious symbols in public service

On July 12, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) upheld a ban on religious symbols in public service, deeming it a "necessary measure in a democratic society." This ruling rejected Emela Kapidzija's appeal, concluding her right to manifest her religion was not violated by the Armed Forces of BiH (AFBiH) prohibition on female soldiers wearing the hijab.

Kapidzija resigned from the AFBiH in mid-May after being barred from wearing the hijab. She had filed an appeal in May 2021 against this prohibition.

The court stated that restricting religious symbols in public service is "legal and has a legitimate aim," noting that such symbols could impact the protection of others' rights and freedoms. The decision considered the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) practices and the principle of neutrality in public service.

The Law on Service in the AFBiH allows for religious expression in line with individual rights and commitments. In December 2021, the Constitutional Court found a violation of the right to religious freedom for men wanting to wear beards for religious reasons in the AFBiH. Additionally, women wearing the hijab cannot serve as judges in BiH judicial institutions. [Sarajevo Times]

(dql)

Greek centre-right politician sacked after attacking worker at airport

Greek centre-right politician and former minister of agriculture, Lefteris Avgenakis, was expelled from the ruling New Democracy party after a video surfaced showing him attacking an airport worker in Athens. The incident occurred when Avgenakis missed his flight after confusing the gates and forcefully grabbed the phone from the worker at the closed boarding gate. The Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, referred Avgenakis to the party's ethics committee, which confirmed his expulsion from the parliamentary group.

The incident sparked outrage on social media, with many criticizing the parliamentary immunity that protects Greek politicians. Avgenakis admitted to a "verbal tension" but claimed he was trying to speak to

the employee's line manager. He apologized but refused to give up his parliamentary seat.

This incident adds to the political turmoil in Greece following disappointing results for New Democracy in the recent EU elections, where the party lost one million votes compared to the last legislative elections. The Prime Minister had already reshuffled the government, excluding Avgenakis, to address the dissatisfaction among conservative voters.

Further complicating matters, former New Democracy leaders and ex-prime ministers Kostas Karamanlis and Antonis Samaras criticized Mitsotakis' leadership and approach, including his dialogue with Turkey, indicating internal party tensions. [EurActiv]

(lm)

Probe clears Greek government agencies in spyware scandal but opposition calls it a cover-up

A two-year investigation in Greece has cleared the country's security agencies of involvement in an international spyware scandal, according to Supreme Court prosecutor Georgia Adilini. The investigation found no evidence linking Greece's National Intelligence Service, the police force, or its anti-terrorism division to the use of Predator spyware, which opposition groups alleged was used against government critics.

The surveillance scandal emerged in August 2022 when it was revealed that the government had wiretapped the phone of Nikos Androulakis, leader of the opposition Socialist Pasok party, the third largest in parliament. Investigations by journalists, civil rights organizations, and the Greek communications regulator ADAE uncovered that the state spy service had been surveilling a growing network of politicians and journalists.

Opposition parties have reacted angrily, accusing the ruling conservatives of a cover-up and calling the investigation a "sham." Androulakis has demanded that lawmakers be shown the full 300-page report of the investigation.

In March, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on individuals and companies connected to the Intellexa consortium, linked to the spyware, which was allegedly sold to authoritarian regimes and used to target U.S. citizens. The Greek government has

maintained that the opposition has baselessly conflated spyware use with legally authorized wiretaps by the National Intelligence Service.

The Predator spyware is capable of infecting devices through “zero-click attacks,” enabling secret data extraction, geolocation tracking, and access to personal information. The alleged use of the spyware in Greece led to the resignation of two top government officials in 2022, including the national intelligence director. Subsequently, Greek lawmakers banned the use, sale, or distribution of spyware, imposing a minimum two-year prison sentence for violations. [Associated Press]

(lm)

Macedonian opposition party elects new leader

On June 30, North Macedonia’s Social Democratic Union of Macedoni (SDSM) party elected Venko Filipce as its new leader. Filipce, currently an MP and former health minister, received 9,052 votes. He replaces Kovacevski, who resigned after the party’s poor performance in the May elections, where they won only 18 parliamentary seats.

Filipce vowed to renew the party amidst challenges including a demotivated membership and a strong government majority. His closest competitor, Jovan Despotovski, received around 2,700 votes, while Aleksandar Bajdevski secured 905 votes.

Slavjanka Petrovska, initially a candidate, withdrew due to concerns about the election's legitimacy and allegations of misuse of personal data.

Filipce faces the challenge of revitalizing a party with approximately 84,000 members, of whom only 13,000 participated in the election. [Ekathimerini]

(dql)

Macedonian Constitutional Court decision challenged by Association of Judges

The Association of Judges plans to submit a new initiative to the Constitutional Court regarding judges' salaries. They argue that the Court's May decision not to address a 13% reduction in salary calculation coefficients was populist and failed to consider

retroactive effects, potentially disrupting the legal order. The Association criticized the Court for making decisions without upholding constitutional integrity.

The Court responded by supporting public debate and welcoming legally grounded reactions but rejected claims that judicial independence was at risk. [Skopje Diem]

(dql)

Montenegrin parliament approves Cabinet reshuffle

On July 23, Montenegro's parliament approved a Cabinet reshuffle at the request of Prime Minister Milojko Spajic. Spajic, alongside the ruling European Now Movement (PES) party, which he heads, argued that the previous Cabinet was not "inclusive, stable, or European."

The new Cabinet, which Spajic presented to the 81-seat Montenegrin parliament, was accepted by most of the attending lawmakers. The reshuffled government now includes pro-Serbian parties and the Bosniak Party.

The inclusion of the New Serbian Democracy party, the Democratic People's Party, and the Bosniak Party – parties with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian stances – sparked controversy. Critics from the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), the Social Democrats of Montenegro (SD), the Civic Movement United Reform Action, and the Croatian Civic Initiative (HGI) – all of them opposition parties – boycotted the vote.

DPS Leader Danijel Zivkovic criticized the new Cabinet for its lack of Montenegrins and accused it of leading the country towards "ethnic federalization." Bosnian Party leader Ervin Ibrahimovic defended his party's political objectives, while SD MP Nikola Zirojevic argued that the Bosnian Party does not adequately represent Bosnians.

The new government consists of 24 ministers, seven deputy prime ministers, and a prime minister. The Cabinet members took their oaths during the session.

After the snap general elections on June 11, 2023, Spajic was tasked with forming a government on August 10. In the snap elections, Spajic's Europe Now Movement (PES) secured 25.6% of the vote, winning 24 seats. The coalition led by the Democratic Party of Socialists, including the Montenegrin Liberal Party, the Albanian Alliance, and the Social Democrats of

Montenegro, came in second with 21 seats and 23.2% of the vote. [AA]

(dql)

Romanian presidential elections postponed until year's end

Romania's governing coalition has decided to postpone the presidential elections until the end of the year. The first round will be held on November 24, with the second round on December 8. Parliamentary elections will take place in between, on December 1, coinciding with Romania's National Day. This marks a return to the original electoral calendar after plans to move the presidential elections to September were abandoned. President Klaus Iohannis, who had previously announced a run for NATO chair, has withdrawn his candidacy and will complete his presidential term, ending on December 22.

The coalition's decision was met with criticism from opposition parties, who argued that the revised calendar favors parties with candidates in the second round. Notable presidential candidates include George Simion of AUR, MEP Diana Șoșoacă, and Elena Lasconi of USR. The Social Democrats and Liberals have decided to field their own candidates. A recent poll showed NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană as the frontrunner with 26.7 percent, followed by PSD President and Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu at 17.8 percent, and USR leader Elena Lasconi at 14.3 percent. [EurActiv]

(lm)

Romanian court reimposes travel ban on influencer and his brother as they await trial

Controversial influencer Andrew Tate and his brother Tristan will no longer be allowed to leave Romania ahead of their upcoming trial on charges of human trafficking and rape. A Romanian court reimposed the travel ban following a successful challenge by prosecutors against a previous decision that allowed the brothers to travel within the European Union.

Andrew, known for his misogynistic views, and Tristan, along with two Romanian female suspects, were indicted in mid-2023 on charges of human trafficking,

rape, and forming a criminal gang to sexually exploit women. They deny the allegations and are committed to clearing their names, according to their lawyer.

The brothers were arrested in December 2022 near Bucharest and formally charged in June 2023. Despite their claims of no evidence and a political conspiracy against them, the court found the case met the legal criteria to proceed, though no trial date has been set.

The Tate brothers were initially held in police detention for three months before being moved to house arrest. Their movement was subsequently restricted to Bucharest and the surrounding Ilfov county, and later to all of Romania. Andrew Tate, who has 9.7 million followers on social media platform X, expressed his compliance with the court's decision and his respect for the Romanian judicial system. [Independent]

(lm)

Romanian government approves artificial intelligence strategy

Romania's government has approved a national artificial intelligence (AI) strategy for 2024-2027, aligning with the EU's goal to become a global leader in AI. Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu highlighted the strategy's emphasis on utilizing AI in risk analysis, public tenders, and optimizing public spending, particularly by state institutions like the tax authority (ANAF).

The strategy aims to keep pace with global AI trends by creating a regulatory framework and adopting technologies suitable for Romania's context. It focuses on leveraging expertise through collaboration between academia, business, research, and public administration.

The digital transformation will be implemented through five strategic areas: digital public administration, digital economy, digital education, cybersecurity, digital communications, and future technologies, which include AI, 5G, IoT, quantum communications, robotics, blockchain, and smart cities.

The strategy envisions AI driving economic growth and social prosperity, emphasizing that AI advancements should not create barriers for users. Implementation will involve intelligence services SRI and SIE as part of an inter-ministerial commission.

This move follows the European Parliament's adoption of the AI Act in March to ensure AI safety, protect fundamental rights, and foster innovation, aiming to address the challenges posed by risky AI systems. [EurActiv]

(lm)

Romania to invest EUR 14 billion in military modernization

Romania's Ministry of Defense is set to invest EUR 14 billion in modernizing the country's armed forces, marking a record financial package for military rearmament. In 2024 alone, contracts worth over EUR 3 billion will be signed, with significant allocations for various advanced weapons systems. Key acquisitions include two squadrons of F-35A fighters, Mistral 3 man-portable air defense systems, and relevant aviation weapons such as AIM-9X, AIM-120, and GBU-39/B SDB precision bombs.

Additional purchases involve laser-guided bombs for British Watchkeeper XR drones, SwitchBlade 300/600 loitering munitions, Javelin anti-tank missile systems, and ATACMS ballistic missiles for HIMARS. The modernization plan also includes buying artillery ammunition, upgrading missile ships, and procuring two maritime patrol ships. [Militarnyi]

(lm)

Serbian ministries sign memorandum on nuclear power development

In Serbia, the ministries of Mining and Energy, Science, Technological Development and Innovation, Education, Environmental Protection, and Health signed a memorandum on nuclear energy development involving 20 faculties, scientific institutions, and state energy companies on July 10 in Belgrade. [Balkan Insight]

In April, Serbian officials have actively considered their options, engaging in meetings with Britain's Rolls-Royce and France's state-owned Electricite de France (EDF). During these meetings, a memorandum was signed to evaluate the potential for developing Serbia's civil nuclear program.

The Serbian government may navigate a new geopolitical landscape concerning nuclear energy in

Eastern Europe, provided the project succeeds. This shift involves reducing dependence on Russia, a dominant force in the nuclear energy sector, and exploring alternative partnerships with nations such as China, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Communist Yugoslavia prohibited the construction of nuclear power plants in 1989 following the Chornobyl disaster. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbia maintained this policy. Driven by the necessity to diversify its energy sector and reduce dependence on Russian gas, Serbia is poised to overturn its longstanding policy prohibiting the construction of nuclear power plants within its borders. [Radio Free Europe]

(zh)

Serbian peace campaign group urges government to proclaim July 11 Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day

In Belgrade, anti-war activists from the group Women in Black gathered to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide and called on Serbian authorities to officially designate July 11 as Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day.

Srebrenica is a town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina that gained tragic notoriety during the Bosnian War in the 1990s. It became the site of one of the deadliest massacres in Europe since World War II. The Srebrenica massacre occurred in July 1995 when Bosnian Serb forces, led by General Ratko Mladic, systematically executed more than 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys, who were seeking refuge in what was supposed to be a UN safe area.

During the Bosnian War, Serbia, under President Slobodan Milosevic, provided political and military support to the Bosnian Serbs, who were fighting against the Bosniak and Bosnian Croat forces. This support included arms, logistical assistance, and strategic guidance. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in 2007 that Serbia had failed to prevent genocide at Srebrenica and had violated its obligations under the Genocide Convention by not taking action to prevent the massacre. However, the ICJ did not find Serbia directly responsible for committing genocide.

Serbia officially refers to the Srebrenica massacre as a "horrible crime" rather than genocide, a stance that has drawn international criticism. Recently, ahead of a

United Nations vote proposing a Srebrenica Genocide Remembrance Day, Serbian officials launched a public relations campaign asserting that Serbia is not a genocidal nation. [Balkan Insight]

(zh)

Serbian police kill suspect in fatal shooting of officer after massive manhunt

Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dacic confirmed on July 19 that Serbian police had fatally shot Faton Hajrizi, the suspect in the fatal shooting of a police officer near the western border with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hajrizi, who had escaped from a prison in Kosovo earlier in the month, was wanted for multiple violent crimes.

The manhunt for Hajrizi involved a massive deployment of resources, including helicopters, drones, and over 150 police officers. Cooperation extended across borders with authorities in Republika Srpska (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Croatia, and Kosovo, where authorities had issued a warrant for Hajrizi's arrest after his prison escape from Smrekonica. Initially labeled as a terrorist act by Serbian officials, the incident underscored ongoing tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, which Serbia considers part of its territory despite Kosovo's declaration of independence. [Radio Free Europe]

(zh)

Violence erupts in Turkey as tensions between locals and Syrian refugees escalate

An alleged criminal incident in Kayseri has sparked widespread unrest targeting Syrian refugees, escalating tensions and leading to retaliatory attacks in Syria. Over the past two days, individuals protesting against Syrian refugees have torched homes, cars, and businesses owned by Syrians, following reports of a sexual assault allegedly committed by a Syrian refugee. [Daily Sabah]

The unrest in Kayseri, located in central Türkiye, quickly spread to other cities including Antalya and Gaziantep. Demonstrators in Syria have also responded by burning Turkish trucks and desecrating Turkish flags in opposition-controlled areas. [Sözcü]

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has condemned the violence, attributing it to provocations by opposition parties, particularly the far-right Victory Party (ZP). Since its establishment in 2021, the ZP has been a vocal critic of Syrian refugees, and Erdoğan accused them of inciting xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment. “Inciting xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment will not benefit us,” Erdoğan stated during an assembly of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in Ankara. [Daily Sabah]

The Turkish authorities have been working tirelessly to contain the unrest. Police have detained over 300 suspects involved in the violence and rescued a bedridden woman from a burning residence. The authorities deployed tear gas and water cannons to subdue the protests, and security forces are maintaining a solid presence to prevent further violence. [Sözcü]

Despite efforts to restore order, the unrest in Kayseri has inspired similar disturbances in other parts of the country, though on a smaller scale. The attacks on the Turkish flag in Syria have only fueled the anger, leading to more targeted violence against Syrian properties. Social media videos show crowds assaulting individuals they believe to be Syrian refugees. [Daily Sabah]

The recent escalation of violence comes amid anticipated normalization talks between Ankara and the Assad regime of Syria. The timing of these events adds to the complexity of Türkiye's political landscape, already strained by the presence of approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees who fled the civil war in 2012 and are living under temporary protection status. [Hürriyet Daily News]

Both Turkish authorities and the Syrian opposition have called for calm and condemned the provocations. However, the increasing far-right anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye has led to rising violence against immigrants, with numerous attacks reported following rumors of refugee involvement in local crimes. [Hürriyet Daily News]

(ab)

Turkey rescues irregular migrants pushed back by Greek authorities

The Turkish Coast Guard has rescued 25 irregular migrants who were pushed back into Turkish waters by Greek authorities. The incident occurred in the Aegean

Sea, off the coast of the Marmaris district in southwestern Türkiye. [TRT World]

According to a statement released by the Coast Guard Command on July 29, the migrants were discovered drifting in Turkish territorial waters after being turned back by Greek coastal authorities. Following their rescue, the individuals were transferred to the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management for further processing. [TRT World]

Turkey has consistently criticized Greece for its practice of pushing back asylum seekers, arguing that such actions not only breach humanitarian values and international law but also put the lives of vulnerable migrants at risk, including women and children. [TRT World]

(ab)

Turkish parliament calls for recognition of TRNC and end to Turkish Cypriots' isolation

In a parliamentary resolution marking the 50th anniversary of the Cyprus Operation, Turkey has called for an end to the "inhumane isolation" imposed on Turkish Cypriots. The resolution, passed by the Turkish parliament, urges the international community to recognize the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) and address the unjust restrictions and embargoes faced by Turkish Cypriots. [TRT World]

The resolution highlights that the TRNC should be recognized as an independent and sovereign member of the international community. It emphasizes that, despite the Turkish side's constructive engagement over the past five decades, progress has been significantly hindered by the Greek Cypriots' inflexible stance in negotiations, causing frustration and impeding the resolution of the issue. [TRT World]

The resolution states, "While Greek Cypriots have been rewarded with EU membership, the Turkish Cypriots have endured unfair isolation." It emphasizes that the ongoing restrictions have exacerbated the plight of the Turkish Cypriot people, who, with Turkey's support, continue to seek a fair and sustainable resolution to the long-standing conflict. [TRT World]

The resolution advocates for a two-state solution as the only viable path to achieving lasting peace and stability in the Mediterranean region. It calls for international recognition of the island's two distinct

peoples and states. Turkey reaffirms its commitment as a "guarantor state" and "motherland," promising to uphold its responsibilities towards the freedom and prosperity of the Turkish Cypriots. [TRT World]

(ab)

Turkish Central Bank maintains policy rate at 50 percent amid inflation concerns

The Turkish Central Bank has maintained its policy rate, the one-week repo auction rate, to be steady at 50 per cent. The decision, made during the Monetary Policy Committee meeting on July 23, reflects the bank's ongoing commitment to curb inflation until there is a sustained decrease in monthly inflation trends and expectations align with projections. [Hürriyet Daily News]

The Central Bank highlighted its readiness to tighten monetary policy further if inflation worsens. Since June 2023, the key interest rate has been raised from 8.5 percent to 50 percent to combat rising prices. The bank emphasized that this decisive stance aims to reduce monthly inflation through moderating domestic demand, appreciating the Turkish Lira, and improving inflation expectations. [BBC News Türkçe]

Recent figures show annual inflation dropped from 75.45 per cent in May to 71.6 per cent in June, with consumer prices rising 1.64 percent month-on-month. The bank forecasts a year-end inflation rate of 38 per cent but expects a temporary rise in monthly inflation for July due to price adjustments and supply-side factors beyond monetary control. [Hürriyet Daily News]

(ab)

Kosovo Serbs protest arrest of 5 war crime suspects

Hundreds of Kosovo Serbs protested in Pasjan on August 5 against the recent arrest of five Serbs suspected of war crimes during the 1999 conflict. The Pristina Basic Court ordered a one-month detention for the suspects pending further proceedings. Protesters claimed the accused are innocent, have lived in Kosovo since the conflict, and alleged the arrests are intended to instill fear and drive Serbs out of Kosovo.[Anadolu Ajansı]

Police raid Serbia-run post offices in North Kosovo

Meanwhile, Kosovo Police closed at least nine post offices run by Serbia's national postal service, Posta Srbije, in North Kosovo as part of an operation to end the use of the Serbian dinar and outlaw Belgrade-backed institutions in Serb-majority areas. This follows a decision by the Kosovo Central Bank to end the use of the dinar for payments. The operation, based on information from the Regulatory Authority of Electronic and Postal Communications (ARKEP), aims to shut down illegal, unregistered, and unlicensed post offices.

This action comes two months after Kosovo Police closed six Serbia-run financial institution offices in the north. Kosovo Serbs have been given an indefinite period to switch to using the euro, which has been Kosovo's official currency since 2002. [Balkan Insight]

The European Union and the United States have criticized the move as a "unilateral and uncoordinated step" that violates agreements made in the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU stressed that such actions negatively impact the daily lives of Kosovo Serbs and do not contribute to normalization efforts. Similarly, the U.S. Embassy in Pristina expressed deep disappointment, stating that the action increases risks for citizens and NATO's KFOR soldiers, escalates regional tensions, and damages Kosovo's international reputation. Both urged Kosovo to reconsider the decision. [Radio Free Europe]

(lm)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Andorra approves bill on transfer of unoccupied apartments

The Andorran Council of Ministers has approved a bill that includes the mandatory temporary transfer of empty flats. It was announced by Andorran Prime Minister Xavier Espot, who stressed that "the right to housing cannot be dissociated from the sustainable growth of our country, so the bill also affects areas such as tourism, finance, foreign investment or aspects of immigration regulation." [France 24]

Empty flats are defined as those that have not had an electricity supply contract or have not consumed energy for two years prior to 2024. Nearly 2000 homes are estimated to fall into this classification. [Público]

A notice explaining the situation will be sent to all owners of "empty homes" when the regulations take effect. They will have three months to justify that the assumption is not true. The owner may, in any event, rent, sell, or give the government permission to occupy the apartment so that it becomes a part of the stock of public housing. [Europa Press]

If the owner refuses to include it in a public housing park or does not occupy it, the law permits its mandatory transfer to the Administration for a five-year term, during which time it will be rented out to tenants upon request. [France 24]

In case the apartment is not given to a person in need within six months, the owner will be entitled to recover its use. The Government will also guarantee payment of the rent in the event of non-payment by the tenant. [Público]

(fs)

Far-right Vox quits regional governments over distribution of migrants

Political chaos has erupted in Spain after the far-right Vox party broke off every regional coalition agreement with the conservative Popular Party (PP) over a disagreement on accepting young migrants. The PP agreed to accept and redistribute 400 unaccompanied minors from the overcrowded Canary Islands to various regions, which prompted Vox to withdraw from regional coalition governments in Castile and Leon, Aragon, and Murcia.

Vox's resignation from these coalitions and refusal to accept any number of migrants has led to instability in the affected regions. While Vox politicians in some areas have chosen to remain in their posts, the overall split has complicated governance.

PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo criticized Vox for their actions, urging them not to obstruct governance while maintaining that they are not PP's enemy. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez celebrated Vox's departure, calling it a positive development for Spain and urging the PP to reverse extreme policies passed with Vox's influence.

The leader of the Canary Islands, Fernando Clavijo, expressed disappointment with the political debate over migrants, emphasizing the humanitarian aspect of the issue and calling for mandatory reforms to support migrants across regions. [The Guardian] [EurActiv]

(fs/df)

Spanish pensioner sentenced to 18 years in jail over letter bomb campaign

A 76-year-old retired civil servant has been found guilty of sending six parcel bombs in 2022 to government and diplomatic offices and sentenced to 18 years in prison. Pompeyo González Pascual received 10 years for committing terrorist acts and 8 years for the use and manufacturing of illegal explosives. He was also sentenced to pay EUR 1500 in damages to Ukrainian embassy official Mykola Velychko, who was slightly injured while handling one of the letters. He denied the charges, but the court found substantial evidence against him, including DNA matches and internet searches related to the crime. [Reuters]

The homemade explosives were sent to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Defence Minister Margarita Robles, the Ukrainian and American embassies in Madrid, an air force base and weapons manufacturer Instalaza. [BBC] [EuroNews]

(fs)

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez declines to testify as witness in wife's corruption case

On July 30, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez declined to testify as a witness in a judicial investigation involving alleged corruption and influence peddling against his wife, Begona Gomez. The case centers on allegations that Gomez used her position to secure sponsors for a university master's degree course she ran.

During a brief hearing, Sanchez answered two questions from Judge Juan Carlos Peinado at the Moncloa Palace in Madrid: confirming his relationship to Gomez and his refusal to testify. Under Spanish law, spouses can opt not to testify against each other.

The accusations, which Sanchez has denied as baseless and politically motivated, prompted him to consider resigning earlier in April. In response to the investigation, the state attorney's office filed a lawsuit against the judge for alleged malfeasance, aiming to protect the judiciary's independence and integrity.

The proceedings saw a small protest outside Moncloa Palace, with demonstrators opposing Sanchez and his Socialist Party. This marks the first instance of a sitting Spanish prime minister being summoned to testify in a judicial case since Mariano Rajoy in 2017, which led to convictions of several People's Party members and Sanchez's eventual rise to prime minister in 2018.

Gomez has not publicly commented on the case, and her lawyer, Antonio Camacho, represented her interests during the proceedings. [Reuters]

(fs)

Spain greenlights almost 300 renewable power projects with EUR 17 billion investment

The Spanish government has approved the construction of nearly 300 renewable energy projects with a total capacity exceeding 28 gigawatts. This initiative involves an investment of over EUR 17 billion and includes primarily photovoltaic power plants, 43 wind farms, and one hydropower plant. This move aligns with Spain's goal to increase the share of renewable-generated electricity to 81 percent of the total by 2030, up from the current 50 percent. The country is leveraging its natural resources, including sunny plains, windy hillsides, and fast-flowing rivers, to achieve these ambitious green energy targets. [Reuters] [Ecoticias]

(fs)

Spain fines Booking.com EUR 413 million for abusing dominant position

Spain's competition watchdog, the National Commission for Markets and Competition (CNMC), has fined Booking.com EUR 413.2 million (USD 448 million) for abusing its dominant market position over the past five years. The fines, totaling EUR 206.6 million each, were imposed due to the company's unfair conditions on hotels and restriction of competition from other providers. Booking.com, a unit of Booking Holdings, plans to appeal the fines, arguing the issue should be discussed under the EU's Digital Markets Act rules.

The investigation was initiated following complaints from the Spanish Association of Hotel Managers and the Madrid Hotel Business Association in 2021. CNMC found that Booking.com banned hotels from offering lower prices on their own sites, imposed unilateral price discounts, and required Spanish hotels to sue in the Netherlands in case of disputes. Additionally, Booking.com offered benefits to hotels that generated more fees, hindering competition from alternative service providers. [Reuters] [DW] [France 24]

Booking was already fined USD 7 million by the Hungarian Competition Authority in 2020 for aggressive sales tactics. [France 24]

(fs)

Spain's current account surplus reached 5.56 billion euros in May

Spain's current account surplus increased to EUR 5.56 billion in May, up from EUR 4.03 billion in the same

month the previous year, according to the Bank of Spain. This marked a significant rise compared to a surplus of EUR 2.83 billion in April. [Reuters]

(fs)

Opposition leaders demand government action following attack on journalist

Leaders of Italian opposition parties voiced strong demands on July 21 for government intervention after an incident involving Andrea Joly, a journalist for the daily newspaper *La Stampa*. Joly was attacked by far-right militants in Turin during the night of July 20, an assault that has stirred significant political and public outcry. [ANSA] [POLITICO]

Elly Schlein, leader of the centre-left Democratic Party, and Giuseppe Conte, former Prime Minister and head of the 5-Star Movement (M5S), both condemned the attack and called for decisive measures against neo-fascist organisations. The assault occurred as Joly was filming CasaPound militants, a far-right group in Italy, celebrating their anniversary outside a local club.

Schlein highlighted concerns about the apparent impunity for such violent acts and called for the immediate disbandment of neo-fascist groups, as mandated by the Italian Constitution. Similarly, Conte described the attack as "squadrista," a term harking back to the violent tactics used by Fascist squads in the early 20th century. He stressed the need for reinforcing democratic principles to combat rising hate and intolerance.

The assault on Joly is part of a troubling pattern of increasing far-right violence in Italy, prompting repeated warnings from political analysts and civil society groups about anti-democratic tendencies. This event follows a series of similar incidents that have raised alarms about the safety and freedom of journalists in the country.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi have been urged to address this issue promptly. The government's response will be closely monitored, particularly in light of Italy's recent drop in the World Press Freedom Index, reflecting growing concerns over media freedom and journalist safety.

This incident not only underscores the ongoing struggle against neo-fascist elements in Italy but also highlights the broader challenges facing democratic

institutions and civil liberties in the country. As the situation develops, it remains to be seen how the Italian government will navigate the pressure to uphold constitutional mandates and protect journalistic freedom. [Repubblica]

(vm/pk)

Court orders journalist to pay damages to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni

A Milan court mandated on July 18 that journalist Giulia Cortese pay EUR 5,000 in damages to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni for a tweet mocking Meloni's height. The court also imposed a suspended fine of EUR 1,200 for what was characterised as "body shaming." [Reuters] [BBC]

This legal action stems from a social media clash in October 2021, when Cortese published a tweet about Meloni, who leads the far-right Brothers of Italy party. The offending post included a mock-up image of Meloni with a picture of the late fascist leader Benito Mussolini in the background. Following this, Cortese tweeted further, dismissing Meloni's physical stature.

In response to the court's decision, Cortese criticised the Italian government's stance on freedom of expression and journalistic dissent. Writing on social media, she highlighted the challenges faced by independent journalists in Italy, a sentiment echoed in the Reporters Without Borders' 2024 World Press Freedom Index, which saw Italy drop five places to 46th due to the high number of lawsuits against journalists.

Meloni is known for taking legal action against journalists. In a separate incident last year, Roberto Saviano, a well-known author, was fined by a Rome court for remarks he made about Meloni's immigration policies on television in 2021. [The Guardian]

(vm/pk)

Italy’s Prime Minister Meloni condemns fascist nostalgia amidst scandal in youth wing

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called on the leaders of her political party to reject antisemitism, racism, and nostalgia for totalitarian regimes on July 2, following a

scandal involving the youth section of her party. The incident was exposed by a hidden camera investigation conducted by the Italian news outlet Fanpage.it, which filmed members of the National Youth, the youth arm of Brothers of Italy, glorifying fascism. [The New York Times]

The hidden camera footage, released in two episodes in June, showed members of the youth wing making fascist salutes, praising Benito Mussolini, and distributing stickers with fascist slogans. The footage also captured members shouting Nazi slogans and making racist and antisemitic comments. This revelation has been a significant blow to Meloni, who has consistently sought to position herself as a modern, pragmatic leader and has repeatedly stated that fascism belongs to history. [BBC]

Brothers of Italy, Meloni's political party, has roots in the Italian Social Movement, which was founded by former fascists after World War II. Despite efforts to distance the party from its fascist past, this incident demonstrates that some elements within the party still hold on to these ideologies.

The scandal has sparked widespread condemnation from various quarters. Liliana Segre, a 93-year-old Holocaust survivor and Italian senator, expressed her dismay on national television, questioning whether she would have to witness such glorification of fascism again in her lifetime. Lawmakers from Italy's Democratic Party also criticised the youth wing of Brothers of Italy for idealising a regime that caused immense suffering and persecution.

In response, Meloni reiterated her commitment to rejecting any form of totalitarianism and reminded her party's leadership of their adherence to the European Parliament's 2019 resolution condemning all 20th-century dictatorships. She emphasised that there is no place in the party for those who seek to revive its darkest past and urged her colleagues to focus on the future.

Despite the controversy, the party's leadership defended the youth wing, arguing that the behaviour captured in the footage represented a small minority and not the broader identity of the movement. Two members featured in the report, Elisa Segnini and Flaminia Pace, resigned from their official roles but were not expelled from the party.

This incident underscores the ongoing challenges Meloni faces in transforming the image of Brothers of Italy from a fringe movement with neo-fascist roots into a mainstream political force. As the largest

governing party in Italy, Brothers of Italy must navigate its historical legacy while addressing the expectations of modern governance and democratic values. [Reuters]

(vm/pk)

Italian antitrust authority probes Google over alleged misleading practices

The Italian Antitrust Authority, known in Italy as the Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato (AGCM), has initiated an investigation into Google and its parent company, Alphabet. This probe, announced on 18th July, aims to scrutinise whether the tech giant's request for user consent regarding its services constitutes a misleading and aggressive commercial practice. [ANSA] [Bloomberg]

Based in Rome, the AGCM is responsible for ensuring fair competition and consumer protection within Italy. The authority's concerns revolve around the manner in which Google solicits consent from its users for linking various services. The AGCM asserts that Google's consent request might lack clarity and precision about the actual implications of user data utilisation. It suggests that users are not adequately informed about how their personal data will be combined and cross-used across Google's numerous services.

The investigation highlights potential issues with the variety of services for which consent is requested and whether users can limit consent to specific services. Moreover, the AGCM is examining the techniques Google employs to obtain this consent, which may unduly influence users' decision-making processes. These practices could lead consumers to make choices they otherwise would not have made, particularly regarding the extensive use of their personal data.

Google, headquartered in the United States, operates numerous services globally, including search engines, email platforms, and cloud storage solutions, which collect vast amounts of user data. The outcome of this investigation could have significant implications not only for Google's operations in Italy but also for its practices in the broader European Union.

The probe into Google's practices underscores the increasing scrutiny of large technology companies by European regulators, who are increasingly concerned about data privacy and the power these companies wield over consumer choices. This development is part of a broader trend within the EU to enforce stricter

data protection regulations and ensure transparency in how tech giants manage user data.

The AGCM's investigation into Google's consent mechanisms marks a critical step in this ongoing effort to protect consumer rights and promote fair competition in the digital marketplace. As the situation evolves, further actions and regulations may follow, potentially reshaping the landscape of digital data management in Italy and beyond. [Reuters]

(vm/pk)

Portugal's main opposition Socialist Party proposes budget talks with minority government

Portugal's main opposition Socialist Party has proposed starting "good faith" negotiations with the centre-right minority government regarding next year's budget bill. This move aims to avoid further political instability. In recent months, the government has faced setbacks, with the Socialists teaming up with the far-right Chega party to block some fiscal proposals, raising doubts about the budget's approval.

Prime Minister Luís Montenegro accused this coalition of political forces of attempting to paralyze government activities and force another election. However, the Socialists' willingness to negotiate aims to establish conditions of stability, which the country needs.

Both the Socialist Party and the government agree on the necessity of maintaining a balanced budget, reducing debt, and implementing policies to support families. Perestrelo emphasized that negotiations should begin as soon as possible to achieve these goals. [Reuters]

(fs)

Portugal to reinstate tax breaks for foreign residents

Portugal's centre-right government is planning to reintroduce tax incentives in an effort to attract skilled foreigners to the country. The scheme, which was launched back in 2009 to attract professionals and investors during the financial crisis, offered foreign residents who spent more than 183 days a year in

Portugal a special 20% tax rate on Portuguese-sourced income from “high value-added activities”, like teaching at universities or practicing medicine. [Reuters]

These tax breaks were eliminated in 2023 by the previous socialist government, which called them a “fiscal injustice”, also arguing that they drove up house prices in the country. [Financial Times]

Portuguese Finance Minister Joaquim Miranda Sarmento announced the reinstated regime would include the same 20% flat rate income tax but cover salaries and professional income only, while pensions, dividends or capital gains would not be included. [Reuters]

Nordic nations heavily criticized the fact that the previous tax breaks included pensions, claiming it caused retirees to stop paying taxes in their home countries. [Schengen News]

The rules still need parliamentary approval to enter into force, which will be a difficult task for the Portuguese government, as it lacks an outright majority. It would require the support of either the Socialist Party or far-right Chega, which have both expressed their opposition to tax breaks. [Financial Times]

(fs)

Portugal will start issuing passports valid for ten years

The Portuguese government has decided to increase the passport's validity from five to ten years. The decision is a result of the "more simplification, less bureaucracy" program, which was introduced earlier in an effort to make people's lives easier. [Schengen News]

Another reason was the “existence of evidence of high-quality counterfeits of the current passport model, which represent serious security and control flaws", apart from the fact that the "limited term of five years requires frequent renewals by citizens". [Publico]

This new measure is expected to come into force in the first quarter of 2026. Until then, the government promised “new security measures that address the growing risks associated with counterfeiting attempts,” without specifying what those measures will be. [O Globo]

For minors, the possibility to maintain the existing five-year passport will be ensured, as is the case in the great majority of Schengen area nations. [O Globo]

Nearly 4 million passports were issued in Portugal between 2019 and 2023.

(fs)

Portuguese doctors strike for 48 hours demanding better working conditions

Doctors in Portugal went on a two-day strike from the July 23-25 to ask for better salaries and working conditions. Almost three quarters of the doctors supported the strike. [PR]

Some of the demands made by the FNAM are the return of the 35-hour workweek, an update to the pay scale, and the inclusion of junior doctors in the medical profession's entry-level category. Others include the reinstatement of 25 working days of paid vacation time annually and an extra five days if taken outside of the high season. [Euronews]

The FNAM accused the government of “intransigence and inflexibility”, since the Ministry of Health has postponed negotiations until 2025. Past negotiations that started in 2022 have failed. [Euronews]

Following snap parliamentary elections in March, the recently elected right-wing minority government has had to deal with the demands of various categories of civil servants. So far, agreements have been reached with educators, court personnel and the police; but negotiations with doctors, nurses and the military are still ongoing. [Vijesti]

Portuguese doctors are among the lowest paid in the European Union, while their working conditions have worsened during the past two decades.

(fs)

Pope Francis critic Carlo Maria Vigano excommunicated by the Vatican

Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano has been excommunicated by the Vatican. The Vatican's doctrinal office found him guilty of schism, meaning he has split from the Catholic Church. Vigano, 83, has been a staunch opponent of Pope Francis, criticizing

his views on immigration, climate change, and same-sex couples, and even calling for the Pope's resignation. He served as the papal envoy to Washington from 2011 to 2016 and went into hiding in 2018 after accusing the Pope of failing to act on sexual abuse allegations against an American cardinal. Over time, Vigano became associated with US conspiracy theorists, criticizing COVID-19 vaccines and alleging a "globalist" and "anti-Christian" project by the UN.

The Vatican stated that Vigano's refusal to submit to Pope Francis was evident from his public statements, leading to his excommunication. Responding on social media, Vigano linked to the decree and expressed that he considered the accusations an "honor," reaffirming his stance against Pope Francis. This move follows the Vatican's actions against other ultra-conservative critics, including the dismissal of Bishop Joseph E. Strickland of Texas last year. [BBC]

(lm)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Police clash with protesters in Vienna ahead of September general elections

On July 20, Austrian police detained over 50 people in Vienna amid clashes between right-wing extremists and counter-protesters ahead of the September parliamentary elections, which are anticipated to see significant gains by the far-right.

The far-right march, featuring banners advocating for “remigration,” faced opposition from anti-fascist

groups and left-leaning parties. Hundreds of officers were deployed to separate the groups, leading to 43 temporary detentions for blocking the march and 10 additional detentions after violence erupted, including protesters throwing rocks and bottles. Three officers were injured, and a patrol car was damaged. Interior Minister Gerhard Karner vowed to prosecute offenses from all sides, emphasizing a commitment to democratic values.

The upcoming elections, scheduled for September 29, are expected to reflect a broader European trend towards right-wing politics, with recent European Parliament results showing the far-right Freedom Party narrowly ahead of the conservative People's Party. Critics, including the Greens and Social Democrats, warn that a government including the Freedom Party could strengthen right-wing extremism and undermine democratic principles. [Euronews]

(nm)

Austria introduces new asylum seekers' requirements

Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner has unveiled a new package of measures aimed at improving refugee integration and supporting Austrian society. The policy introduces work and social obligations for asylum seekers, including mandatory charitable work with federal, state, or local governments, as well as in certain companies and services.

A new "benefits card" trial will manage state support payments, with non-compliance resulting in reduced benefits. The measures also include a "catalogue of obligations" to educate refugees on Austrian values and social norms.

Karner noted that stricter immigration policies have already reduced asylum claims and eased pressure on Austria's care system. [Euronews]

(nm)

Czech government proposes mandatory health programs for employees

The Czech Ministry of Health has put forward a proposal for mandatory health programs for all companies to improve employee well-being. These programs will include medical check-ups, vaccinations,

and educational materials, aiming to reduce lifestyle-related diseases and absenteeism.

Matyáš Fošum, Director of the Public Health Protection Department, confirmed ongoing discussions with employees and employers about the initiative. The programs will vary by profession, addressing specific health risks. For example, professional drivers will receive targeted health measures due to their sedentary and stressful work conditions.

The ministry will set basic standards, but employers and occupational physicians will determine specific requirements. However, there is resistance from employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, due to concerns about financial and administrative burdens. Jiří Horecký, President of the Union of Employer Associations, highlighted the potential increased costs and workload.

Doctors are also concerned about a potential shortage of medical professionals to meet the increased demand. With 279,000 employers in the country, there may not be enough general practitioners and occupational health specialists. The ministry plans to include nutrition therapists and public health experts to address this issue.

Despite the challenges, the ministry is optimistic that employees will voluntarily participate in the programs. They aim to implement these changes in the health services law by 2026. [Czech Daily]

(dql)

Czech government moves against rent non-payers

The government has adopted a firm stance against tenants who fail to pay rent and refuse to vacate properties, even after receiving proper notice. An amendment to the Civil Procedure Code, linked to the Housing Support Act, was recently approved that seeks to expedite the eviction process, alleviating the burden on property owners entangled in prolonged legal battles.

The amendment suggests a streamlined process allowing landlords to seek an eviction order from the court without a full hearing. Justice Minister Pavel Blažek affirmed that this order would apply only to cases where a rental relationship existed and has ended. Landlords must prove ownership, provide

evidence of the tenant's eviction notice, and show a formal request for the tenant to vacate the property.

The government anticipates completing the legislative process by the end of the year, with reforms taking effect by summer next year.

Support for the changes comes from the coalition parties. However, the opposition has voiced concerns about tenants appealing eviction orders, which could revert the process to the traditional court system, creating uncertainty about the amendment's practical effectiveness.

Currently, evicting non-paying tenants is a lengthy ordeal, often taking years and discouraging property owners from renting out their properties or leading them to prefer short-term leases to mitigate risk. [Czech Daily]

(dql)

Analysts sceptical about Dragan Primorac's bid against Zoran Milanovic in Croatian presidential election

Political analysts have cast doubt on the prospects of Dragan Primorac, the HDZ-backed candidate, in the upcoming Croatian presidential election. Primorac, a former science and education minister, declared his candidacy as an independent with the backing of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) on July 30. In a video announcement, the 59-year-old paediatrician, forensic scientist, and geneticist promised to enhance the well-being and quality of life for Croatian citizens.

Despite his notable background, experts are questioning his ability to challenge incumbent President Zoran Milanovic successfully. HDZ leader and Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, who confirmed Primorac as the party's candidate on July 31, expressed confidence in his qualifications. Plenkovic emphasized Primorac's previous association with the HDZ and his distinguished scientific career, asserting that these factors make him a strong contender for the presidency.

However, analysts remain sceptical about his chances in the competitive race. [Balkan Insight]

(nm)

Croatia faces fiery crisis: wildfires rage amid droughts

Croatia faced its toughest firefighting day this season, with over 1,000 firefighters and 20 planes tackling more than 100 blazes, including a major fire near Tucepi that injured one firefighter.

Balkan nations grappled with severe wildfires on July 31, ignited by high temperatures, winds, and prolonged drought. The region's fires, exacerbated by climate change, have led to evacuations, power cuts, and ongoing international appeals for help. [AP news]

(nm)

Opposition party demands government's explanation for Chinese loan

The opposition party Democratic Coalition plans to request information from the State Debt Management Centre regarding the terms of a recent EUR 1 billion loan the Hungarian government obtained from China, as announced by László Varjú, the opposition party's deputy leader.

Varjú accused the government of concealing the purpose of the loan, suggesting that Hungarian taxpayers would be burdened with repayment for decades. He raised concerns about the interest rate, loan term, and potential beneficiaries within the ruling Fidesz party.

He warned that the loan could increase Hungary's economic and political dependence on China and criticized Prime Minister Viktor Orbán for accepting the loan, which he claimed indicates the government's fiscal mismanagement and ongoing austerity measures. [Daily News Hungary]

(dql)

Polish opposition MP detained for alleged misuse of funds released after European immunity judgement

Polish opposition MP Marcin Romanowski detained for allegedly misusing public funds has been released after a court confirmed his immunity as a member of the Council of Europe. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters] [Politico] [TVP World]

Romanowski – who served as deputy justice minister from 2019 to 2023 under Poland's previous nationalist-populist government – was detained on July 15 and charged with 11 counts relating to misusing money from the country's Justice Fund during his time in office. [Politico] [TVP World]

The Justice Fund is a pool of money earmarked to support victims of crime in Poland. The country's current centrist government, elected last year, has accused several members of the right-wing Sovereign Poland Party – which was a junior coalition partner in the previous government – of illegally using millions of euros from the fund for their personal benefit. [TVP World] [Reuters]

The alleged misuses include spending the money on election campaigning and on the Pegasus spyware system used to spy on political opponents.

Romanowski, who is one of the accused members of the Sovereign Poland Party, has also been charged with being part of an organized criminal group. [TVP World]

Romanowski and other members of the opposition have denied the charges and accused the government of carrying out a targeted witch hunt. [Reuters] [TVP World]

Poland's parliament stripped Romanowski of his immunity as an MP so that his detention and an investigation into his alleged wrongdoing could take place. [Reuters] [Politico]

However, the president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Theodoros Rousopoulos, submitted a letter to Warsaw arguing that Romanowski still enjoyed immunity as a member of the European body. [Notes From Poland] [Reuters]

Rousopoulos said that Polish authorities would have to file a request with the Council of Europe for the immunity to be removed. [Notes From Poland]

A Warsaw court ruled in agreement with Rousopoulos, leading to Romanowski being released the day after being detained. Poland's National Prosecutor's Office said that it would share details of its case against Romanowski with Rousopoulos. [Reuters]

National Prosecutor Dariusz Korneluk said: "If the application [to strip Romanowski of his immunity as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe] needs to be submitted after clarification, we will certainly do so." [Reuters]

The Parliamentary Assembly is made up of lawmakers from the 46 member states of the Council of Europe, an organization independent from the European Union that aims to promote human rights and democratic values across Europe. [Council of Europe]

(ek)

Polish parliament passes bills aimed at restoring judicial independence of top court

On July 24, Poland's parliament passed two bills aimed at overhauling the country's top court in an effort to restore its judicial independence. [TVP World] [Notes From Poland] [Polskie Radio]

The bills are designed to reverse controversial changes made to the Constitutional Tribunal by Poland's previous government, which was led by the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party from 2015 to 2023. [TVP World]

This is the latest in a series of moves by the centrist pro-EU ruling coalition to, in its view, restore rule of law in Poland – a key pledge during last year's parliamentary election campaign which saw voters eject the eurosceptic PiS and its partners from government. [TVP World]

During its time in power, PiS was accused by opposition parties of politicizing the institution and packing it with hand-picked appointees loyal to the party. [Europe Monthly April 2022] [Notes From Poland]

The matter had also been at the center of a dispute with Brussels after the Constitutional Tribunal challenged the primacy of European law by ruling in 2021 that parts of EU treaties are not compatible with Poland's constitution. [Europe Monthly April 2022]

The newly approved bills would undo rulings made by members of the Constitutional Tribunal who are deemed to not have had authorization to make such decisions. [TVP World] [Polskie Radio]

The bills would remove from office the top court's chief justice, Julia Przylebska, who the current government says was illegitimately put there under the government of PiS. Three judges seen to have been appointed illegally would also be removed from their positions. [Notes From Poland]

A new method of appointing judges would also be introduced, requiring a three-fifths majority parliamentary vote rather than a simple majority, which is the requirement now. [Notes From Poland]

Patryk Jaskulski, a lawmaker from the centre-right Civic Coalition, the largest grouping in Poland's coalition government, said: "No one will politicize the [Constitutional Tribunal] anymore. This is proof of the purity of our intentions." [Notes From Poland]

Meanwhile, Jaroslaw Kaczynski – the leader of PiS and widely seen as the most powerful man in Polish politics during his party's time in government – said: "This is simply an attempt to abolish the Constitutional Tribunal."

"Because what is the purpose of the [top court]? So that it can control the parliamentary majority. But [the ruling coalition] has introduced a policy where the majority can change the Tribunal's every decision," he added. [Euractiv]

The bills must still be approved by Poland's upper legislative chamber, the Senate, before they can be passed into law. [Polskie Radio]

They would then need to be signed into law by Polish President Andrzej Duda – a key PiS ally who could veto the legislation. [Notes From Poland]

(ek)

Polish coalition government faces first major hurdle as junior partner rejects abortion legislation

Poland's government is facing its first major legislative hurdle since being voted into power last year as a bill to increase legal access to abortion was rejected by members of a junior coalition partner. [Politico] [TVP World] [DW News] [Euronews]

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk – who leads the centre-right Civic Coalition, the largest grouping in Poland's coalition government – made the liberalization of the country's strict abortion laws a key promise of his election campaign during last year's parliamentary race. [Politico]

However, in a parliamentary vote on July 12, a bill that would decriminalize assisting in an abortion within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy failed to pass when most members of the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL)

broke ranks with their coalition partners and voted with the opposition against the bill. [Euronews] [Polska Agencja Prasowa]

To make matters worse for Tusk, several members of his own party failed to support the bill, leading the prime minister to suspend two of them. [Politico]

The agrarian Polish People's Party, a junior government coalition partner, champions itself as a party that stands up for traditional values that connect it to rural voters. [Politico]

Tusk, a former European Council president, said: "I feel very bad that I couldn't find arguments to convince those who voted differently than I did. Personally…I am doing everything…so that women in Poland feel respected and free." Conceding failure, he added: "If I hear you say that I failed in this matter, then yes, you have the right to believe that." [Politico]

The result of the parliamentary vote prompted women's rights groups to stage demonstrations in Warsaw and other Polish cities, with activists accusing the ruling parties of deceiving their voters. [DW News] [Euronews]

Marta Lempart, a member of one of the groups that organised the Warsaw protest, said: "You got [parliamentary] seats because of us…Give them back if you don't like the electorate." [TVP World]

She also called for the dismissal of Polish Deputy Prime Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, a member of the Polish People's Party, adding: "We don't want a hypocrite in the government." [TVP World]

Under Poland's previous government, led by the nationalist-populist Law and Justice (PiS) party, the deeply Catholic nation introduced some of the toughest restrictions to abortion in Europe. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Rules enacted in 2021 effectively made most terminations illegal except if a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, or if the health or life of the mother is endangered. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

Critics say that the tough rules have made doctors hesitant to perform terminations for fear of being prosecuted. Polish courts can issue prison sentences for illegal terminations. [Europe Monthly July 2023]

(ek)

Poland's justice minister requests EU parliament to lift immunity of opposition politicians

Poland's Prosecutor General Adam Bodnar, who doubles as Justice Minister, has requested the European Parliament to lift the immunity of two Polish MEPs belonging to the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party: former Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński and his deputy Maciej Wąsik. This move would allow them to face charges for violating a ban on holding public office.

Kamiński and Wąsik have been involved in a lengthy legal dispute. They were imprisoned earlier this year but were pardoned by President Andrzej Duda. In December, a court found them guilty of abusing their powers while running Poland's Central Anticorruption Bureau (CBA) and banned them from holding public office for five years. Despite the ban, they continued to participate in the Polish parliament and were later elected to the European Parliament, which granted them legal immunity.

Bodnar's will be reviewed by the European Parliament's legal affairs committee, which will make a recommendation. A simple majority vote in the parliament will decide whether to lift their immunity. The review is expected to begin in September. [Notes from Poland]

(dql)

Number of asylum seekers in Poland increase in first half of year

From January to June, 7,716 foreigners applied for international protection in Poland, marking a 79% increase compared to the same period last year.

June saw a record 1,766 applications. Most applications came from Ukraine and Belarus, accounting for nearly 60%, while significant increases were seen from African countries like Somalia and Middle Eastern countries like Syria.

Amid a renewed crisis on Poland's border with Belarus, large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa have been attempting to cross, encouraged by Belarusian authorities. In the first six months of 2024, applications were received from 2,655 Ukrainians, 1,952 Belarusians, 547

Russians, 347 Somalis, and 328 Syrians, among others, according to the Office for Foreigners (UdSC).

The majority of applicants were men (around 5,100), compared to 2,600 women. Most applicants were aged 18-34, with children up to 13 years accounting for 17% of applications and teenagers aged 14-17 just under 4%.

Poland issued 4,686 decisions on asylum applications during this period, granting international protection in approximately 3,000 cases, including 1,400 Belarusians, 1,300 Ukrainians, and 100 Russians. [Notes from Poland]

(dql)

Slovak pro-Russia PM says liberal ideas spread like "cancer" in first public appearance since shooting

Slovak populist Prime Minister Robert Fico has slammed progressive ideas for damaging the country in his first public appearance since an assassination attempt on May 15.

Robert Fico, a polarising figure who won a fourth term in power last October with a pledge to end military aid to Ukraine, gave a speech at a ceremony marking the Saints Cyril and Methodius Day, a national holiday in Slovakia. [The Telegraph] [Reuters] [BBC] [AP news] [Sky News]

The country's longest-serving prime minister has been convalescing since being gunned down on May 15. He was shot multiple times at close range while greeting his supporters at a government meeting in Handlova. [Europe monthly June 2024]

In his first live speech since the shooting, Fico said "meaningless" liberal and progressive ideologies were "spreading like cancer", and that he aims to amend the Constitution to create a stronger barrier against liberalism. [Politico 1]

"I don't want Slovakia to be among the countries that make a caricature of Western civilization," he said on July 5 at Devin Castle in Bratislava. [Reuters] [Sky News]

In the meanwhile, the populist leader reiterated a call for peace talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the Ukraine-Russia conflict. "There are not enough, I repeat, not enough peace talks, peace initiatives," said Fico.

Fico also added that if his health had permitted it, he would have joined Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban on the trip to visit Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on July 5. [Bloomberg] [Sky News] [Politico 2] [The Telegraph]

Fico's comeback has rung alarm bells in the EU that he would gang up with Hungary's Orban to further strain Western allies' fragile unity in helping Kyiv resist Russia's invasion.

Fico's populist administration, headed by his leftist Smer party, has faced full-throated criticism for its Kremlin-friendly stance. In March, Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanar met his Russian counterpart at a diplomatic forum, despite officials worldwide avoiding high-profile meetings with Moscow amid its war against Ukraine. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

In June, former defence minister Jaroslav Nad told the Financial Times that a criminal probe was launched against him, former Prime Minister Eduard Heger, and other members of their administration. They are accused of treason and sabotaging national sovereignty for the decision to donate 13 warplanes to Ukraine.

In addition, critics also voice concerns that Slovakia would follow Hungary's path of democratic backsliding, which would risk the flow of EU funds to the country. Both leaders have weakened the rule of law, limited freedom of speech, and cracked down on foreign funding for media houses and NGOs, despite Brussels' repeated warnings that these actions violate EU treaties.

Branislav Grohling, head of the liberal opposition Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, railed against Fico's speech. "It's not liberalism that's the cancer, but the 12 years of hatred and corruption [under Fico's administration] that have only diminished this country," said Grohling. [Politico 1]

Sorry but not sorry

The attack, the first of such against a sitting EU leader in more than two decades, has touched the raw nerves in one of the most divided countries in the EU.

Fico has shown no signs of reconciliation with opposition parties and the media. He has blamed the attempted assassination on the pro-liberal opposition, media outlets and non-governmental organisations for fostering a climate of hatred.

Fico, who returned to office and chaired a cabinet meeting on July 9, reinforced his rhetoric and said in a Facebook post: “Dear progressive liberal media and opposition, sorry I survived, but I’m back.”

Following the attack on Fico, his three-party ruling coalition approved a bill in June to tighten the security protocols, including restrictions on protests near official buildings and life-long protection for high-level officials. [Bloomberg 2] [FT]

“This bill is an attempt to use security and public order as pretexts to crack down on the right to peaceful assembly and strip people of their right to protest,” said Rado Sloboda, the director of Amnesty International Slovakia. [Amnesty International]

(ytl)

Slovakia amends controversial criminal overhaul to secure EU funds

Slovakian lawmakers have approved changes to the country’s contentious penal code reform, increasing penalties for misuse of EU funds as the populist government seeks to address the European Commission’s concerns.

The three-party ruling coalition, led by populist Prime Minister Robert Fico, had pushed through the country’s penal code overhaul that softens punishments for white-collar crimes, including misuse of EU funds, tax fraud, corruption, and manipulation of public tenders.

Justice Minister Boris Susko said on July 15 that the new changes were fast-tracked to minimize the risk of losing EU funds, which would damage Slovakia’s economy. [Politico] [Reuters] [Euractiv]

Slovakia, the EU and NATO member country of 5.4 million, has been keen to avoid a clash with Brussels that would jeopardise the flow of much-needed funding. The EU funds have financed more than half of all public investment in the country. [Bloomberg]

Following months of consultation with Brussels, Fico’s government has water-downed parts of the controversial reform but left most of it intact, including the disbandment of an anti-graft office that dealt with major crimes and extremism.

The government has heightened penalties for crimes related to EU funds while extending the statute of limitations for such offences.

The original legislation has drawn scrutiny from the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which fears that Fico's changes would compromise Slovakia's ability to safeguard the bloc's financial interests. [Europe Monthly January 2024] [Politico]

The European Commission also voiced concern after pro-liberal parties accused Fico's administration of using the overhaul as a ploy to shield politicians and benefactors from graft probes.

Liberal opposition's 'dirty work'

Fico has denied that his leftist ruling coalition overreached the penal code revamp. He accused the liberal opposition of lobbying Brussels to freeze EU funds.

"The opposition sought to financially damage Slovakia," Fico said in a video statement on July 15, adding that their "dirty work left traces in Brussels".

Fico said: "Therefore, we must urgently strengthen the protection of the European Union's interests in the law." [Bloomberg]

In response to Fico's criticism, Branislav Grohling, chairman of the liberal opposition party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), said that the approved amendment would create a two-tier system for corruption investigations, with misuse of EU funds being punished more severely than domestic cases.

(ytl)

Government, trade unions reach tentative agreement on Slovenia's public sector pay reform

After months of negotiations, Slovenia's government and trade unions have reached a tentative agreement on public sector pay reform, though several issues remain unresolved.

The non-binding document outlines a new pay system to be implemented gradually from January 1, 2025. This system will establish a 1:7 wage ratio between the minimum and maximum salaries across the public sector. Initially, salaries will not be adjusted for inflation, but a transitional adjustment will be made if inflation exceeds a certain threshold. Once fully implemented by 2029, the system will automatically adjust pay to 80% of consumer price inflation annually from May, unless altered by a new agreement.

The reform is expected to increase public sector salaries by 25-30% on average, distributed over six instalments from January 2025 to January 2028. Employees currently receiving an extra five days of annual leave at age 50 will instead receive these days after age 55, with full implementation expected by 2030.

Finance Minister Klemen Boštjančič confirmed that no public employee would earn less than the minimum wage under the new system, with provisions reviewed every four years. However, details on job classifications and the five wage pillars—covering various public sector groups—are still under negotiation, with talks set to resume in late August.

Current unresolved issues include pay disparities among different roles, such as headteachers earning less than some teachers and hospital directors making less than doctors. Doctors have been on strike for over six months demanding higher pay and better working conditions, though the impact of their strike has been limited due to legislation requiring essential services during the action.

The agreement signed on July 17 is a significant step but is not final. It allows for further negotiations on unresolved issues, with trade union leaders Branimir Štrukelj and Jakob Počivavšek endorsing the progress made so far.

The estimated EUR 1.4 billion cost of the wage reform has not yet been fully secured, adding to the complexity of the negotiations. [The Slovenia Times]

(dql)

Slovenia's administrative units resume work after months-long strike

On July 5, Slovenia’s administrative units agreed to resume normal operations on July 8 ending a strike that began in March. The strike, initiated due to concerns over understaffing, low pay, and high workloads, escalated to an all-out industrial action in May after negotiations for better conditions failed.

The strikes severely impacted services such as passport and driver’s license applications, leading to long queues and chaotic scenes, particularly in Ljubljana. The government had resisted making separate agreements with striking staff, instead issuing a list of urgent tasks and replacing the head of the Ljubljana unit.

A deal was finally reached and signed on July 5. The agreement includes bonuses for increased workload, a reduction of backlogs, and compensation for strike days.

The deal was signed by Frančišek Verk of the Trade Union of State Bodies and Dragan Stanković of the Trade Union of Administrative Units. The government also proposed legislative changes to ease the workload by suspending territorial jurisdiction for issuing residence and work permits to foreign citizens and allowing workers to start immediately upon filing their work permit forms.

These changes are expected to be passed by parliament and will be in effect until the end of September. [The Slovenia Times]

(dql)

Slovenia's opposition challenges government's recognition of Palestine

Slovenia's centre-right opposition has requested the Constitutional Court to review and annul the country's recognition of Palestine, citing violations of parliamentary procedures.

The National Assembly recognized Palestine on June 4, despite attempts by the opposition, particularly the Democrats (SDS) and New Slovenia (NSi), to delay the vote. The SDS had initially sought a consultative referendum to postpone the vote but withdrew the request, prompting the coalition to reinterpret parliamentary rules to proceed with the recognition immediately.

The opposition accuses the ruling coalition of unconstitutional and arbitrary actions, alleging a breach of established procedures. It further claims that the procedural violations prevented a thorough debate on this significant foreign policy issue.

The coalition parties maintain that the recognition process followed proper parliamentary procedures. [The Slovenia Times]

Slovenia and Palestine established diplomatic relations on June 5, following the parliamentary vote. [Government, Slovenia]

Slovenia is first European Union member state to issue sovereign digital bond

On July 25, Slovenia became the first EU state to issue a sovereign digital bond, launching a EUR 30 million bond with a 3.65% coupon as part of the European Central Bank's (ECB's) money settlement experimentation program.

The bond, which matures on November 25, was settled on-chain through the Bank of France's tokenized cash system using wholesale central bank digital currency (CBDC). The ECB completed its first wholesale CBDC settlement test in May and plans more trials.

The Slovenian government highlighted the potential for greater transparency and efficiency in financial markets through distributed ledger technology. BNP Paribas coordinated and managed the issuance on its Neobonds platform. [Government, Slovenia] [Coin Desk]

(dql)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

World's first livestock carbon tax to be introduced in Denmark

Denmark is set to introduce the world's first carbon tax on livestock to advance its goal of carbon neutrality by 2045. Starting in 2030, methane emissions from cattle

and pigs will be taxed at DKK 300 (EUR 40) per ton of CO2 equivalent, rising to DKK 750 in 2035.

This measure was agreed upon by the government, part of the opposition, and representatives of livestock farmers, industry, and trade unions. It currently awaits parliamentary approval after the summer.

The Danish Association for Sustainable Agriculture voiced dissatisfaction with the agreement with its presideng Peter Kiaer expressing concern over participating in "an uncertain experiment" that potentially pose a threat to food supply security in the country. He pointed to New Zealand's abandonment of a similar proposal due to farmer protests.

To mitigate the impact on Danish farmers, the plan proposes a 60% tax deduction, reducing the actual cost to DKK 120 (EUR 16) per ton from 2030, rising to DKK 300 (EUR 40) by 2035. Despite these measures, the economy ministry estimates that up to 2,000 jobs could be lost in the sector by 2035.

Revenue from the tax will be reinvested in the ecological transition of the agricultural industry, crucial for a country where over 60% of the surface area is devoted to agriculture. [RTÉ]

(dql)

Danish government approves offshore wind farm plan

The Danish Energy Agency (DEA) has approved the Hesselø offshore wind farm plan, incorporating the environmental plan and feedback from the consultation process. The wind farm will have a capacity of 800-1,200 MW, consisting of turbines, cables, and power transformers, and will connect to the grid at Hovegård High Voltage Station.

The turbines will be installed in Hesselø Bay, approximately 30 km from the coast of North Zealand, Anholt, and Djursland, and about 33 km from the Swedish west coast. The original planning area was adjusted due to unsuitable seabed conditions, and the wind farm will now be located in a more southerly area.

Subsea cables will run to Gilbjerg Hoved in North Zealand, with a potential new high-voltage substation at Pårup, and buried land cables extending to Hovegård High Voltage Station north of Ballerup.

While the DEA is handling planning and environmental assessments, Energinet is also conducting an environmental evaluation and preparing the planning basis for the onshore infrastructure, linked to the Hesselø offshore wind farm. An independent public enterprise owned by the Danish state under the Ministry of Climate and Energy, Energinet is Denmark's national transmission system operator for electricity and natural gas.

The tender for the wind farm opened in April 2024, with a bid deadline of April 1, 2025. The winner must conduct an environmental impact assessment, and the final project capacity will depend on the auction's outcome. [offshoreWIND.biz]

(dql)

Deportation of man allegedly involved in attacking Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen demanded by prosecution

Danish prosecutors have called for the deportation of a 39-year-old Polish man charged with assaulting Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on June 8. They also seek a six-year travel ban preventing his return to Denmark. The man faces charges of violence against public servants and additional charges alleging the assault was motivated by Frederiksen's public statements, potentially leading to a harsher sentence.

The trial is scheduled for August 6-7 at Copenhagen City Court. During a preliminary hearing, the accused pleaded not guilty, stating he was out for a Friday evening on June 8 and does not remember much of the incident.

Copenhagen police reported no political motivation behind the assault, describing it as a spontaneous act. The arrest report noted the accused may have been under the influence, as he appeared absent, lethargic, and mumbling when he was arrested. [AA]

(dql)

Finland's ruling parties gain ground as opposition faces decline in opinion poll

Support for Finland's ruling coalition members, the centre-right National Coalition Party and the far-right Finns Party is on the rise, according to the latest poll by

Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

The National Coalition saw its support increase by 0.8 percentage points to 20.8 percent, marking the most significant shift since the previous poll. The Finns Party experienced a 0.7-point rise in support, reaching 15.6 percent. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Helsinki Times]

The centre-left Social Democratic Party, the leading opposition party in the Finnish Parliament, experienced a decline in its approval rating, dropping from 21.2 percent to 20.8 percent. This is nearly two points below its peak of 22.7 percent reached in May 2024. [Helsinki Times]

The poll indicates a decline in support for several opposition parties. The centrist Centre Party dropped by 0.4 points to 11.8 percent, the centre-left Greens fell by 0.2 points to 8.2 percent, and the centre-right Movement Now decreased by 0.1 points to 2.2 percent. Conversely, the left-wing Left Alliance saw a slight increase of 0.1 points, bringing its support to 10.0 percent. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Helsinki Times]

Among the ruling parties, the centre-right Christian Democrats saw a decrease of 0.5 points to 3.8 percent. In contrast, the liberal Swedish People's Party experienced a 0.1-point rise, reaching 4.6 percent. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Helsinki Times]

The survey commissioned by Helsingin Sanomat was conducted by the Finnish research agency Verian, which interviewed 2,388 individuals. [Helsingin Sanomat] [Yle]

The polling period was marked by intense debate and political manoeuvring regarding an emergency legislation that permits the government to halt the acceptance of asylum applications at the country's border with Russia. This legislation, which has now been passed, also allows border guards to immediately turn away migrants seeking international protection, except for specific vulnerable groups. [Helsinki Times]

(rs)

Finland's birth rate shows increase

In the first half of 2024, Finland has seen a slight increase in birth, with 21,719 children born—465 more than the same period last year. This marks a positive shift after a decade-long decline in birth rates,

interrupted only briefly during the COVID-19 years of 2020 and 2021.

Additionally, statistics also reveal that the mortality rate in Finland has decreased, contributing further to population growth. The death rate has continued to decline into 2024, following a slight reduction in 2023 compared to 2022.

Notably, immigration remains a significant factor in Finland's population growth. In the first six months of 2024, 27,247 people immigrated to the country, while the number of those emigrating stands at 6,051. Despite a decrease in immigration from Russia and Finland, overall immigration remains high. Ukrainian citizens constituted the largest group of immigrants at 29%, followed by Finnish citizens at 11% and Filipino citizens at 7%.

While the slight rise in birth rates and the steady influx of immigrants provide a hopeful outlook for Finland's demographics, it remains uncertain whether these trends will continue in the long term. [Helsinki Times]

(dql)

Secretive meeting of Finnish neo-Nazis and far-right extremists held

According to findings on Bellingcat, an investigative journalism group, a secretive summer event for Finnish neo-Nazis and far-right extremists was held in June 14-15 at an island campsite near Ruovesi in the Pirkanmaa/Tampere region.

The “White Boy Summer Fest” was the third annual iteration of the event, named after an internet meme popular in far-right circles. It was organized by the Finnish far-right group Tulenväki and a combat sports organization called Veren Laki ("Law of Blood"), attracting both Finnish and foreign far-right extremists.

The municipality was unaware of the event's nature until contacted by Bellingcat. [Yle] [Bellingcat]

(dql)

Finland’s revised conscription law takes effect

An amendment to Finland’s Conscription Act, allowing reservists to assist the Finnish Border Guard, came

into effect on July 15.

This change enables the organization of refresher exercises for reservists to maintain border security at short notice, though this procedure will be highly exceptional and used only as necessary to manage border situations.

The amendment addresses an ongoing exceptional situation at Finland's eastern border with Russia and applies exclusively to Border Guard reservists who completed their conscript training with the Finnish Border Guard, not the Finnish Defence Forces.

The Border Guard will provide more details to its reservists in August and September.

(dql)

Police ordered to reinvestigate activists

Iceland's Metropolitan Police Chief has been ordered to reinvestigate alleged bribes by activists Sema Erla Serdaroglu and María Lilja Þrastardóttir Kemp.

The case originated in April 2024, when Supreme Court lawyer Einar S. Hálfdánarson accused them of violating public fundraising laws, bribing officials, and financing terrorism. Sema Erla and María Lilja, who are involved with the humanitarian association Solaris, assist Palestinians evacuating from Gaza.

The police dismissed the case in April, citing lack of evidence. However, on July 16, the public prosecutor mandated a reinvestigation, arguing that the police had failed to fully examine the case initially. [The Reykavík Grapevine]

An adjunct lecturer at the University of Iceland, Seraroglu is president and founder of Solaris, a 2017-founded humanitarian aid organisation for refugees and asylum seekers in Iceland.

(dql)

Iranian-born Norwegian sentenced to 30 years for attack during 2022 Oslo LGBT+ festival

On July 4, the Oslo District Court sentenced Iranian-born Norwegian Zaniar Matapour to 30 years in prison after finding him guilty of terrorism for a 2022 attack

on an LGBTQ+ festival in Oslo. This sentence is Norway's highest since terror legislation changed in 2015.

Matapour shot 10 rounds with a machine gun and eight with a handgun, killing two and seriously wounding nine outside the London Pub, a popular gay bar. Matapour had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group and had been radicalized for years.

The trial, which started in March and concluded in May, revealed that four others are suspected of complicity but remain uncharged. [AP]

(dql)

Cyberattack hits Norwegian ministries

Norway's government has disclosed on July 22 that twelve Norwegian government ministries were hit by a cyber-attack. Not affected by the attack were the Prime Minister's office or the foreign, defence, and justice ministries, as they use a different IT platform.

The attack exploited a vulnerability in a supplier's platform, which has since been addressed. Detected on July 12 due to unusual traffic on the supplier's platform, the breach is under investigation by the police.

Previous cyber-attacks in Norway, Europe's largest gas supplier and NATO's northernmost member, include a June 2022 distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack attributed to a criminal pro-Russian group. Norway's cyber security agency reported a tripling of cyber-attacks between 2019 and 2021, with serious incidents in 2022 remaining consistent with 2021 levels. [Reuters]

(dql)

Sweden toughens family reunification rules

Sweden has announced plans to tighten family reunification guidelines in order to control immigration.

The Swedish government will introduce tougher income criteria for foreign nationals wishing to join their relatives living in Sweden, as well as stricter

maintenance requirements and other visa conditions. [Info Migrants] [Sverige Radio]

The possibility of implementing additional DNA testing in order to verify people's identities is also being explored. This would especially apply in situations where the family relationship cannot be established solely through documentation, particularly in cases involving children. [Info Migrants]

The government considers that Sweden's current laws regarding family immigration and foreign commitments in general are "more generous" than what is mandated by EU law. [Schengen News]

There will still be some exceptions to the maintenance requirement, Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard said. She also assured that these tougher regulations are not expected to make Sweden less attractive to highly skilled foreign workers. [Sverige Radio]

(fs)

Sweden to introduce payment to babysitting grandparents

Sweden has enacted law that compensates grandparents for babysitting their grandkids for up to three months during the child's first year.

Grandparents are entitled to a portion of the parents' parental leave allowance. Parents can transfer up to 45 days to others, while single parents may transfer up to 90 days. [International Business Times]

(dql)

Sweden's unemployment rate on the rise

As announced by the Swedish Public Employment Service, around 348,000 people were registered as unemployed at the end of June, which is 26,000 more than one year ago. [Arbetsförmedlingen]

Over 140,000 people are currently long-term unemployed, up nearly 3,000 from the same time last year. Long-term unemployment is defined as those without a job for a year or longer. [The Local SE]

Unemployment is rising among all groups, but Swedish men are the most affected, with an increase of 13.000

over the previous year. With approximately 37.500 persons between the ages of 18 and 24 unemployed, there is a 3.500 increase in youth unemployment from the previous year. [TNT]

The Employment Service predicts that unemployment will still slightly rise in 2024, but it is expected to start declining the following year as the economy strengthens. In 2024, the average unemployment rate is predicted to be 6.7%, up from 6.5% in 2023. [Arbetsförmedlingen]

(fs)

Sweden launches study on fighter jet satellite launch capability

Sweden has initiated a study to explore the feasibility of launching a small satellite into space using a Saab Gripen multirole fighter jet. This novel approach aims to enhance dispersed operations and counter Russian aggression.

Led by the Swedish Air Force in collaboration with the Defense Research Agency, the Stella study focuses on the Gripen's potential to launch a satellite into Low Earth Orbit (LEO). Col. Ella Carlsson, head of the Air Force's Space Division, emphasized the study's goal to leverage the Gripen's strengths for space operations.

The Stella study aligns with Sweden's recently announced defense space strategy, which focuses on freedom of action, capability development, responsible operations, and crisis preparedness. The strategy did not disclose budget details for space-based capabilities.

In the near term, the Swedish Air Force prioritizes acquiring a new long-range air-to-ground missile for its Gripen C/D fleet. [Breaking Defense]

(dql)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Russian President Putin highlights ties with China at Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit

On July 4, the 24th Summit of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) concluded in Astana, Kazakhstan, with the adoption of the Astana Declaration, aimed at enhancing cohesion and cooperation in the Eurasian region. Hosting Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev welcomed the heads of state, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not attend.

The summit saw the accession of Belarus as the SCO's 10th full member to the SCO. The SCO, founded in 2001, initially comprised six countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined in 2017, followed by Iran in 2023. The SCO also has two observer states, Afghanistan and Mongolia, and 14 dialogue partners, including Turkey, represented by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at this year's summit. [AA 1]

Notably regarding the accession of Belarus to the SCO, the Belarusian government of President Alexander Lukashenko is not recognized by a number of Western states including the US, UK, and Canada, while Belarus itself is sanctioned by the US and the European Union. Even more, shortly after the accession to the SCO, Belarus and China launched military drills at the Brestski training ground, less than two miles from the Polish and by extension NATO border and only 17 miles from Ukraine at a potentially decisive period of the Ukraine war.

The Astana Declaration adopted during the summit emphasized the SCO's commitment to a more representative, democratic, equitable, and multipolar world order. It highlighted the importance of

cooperation within the organization for establishing a security architecture in Eurasia based on equality and indivisibility.

While “strongly condemn[ing] the actions that have led to numerous civilian casualties and a catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip”, the statement does even not mention the Ukraine war at all. This is even more remarkable as the member states “emphasize that interaction within the Organization can serve as the basis for the formation of an architecture of equal and indivisible security in Eurasia.”

Moreover, based on the observation of “tectonic shifts taking place” in the world system, the member states “consider it necessary to increase the role of the SCO in creating conditions for strengthening global peace, security and stability, as well as building a new democratic, fair, political and economic international order” and “invite the world community to join” the respective SCO initiative "On World Unity for a Just Peace, Harmony and Development”. Notably, the originally Chinese theme of “creating a community with a common destiny for humanity” also found its way into the document. [Shanghai Cooperation Organization]

In its view on global order, the summit’s joint statement underscores once more that the member states clearly pursue an alternative vision to the Western concept of the international liberal order as it emerged after the end of the cold War.

Altogether, at least in the self-perception of the member states, the latest SCO summit reflects a growing significance of the SCO as a non-Western counterweight to Western influence in the world system. Like the BRICS, the SCO seems to be indeed determined to integrate and engage with countries considered to be rogues and outcasts by the West and to strengthen those states that challenge the still dominant position of the West in the world system. [CNN] [USIP]

Other key agreements signed included the SCO's development strategy for the next 12 months, with Kazakhstan set to pass the chairmanship to China in 2025. There is speculation that the SCO may expand further next year. In response to growing security concerns, notably the March terrorist attack outside Moscow claimed by ISIS-K, leaders approved a three-year Cooperation Program to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism. An agreement on the regional anti-drug strategy was also signed.

The SCO's development strategy for energy cooperation was another significant document, highlighting Kazakhstan's transition to green energy. Chinese leader Xi Jinping referenced key joint projects like the Zhanatas wind farm and Turgusun hydropower station in a recent article in the Kazakh press. [The State Council, China 1]

The afternoon session, known as the "SCO Plus," included heads of state from dialogue partners such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. Turkmenistan was represented by its former leader Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, now chairman of the country's People's Council. [The Times of Central Asia]

Vladimir Putin meets Xi Jinping at SCO summit

During their meeting on the sidelines of the summit on July 3, Russia President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping emphasized their countries' strategic partnership. Putin highlighted the SCO's role in fostering a multipolar world order.

Both leaders praised the expanding SCO membership and portrayed the China-Russia relationship as a stabilizing force amidst global turmoil. They underscored their nations' deepening ties, referencing their historical friendship and strategic cooperation, particularly significant given the current international pressures from the West. They have met approximately 40 times, cementing a "no limits" strategic partnership just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Xi stressed the importance of continued cooperation between China and Russia in light of a turbulent international environment. The leaders' meeting, the second in two months, comes as both countries face Western criticism and sanctions—China for its assertive policies in the Asia-Pacific and Taiwan, and Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. [The State Council, China 2]

While Putin emphasized that the SCO is not antagonistic towards any bloc but serves the interests of its members [Kremlin, Russia], Putin's strategic objectives are widely seen as pushing together with China for solidifying the SCO as counterweight to Western influence in the world system. [Aljazeera] [DW]

Putin/Erdogan meeting

During the summit, Putin met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Both leaders reaffirmed their

commitment to bilateral ties and discussed regional issues, including the Syrian conflict, where Ankara and Moscow support opposing sides.

The discussion on Syria comes amid regional efforts to resume direct dialogue between high-level Turkish and Syrian officials. Both Erdogan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad have recently shown openness to talks. However, the Russian-mediated dialogue that began in 2022 stalled because Damascus demanded the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syrian territory before any normalization. Ankara fears such a withdrawal would create a power vacuum potentially filled by the US-allied, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which Turkey considers a national security threat. [Al-Monitor]

Erdogan also suggested that Turkey could mediate peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, but Russia dismissed the possibility of Erdogan assuming such a role. [Reuters]

Putin/Sharif meeting

In another bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the summit, Putin and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif engaged in extensive discussions covering bilateral relations, with a particular focus on trade, economic relations, energy, and significant regional and global issues.

Putin acknowledged the excellent relations between the two countries, which have been further strengthened by increased trade cooperation. He highlighted the potential for enhancing cooperation in the energy and agriculture sectors and expressed a desire to boost Russian cooperation with Pakistan in the field of food security.

Sharif, for his part, stressed the importance Pakistan places on its relationship with Russia and expressed satisfaction with the steady growth of these ties. He reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to working with Russia to further expand and strengthen the multi-dimensional cooperation between the two countries in areas such as trade, energy, defense, and security. [Radio Pakistan]

Sharif also proposed to Putin that Russia consider using barter trade to circumvent Western financial sanctions. [AA 2] [Kremlin, Russia]

(jm/ss/lm/hs)

Hungarian prime minister urges Russia-Ukraine ceasefire during meeting with world leaders

Prime Minister Viktor Orban visits Ukraine

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban urged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to consider a ceasefire with Russia on July 2, making a trip to Moscow days later.

Orban's proposal to Ukraine came shortly after Hungary assumed the six-month rotating presidency of the European Council on July 1.

The surprise visit to Kyiv was the president's first visit in over a decade. [BBC]

In the past, the Hungarian prime minister has criticized the decision to send Western military aid to Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion of the eastern European country in February 2022.

Orban's relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin is also one of the warmest among EU leaders.

Orban's push for a ceasefire comes ahead of a planned international summit in Kyiv later this year.

The Hungarian president said: "A ceasefire connected to a deadline would give a chance to speed up peace talks. I explored this possibility with the president, and I am grateful for his honest answers and negotiation."

Kyiv responded with its own plans for peace including the plan for an international summit that could invite a Russian representative to help facilitate peace talks.

Ukrainian foreign policy adviser Ihor Zhovkva said: "We say that Ukraine really wants peace for itself, this is logical... For this, we have a tool - the peace summit." [Reuters]

Officials in Kyiv have frequently expressed concerns that Russia would exploit any pause in hostilities to reorganize and bolster its forces for a potentially larger assault on Ukraine.

During a statement to reporters, Zelenskyy highlighted the potential for a comprehensive bilateral cooperation agreement between Ukraine and Hungary, "...the content of our dialogue today on all issues can become the foundation for a bilateral document between our states, a document that will govern all our mutual relations," he stated. [Reuters]

Orban expressed support for Zelenskyy's remarks, noting that Hungary is eager to assist in the modernization of Ukraine's economy.

Tensions between Ukraine and Hungary have risen in recent years in the face of Hungary's continued peaceful relationship with Russia and opposition to many EU efforts to aid Kyiv.

Despite this, Ukraine has continued to seek Hungary's support due to its reliance on EU financial and military backing amid its ongoing war with Russia.

Orban visits Russia

Later the same week, on July 5, Orban met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

During the trip, Putin insisted that Ukraine withdraws its troops from regions that Moscow has annexed.

In May, Putin made the same request, adding that Kyiv must agree to drop any plans of joining NATO. Kyiv rejected these requests. [Reuters 2]

Putin also told Orban of his expectations for Hungary to outline "the position of European partners" in Ukraine given its newly acquired leading position in the European Council. Orban responded by saying: "The number of steps needed to end the war and bring about peace is many."[Le Monde]

The trip to Russia was heavily criticized by EU officials who said it threatened to undermine the EU's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. The EU has consistently positioned itself against any Russian offensive.

European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen wrote on X: "Appeasement will not stop Putin." [X]

Many EU leaders are claiming that Orban is acting out of line with no mandate or official representation of the EU, and that the underlying intentions of his visit to Moscow are the bilateral relations between Hungary and Russia.

US press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre added that the visit to Russia "will not advance the cause of peace and is counterproductive to promoting Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence".

The White House also criticized Orban's meeting with Putin. Their press secretary stated that the visit "will not advance the cause of peace and is counterproductive to promoting Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence". [Le Monde]

The visit to Moscow was the first by a European leader since 2022. [Barron's/AFP]

Orban visits China

Prime Minister Orban met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on July 8, making an unexpected visit to Beijing just days after his meeting with Russian President Putin.

Following recent visits to Kyiv and Moscow, Orban has branded his meeting with the Chinese leader as the third leg of his self-proclaimed “peace mission” surrounding the war in Ukraine. [Reuters 3]

China, which maintains strong relations with Russia, has been advocating for a six-point peace plan introduced with Brazil in May. The plan suggests organizing an international peace conference "at a proper time" and emphasizes equal participation from both Ukraine and Russia.

According to Chinese state media, Xi told Orban that the international community should facilitate conditions for resuming direct dialogue and negotiations between the two parties. "An early ceasefire and political solution are in everyone's best interest," he added.

Orban stated that China is "a key power in establishing conditions for peace in the Russia-Ukraine war," citing this as the reason for his meeting with Xi just two months after the Chinese leader's visit to Budapest. [Reuters 3]

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy states that Orban could not act as a mediator for the conflict as it is a task that can only be undertaken by world powers or the whole EU.

Hungary has taken a different stance from its NATO allies regarding China, which the Western military alliance has identified as a supporter of Russia's war effort in Ukraine and a challenge to security. At the NATO summit in Washington earlier this month, Hungary's foreign minister, stated that Hungary does not want NATO to turn into an "anti-China" alliance and will not back any efforts to make it so.

Orban meets with Trump

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban met with former US President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida on July 11.

The latest stop on Orban’s advertised “peace-making tour”, the Hungarian prime minister paid a visit to the

former US leader following the NATO summit in Washington to discuss the “possibilities of peace”. [Al Jazeera]

Orban, a longtime outspoken supporter of Trump, issued a statement on X following his meeting, “It was an honour to visit President [Donald Trump] at Mar-a-Lago today. We discussed ways to make peace. The good news of the day: he’s going to solve it!” [X]

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto expressed to Reuters that Hungary believes a second Trump presidency could increase the chances of achieving peace in Ukraine. Szijjarto also mentioned that Prime Minister Orban is hopeful about ending the war through peace negotiations that would involve both Russia and Ukraine.

The Kremlin said on July 12 following the meeting that Orban did not tell Putin of his plans to meet Trump, and the Russian president did not convey any message to Trump via Orban.

In a letter to fellow leaders of the European Union, Orban stated that Trump, the Republican presidential candidate in the US, is prepared to act "immediately" as a peace mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict if he wins the election in November. [Reuters 4]

Charles Michel, the chair of the European Council of the EU's national leaders, replied to Orban’s letter by saying, “The rotating Presidency of the Council has no role in representing the Union on the international stage and received no European Council mandate to engage on behalf of the Union." [Reuters 4]

Many EU officials are wary of a possible Trump presidency due to fear that he would cut US aid to Ukraine and push the country into peace talks that are advantageous to Russia and give President Vladimir Putin the confidence to pursue future acts of military aggression.

EU anger

Orban's actions since assuming the EU presidency have provoked outrage among numerous EU governments and officials.

Since entering the rotating position of president of the European Council of leaders, Orban has sought the role of mediator regarding the Russia-Ukraine war and cast himself as a “peacemaker”.

“The number of countries that can talk to both warring sides is diminishing,” Orban said, adding: “Hungary is

slowly becoming the only country in Europe that can speak to everyone," and alluding to Russia's diplomatic and economic isolation from Europe since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Al Jazeera 2]

In an unprecedented move, the European Commission on July 15 prohibited EU Commissioners from participating in meetings hosted in Hungary during its EU presidency. Some EU governments also intend to send only senior civil servants, instead of government ministers, to ministerial meetings in Hungary. Additionally, 63 European Parliament lawmakers have called for the EU to suspend Budapest's voting rights within the bloc. [Reuters 4]

Orban has notably been a heavy critic of European military support to Ukraine, in contrast to most EU members.

Many European leaders have criticized Orban's recent diplomatic adventures, labeling them as acts of appeasement, not peace. EU member states have since claimed they will not participate in a peace summit that Orban plans to host on August 28-29, opting instead to hold their own separate meeting. This would be the first time a country holding the EU's rotating presidency is ignored in this way.

European officials have also floated suggestions to boycott all ministerial meetings during Hungary's presidency or to remove it from the presidency entirely —a completely unprecedented action. [Al Jazeera 2]

These developments come as the latest aggregations of an ongoing rift between Hungary's leadership and most European Union officials.

(pt/ytl)

NATO pledges to increase support for Ukraine during Washington summit

During the NATO summit held in Washington DC from July 9-11, the 32 member states officially announced that Ukraine's NATO membership is on an "irreversible path", although the actual schedule for the war-torn country to join the defense alliance is not specified. [BBC]

To better strengthen the tie between NATO and Ukraine, the summit decided to appoint a senior representative in Kyiv, aimed at deepening ties between the alliance and the country. [Al Jazeera]

For Ukraine to sustain the summer, NATO also decided to provide F-16 fighter jets which would be transferred to Ukraine from Denmark and the Netherlands. This is the first time for NATO to support Ukraine with combat aircrafts, boosting the country's air defense competency significantly. [BBC]

Ukraine would also receive five Patriot systems which is crucial for protecting civilians and domestic infrastructure. In total, leaders in the summit have promised around USD 43 billion in aid to Ukraine for the following year. [Euronews]

The alliance' long-term commitment to Ukraine includes security assistance that ensure military aids like weapons and training can be reliably delivered. [AP News]

To speed up the F-16 fighter jets' arrival, the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy disclosed that the Polish government had taken action, although the detail of it wasn't disclosed. [Reuters]

(ycl)

In a first, EU transfers EUR 1.5 billion to Ukraine using Russia's frozen assets Switzerland not to follow

The European Union (EU) has announced the release of EUR 1.5 billion in aid to Ukraine, marking the first time funds have been sent using revenue generated from EUR 200 billion worth of Russian sovereign assets that were frozen following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The funds will be channeled through the European Peace Facility and the Ukraine Facility to bolster Ukraine's military capabilities and support its reconstruction efforts. [European Commission]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasized that using the Kremlin's funds to aid Ukraine is a strong symbol of support. Brussels is particularly concerned about the potential for a humanitarian crisis and a new wave of migration if Ukraine's power grid, which has suffered significant damage, is not repaired before winter.

Conversely, Russia has condemned this decision as "illegal," with the Kremlin indicating that it will respond thoughtfully. [EuroNews]

Switzerland, however, has decided not to follow the EU's approach. According to the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), Swiss law and international obligations prevent Switzerland from generating any extraordinary income from the Russian

central bank's funds. As of April 2024, Switzerland had frozen over CHF 7 billion in assets from the Russian Central Bank, which is separate from assets owned by Russian individuals or companies. [SWI]

(lm)

Denmark to send Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine

Denmark and the Netherlands have pledged to send 14 additional refitted Leopard 2A4 tanks to Ukraine this summer to bolster military support.

12 tanks have already been refitted and verified by Germany's automotive and arms manufacturer Rheinmetall, with the final two undergoing final testing. The Netherlands' Defense Ministry confirmed that all 14 tanks will be delivered simultaneously before the end of summer.

Both countries have previously provided significant military aid to Ukraine, including F-16 fighter jets. However, Ukraine has consistently requested more land firepower, such as air defense systems, artillery shells, and armored vehicles.

In 2023, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany committed to supplying 100 refurbished Leopard tanks to Ukraine, with Germany having already sent 18 as part of its contribution. [Politico]

Meanwhile, the German Foreign Ministry has revealed that as of July 29, Denmark and Germany have delivered 58 Leopard 1A5 tanks to Ukraine under a joint project. Additionally, Kyiv received 21,000 rounds of ammunition for Gepard anti-aircraft guns, two Bergepanzer 2 armored repair and recovery vehicles, and spare parts. The latest military aid package also includes 10 unmanned surface vessels, 10 ground surveillance radars, nearly 25,000 combat helmets, and a field hospital. Eight Leopard 1A5 battle tanks were recently sent to Ukraine. [Foreign Ministry, Germany] [European Pravda]

(dql)

Ukraine displays first F-16 jets donated by Western allies

On August 4, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky unveiled the first US-made F-16 jets that Ukraine has

received from NATO allies. Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway have pledged to deliver over 60 F-16s to strengthen Ukraine's air defenses after receiving approval from Washington last year.

The F-16s are expected to intercept Russian missiles and drones, suppress enemy air defenses, and strike Russian troop positions and ammunition depots.

During the Ukrainian Air Forces Day event, held at an undisclosed location for security reasons, Zelensky displayed two of the fighter jets and emphasized their significance in boosting Ukraine's defense against Russia. He mentioned efforts to get neighboring countries to help defend against Russian missiles and discussed the possibility of a NATO-Ukraine council to address these defenses.

Zelensky expressed pride in Ukrainian pilots mastering and using the F-16s and highlighted their role in bringing Ukraine closer to victory. There is consideration of keeping some F-16s at foreign bases to protect them from Russian strikes, given Russian President Vladimir Putin's warnings about potential strikes on NATO facilities hosting these warplanes.

The Kremlin dismissed the F-16s as a "magic pill" to alter the war's course and stated that Moscow has offered rewards for destroying them.

The F-16s, iconic fighter jets used by NATO for 50 years, have been donated by Western allies and are older models. While their arrival boosts Ukraine's military capabilities, analysts caution they won't singlehandedly change the war's outcome. Ukraine continues to face challenges, with Russia making steady gains in the eastern Donetsk region. [Reuters] [France24] [The Guardian]

(lm/dql)

Norway, Poland train Ukrainian tank crews

Ukrainian tankers are being trained at a military training facility in Poland, on the use and maintenance of the Leopard 2A4 main battle tank by instructors from NATO Allies Poland and Norway. This training, part of the European Union Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM UA), aims to boost the Ukrainian Army's capabilities in its defense against Russia.

Known for its firepower, protection, and mobility, the Leopard 2A4 is a key asset for NATO armies, and

mastery of this system believed to significantly strengthen Ukrainian tank crews.

The training seeks to ensure that Ukrainian forces can operate and maintain the Leopard 2A4 tanks independently, enhancing their combat effectiveness and self-reliance. It aligns with broader NATO efforts, including a pledge of EUR 40 billion in military aid for Ukraine over the next year, made at the recent NATO Summit in Washington, D.C. [Defence Blog]

(dql)

Latvia adds over 150 foreigners to blacklist following outbreak of Russian-Ukrainian war

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Latvia has blacklisted 153 foreigners, following recommendations from the State Security Service (VDD), restricting their access to the country.

Among the blacklisted, the majority are from Russia and Belarus – 81 and 21 citizens, respectively.

A foreigner who is blacklisted has the right to appeal the decision to the Administrative Regional Court within one month. However, submitting an appeal does not suspend the execution of the decision, and the applicant cannot request the court to suspend the decision's operation. [Baltic News Network]

(dql)

Czech president urges allies not to expect near-term breakthrough in Ukraine war

Czech President Petr Pavel has said it will be a "success" if Ukraine can retain its territory and cautioned against expecting a "significant breakthrough on the front line" in the near future.

Pavel made the statement at an Atlantic Council Front Page event in Houston, Texas, following a three-day NATO summit in Washington, at which allies voiced support for Ukraine's bid for NATO membership.

Pavel said the support needed for Ukraine to fully reclaim its territory is "not realistic at this time." [Atlantic Council]

He urged allies to provide more military aid to help defend Ukraine's frontlines while convincing Russia that it "cannot achieve significant battlefield successes".

"And then once the negotiation starts . . . our position shouldn't be to legalize occupied territories as Russian, but rather declare them as temporarily occupied territories," said Pavel on July 12.

Pavel, a retired NATO general and a former head of the Czech armed forces, has been a staunch backer of Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

The Czech Republic has led an ammunition initiative to procure hundreds of thousands of rounds from arms dealers worldwide to help Kyiv overcome its depleted firepower amid Russia's invasion. [Europe Monthly April 2024]

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal confirmed on July 16 that his country has received the first tranche of 50,000 artillery shells as part of the Czech initiative. [Reuters] [Bloomberg]

Defence Minister Jana Cernochova said under the Czech drive, some half a million heavy ammunition rounds would be delivered to Kyiv this year. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala assured the drive would continue into next year, adding that Czechs had also trained 1,700 Ukrainian soldiers this year, bringing the total to some 6,000. [Bloomberg]

While 20 countries have pledged to participate in the Czech ammunition initiative, only five—Canada, Portugal, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands—delivered payments by the end of May. [Reuters 2]

(ytl)

Prisoner swap between Russia and Western countries

On August 1, the largest prisoner exchange between Russia and the West since the Cold War took place, involving the release of 24 individuals. The exchange occurred on the runway at Ankara airport.

The US confirmed the release of 16 prisoners, including Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, in exchange for eight Russian prisoners held in the US, Norway, Germany, Poland, and Slovenia, including intelligence operatives, were released.

Among the freed US prisoners were also US Marine veteran Paul Whelan, Russian-American journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, and Russian-British activist Vladimir Kara-Murza. The deal, which took over 18 months to finalize, hinged on the return of Vadim Krasikov, a Russian serving a life sentence in Germany for an assassination in Berlin. He was convicted of the 2019 fatal shooting of former Chechen rebel commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in a Berlin park and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2021.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and senior officials welcomed the returning Russians at Moscow's Vnukovo airport. Earlier discussions had included the now-deceased Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. His widow, Yulia, celebrated the swap, calling it a victory against unjust imprisonment by Putin.

President Joe Biden hailed the exchange as a “feat of diplomacy,” thanking various countries for their roles in the complex negotiations. He criticized the “show trials” that led to the wrongful convictions and lengthy sentences of those released.

UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy also welcomed the releases, particularly of Kara-Murza and Whelan, who hold British citizenship. The Kremlin stated that 13 prisoners had been pardoned for the exchange, though it did not clarify why the names of two Germans, Patrick Schobel and Herman Moyzhes, were not on the pardon list. German citizen Rico Krieger, previously sentenced to death in Belarus (see article in this edition), was also released.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz affirmed the swap's importance after meeting some of the freed prisoners in Cologne.

Turkish security officials supervised the transfer of prisoners at Ankara airport, ensuring they boarded planes to their respective countries. The exchange involved 26 individuals, including two children returning to Russia with their convicted spy parents.

This swap follows days of speculation and the unusual transfer of well-known prisoners to undisclosed locations in Russia. The previous high-profile exchange occurred in December 2022, when US basketball star Brittney Griner was traded for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout. Another notable swap was in 2010 in Vienna, involving Russian spies and alleged double agents. [BBC]

(dql)

German citizen sentenced to death in Belarus freed after US-Russia-Germany prisoner swap

A German national sentenced to death in Belarus and subsequently pardoned was among 24 prisoners freed on August 1 in the largest prisoner exchange between Russia and the West since the Cold War, which took place at Ankara airport. Sixteen prisoners from Europe and the US and eight Russian counterparts were released from prisons in the US, Norway, Germany, Poland, and Slovenia, along with the children of two prisoners. [The Washington Post]

The German prisoner had been sentenced to death in June on terrorism and other charges but was pardoned by President Alexander Lukashenko only two days before the swap. He was accused of taking pictures of sensitive military sites and collaborating with Ukrainian security services, a claim Ukraine denied. [DW]

His release was part of the exchange that included Vadim Krasikov, an intelligence operative convicted of the 2019 fatal shooting of former Chechen rebel commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in a Berlin park and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2021.

Krasikov was a key bargaining chip for Russian President Vladimir Putin in securing the release of American journalist Evan Gershkovich, who had been sentenced to 16 years in jail for espionage in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on July 19, after spending nearly three years in prison. [Axios]

(dql)

NATO Washington Declaration excludes mention of Georgia's membership path

From July 9 to 11, NATO leaders convened in Washington, D.C., where NATO's founding document, signed in 1949, was celebrated for its 75th anniversary. During the summit, significant decisions were made to chart the strategic course for the Alliance's future. [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]

Since the 2008 Bucharest Summit Decision, the NATO Washington Summit Declaration adopted on July 11 by the heads of state of allied countries marks the first time it has omitted the affirmation that Georgia's path to membership in the Alliance will involve the Membership Action Plan as part of the process. [Civil Georgia]

In the Washington Summit Declaration, Georgia is mentioned once, specifically in paragraph 17, where it calls on Russia to withdraw all its forces from the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which are stationed there without their consent. [Civil Georgia]

Paragraph 28 of the declaration addresses partner countries, including Moldova, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, but does not mention Georgia. Similarly, Georgia is also not referenced in the article concerning the Black Sea region in Article 31. [Civil Georgia] [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]

This comes as over the past two years, the significant decline in relations between Georgia and its Western partners has raised concerns among NATO officials, primarily revolving around the reforms implemented since 2022 by the Georgian Government.

(zh)

Urgent request filed with Dutch court to challenge appointment of Rutte as new NATO secretary general

A Dutch tax specialist and legal advisor, Karim Aachboun, has filed an urgent legal request with the Dutch-speaking court of first instance in Brussels to challenge the appointment of former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte as the new Secretary General of NATO. Aachboun's action is directed against both NATO and Rutte, who is slated to succeed Jens Stoltenberg on October 1.

Aachboun is seeking to suspend Rutte's nomination due to two ongoing civil lawsuits he has filed against Rutte in the Netherlands. The first lawsuit pertains to the infamous Dutch benefits scandal, which caused the collapse of Rutte's government in 2021. The second case involves the death of a Dutch woman in Gaza in October 2023. These cases are scheduled to be heard in The Hague only after October 1, raising concerns for Aachboun that Rutte might invoke immunity as NATO Secretary General to avoid legal accountability.

On June 26, the ambassadors of NATO's 32 member countries officially appointed Mark Rutte as the next Secretary General. Aachboun's legal action aims to prevent Rutte from taking up the role, arguing that his immunity would obstruct justice in the pending civil cases.

The legal request has been scheduled for a hearing on August 12. However, it remains uncertain whether the

court will address the matter immediately. According to the legal documents seen by Agence Belga, Aachboun has asked the Brussels court to delay Rutte's appointment until the Dutch legal proceedings are resolved. The outcome of this urgent legal request will determine whether Rutte can assume his new role at NATO as planned or face further legal obstacles in his appointment process. [RTL, in French]

(lm)

UN-hosted Cyprus talks uncertain as Turkish side says it wasn't invited

Tentative plans by the United Nations to convene leaders from Cyprus's divided communities for talks later in August are uncertain, as the Turkish Cypriot side has stated it has not received an invitation.

Greek Cypriot leader Nikos Christodoulides indicated that he had been approached for talks hosted by the UN in New York on August 13, with Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar. Speaking on August 3, Christodoulides said he responded positively to the invitation and expressed hope that the Turkish side would do the same, leading to constructive outcomes.

However, Tatar responded by saying he had not received any invitation and accused Christodoulides of creating confusion with his comments. Tatar stated, "There is no invitation from the UN Secretary-General for a tripartite meeting. In any case, under the current conditions, we would not approve a tripartite meeting. There is no basis for such a meeting."

Christodoulides argued that any refusal from Tatar to meet would be a disservice to the Turkish Cypriots. He emphasized the importance of dialogue and expressed optimism about the potential talks.

Cyprus has been divided since a Turkish invasion in 1974, following a brief Greek-inspired coup. The initial seeds of division were sown earlier when a power-sharing administration collapsed, and ensuing violence led to the deployment of a peacekeeping force.

Peace talks have been on hold since 2017. The Turkish Cypriot side, which administers a breakaway state in northern Cyprus recognized only by Turkey, now demands that any resumption of talks must acknowledge their equal sovereignty with the internationally recognized Greek Cypriot government. [Middle East Monitor]

(lm)

FATF adds Monaco to Gray List for money laundering deficiencies

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an intergovernmental organization founded in 1989 on the initiative of the G7 to develop policies to combat money laundering, has added Monaco and Venezuela to its "gray list" of countries with deficiencies in combating money laundering and terror financing. This list includes jurisdictions "under increased monitoring." In contrast, Jamaica and Turkey have been removed from the list due to their progress in addressing these issues.

Monaco, a wealthy city-state known for its lack of income and wealth taxes, was targeted despite implementing several policies following the Council of Europe's anti-money laundering body's concerns over figures close to Prince Albert II. Despite significant progress since 2022, the FATF found Monaco's efforts insufficient. In response, Monaco's government has committed to addressing the deficiencies and meeting planned deadlines to get off the list.

Turkey, on the other hand, showed "significant progress" in fighting money laundering and terror financing, leading to its removal from the gray list. The FATF highlighted multiple investigations by Turkish authorities as evidence of their improvement. Turkish Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek and Vice-President Cevdet Yilmaz both praised the decision, noting that it would boost international investor confidence in Turkey's financial system and positively impact the financial sector and economy.

The FATF's gray list currently includes 21 countries, while the blacklist contains high-risk jurisdictions like North Korea. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

French startup launches first EU market access application for lab-grown meat

'Gourmey', a French startup, has become the first company to apply for European Union (EU) market access for cultivated meat, specifically for foie gras, a traditional French delicacy. This lab-grown foie gras aims to address animal welfare concerns associated with traditional production methods.

The EU's evaluation process for this novel food will take 1.5 to 2 years, starting with a nine-month risk assessment by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), followed by a seven-month risk management phase where EU countries will vote on approval. If successful, Gourmey's product could be available to high-end chefs by 2026 and later in supermarkets. Gourmey, which has raised EUR 65 million in venture funding, is also seeking approval in other markets, including the UK, Switzerland, Singapore, and the USA. [Politico]

There has also been pushback against the growth of lab-grown meat alternatives. For instance, Italy and Hungary have taken steps to limit their proliferation. In November 2023, Italy decided to ban the production, sale, or import of cultivated meat. More recently, on July 15th, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban hosted a conference in Budapest to discuss the potential impacts of "novel foods" such as lab-grown meat and insects on European culinary traditions. [BBC] [Euractiv]

Regardless of legislative outcomes, more and more firms are likely to follow Gourmey's example, with estimates suggesting that the European cultured meat market could more than triple in size by 2033 to just over 500 million euros. This projected growth is the result of ethical and sustainable food practices becoming increasingly important to consumers. [Yahoo Finance]

(axc)

OSCE to send more than 300 observers for Azerbaijan's general elections

On August 1, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) opened an election observation mission for the early parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. The mission consists of a core team of 11 international experts and 28 long-term observers who will be deployed throughout the country.

The observation mission will monitor the conduct of the elections for compliance with OSCE commitments and other international obligations and democratic election standards. The observers will assess the conduct of the campaign, appearance of the parties in social networks, the work of the administration of the election at all levels, compliance of the fundamental freedoms and media coverage. [First Channel News]

This follows a July 31 meeting between the Chairman of Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission (CEC), Mazahir Panahov, with ODIHR head Ditmir Bushati.

During the meeting Panahov briefed on the commission's activities, including the registration of parliamentary candidates, the pre-election campaign, and other projects, emphasizing that the upcoming September 1 parliamentary election will be the first held across the entire Azerbaijani territory following this year's snap presidential election.

Panahov affirmed that all necessary conditions have been created for election observation missions to monitor the commission's activities and related processes. [Azertag]

(nl)

Hijab ban on France Olympic athletes breaches international human rights laws, rights groups say

Amnesty International has criticized the French government's decision to ban women athletes from wearing headscarves at the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, stating it breaches international human rights laws. The report highlights that such bans, implemented through national laws or sports regulations, disproportionately affect Muslim women and girls, causing humiliation and fear. Anna Błuś, Amnesty's Women's Rights Researcher in Europe, emphasized that such discriminatory rules violate human rights and hinder efforts to make sports more inclusive.

The report also condemns the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) inadequate response to calls for lifting the ban. Advocacy groups had petitioned the IOC to pressure French sporting authorities to overturn these bans, but the IOC claimed it was beyond their remit, citing varied interpretations of religious freedom by different states.

Several French sports federations, including football and basketball, enforce bans on religious headwear, creating barriers for Muslim women and girls. Advocacy groups like Les Hijabeuses and Basket Pour Toutes have been campaigning against these policies. Earlier this year, a coalition of athletes and human rights organizations petitioned the French Basketball Federation to revoke its ban on religious headwear, arguing it violates international human rights standards.

The French constitutional principle of laïcité has long restricted public religious expression, impacting various professions and now extending to sports. [Amnesty International] [JURIST]

(lm)

Albania, Bulgaria, Italy and North Macedonia sign military mobility agreement

Away from the NATO Summit, Guido Crosetto, the Italian Minister of Defense, alongside Albanian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian defense ministers recently signed a Letter of Intent for cross-border military mobility cooperation. This initiative seeks to allow a quicker flow of military forces and equipment. [Ekathimerini]

The Italian Ambassador to North Macedonia, Andrea Silvestri, also met with Macedonian Defense Minister Vlado Misajlovski. In this meeting, Ambassador Silvestri recognized the importance of North Macedonia as a strategic partner. Defense Minister Misajlovski reciprocated by emphasizing that Italy is a Macedonian ally and strategic partner regarding defense cooperation. [Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata]

Italy accuses NATO's Stoltenberg of betrayal over new southern envoy

Italy's Defence Minister, Guido Crosetto, has openly criticised NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg for what he perceives as a betrayal regarding the appointment of the alliance's new envoy for the southern flank. This incident has added tension within the NATO alliance, particularly between Rome and Brussels. [Reuters] [US news]

On July 22, the Italian government expressed its discontent over Stoltenberg's decision to nominate a Spaniard for the newly created envoy position. This role, intended to coordinate NATO's actions on its southern borders, was established at the behest of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The Italian administration had anticipated that one of its own nationals would be appointed to the position, given Italy's significant contribution to its creation.

Crosetto's response to the nomination was vehement. He described the decision as "nearly a personal

affront" and accused Stoltenberg of acting against Italy's interests. The Defence Minister articulated his frustration in a statement to *La Stampa*, indicating that he had sent an angry message to Stoltenberg, accusing him of undermining a principle that Italy had fought hard to establish. The criticism marks an unusual public outburst from a NATO member against the head of the military alliance, reflecting deep-seated frustration within the Italian government.

The NATO press office has refrained from commenting in detail, stating only that any appointments will be announced in due course. This diplomatic rift surfaces amidst NATO's recent leadership transition, with former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte set to succeed Stoltenberg on 1st October.

The role of the southern envoy is seen as crucial for NATO's strategic interests in the Mediterranean and North Africa, regions where Italy holds substantial geopolitical influence. The Italian government's dismay over the nomination process underscores the complexities and sensitivities involved in international diplomatic appointments within multilateral organisations.

This development follows Italy's recent advocacy for a stronger NATO presence in the southern Mediterranean, aimed at addressing security threats emanating from North Africa and the Middle East. As tensions simmer, it remains to be seen how this appointment will impact Italy's future interactions and collaborations within NATO, and whether diplomatic efforts will be made to reconcile the differences highlighted by this incident. [ANSA]

(vm/pk)

Russian fighters near Latvia intercepted by Swedish and German air forces

On August 3, German and Swedish military aircraft were scrambled into the air due to Russian jets approaching Latvia's borders. The German Eurofighters and Swedish planes were dispatched into international airspace over the Baltic Sea when unidentified Russian fighter jets were detected near Latvia's coast.

The Russian planes, which were participating in exercises with Russian vessels, had their transponders turned off and did not respond to radio calls. They also failed to communicate their flight plan in advance, a standard practice in the Baltic Sea region.

Recently, two US Air Force B-52H strategic bombers arrived in Romania for the first time, and in July, Finnish and Swedish pilots also intercepted Russian fighter jets over the Baltic Sea (see article in this edition). [Ukrainska Pravda]

Russian aircraft over Baltic intercepted Finland and Sweden

On July 15, Finnish and Swedish air operation centres intercepted two Russian fighter aircraft over international waters in the Baltic Sea, as reported by the NATO's Combined Air Operation Centre (CAOC) in Uedem, Germany.

The Russian planes, flying from Kaliningrad to mainland Russia, lacked a flight plan, did not communicate with civilian air traffic control, and did not use a transponder signal as required by international aviation rules.

Finnish and Swedish quick reaction alert (QRA) forces were launched, in a sign of close cooperation between NATO and its two latest members. [UK Defence Journal]

(dql)

Finnish international civil protection experts to join EU aid teams to tackle wildfires in Portugal

The Finnish Ministry of Interior has announced to send 48 experts in international civil protection to Portugal to help manage wildfires.

The ministry has arranged for two groups to be deployed: the first departing on August 1 and the second on August 16, each for approximately two weeks. These deployments aim to enhance EU-level preparedness and foster collaboration among European forest firefighting modules.

Portugal requested assistance through the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, which coordinates rescue teams from several EU Member States. These teams will support local authorities in combating wildfires.

This year, the EU will also send rescue teams to Spain, Greece, and France, involving over 500 rescue workers

from Member States. Finland has previously deployed rescue personnel to Portugal and Greece. [Government, Finland]

(dql)

Polish-led criminal group investigated for drug smuggling into Finland

Finland's Eastern Uusimaa Police disclosed on July 30 that it has been investigating a large Polish-led international crime group suspected of importing raw drug ingredients and narcotics into Europe and manufacturing drugs in various European countries and distributed them across the continent, including Finland. The estimated resale value exceeding EUR 11 million.

Led by a Polish man, the group's operations were highly professional, with drug manufacturing facilities in multiple countries, producing drugs from precursors mainly sourced from Asia.

The case is now being handed over to prosecutors. [Yle]

(dql)

Turkish President Erdogan raises issue against Israeli military action in Gaza during the NATO summit in July

The Turkish president Recap Tayyip Erdogan showed his stance on the current conflict at the Gaza strip again during the latest NATO summit, held in Washington, DC, from 9th-11th July. [Reuters]

This is NATO's first summit with Sweden fully participated as a member state. The country's membership for NATO was only approved by Turkey this January after nearly two years of objection. [Reuters]

Although the focus of the summit was the on-going war in Ukraine, Erdogan chose to address the conflict between Israel and Hamas and further proclaimed that he will not approve any cooperation between NATO and Israel before peace is forged in the region. [Politico]

In addition, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Israeli government of preferring bloodshed over ceasefire. Corresponding to Erdogan's speech, the ministry described the Israeli attack as "barbarity" to which countries supporting Israel must put an end. [Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affair]

Further fueling the rhetoric, on July 28th, Erdogan suggested that Turkey might intervene in the conflict, stating in a speech that "there is no reason" why Turkey could not act, citing previous military interventions in other countries. [Al Jazeera]

In a latest development, on August 5th, Erdogan criticized social media companies, accusing them of "muzzling the Palestinian people's voices," following Turkey's recent block of access to Instagram. Turkey has been in discussions with Instagram following this action, which came shortly after a senior Turkish official accused the platform of blocking condolence posts related to the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, leader of the Palestinian militant group Hamas. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, the new Freedom Flotilla, intended to deliver urgent humanitarian aid to Gaza and break Israel's siege, has been prevented from departing Istanbul by Turkish authorities, according to organizers. The Freedom Flotilla Coalition, comprising several humanitarian and pro-Palestinian groups, stated that they received no explanation for the blockade but suggested "intense pressure from the United States, the United Kingdom, and possibly other NATO countries strongly aligned with Israel." [Middle East Monitor]

These developments underscore Turkey's delicate position between its aspirations as a protector within the Islamic world and its vulnerability to Western pressures.

(ycl/dql)

Türkiye applauds Palestinian unity efforts, praises China's Role

Turkey has expressed strong support for the recent convergence of Palestinian political factions in Beijing, where Palestinian leaders signed a declaration aimed at fostering national unity. This initiative, hosted by China, was warmly acknowledged by the Turkish foreign ministry.

In a statement released on July 23, the ministry lauded China's pivotal role in facilitating the reconciliation process among the Palestinian groups. "We welcome the gathering of Palestinian political factions in Beijing at the invitation of the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and their acceptance of a declaration aimed at achieving national unity," the statement read.

The Turkish foreign ministry emphasized the heightened importance of unity amidst ongoing Israeli military actions in Gaza, as well as increased incursions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The statement underscored the urgency of consolidating political unity in Palestine under these challenging circumstances [TRT World]

(ab)

United Kingdom drops challenge to International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Israeli leaders

In its most significant move to reconstruct the U.K.'s approach to the Middle East, Britain's new Labour government has decided not to challenge the International Criminal Court's (ICC) jurisdiction over an arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This decision reverses the previous Conservative administration's stance and aligns with Labour's commitment to uphold the rule of law. The move increases the likelihood that the ICC will grant the arrest warrant request by Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan, which pertains to alleged war crimes during Israel's operations in Gaza. [CNN] [The Guardian]

United Kingdom delays decision on banning some arms sales to Israel amid Lebanon crisis

This policy change has implications for future UK actions, including a potential review of Israel's compliance with international law and consideration of restrictions on arms sales to Israel. However, so far, Downing Street has delayed a decision on banning certain arms sales to Israel due to the escalating crisis in Lebanon and challenges in legally defining arms used solely for offensive purposes. The decision is likely to be deferred for several weeks following a rocket attack on the Golan Heights that killed 12 people, prompting Israeli retaliation in Lebanon.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy seeks to distinguish between weapons used by Israel in Gaza and those used defensively, a distinction complicated by the

current conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon. The issue includes how to categorize UK components used in F-35 jets bought by Israel from Lockheed Martin, which have been used in both offensive and defensive operations.

Lammy stated that the test for arms sales would focus on the risk of breaching international humanitarian law and mentioned commissioning fresh legal advice on the matter. The legal advice, once completed, might be published for transparency. London has also been pressing Israel to allow independent UK lawyers to examine allegations of torture of Palestinian detainees, which could influence the decision on arms sales.

Human Rights Watch, ActionAid UK, and Oxfam criticized the UK government for delaying the decision, arguing that the delay facilitates Israeli airstrikes and the destruction in Gaza. [The Guardian]

(lm/ts)

Denmark to provide Iraq with assistance in demining

The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in Iraq has received an additional contribution of DKK 22 million (approximately USD 3,2 million) from the Danish government to aid the Iraqi government in protecting civilians from explosive ordnance (EO) and supporting humanitarian, socio-economic, and reconstruction efforts. Since 2015, Denmark has contributed over USD 38 million to the UNMAS Iraq program.

Iraq is one of the most EO-contaminated countries globally, with over 2,700 square kilometers affected by landmines, cluster munitions, improvised explosive devices, and other explosive remnants of war, posing significant public safety risks and limiting access to livelihoods and infrastructure.

Denmark's contribution will allow UNMAS Iraq to continue supporting national mine action operators and the Iraqi government in building a sustainable and well-coordinated mine action sector. UNMAS Iraq focuses on nationalizing mine action responses, implementing and managing survey and clearance operations, and providing explosive ordnance risk education in the most vulnerable areas of Iraq.

Additionally, this funding will enable UNMAS Iraq to support national authorities in enhancing their response to EO contamination in Islamic State in Iraq

and the Levant (ISIL)-liberated areas through technical and advisory assistance for effective leadership and coordination of the mine action sector. [reliefweb]

(dql)

16 injured and sick Palestinian minors are transferred from Egypt to Spain

Sixteen Palestinian minors with severe health problems or serious injuries, resulting from the Israeli offensive on Gaza, have been evacuated from Gaza to Spain for medical treatment. The evacuation, coordinated by the European Union, involved the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Palestine Children Relief Fund (PCRF), and relevant authorities from participating countries. The children, along with some of their relatives, were transported from Egypt to Madrid to receive care in Spanish hospitals. [El País] [European Union]

While the action has been praised by humanitarian experts, it has also been described as a "drop in the ocean" given the ongoing severe impact of the conflict on children in Gaza. To date, only seven of the 27 EU member states (Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) have offered to treat patients or assist with their transport. More such operations are anticipated in the coming weeks. [Euronews]

(fs)

US to deploy long-range missiles in Germany from 2026; Russia's Putin vows 'mirror measures'

The United States' decision to deploy long-range weapons in Germany, marking a return to Cold War-era strategies, has sparked significant debate and concern across Europe. Agreed upon during the recent NATO summit, this move reflects heightened tensions following Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine since 2022. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated at the summit, "We know that there has been an incredible arms buildup in Russia, with weapons that threaten European territory." [Deutsche Welle]

The "episodic deployments" of these missiles will being in 2026 and will include SM-6, Tomahawk cruise

missiles and developmental hypersonic weapons. They are seen as crucial for NATO's defence strategy amid perceived threats from Russia, especially from its enclave in Kaliningrad. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius acknowledges a “serious gap in capabilities. “ [Al Jazeera]

Political reactions within Germany are mixed. Centrist parties generally support the deployment, viewing it as necessary for regional security within NATO. Conversely, opposition parties and some activists warn of triggering a new arms race, echoing historical parallels to NATO's contentious Dual-Track Decision of the 1980s, which saw the Western Alliance deploy nuclear missiles in Western Europe in response to the Soviet threat. This was coupled with invitations to disarmament negotiations with Moscow, leading to nuclear disarmament treaties but sparked mass protests in West Germany. [Deutsche Welle]

Today, critics argue that such deployments could escalate tensions with Russia and undermine disarmament efforts. Ralf Stegner, a member of parliament for Scholz’s Social Democrats stated that this could likely signal the beginning of a modern ‘arms race’ and that “this will not make the world safer.” Sahra Wagenknecht, a prominent far left politician told the Spiegel weekly that this “increases the danger that Germany itself will become a theatre of war.” [Al Jazeera]

While proponents emphasize NATO's defensive posture, concerns linger about the potential repercussions for European stability and global security dynamics. Russian Deputy Foreign minister Sergey Ryabkov issued a staunch warning to Berlin and stated that this move was a “step towards escalation” by NATO and the US against Russia and that Russian security would be undermined. [Deutsche Welle]

Russian President Putin promises 'mirror measures'

In response to the US plan to station long long-range and hypersonic missiles in Germany, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow might deploy new strike weapons. Speaking at a naval parade in St. Petersburg, Putin promised "mirror measures" to counter the US deployment, emphasized that such actions would nullify Moscow's unilateral moratorium on deploying intermediate and shorter-range strike weapons. Putin also said that Russia's development of suitable systems is nearly complete.

Meanwhile, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov highlighted the defense of Kaliningrad, a

heavily militarized Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania, as a particular concern. [EuroNews]

(nm/lm)

US, Canada, and Finland to expand icebreaker fleets to counter Russia's influence in the Arctic

(rs) The United States, Canada and Finland will collaborate to develop a fleet of icebreaker ships with the aim of strengthening their Arctic defenses in response to Russia's growing activity in the region. [Reuters] [abc]

The pact, known as the Icebreaker Collaboration Effort or ICE pact, was announced during the NATO summit in Washington and entails the potential production of up to 90 icebreaker ships by the three countries in the upcoming years. [The Guardian]

The pact emphasises increased information sharing on polar icebreaker production. It allows workers and experts from the participating countries to receive training in shipyards across all three nations. It also encourages allies to buy polar icebreakers from American, Finnish, or Canadian shipyards to meet their requirements. [abc]

"As leaders of Arctic nations, Canada, Finland and the United States, recognising the enduring importance of the region to our collective economic, climate and national security, we resolve to deepen our cooperation to ensure the polar and Arctic regions remain peaceful, cooperative and prosperous," said Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a statement. [The Guardian]

The pact was described as a "strategic imperative" by a senior US administration official who said the goal of the collaboration was to create a fleet of icebreaking ships to "project power" in the polar regions and uphold international norms and treaties. [Reuters]

With the Arctic climate changing rapidly, Russia and China have shown interest in developing new polar routes for trade and military use, causing concern among NATO countries. The two countries have been collaborating to establish Arctic shipping routes, with Russia aiming to supply more oil and gas to China while facing heightened Western sanctions. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

Russia currently has over 40 icebreakers and additional ones under construction, while China manages a smaller yet expanding fleet. The two nations forged a "no limits" partnership just days prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

"Without this arrangement, we'd risk our adversaries developing an advantage in a specialised technology with vast geostrategic importance, which could also allow them to become the preferred supplier for countries that also have an interest in purchasing polar icebreakers," said the US official. [Reuters]

He pointed out that the U.S. currently has only two icebreakers, which are both approaching the end of their operational lifespan. Meanwhile, Canada has nine icebreakers and Finland has 12. [AP]

(rs)

EU to impose tariffs on Chinese biodiesel

(rl) The European Union is set to slap provisional duties on Chinese biodiesel imports, following findings that these products are being sold at unfairly low prices. This decision is the latest in a series of trade actions against China.

The European Commission, which oversees EU trade policy, has proposed provisional tariffs ranging from 12.8 percent to 36.4 percent. These tariffs are expected to take effect in mid-August. The investigation will continue until February, when definitive duties could be established for a five-year period.

The EU has already imposed provisional duties on electric vehicles made in China, citing unfair subsidies. For biodiesel, the proposed duties are 12.8 percent for EcoCeres Group products, 36.4 percent for Jiaao Group, and 25.4 percent for exports by Zhuoyue Group.

The European Biodiesel Board (EBB), which filed the complaint, stated that an influx of biodiesel from China has severely impacted EU production. According to EBB, Chevron Renewable Energy Group had to furlough workers in Germany, Shell paused construction of a Dutch plant, BP suspended a project in Germany, and Argent Energy closed a biorefinery. "While Chinese imports are not the only reason for these decisions, the biodiesel dumping has contributed to the difficulties producers face," EBB said.

In 2023, China exported 1.8 million tons of biodiesel to the EU, accounting for 90 percent of its total biodiesel exports. The European Waste-based and Advanced Biofuels Association welcomed the measures, expressing hope that they would normalize market conditions from the "extremely adverse" situation that has persisted since late 2022. [Bloomberg] [Ground News] [Reuters]

China to strengthen investigation of European brandy import probe with hearing

China has intensified its investigation into imports of European brandy with an anti-dumping hearing. This development comes shortly after the European Union imposed additional duties on Chinese battery electric vehicles, according to individual manufactures ranging from 17.4 percent to 37.6 percent (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3).

The Chinese Ministry of Commerce stated that the hearing would address "industrial damage, cause and effect, and public interest in the anti-dumping investigation of related brandy products," specifically targeting French cognac. The investigation covers brandy in containers holding less than 200 liters imported from October 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023, and examines whether these imports harmed the Chinese brandy industry from January 1, 2019, to September 30, 2023.

Initiated in January following a request from the China Alcoholic Drinks Association, the investigation alleges that the prices of imported brandy products were reduced by an estimated 15.88 percent. The probe is expected to conclude by January 5, with a potential six-month extension under special circumstances.

The Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac reported that a "high-level European delegation" participated in the hearing, rejecting the allegations of dumping as unfounded and unsupported both technically and legally. The European associations and companies involved reiterated the absence of dumping or injury, as evidenced throughout the investigation.

In 2023, China imported 43.31 million liters of brandy, with French products making up 96.16 percent of this volume. Policy research organization Trivium China highlighted those agricultural products, like French brandy and Spanish pork, are crucial in the ongoing trade dynamics, serving as significant leverage points for Beijing.

China also launched an anti-dumping investigation into certain pork products from the EU in June, citing accusations of overcapacity and subsidies. Trivium China noted the influential role of farmers in EU politics, which provides Beijing with additional leverage (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3).

Despite the rising trade tensions, both China and the EU are likely to continue efforts to address market access and overcapacity concerns through engagement and negotiations. However, if these talks fail, the EU may expand its trade investigations against China, using tariffs on Chinese EVs as an indicator of its commitment to countering market-distorting practices. [The Guardian] [South China Morning Post]

(rl)

China targets Danish, Dutch, and Spanish firms in EU pork anti-dumping probe

July 18, China has named Danish Crown A/S, along with Dutch and Spanish pork firms, in an anti-dumping investigation into European Union pork imports. This move escalates the trade tensions with the EU, which recently imposed duties on Chinese electric vehicle exports.

The investigation, initiated after the EU applied provisional duties of up to 37.6 percent on Chinese-made electric vehicles, focuses on the potential dumping of pork products (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3).These measures could have a significant impact on Europe, as a large portion of the EU's pork exports to China consists of pig ears, noses, feet, and offal, items rarely consumed by Europeans.

Danish Crown, one of the largest pork exporters globally, stated its commitment to the investigation, saying, "Danish Crown has registered to participate in the investigation and submitted all relevant information to the investigating authority."

The probe appears to be particularly aimed at Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark; countries perceived to support the EV tariffs. EU governments have shown divided opinions on the tariffs' merits.

China's commerce ministry indicated that the investigation would involve samples from Danish Crown, Dutch producer Vion Boxtel B.N., and Spanish food processor Litera Meat S.L.U. The Spanish pork producer group Interporc confirmed its cooperation with the investigation.

The focus of the investigation is on pork intended for human consumption, including fresh, cold, and frozen whole cuts, as well as pig intestines, bladders, and stomachs. In 2023, China imported USD 6 billion worth of pork, with over half coming from the EU. Spain is the largest EU pork supplier to China, followed by the Netherlands, Denmark, and France.

The investigation is expected to conclude by June 17, 2025, but may be extended by another six months if required. [Reuters]

(rl)

European Union postpones the first round of negotiations of Bangladesh

The European Union (EU) has postponed its first round of negotiations with Bangladesh on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) due to the "prevailing situation" in the country. The decision follows a statement by EU High Representative Josep Borrell condemning the Bangladeshi authorities' "shoot-on-sight policy" during recent quota reform protests, which have resulted in at least 200 deaths at the time of writing on August 4. Borrell expressed concern over unlawful killings and called for thorough investigations and accountability. The negotiations, initially set for September, have no rescheduled date.

Bangladesh exported USD 24 billion worth of products to the EU in 2023, accounting for 58 percent of its total exports, enjoying duty-free access due to its Least Developed Country (LDC) status. Post-2026, Bangladesh will need to meet human rights, labor rights, democracy, and environmental conditions to qualify for the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Plus or face a 12.5 percent duty on exports to the EU. [The Daily Star 1]

EU releases EUR 1 million aid for monsoon flood victims in Bangladesh

At the same time, the EU recently allocated EUR 1 million (approximately USD 1.09 million) in humanitarian aid to assist victims of recent monsoon floods in northern Bangladesh. This funding is aimed at addressing the urgent needs of vulnerable people in the hardest-hit areas in the northeast and northwest of the country.

This new funding adds to the over EUR 30 million (approximately USD 32.7 million) already allocated to Bangladesh earlier this year for various emergencies,

including support for the Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar, recent heatwaves, and tropical Cyclone Remal. The monsoon floods have affected up to 3.7 million people in the northeastern part of Bangladesh, with over 600,000 people estimated to need shelter. The risk of further flooding remains high due to the ongoing cyclone season. [The Daily Star 2]

(sg)

European Union renews ban on Sri Lankan militant organization LTTE

The European Union (EU) has renewed its ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant organization that sought to create an independent Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka, especially during the Sri Lankan Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2009, for an additional six months. As a result of this decision, the LTTE, along with other designated persons, groups, and entities, will continue to face financial sanctions. These sanctions include the freezing of funds and other financial assets or economic resources within EU member states. Additionally, EU entities are prohibited from providing funds and economic resources to these proscribed organizations. [Daily Mirror]

(sa)

Russia boosts economic engagement in North Caucasus

Russia is intensifying its efforts in the North Caucasus to secure its southwestern border and enhance regional stability amidst its ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

On July 16, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin chaired a meeting held on the sidelines of the Caucasus Investment Forum in Grozny to discuss the region's socioeconomic development.

Underscoring the region's strategic importance, Mishustin confirmed that development plans for North Ossetia, Derbent, and the Kavkazskiye Mineralnye Vody resort area have been approved, aimed at significantly improving social, transport, and utility infrastructure, with more than RUB 9.5 billion (EUR 100 million) to be allocated from the federal budget next year for these projects.

He further confirmed that the modernization of housing and utility systems is underway, with a pilot project launched in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia to enhance regional operator efficiency.

Mishustin added that the primary goal is to unlock the economic potential of North Caucasus territories by creating growth points, attracting investment, launching production facilities, and creating jobs. He emphasized that positive results are already evident, particularly in the processing sector of the industry and agriculture, citing 35 related projects in priority areas like industry, agriculture, housing, utilities, transport, and tourism and RUB 330 billion attracted in extra-budgetary funding in the first three months this year as well as the creation of about 20,500 jobs. The goal is to create over 87,000 jobs by 2030.

Overall, Moscow's strategy involves substantial investments in infrastructure and regional development to consolidate control and mitigate threats from the conflict zone. Key initiatives include tackling the informal economy, with approximately 24% of employment unreported. The government is promoting job creation through small businesses, with the self-employed population increasing 34-fold since 2020 to 718,000. [Russian Government]

(hs/dql)

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to strengthen joint electricity export capacity development efforts

Kazakhstan is advancing its electricity export capacity development in partnership with Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, despite challenges in meeting its own domestic power needs. The Kazakh Ministry of Energy has released a draft agreement for public comment, detailing a strategic green-energy partnership with these countries. This agreement builds on a memorandum of intent signed in May.

The draft emphasizes the importance of renewable energy, energy efficiency, green hydrogen, and green ammonia in combating climate change and improving energy security. It commits Kazakhstan to new energy infrastructure initiatives aimed at diversifying energy supplies and transit routes in Europe, Central Asia, and the Caspian region, and achieving significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The agreement also aims to facilitate the interconnection of energy systems in Central Asia and Azerbaijan for sustainable green energy export.

The primary market for this green energy initiative is the European Union, which faces energy shortages and high costs due to the sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. The plan includes laying a high-voltage power transmission line on the Caspian seabed to support westward electricity exports. However, the draft agreement and the earlier memorandum do not specify investment costs, infrastructure projects, or construction timelines. [Eurasianet]

(dql)

UK Foreign Secretary pays first visit to Southeast Asia to re-enforce economic ties

On July 25th, Foreign Secretary David Lammy arrived in Laos to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting. With ASEAN counting a population of over 700 million and an economy slated to be the fourth largest economy by 2030, the Secretary pledged British support within the Indo-Pacific in areas including trade, health security, and climate change mitigation efforts.

These initiatives included the Secretary's unveiling of a £25 million UK-ASEAN partnership to establish greater regional health security. The Secretary also announced the new UK-ASEAN Green Transition Fund, worth up to £40 million, which will target climate change within the region and leverage British expertise to expand green growth opportunities for Indo-Pacific business operations. GOV.UK

The Secretary's visit follows his Wednesday visit to Delhi with Indian Prime Minister Modi, during which he announced the "UK-India Technology Security Initiative" to strengthen trade and innovation exchange on deep tech staples such as semiconductors. The Independent

(ts/gc)

Swiss state secretary concludes four-nation tour of Southeast Asia, participates in ASEAN meeting

Swiss State Secretary Alexandre Fasel represented Switzerland at the ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting, held as part of a four-day tour of Southeast Asia aimed at advancing the Swiss Federal Council's Southeast

Asia Strategy. The strategy seeks to deepen Switzerland's relations with this economically significant region.

During the ASEAN meeting in Vientiane, Laos, Fasel held a bilateral discussion with Laos' Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, whose country currently holds the ASEAN chairmanship for 2024. The meeting included representatives from other ASEAN partner countries and addressed issues such as the ongoing civil unrest in Myanmar and tensions in the South China Sea.

Additionally, Fasel and the Laotian Minister for Public Works and Transport signed a bilateral agreement on air transport, approved by the Swiss Federal Council in November 2023. This agreement aims to provide operational flexibility for airlines and positively impact both economies.

Fasel's tour also included visits to Vietnam and Singapore. In Vietnam, he held meetings with Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Minh and Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hoang Long. In Singapore, Fasel focused on discussions about science, digitalization, and regional challenges, and inaugurated the new Swiss Embassy building. [SWI]

(lm)

Norway, Laos and ASEAN Secretariat hold trilateral meeting

On July 25, Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth held a trilateral meeting with Lao PDR Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith and ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn in Vientiane. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the the sidelines of the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting hosted by Laos as ASEAN Chair.

They discussed enhancing ASEAN-Norway relations in areas of mutual benefit. Both sides acknowledged that 2025 will mark the 10th anniversary of the ASEAN-Norway Sectoral Dialogue Relations and looked forward to activities to further strengthen their partnership. [ASEAN]

(dql)

New Caledonia nickel plant shuts down, furthering territory's instability

On July 26, the Koniambo Nickel SAS (KNS) nickel plant in New Caledonia, a French overseas territory located in the southwest Pacific Ocean, announced the dismissal of 1,200 workers, by the end of August due to the lack of a finalized offer from a buyer. The plant, facing significant financial difficulties with over €13 billion in debt, has been seeking a buyer since the departure of its main shareholder, Glencore, in February. Although three groups have shown interest, no definitive offers have been made, leading to the continuation of collective redundancies for economic reasons.

After August 31, around 50 employees will remain to keep the site on "cold standby." The plant, a major employer in the region, also relies on subcontractors employing about 500 people. Despite the layoffs, the search for a new economic partner continues.

With stark competition from cheap nickel exports from Indonesia, export restrictions, and unpredictable E.V. manufacturing demands, New Caledonia has struggled to navigate what experts call the current global nickel crisis. Of the two remaining nickel plants in the Territory, one has halted operations, and the other operated at a net loss of 72 million euros in the first half of 2024. The nickel mining industry makes up around a quarter of the private jobs in the Territory. [New Caledonia Business]

On May 15, France declared a 12-day state of emergency in response to riots regarding proposed voting reforms in the Territory. The legislation, which has since been postponed indefinitely, enraged separatists by proposing the grant of voting rights to French citizens living within the Territory for ten years. The instability and unrest disrupted New Caledonia nickel mining and brought global Nickel Prices into disarray, further impacting an insatiable region with economic uncertainty. [Le Monde]

(ts)

Switzerland to host United States-mediated peace talks on Sudan

Switzerland will host US-mediated peace talks between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in mid-August. The announcement was made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who extended invitations to both factions for the conference. The Swiss Foreign Ministry confirmed its participation and support for the

negotiations, which will be co-hosted with Saudi Arabia.

The conflict in Sudan has been ongoing since April 2023, involving a power struggle between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhane, leader of the SAF, and General Mohammed Hamdan Daglo, leader of the RSF. This war has led to tens of thousands of deaths and a significant humanitarian crisis. Previous negotiation attempts in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, failed to achieve a ceasefire.

The upcoming talks in Switzerland aim to establish a nationwide cessation of violence, secure humanitarian access, and create a monitoring mechanism to oversee the implementation of any agreements. The discussions will also involve observers from the African Union, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Nations.

Humanitarian issues will be a key focus of the talks, following a recent report by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) highlighting the devastating impact of the conflict on civilians. The report described the situation as a "war against the Sudanese people," underscoring the urgent need for a resolution. Despite the challenging conditions, MSF continues to operate in eight states across Sudan, providing critical medical aid. [SWI]

(lm)

Ukraine-backed mercenaries attack Russian corps in Mali

On the night of July 27-28, Tuareg separatists ambushed a convoy of Russian mercenaries and Malian soldiers in northern Mali, killing members of the "Africa Corps" mercenaries. Ukrainian intelligence has claimed support for the rebels, raising concerns about the conflict's expansion in the Sahel.

The ambush occurred near the Mali-Algeria border during a sandstorm, resulting in significant casualties among the Russian paramilitary group, formerly known as PMC Wagner. Russian sources report 20-50 deaths, with some suggesting up to 82. The Malian army remains determined to reclaim lost territories, despite facing reinforced separatist groups, possibly aided by sophisticated Western weaponry from Ukraine. [Courrier International]

The Tuareg separatists, part of the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), seek independence for the

Azawad region in northern Mali and have been in conflict with the Malian government for years. The Russian mercenaries, formerly part of the Wagner Group and now operating as the “Africa Corps,” support the Malian army in its efforts combat armed groups. Their presence in Mali reflects Russia's broader strategy to expand its influence in Africa through military assistance and security operations. [BBC Africa]

In a latest development, Mali announced on August 5 that it is cutting diplomatic ties with Ukraine, accusing a senior official of having admitted Kyiv’s role in the attack. [Al Jazeera]

The attack has been ill received by neighbouring countries, Senegal summoned the Ukrainian ambassador, condemning his support for terrorism in Mali and warning against transposing the Russia-Ukraine conflict onto Senegalese soil. Nine Senegalese civil society groups also denounced the diplomat's remarks. [BBC Africa]

Burkina Faso issued a similar condemnation, urging Ukraine to avoid bringing its conflict to the region. This diplomatic row underscores fears that the Russian-European war could extend its influence into the Sahel region, escalating tensions and conflicts. [BBC Africa]

(hs)

Hungary and Slovakia demand EU’s response to Ukraine’s ban on Russia's Lukoil

Ukraine has sanctioned Russian multinational energy corporation Lukoil last month, stopping the company’s crude oil from flowing through Ukrainian territory and benefitting Russia’s invasion.

However, this meant halting Hungary and Slovakia’s major crude oil supply. [DW News]

70% of Hungary’s oil import still relies on Russia, and half of this proportion was supplied by Lukoil. As for Slovakia, the major refineries in the country, owned by the Hungarian oil and gas group MOL, also relies on Lukoil as the primary crude oil source.

Because of their heavy reliance to Russian oil, crude oil transported through pipes from Russia to Hungary, Slovakia, and Czech were exemptions of European Union’s sanction against Russian oil in 2022. The exemptions were mean to grant more time for

influenced countries to shifted from Russian oil. [Politico]

Hungary and Slovakia did not take the blow silently. Both countries have called for the European Union to meditate. Viktor Orban, the Hungarian Prime Minister openly described Ukraine's choice as a "blackmail" for Hungary and Slovakia. Facing Orban's accusation, Ukraine replied that the decision was merely in accordance with the government's decision to sanction the company. [Reuters 1]

In attempt to restore the oil supply, Slovakia has proposed a technical solution to Ukraine which requires cooperation between several countries. The details of the proposal were, however, not disclosed. [Reuters 2]

Hungary was also looking for solution for the upcoming energy crisis. If Ukraine persist its decision and the European Commission does not help, then the country needs to find alternatives that are not affected by the sanction. [Reuters 3]

Ukraine, on the other hand, state that it will secure the oil transit of companies that are not on the sanction list and is ready to resolve this problem if the issue is brought to the EU. [Reuters 4]

(ycl)

Hungary's relaxed visa rules for Russians, Belarusians raise espionage concerns in EU

Hungary's recent decision to relax visa rules for Russian and Belarusian nationals has raised significant concerns about potential espionage risks within the European Union. The European Parliament's largest group, the European People's Party (EPP), expressed these concerns in a letter to European Council head Charles Michel. The new visa scheme, signed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, extends fast-track visa privileges to citizens of Russia and Belarus, allowing them to work in Hungary. Previously, these privileges were limited to Ukrainian and Serbian citizens.

Manfred Weber, chairman of the EPP, criticized the policy, arguing it could create significant security loopholes that might facilitate espionage activities, enabling easier movement for Russians within the EU's Schengen area. Weber urged the European Council to

address the issue seriously and consider stringent measures to protect the integrity of Schengen.

The European Commission responded by stating it would seek clarification from Hungary regarding the scope of the new visa scheme, emphasizing the need to ensure the EU's security and the integrity of the Schengen area. [The Moscow Times]

(pt)

Slovenia to purchase French and Finish artillery and air defense systems

On July 12, Slovenia and France signed a letter of intent for Slovenia to join a European joint procurement program for French truck-mounted CAESAR 155 mm self-propelled howitzers from European defence industry holding company KNDS and Mistral air defense systems from MBDA, a French defense group.

The Slovenian Ministry of Defence will now begin the necessary procedures to procure and integrate these new weapon systems into the Slovenian Armed Forces. Slovenia also plans to seek EU funding for this procurement and to develop joint military capabilities with other member states.

Additionally, on July 10, during the NATO Summit in Washington, Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob announced plans to acquire Finnish Patria AMV XP eight-wheel-drive vehicles for the Slovenian Armed Forces.

The contract, expected to be finalized by the end of the year, could involve 106 vehicles at an estimated cost of EUR 695 million, according to local broadcaster 24UR. [Government, Slovenia] [Defense News]

(dql)

Bulgaria, Romania, Greece to cooperate on harmonised military mobility corridor

Bulgarian Defence Minister Atanas Zapryanov, Greek Defence Minister Nikos Dendias, and Romanian Defence Minister Angel Tîlvăr signed a letter of intent to establish a harmonised military mobility corridor. The signing occurred on July 10 during the NATO Summit in Washington, DC.

Following Dendias' proposal, the three ministers will hold a trilateral meeting in Alexandroupolis in the autumn to discuss the implementation of these actions.

On July 11, Bulgaria's Defence Ministry announced that Zapryanov signed additional letters of intent to construct harmonised military mobility corridors with Italy, Albania, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria within Pan-European Transport Corridor No. 8, as well as between Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. These initiatives aim to enhance NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities, improve military mobility, strengthen transport connectivity, stimulate regional economic development, and deepen NATO-EU cooperation.

Additionally, the defence ministers of Bulgaria and Romania signed a Memorandum of Understanding to establish the Headquarters of the Regional Component Command of Special Operations, which will oversee planning, command, and control of NATO's Special Operations Forces in the Black Sea region, bolstering NATO's Southeast flank. [The Sofia Globe]

(dql)

Opening of migrant processing centres for Italian asylum seeker in Albania delayed

The opening of Italy's new migrant processing centers in Albania, originally scheduled for August 1, will face delays due to construction issues, as confirmed by Italian officials. The Gjader center is delayed because of hot weather impacting construction, while the Shengjin center has been ready since May.

The centers, part of a controversial agreement signed by Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, will process adult male migrants rescued at sea and taken to Albania instead of Italy. Despite retaining the right to apply for asylum in Italy, migrants' movement in Albania will be restricted.

The plan has been supported by the European Commission, but has drawn criticism from human rights groups, including Amnesty International. They argue it will lead to prolonged detentions and believe the EUR 670 million allocated for this initiative would be better spent on improving migrant processing in Italy. [AP] [Euro News]

(dql)

Albania urges Greece to scrap 1940 declaration of war

Albania has urged Greece to abolish an 84-year-old law declaring a state of war between the two countries. Albanian MPs unanimously supported a motion to strengthen bilateral relations by scrapping the WWII-era law, which Greece enacted in October 1940 following an Italian attack from Albanian territory. The Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity described the law as a "historical absurdity" and called on the Albanian government to work with Greece to abolish it and its legal consequences. Despite an agreement to end the formal state of war in 2016 and assurances from Greece's then-foreign minister in 2020, no significant progress has been made. [TVP World]

(lm)

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister receives Turkish delegation

On August 1, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov has received a visiting delegation led by Mehmet Samsar, the head of the General Directorate for Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus of the Turkish Foreign Ministry.

The meeting's participants emphasized the challenges and opportunities concerning the existing alliance between Azerbaijan and Türkiye and discussed regional and international security concerns. It was highlighted that mutual intergovernmental consultations play a crucial role in facilitating in-depth discussions on bilateral and regional matters.

Bayramov provided extensive information concerning the normalization process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. He underscored permanent obstacles to peace, including Armenia's constitutional claims that challenge Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty. [News AZ]

(nl)

Belarus pardons German sentenced to death

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has pardoned German national Rico K., who was sentenced to death in June on terrorism and other charges. The pardon comes after Rico K.'s lawyer sought a stay of execution and Lukashenko considered the bid during a meeting in Minsk. [Deutsche Welle 1]

According to his LinkedIn profile, Krieger was an armed security officer for the U.S. embassy in Berlin and a current medic for the German Red Cross. He was accused of photographing sensitive military sites and collaborating with Ukrainian security services, charges denied by Kyiv. He was convicted under six articles of Belarus' criminal code after a closed trial on June 24.

While few details are available, some news reports suggest that the conviction is related to the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment, a unit fighting alongside Ukraine against Russia. While not formally part of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Belarus is a close ally of Russia and allowed Russian troops to enter Ukraine via its territory at the war's outset. [Deutsche Welle 2]

Prior this pardon, state media aired a statement from Rico K. where he expressed regret for his actions and mentioned being abandoned by the German government. The German Foreign Ministry criticized this televised appearance, calling it a violation of dignity. [Deutsche Welle 1]

(nm)

Bulgaria mulls sending surplus ammunition to Ukraine

Bulgarian acting Defense Minister Atanas Zapryanov announced that Bulgaria is prepared to transfer surplus and unnecessary shells to Ukraine, as reported by Bulgarian National Radio on July 22. An inspection revealed that the Bulgarian army has extra ammunition and equipment, which can be provided to Ukraine. This aid package will be tied to an agreement with an ally country for compensation, similar to a previous aid package.

The decision on this new military aid must still be approved by the Bulgarian government and coordinated with its partners and Kyiv.

Initially hesitant, Bulgaria has shown increasing support for Ukraine as the war has progressed. In December 2023, the Bulgarian parliament approved the provision of armored vehicles and Soviet-era air defense missiles to Ukraine, with the first batch of

armored personnel carriers already delivered. [The Kyiv Independent]

Pro-Russian sentiment, however, remains strong in the country. [Radio Free Europe]

(dql)

Bulgaria's Cabinet seeks Parliament's ratification of security agreements with Türkiye and Romania

Bulgaria's caretaker Cabinet has requested the National Assembly to ratify a memorandum of understanding on cross-border airspace security operations with Türkiye. This agreement is part of Bulgaria's peacetime duties within the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATINAMDS).

Approved by the Bulgarian Cabinet in January and signed in February, the memorandum allows for duty fighters from one country to conduct airspace security operations in the airspace of a neighboring country. Bulgaria already has similar agreements with Romania and Greece.

The memorandum with Türkiye outlines the rights, responsibilities, and procedures for conducting these cross-border operations to protect the airspace of both countries. [The Sofia Globe 1]

Further, the caretaker Cabinet has asked for the ratification of a memorandum of understanding with Romania on the establishment of a Regional Special Operations Component Command (HQR-SOCC) which have command and control capabilities for assigned multinational special operations forces and support forces for the conduct of Nato operations.

Signed by Bulgaria's caretaker Defence Minister Atanas Zapryanov and Romanian Defence Minister Angel Tîlvăr on July 10 during the Nato Summit in Washington D.C., the agreement aims at boosting the deterrence and defence potential of the south-eastern flank of the alliance. [The Sofia Globe 2]

(dql)

Czechia and Ukraine forge strategic partnership for arms production and

reconstruction

On July 18, the Czech and Ukrainian governments signed several bilateral agreements to bolster cooperation in arms production and the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal emphasized the formation of a "strong, strategic partnership" aimed at enhancing European security.

The Czech Republic has been a steadfast supporter of Ukraine since Russia's full-scale invasion over two years ago. During a joint cabinet meeting, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala reaffirmed this support, underscoring the commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and European security. [President of Ukraine]

“We have assured our Ukrainian friends that we are committed to supporting Ukraine in the fight for its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, but also for European security and the democratic principles we share. We must do everything in our power to make sure that it wins this war,” Fiala stated. [Radio Prague International]

The agreements outline a major initiative involving the establishment of a new ammunition production plant in Ukraine in collaboration with Czech company Sellier & Bellot and the relocation of Colt CZ Group's assault rifle production to Ukraine. This effort is part of a larger strategy by the Czech government to globally source ammunition to support the Ukrainian military. [Reuters]

Beyond arms production, the bilateral agreements include memoranda on cooperation in healthcare, energy, and trade, paving the way for increased Czech involvement in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Prime Minister Fiala noted that Czech companies are already playing a significant role in rebuilding Ukraine's infrastructure and sees further opportunities, particularly in modernizing Ukraine's nuclear power plants.

One notable healthcare agreement will allow Czechia to treat and rehabilitate child patients from Ukraine, following a recent attack on Ukraine's largest children's hospital. This is part of a newly signed memorandum on healthcare cooperation. [President of Ukraine] [Radio Prague International]

Prime Minister Fiala expressed optimism about the agreements, describing them as mutually beneficial and indicative of deepening ties between the two nations. [Radio Prague International]

(nm)

Denmark suspends military aid to Georgia

Denmark has halted military aid to Georgia in response to Georgia's adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, also known as the law on foreign agents (see article in this edition), according to Georgian lawmaker Teona Akubardia from the opposition Strategy Aghmashenebeli party, referencing a letter from the Danish Foreign Ministry.

The aid, initiated in 2023, was worth DKK 71.5 million (approximately USD 10.376 million). Denmark has urged Georgia to return to the Euro-Atlantic path and comply with the EU's reform program, which is vital for maintaining strong bilateral relations. [News.AZ]

Denmark's move follows a decision of the European Union Council in June on a review of direct financial assistance to the Georgian authorities, including suspending of disbursements under the European Peace Facility, an instrument aimed at enhancing the EU's ability to prevent conflicts, build and preserve peace and strengthen international security and stability. EU leaders also decided to suspend Georgia's accession process. [Civil Georgia]

(dql)

Estonia to tighten customs controls at border with Russia

On August 1, newly elected Estonian Prime Minister Kristen Michal announced plans to implement full customs controls on its border with Russia starting August 8 to combat sanctions evasion. Michal emphasized that goods aiding Russia's war against Ukraine and undermining European and Estonian security should not be imported.

Estonia suspects that some goods declared for transit through the country are actually destined for Russia, bypassing Western sanctions. These shipments are believed to often include military and dual-use goods, as well as large amounts of cash, indicating smuggling activities. [The Moscow Times]

(dql)

Estonian citizen to be extradited to US over charges of suppling electronics to Russia

Estonia has decided to extradite its citizen Andrei Ševljakov to the US, where he faces charges of supplying electronics to Russia. This decision aligns with the 1923 extradition treaty between the two countries which mandates the extradition of serious criminals upon request.

The U.S. Department of Justice alleges that Ševljakov has been purchasing sensitive electronics for the Russian government for over a decade. He faces potential penalties of up to 20 years in prison if convicted.

Ševljakov was arrested in March last year by the FBI and Estonia's Internal Security Services (ISS). In 2012, he was listed as a threat to U.S. national security by American authorities. [ERR]

(dql)

Estonia suggests cooperation with Russia on joint Narva River survey

On July 15, the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs put forward a joint survey of the Narva River with Russia to resolve disputes over the river's fairway. The river is part of the international border between Estonia and Russia.

The ministry suggested that both countries conduct joint measurements of the fairway, as the current disagreement stems from different interpretations of the border line. The last survey of the Narva River bed was conducted nearly 20 years ago, and natural changes over time can alter water bodies.

The joint survey aims to provide an objective basis to avoid future ambiguities and ensure safe navigation. The survey is proposed to take place by August, as the absence of markers could endanger boats crossing the border accidentally.

This proposal follows Estonia's diplomatic note to the Russian Embassy in Tallinn, responding to Russia's claim that Estonia had placed 25 buoys in Russian waters on May 23, which Estonia denies. Estonia emphasized the need for peaceful dialogue and condemned the removal of the buoys at night. [EiR No. 6, June/2024]

If Russia rejects the proposal, Estonia will rely on its 2005-2006 measurements and replace the necessary buoys for navigation in Estonian waters. [AA]

(dql)

Estonia sends PPA unit to Latvia's border with Belarus

On July 29, the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board's ESTPOL9 team traveled to Latvia to assist in addressing the surge of irregular immigration attempts at the Latvia-Belarus border.

The 11-member team will participate in land patrols, equipped with a dog handler and drones, and is trained in crowd control if necessary. They will operate in the Kaplava and Robežnieki areas, where the most recent border crossing attempts have been recorded. The team will work in Latvia for two weeks before being replaced by another rotation.

Estonia's assistance comes after in the first three weeks of July, the Latvian border guard prevented 730 unlawful entry attempts, prompting them to request help from its neighbor.

Previously, the ESTPOL8 unit assisted Latvia in guarding the border from September to November. [Postimees]

(dql)

Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC) to eliminate influence of Moscow Church

The Estonian Ministry of Interior and the Estonian Orthodox Church (EOC) have agreed to reduce and eventually eliminate the Moscow Patriarchate's influence over the EOC. This agreement was reached during a July 30 meeting attended by officials, including Raivo Küüt from the Ministry of Interior, Bishop Daniel Lepisk of the EOC, and lawyer Steven Evestus.

The government insists that the EOC must separate from the Moscow Patriarchate both canonically and legally, emphasizing the need to protect Estonia's population from a hostile regime while assuring that churches would remain open and religious freedom would be maintained. [Orthodox Times]

(dql)

Controversial Finnish law to block asylum seekers from Russia passes parliament

Finland's parliament has approved a new law on July 12 that empowers border guards to stop asylum seekers from entering the country from Russia. [Reuters]

The move was prompted by the arrival of over 1300 people since last year, leading to the closure of the border between the two countries. Finland has alleged that Russia is using migration as a "hybrid warfare" tactic by facilitating the crossings of undocumented migrants from countries like Somalia and Syria into the Nordic country. The Kremlin has denied these claims. [Reuters] [Euronews]

Helsinki suspects that Moscow is encouraging these border crossings as a form of retaliation for Finland joining NATO, given the military alliance's support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. [Reuters]

Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's right-wing government asserts that the new legislation is essential to prevent future arrivals. However, critics including academics, legal experts, and human rights organizations argue that the legislation is in conflict with Finland's Constitution, international rights obligations established by the United Nations, and commitments made by the EU and other international treaties to which Finland is a signatory. [Al Jazeera]

"This is a strong message to Russia, a strong message to our allies, that Finland takes care of its own security, we take care of the security of the EU border," Orpo said at a press conference on July 12. [Reuters]

According to the new law which now awaits approval from President Alexander Stubb, Finnish border guards will have the authority to deny asylum applications at border crossing points under specific conditions. However, the refusal will not apply to children, individuals with disabilities, or asylum seekers considered to be in particularly vulnerable situations by the border guards. [Al Jazeera]

Since last summer, over 1,300 asylum seekers have crossed into Finland from Russia. However, there had been no new arrivals since March until July 11. Following the parliamentary vote, the Finnish Border Guard issued a statement revealing that one individual had crossed the border illegally on July 11 and subsequently applied for asylum upon being detained by a border guard. [CNN]

Finland closed its land borders with Russia late last year. [Europe Monthly December 2023]

Meanwhile, the Finnish immigration authority has voiced concerns about the missing of 160 asylum seekers among those more than 1300 asylum seekers.

The disappearances highlight the broader crisis in managing immigration in Europe. Finnish President Sauli Niinistö has called for a unified EU-wide response to the migration crisis. The situation also questions the effectiveness of systems like Eurodac – an EU database that stores the fingerprints of international protection applicants and irregular migrants – in tracking and ensuring the safety of asylum seekers.

Investigations suggest the missing asylum seekers might be linked to "large-scale human smuggling" by criminal organizations, potentially escalating tensions between Finland and Russia. This crisis underscores the need for collaborative European solutions to manage asylum seekers' locations and protect those seeking refuge within the EU.

Keywords- Finland, Policies, Migration, International Relations & Diplomacy, International / regional governance, Security and Defence, International conflict/war, NATO

(rs)

Finland investigates Russian vessel

On July 26, Finland announced that it suspects a Russian vessel violated its territorial waters in the eastern Gulf of Finland. The Finnish Defense Ministry stated that the incident is under investigation by the Border Guard.

This event follows a previous violation in June, when four Russian military planes entered Finnish airspace. Tensions between Helsinki and Moscow have escalated since Finland and Sweden joined NATO last year, with Russian President Vladimir Putin accusing the West of dragging Finland into the military alliance.

In December, Finland closed its 1,340-kilometer (830-mile) border with Russia, accusing Moscow of aiding undocumented migrants in crossing into Finland, a claim Russia denied. [AA] [Europe Monthly December 2023]

(dql)

Germany, United Kingdom sign joint defence declaration for closer cooperation

Germany and the United Kingdom signed a joint defence declaration on July 24, committing to closer cooperation to strengthen their defence industries, enhance European security, and support Ukraine against Russian forces. The agreement, signed by UK Defense Secretary John Healey and German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius in Berlin, is the first of its kind between the two NATO allies. [Reuters]

The declaration highlights plan to nurture the European defence industrial base, foster joint procurement initiatives, and collaborate on research and development to enhance production and innovation. It also emphasizes long-term cooperation in long-range capabilities, crucial for supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Prime Minister Keir Starmer has advocated for improved cooperation with European allies on defence and security, proposing a UK-EU security pact covering energy, supply chains, pandemics, and migration. [Reuters]

This push for closer relations comes as NATO addresses the high costs of upgrading Europe's defences along with growing concerns of Trump's potential return to the White House, which would slash financial support for Ukraine. Key issues include shortages in air defences, long-range missiles, troop numbers, ammunition, and secure digital communications. [Politico]

Healey's visit to Berlin was part of a two-day trip that included stops in France, Poland, and Estonia. The British top diplomat underscored that European security is a top priority, aiming to increase cooperation with European allies to better support Ukraine. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has also proposed a UK-EU security pact covering areas such as energy and migration, reflecting his commitment to strengthening ties with European partners.

(nm)

Georgian citizen detained by Russia

The Georgian State Security Services reported on July 13 that a Georgian citizen was unlawfully apprehended

by Russian occupation forces near Adzvi village in Gori Municipality. [Civil Georgia]

Upon receiving information about the incident, the State Security Service activated the "hotline" operated by the EU Monitoring Mission. Details regarding the subsequent illegal detention were promptly communicated to the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions and international partners. [Civil Georgia]

The existing mechanisms have already been employed to release the Georgian citizen as promptly as possible. The State Security Services announced, "The responsibility for all destructive acts committed in the occupied territories of Georgia, as well as along the occupation line, lies with the occupying power." [Civil Georgia] [State Security Service Of Georgia]

Earlier on June 8, the Russia detained another Georgian citizen near the occupied town of Tskhinvali, a district of South Ossetia. [Civil Georgia] [State Security Service Of Georgia]

(zh)

Georgian Prime Minister Kobakhidze participates in European Political Community Summit

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze participated in the declaration of the 4th summit of the European Political Community (EPC) adopted by the leaders gathered in Blenheim Palace in the United Kingdom.

According to the Prime Minister, the declaration of the summit represented the proposal from the Georgian side to reinforce the regional ties of the Black and Caspian seas, as part of which the countries situated in the Northern and Baltic Sea regions of the European political union will engage in dialogues with Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. [Civil Georgia] [Georgia Today]

The European Political Community (EPC) is an intergovernmental forum established in 2022 for political and strategic discussions about Europe's future, which French President Emmanuel Macron initiated after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

(zh)

Germany seeks forgiveness in Poland 80 years after Warsaw uprising

In his address, delivered on the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising on August 1, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier sought forgiveness from the Polish people, emphasizing the need for Germans to remember the immense suffering inflicted on Poland by their nation.

Steinmeier continued the tradition of German leaders honoring victims of Adolf Hitler's regime. This tradition began in 1970 when Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt at the former Warsaw Ghetto site. Steinmeier had also asked for forgiveness in 2023 on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. [RFI]

(dql)

Germany to halve military aid to Ukraine in 2025 amid concerns over future US support

Germany will halve its military aid to Ukraine in 2025, reducing it to 4 billion euros from 8 billion euros in 2024, according to a draft budget. This decision comes amid concerns over potential reduced U.S. support if Donald Trump wins the presidency again. Germany expects Ukraine to cover its military needs with USD 50 billion in G7 loans from frozen Russian assets. [DeutscheWelle]

Finance Minister Christian Lindner assured that Ukraine's funding is secure due to European and G7 financial instruments. The decision aligns with EU leaders' efforts to front-load support, mitigating risks associated with a potential Trump administration. Trump's recent choice of Senator J.D. Vance, an opponent of Ukraine aid, as his vice-presidential candidate has heightened these concerns.

Germany's military stocks have been depleted by decades of underinvestment and recent donations to Ukraine, including three Patriot air defence units. Despite reducing aid to Ukraine, Germany will meet NATO's 2% GDP defence spending target in 2025, totalling 75.3 billion euros. This includes a 100-billion-euro special fund announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius's request for a 6.7-billion-euro increase was only partially met. The financial plan reveals a 39-billion-euro budget gap by 2028, with

decisions on addressing this shortfall postponed until after the 2025 election. [Reuters]

(nm)

Greek border guard shot in abdomen while patrolling border with Turkey

A Greek border guard was shot in the abdomen on July 20 while patrolling the Greek-Turkish border, where undocumented migrants frequently attempt to enter the European Union. The incident occurred near the Evros River around 6 p.m. Four Greek border guard officers were on duty when three or four shots were fired from the Turkish side, hitting one officer in the lower abdomen.

Greek police believe the shooter or shooters were likely human traffickers, although officials, who requested anonymity due to the ongoing investigation, could not confirm this. [Associated Press]

(lm)

Irish Prime Minister Harris meets briefly with Ukrainian President Zelensky

On July 13, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy stopped in Ireland, returning from NATO's 75th-anniversary summit in Washington. Welcomed by Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris, Shannon Airport Group CEO Mary Considine, and Ukrainian Ambassador Larysa Gerasko, this marked the first bilateral meeting between Zelenskiy and Harris in Ireland. [Irish Times]

Zelenskiy thanked Ireland for supporting Ukrainian refugees and downplayed US President Biden's mix-up, referring to him as President Putin, citing the significant US support for Ukraine. He praised Ireland for its support since the war's onset, noting the arrival of over 108,000 Ukrainian refugees and Ireland's EUR 250 million non-lethal military assistance. Discussions included demining, cybersecurity, and global attention to children deported by Russia. [Irish Times] [Clare Echo]

Harris spoke positively about the meeting, expressing Ireland's condolences for the "loss of life during this brutal and illegal war of Russian aggression." Harris confirmed he had accepted an official invitation to visit Kyiv and Ukraine as Taoiseach, aiming to make the trip "in the coming weeks." [Irish Times]

When questioned about the reduction in weekly payments for Ukrainian refugees in state-provided accommodation from EUR 220 to EUR 38.80 starting in August, Harris explained that although it wasn't specifically addressed, Ireland's goal is to shift towards a sustainable support model that aligns with European standards and he affirmed Ireland's commitment to supporting Ukrainians as long as needed. He further expressed Ireland's aspiration for Ukraine to join the EU, noting, "Should that happen, people from Ukraine would have the same freedom of movement that every other EU citizen has too." [Reuters]

(nm)

Italian Ambassador visits bombed Ukrainian children's hospital

After a wave of Russian missile strikes against Ukrainian cities, the "Okhmatdyt" children's hospital in Kyiv was struck. At the time of the strike, twenty child patients were being treated. According to Ukrainian authorities, 36 have been killed and 140 were injured. Russia denies targeting the hospital and states that the hospital was in fact struck by fragments of Ukrainian air defense missiles. [BBC News]

Allies to Ukraine have labeled these Russian strikes as "horrendous" and "barbaric". NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the strikes as, "horrendous missile attacks against Ukrainian cities, killing innocent civilians including children". [ABC News]

Italian Ambassador to Ukraine, Carlo Formosa, visited the "Okhmatdyt" children's hospital after the attack. Ambassador Formosa was accompanied by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) as well as with humanitarian workers from Soleterre, an Italian organization. Ambassador Formosa also met with senior hospital leadership such as Director General Volodymyr Zhovnir and Medical Director Serghiy Chernyshuk. Prior to the strikes, the "Okhmatdyt" hospital was already a beneficiary of Italian-funded projects and initiatives. [Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Kosovo's president involved in Macedonian airport scuffle, sparking diplomatic row

Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani was involved in a scuffle with airport security in Skopje, North Macedonia, while traveling to Slovenia. The altercation began when Osmani refused to hand over her mobile phone for scanning, which her adviser called "contrary to international practices." This refusal led to a physical confrontation, with an airport staff member allegedly attempting to push Osmani, prompting her security detail to intervene.

North Macedonia's Interior Ministry confirmed the incident but provided a different account, stating that Osmani's security detail had pulled an airport staff member aside to allow her to pass through border control without the phone scan. They also mentioned that security officials from North Macedonia's parliamentary speaker arrived later, threatened airport staff, and one even pushed a police officer. However, the speaker's office denied these claims, stating their staff only aimed to calm the situation. An investigation into the incident has been launched. [Politico]

(lm)

Latvia concludes fence construction on border with Belarus

Latvia has completed the construction of a nearly 145-kilometer fence along the Latvian-Belarusian border. By the end of this year, work will continue on the remaining infrastructure, including patrol trails, footbridges, and other necessary features along the full 173 kilometers of the border.

The developer of fence - state enterprise “Valsts nekustamie īpašumi” (State Real Estate) – is also overseeing the ongoing construction of infrastructure in two areas without a border fence: a 16.7-kilometer stretch along the Daugava River and around Lake Riču. These sections are expected to be completed by summer 2025.

The total cost for the border fence and related infrastructure stands at EUR 125.35 million, including EUR 3.6 million from EU funds. [LSM]

(dql)

Canada deploys troops to Latvia

Eleven soldiers from the Canadian Prince Edward Island Regiment (P.E.I.), a Primary Reserve armored

reconnaissance regiment of the Canadian Forces, are being deployed to Latvia as part of a Canadian-led mission to support NATO allies and deter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

The platoon, comprising 38 Maritime soldiers from the 36 Canadian Brigade Group, is part of Operation Reassurance, involving about 1,650 Canadian Armed Forces members.

The largest deployment from P.E.I. since the Afghanistan mission, the platoon includes combat-armed soldiers, senior non-commissioned officers, combat engineers, and infantry. Preparation for the mission began in February, including medical screenings, paperwork, and training in basic soldier skills, first aid, and vehicle use. [CBC]

In an earlier move, Canada delivered in July additional military equipment and vehicles to Latvia, as unveiled by the Latvian Ministry of Defense through photos showing multiple armored fighting vehicles being unloaded at a port. The delivery is part of NATO's efforts of establishing a multinational brigade in the Baltic country, which will consist of 3,500 troops, with full combat readiness to be reached by 2026. [News.AZ]

In addition, Canada has deployed CH-146 combat helicopters to Latvia, as announced by the Canadian Armed Forces' Joint Operations Command, highlighting that these helicopters are a key component of Canada's commitment to NATO's multinational brigade in Latvia.

The helicopters will assist in logistical coordination and personnel support for the mission. Canada, along with other NATO nations, has been stationed in Latvia as part of Operation Reassurance for six years. Canada plans to double its military presence in Latvia.

Last year, Canada also sent 15 Leopard 2 main battle tanks. The brigade is expected to be fully staffed by 2026, with a total of 2,200 soldiers. [Ukrinform]

(dql)

Latvia sends drones to Ukraine

Latvia has dispatched over 500 drones to Ukraine as part of the international Drone Coalition, according to Defense Minister Andris Sprūds in a X tween on July 22.

On July 5, Latvia had already announced a separate batch of 300 drones, and a total of more than 2,500 drones, valued at EUR 4 million, are expected to be delivered to Ukrainian Defense Forces in July. The drones are produced by seven Latvian companies.

Announced in December 2023 and formally established in February 2024, the Drone Coalition currently comprises 14 countries including the UK, Australia, Canada, and others and aims to support Ukraine with unmanned aerial vehicles.

By June, the coalition had raised EUR 549 million for this purpose. Latvia alone allocated EUR 20 million for the coalition's needs in 2024, with EUR 10 million designated for purchasing drones from Latvian manufacturers. [Militarnyi]

(dql)

Lithuania's' intelligence chief vows actions against Belarus' kidnapping

Lithuanian State Security Department (VSD) Director Darius Jauniškis warned that the Belarusian regime is prepared to kidnap Lithuanian citizens, as evidenced by the recent case of Elena Ramanauskienė, a Lithuanian woman sentenced in June to six years in prison by a Minsk court for alleged spying. [LRT 1]

Ramanauskienė was accused of repeatedly passing on information about visiting guests, including high-ranking Belarusian officials. It is alleged that Lithuanian special services recruited her more than ten years ago.

Commenting on this case in an interview, Jauniškis accused the Belarusian regime of having shifted to groundless kidnapping of, adding: "They kidnap citizens on trumped up charges, sentence people based on this and imprison them."

He announced measures and reactions from the Lithuanian authorities in response and advised Lithuanians to avoid traveling to Belarus, highlighting a trend of the Belarusian government fabricating charges against foreign nationals and using them as leverage. [Delfi] [LRT 2]

(dql)

Macedonian Prime Minister meets Hungarian counterpart

During his visit to Washington, D.C., to attend the NATO summit, Macedonian Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to discuss future economic cooperation.

They agreed that Hungary will lend Macedonia EUR 500 million at an interest rate of 3.25%, with a three-year grace period and a 12-year repayment period, totaling 15 years. This agreement aims to provide financial stability and economic security for Macedonia.

Prime Minister Mickoski emphasized that the loan will be used to support the Macedonian economy, with EUR 250 million allocated directly to economic support and EUR 250 million designated for capital projects in municipalities, benefitting citizens directly. This cooperation also opens the possibility for Macedonia to seek additional economic support from Hungary in the future if needed. [ENR]

(dql)

Moldavan foreign ministry expels Russian diplomat

Moldova's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on August 1 that it has expelled a Russian diplomat following the detention of two Moldovan officials on suspicion of treason and conspiracy. One official is accused of collecting and sharing sensitive information with a foreign embassy, while the other is alleged to have conspired for personal gain. Both officials, one from Parliament and the other from the border police, were detained for 72 hours earlier this week.

The Ministry summoned Russian Ambassador Oleg Vasnetsov to inform him that the diplomat involved was declared persona non grata and must leave Moldova.

The expulsion is part of escalating tensions between Moldova and Russia, exacerbated by Moldova's pro-Western stance and opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Earlier this year, Moldova also expelled a Russian diplomat after Russia set up polling stations in Moldova's pro-Russia region of Transnistria, contrary to Moldovan authorities' wishes.

Moldova has accused Russia of conducting a "hybrid war" through disinformation, funding anti-government protests, and interfering in local elections. Moldova is preparing for a referendum on EU membership and a presidential election on the same day, October 20. [AP]

(dql)

Croatia declares Montenegrin officials persona non grata amid historical disputes

Croatia has declared Montenegrin Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Becic, parliamentary speaker Andrija Mandic, and parliamentarian Milan Knezevic persona non grata in response to a diplomatic dispute over World War II history. [Politico]

The Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the ban on July 25, citing the officials' actions to disrupt relations. This decision follows the officials' support for a Montenegrin parliamentary declaration labelling the Jasenovac death camp as a site of “genocide.”

The Ustasha-run camp, which the US Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates killed around 100,000 ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma, and anti-Nazi Croats, remains a contentious issue. Croatia condemned the Montenegrin declaration as politically motivated and damaging to historical reconciliation.

The move underscores ongoing tensions related to the legacy of World War II and the shifting political landscape in Montenegro, which is seeking EU membership amid recent pro-Serb and pro-Russian influences. [Al Jazeera]

(nm)

3 Montenegrin officials banned by Croatia in diplomatic row over WWII death camp

Croatia has declared three top Montenegrin officials—Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Becic, parliamentary speaker Andrija Mandic, and parliamentarian Milan Knezevic—persona non grata amid a diplomatic dispute over the Jasenovac death camp, operated by the pro-Nazi Croatian government during World War II.

On July 25, the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Montenegro that the three officials were banned from entering Croatia, citing their “systematic actions to disrupt good neighbourly relations.” It criticized the banned officials’ actions as counterproductive to Montenegro’s EU membership aspirations.

This decision follows their role in passing a Montenegrin parliamentary declaration accusing the Jasenovac camp of genocide. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that 100,000 ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma, and anti-Nazi Croats were killed at Jasenovac from 1941 to 1945 under the Nazi-allied Ustasha regime.

Croatia condemned the Montenegrin declaration as “unacceptable, inappropriate, and unnecessary,” alleging that it exploits the victims’ memory for political purposes. Tensions have been exacerbated by Croatia’s increasing tolerance for its pro-Nazi past and criticisms over the use of Ustasha symbols.

The conflict over World War II legacies remains a contentious issue in the Balkans. Montenegro's support for a UN resolution commemorating the 1995 Srebrenica genocide has further strained relations, especially with Serbia, which has significant influence in Montenegro.

Montenegro, which joined NATO in 2017 despite Russian and Serbian opposition, recently reshuffled its government to include pro-Serb and pro-Russian parties, raising US concerns. [Al Jazeera]

(dql)

Dutch court endorses EUR 5.6 billion submarine deal with France

A Dutch court has dismissed a lawsuit calling for the revision of a submarine deal between the Netherlands and France, stating there was "no reason" to further investigate the multi-billion-euro agreement. In March, the Netherlands selected French defense company Naval Group and its Dutch partner Royal IHC to build four new submarines, over competing bids from Germany's Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) and Sweden's Saab AB. TKMS challenged this decision, claiming its offer was wrongly judged as invalid and requested a new procurement process or further investigations.

The decision is a significant win for Naval Group, which had previously lost a major contract with Australia.

The new submarines will replace the Netherlands' aging Walrus class subs, with the first two expected to enter service within ten years of contract signing. [Arab News]

(lm)

Norway to send Ukraine fighter jets

On July 10, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre announced on the sidelines of the NATO summit, held in Washington. D. C., on July 9-1, his government's decision to provide Ukraine with six F-16 fighter jets, with the first delivery scheduled for 2024. Støre emphasized the importance of enhancing Ukraine's air defense capabilities in its fight against Russian aggression, adding that Western fighter jets, alongside air defense systems, would significantly bolster Ukraine's defense against airstrikes.

This decision aligns with a previous 2023 announcement about Norway's participation in the Danish-led aircraft coalition for Ukraine.

A government press release indicated that the provision of Western fighter jets to Ukraine will necessitate a coordinated effort to ensure sufficient weapons and maintenance. This initiative involves an international coalition including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Norway.

Norway has been gradually decommissioning its F-16s since 2021, transitioning to the new F-35s. While 32 of the decommissioned F-16s were sold to Romania, some remain in Norway.

Additionally, the Netherlands is set to begin delivering the first of its 24 promised F-16s to Ukraine. [European Pravda]

In a second announcement a day later, Støre promised additional funding of NOK 1 billion (USD 92.69 million) to boost Ukraine's air defense. The funding will go to Germany's Immediate Action for Air Defence initiative, launched this year following Berlin's request to the European Union, NATO and other countries to supprt Ukraine's air defenses as quickly as possible.

With this, the value of Norway's measures in support of Ukraine's air defense totals NOK 4 billion. [Government, Norway] [Reuters]

Furthermore, the government has provided UNICEF with USD 7.4 million in additional funding to support the agency's programmes in Ukraine.

Norway is the fifth-biggest funding partner of UNICEF for its emergency response in Ukraine. [UNICEF]

(dql)

Polish-Ukrainian security agreement signed

On July 8, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk signed a security agreement in Warsaw.

The agreement underscores Poland's historical role as the first country to recognize Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union on December 2, 1991. It aims to enhance political, military, and economic cooperation between the two nations and includes provisions for intercepting Russian missiles and drones targeting Ukraine.

This agreement is part of a broader initiative, endorsed by the Group of Seven (G7) in July 2023, where several countries including the U.S., U.K., Germany, France, and the European Union have pledged similar support to Ukraine.

Poland has committed to providing multiple packages of military assistance through the end of 2024 and continuing support for the next decade. This includes potentially supplying an additional MiG-29 squadron and forming a Ukrainian Legion to be trained and equipped in Poland. [The Kyiv Independent]

(dql)

Poland weighs shooting down Russian missiles heading to Ukraine

Poland is considering a Ukrainian proposal to intercept Russian missiles that might enter Polish airspace before hitting targets in Ukraine or Poland. Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski discussed this at the NATO summit, noting that some Russian missiles, launched from near St. Petersburg, briefly enter Polish airspace before reaching Ukraine.

Sikorski said Poland faces a dilemma: intercepting the missiles could result in dangerous debris, but doing nothing poses risks to Ukrainian cities and potentially Polish territory. He indicated that Ukraine has suggested intercepting the missiles over Ukrainian airspace if they are close to crossing into Polish territory. Polish Defense Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz stated that any decision would require NATO consensus.

Dismissing the proposal, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reaffirmed that NATO would not become directly involved in the conflict. [CNN]

(dql)

Polish parliament passes legislation granting immunity to soldiers using firearms at Belarus border

The Polish parliament has approved amendments to the criminal code, allowing soldiers and officers to bypass normal rules of engagement under specific circumstances while defending the country's eastern border. These circumstances include repelling direct and unlawful attacks that threaten life, health, or freedom. For instance, if a soldier sees a migrant picking up an item suspected to be a weapon, they could act without fear of criminal responsibility.

These changes were proposed following incidents on the Polish-Belarusian border. On June 6, a soldier was killed by a migrant with a knife. In another incident, soldiers fired warning shots at migrants, causing public outrage.

While Defense Minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz defended the amendments for enhancing the security of soldiers defending Poland and the EU, human rights lawyers criticized the changes, arguing they create opportunities for abuse and give officers a "license to kill." The Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, Michael O'Flaherty, expressed concerns that the amendments could lead to arbitrary and abusive use of force, urging the parliament to reject them.

Also, legal experts, including the Polish Ombudsman and rights groups like the Helsinki Foundation, condemned the amendments for violating constitutional principles of legality, proportionality, and specificity of law. They warned that the legislation's impact extends beyond border situations and could apply to any declared "military operation during peace times," potentially allowing police or soldiers to shoot at demonstrators if they felt threatened. [Balkan Insight]

(dql)

Romania plans to jointly develop R-360 Neptune missiles with Ukraine

Romania plans to jointly develop the R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles with Ukraine, following the example of other European countries in collaborating on armaments.

The Neptune missile, first presented in 2015 and entering service with the Ukrainian Navy in 2021, is designed to target naval vessels and has a range of up to 400 kilometers. Unlike air-launched missiles like the French SCALP-EG, the Neptune is ground-launched and can target both land and sea objectives, playing a strategic role in the ongoing conflict. It was notably used to take down the Russian cruiser Moskva in 2022.

Ukraine is working on extending the missile's range to 1,000 kilometers and increasing production, with plans for the Romanian-Ukrainian military-industrial partnership envisioned for the post-war period. [Army Recognition]

(lm)

Russian official has not dismissed possibility of assisting the Georgian Dream in staying in power

Russia is prepared to assist the Georgian Dream party in retaining power if requested by Tbilisi, implied Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Andrei Klimov, during a meeting of the Friends of Russia Club in Moscow, according to Pirveli TV Channel. Klimov, also the Chairman of the Federation Council's Interim Commission on State Sovereignty Protection, appears concerned with alleged interference in both Russia's and its neighboring countries' affairs. [Civil Georgia]

According to TV Pirveli, a journalist asked Andrei Klimov if Russia is "ready to prevent a coup attempt in Georgia." Klimov responded by citing Syria as an example, stating that Russia provides military assistance to those who request it: "Any coup d'état is an interference of external forces in the internal affairs of another state, which is a violation of the UN Charter. Let me tell you something else: For example, there was an attempt to overthrow the state of Syria. When the legitimate government of Assad turned to us for military assistance, we provided them with this assistance, and, as you know, the situation in Syria stabilized," Klimov said, as quoted by TV Pirveli. [Civil Georgia]

Commenting on Georgia's potential membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Andrei Klimov told TV Pirveli, "This is, first of all, for Georgia to

decide. To become a member of CSTO, one must first be willing to do so. The Collective Security Organization is an open system, and all countries that are ready to live by its rules should rely on this organization. The Collective Security Organization is an open system, and all countries that are ready to live by its rules should rely on it. Vladimir Putin's proposal is to have a common security system on the Eurasian continent. Georgia is a country on the Eurasian continent, and it can do this." [Civil Georgia]

The meeting also saw the attendance of Mamuka Pipia, the leader of the pro-Russian party Solidarity for Peace. TV Pirveli reported that Georgia was announced at the meeting as having joined the Friends of Russia Club. The pro-Kremlin party advocates for restoring diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, among other measures to improve ties between the two countries. [Civil Georgia]

(zh)

Russia, Belarus discuss Eurasian Economic Union regulation development for 2025

On August 5th, 2024, in Moscow, Valentin Tataritsky, Eurasian Economic Union (EEC) Minister of Technical Regulation, and Elena Morgunova, Chairwoman of the Belarusian State Committee for Standardization, discussed technical regulation and standardization issues within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The aim was to create a unified registers of examination protocols, authorised representatives, and second-tier documents for product compliance. Adjustments to the "On the Safety of Wheeled Vehicles" regulation and electronic vehicle registration were also reviewed. The development and amendment of EAEU technical regulations were evaluated. Tataritsky plans similar meetings with other EAEU countries' technical regulation heads to address sensitive issues collectively, aiming to implement the Strategy 2025 action plan.[BelTA]

The Strategy 2025 action plan for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was approved by the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) Council on April 5, 2021, following its initial endorsement by the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on December 11, 2020. A meeting held on May 8, 2024, discussed the implementation progress of this strategy, presenting a report on the results from 2023 to the heads of state of the EAEU member countries [EAE Union]

(hs)

Slovak prime minister threatens to halt diesel supplies to Ukraine

On July 29, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico announced that Slovakia would halt diesel supplies to Ukraine if Kyiv does not restore oil flows from the Russian company Lukoil. Slovakia and Hungary, both of which have opposed Western military aid to Ukraine, have increased pressure since Ukraine sanctioned Russian multinational energy corporation Lukoil earlier in July, disrupting oil supplies to Slovak and Hungarian refineries via the Druzhba pipeline.

"If Russian crude transit through Ukraine is not quickly resumed, Slovnaft (a Slovak refiner) will cease diesel supplies to Ukraine," Fico stated in a Facebook video. He noted that oil deliveries from other Russian suppliers remain unaffected and that Slovak deliveries constitute 10% of Ukraine's diesel consumption.

Fico proposed a technical solution to Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, though details were not disclosed. He indicated that multiple countries would need to be involved and welcomed reports that trading firms are already considering implementation.

This dispute highlights the ongoing reliance of some EU countries on Russian energy, despite the EU's decision to halt oil imports from Moscow following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have exemptions from the ban on Russian pipeline oil imports to allow time to find alternatives. [Reuters 1]

In a related development, Slovakia and Hungary have rejected the European Commission's proposal to replace halted Russian oil supplies with an alternative route through Croatia, citing high costs. Both countries requested the European Commission's mediation, but they dismissed the suggestion to use Croatia's JANAF Adriatic pipeline due to reliability concerns and increased transit fees. [Reuters 2]

The two countries have reportedly threatened to restrict or even suspend electricity supplies to Ukraine in response to its recent decision to halt Lukoil crude oil transits. [Central European Times]

(dql)

Slovenia, Ukraine sign security agreement

On July 18, Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a bilateral security agreement during the European Political Community meeting in Oxford, UK.

Under the agreement, Slovenia will continue to provide security and defense support to Ukraine, matching the aid levels of 2022, 2023, and 2024. Additionally, Slovenia will contribute EUR 5 million this year for humanitarian aid, recovery efforts, and food security initiatives.

The agreement condemns Russian aggression, supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, and emphasizes shared values like democracy and human rights. It also calls for accountability for crimes committed in Ukraine, including the crime of aggression, and insists that frozen Russian assets remain so until Russia compensates Ukraine for damages.

Slovenia and Ukraine have pledged to enhance intelligence and counter-intelligence cooperation, prevent cyber-attacks, and consult within 24 hours in the event of a future Russian attack. Slovenia could provide rapid and sustained aid in such a scenario. [The Slovenia Times]

(dql)

Slovenia, Azerbaijan sign MoU on gas supply

On July 17, Slovenia’s largest natural gas wholesaler Geoplin and Azerbaijan’s State Oil Company (SOCAR) signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance cooperation in gas supply. The agreement aims to increase the reliability and diversification of Slovenia’s natural gas supplies.

The memorandum sets the stage for deeper cooperation between Slovenia and Azerbaijan, aimed at boosting Slovenia’s energy security. This move aligns with Slovenia's strategy to diversify its gas sources, complementing the resumption of supplies from Algeria in 2023.

With this new agreement, Slovenia becomes the ninth European country to receive Azerbaijani gas, joining Türkiye, Georgia, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Serbia. Meanwhile, Slovakia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, and Croatia are considering similar purchases from Azerbaijan. [Caspian News]

The signing took place during a visit by Slovenian Environment, Climate, and Energy Minister Bojan Kumer to Baku, where he met with SOCAR CEO Rovshan Najaf and Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov. The discussions focused on securing natural gas from Azerbaijan, which has become a significant gas supplier for the EU.

In addition, Kumer met Azerbaijani Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources Mukhtar Babayev, who will preside over the COP29 climate conference in November. They discussed the conference preparations and the need for ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets. [The Slovenia Times]

In a latest development, SOCAR begun delivering natural gas to Slovenia on August 1. [The Kyiv Independent]

(dql)

Slovenian court sentences Russian couple to 19 months in prison for spying

On July 31, the Ljubljana court sentence a Russian couple to 19 months in prison for espionage and using fake documents.

The couple, who posed as Argentine citizens, settled in Slovenia in 2017. The husband, operating under the alias Ludwig Gisch, ran an IT startup, while the wife, using the name Maria Rosa Mayer Muños, had an online art gallery. Their real names are Artem Viktorovich Dultsev and Anna Valerevna Dultseva.

The couple allegedly used Slovenia as a base to travel to neighboring NATO and EU countries, relay orders from Moscow, and deliver cash to other Russian agents. They were arrested in 2022 and later identified as operatives of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Their trial was closed to the public. The couple was released on time served and banned from returning to Slovenia for five years. [AP]

Dultsev and Dultseva were among those Russian operatives in the August 1 prisoner swap between Russia and Western countries (see article in this edition). [BBC]

(dql)

Spanish police arrest Italian mafia fugitive

The Spanish police have arrested Italian fugitive Francesco Lapis, considered one of Italy's "most dangerous" mafia fugitives, in Barcelona. He is one of the trusted men of the mafia boss Michele Sense, leader of the Roman Camorra crime organization. Lapis had been convicted in Italy for trafficking significant quantities of cocaine, hashish, and marijuana between Spain and Italy. [El Periódico] [El País] [Reuters]

(fs)

Spanish army orders half a million 155mm ammo charges from Germany's Rheinmetall

The Spanish Army has signed a framework agreement with Rheinmetall to supply approximately half a million modular propellant systems for 155mm extended-range artillery ammunition, valued up to EUR 205 million, with deliveries scheduled from mid-2024 to the end of 2025. This agreement includes a two-year extension option that could increase its value. This procurement aims to replenish ammunition stocks, particularly for the M109 and SIAC 155mm howitzers, in response to the Russian attack on Ukraine.

This contract is one of several orders placed by the Spanish Army this year. In April 2024, Rheinmetall received an order for mortar shells worth a high double-digit million-euro amount. In March 2024, another order was placed for 155mm artillery ammunition worth over EUR 200 million, also to be delivered by the end of 2025. [Rheinmetall]

This development comes after Spain's watchdog, the CNMC, opened an investigation into Rheinmetall for potentially providing incomplete and misleading information during its acquisition of Expal Systems. This disciplinary proceeding follows CNMC's initial approval of the EUR 1.2 billion (USD 1.29 billion) acquisition in February 2023. Rheinmetall acquired Expal Systems from Rhone Capital. [Reuters]

(lm)

Sweden to donate 13 reserve generators to Ukraine

Sweden has announced plans to transfer thirteen diesel-powered backup generators to Ukraine.

Due to Russian attacks on power plants, several urban centers in Ukraine are experiencing prolonged blackouts. [The Local SE]

Swedish Energy Minister Ebba Busch stated that they are not included in any of the previously announced aid packages. She also said that the generators will help Ukraine manage power outages and supply electricity to hospitals. [Sveriges radio]

The government refused to say where and when the generators will be sent for security reasons.

(fs)

Swedish, German authorities arrest 7 suspicion of committing war crimes in Syria

Authorities in Germany and Sweden have arrested at least seven individuals on suspicion of committing crimes against humanity and war crimes in Syria between 2012 and 2014. This coordinated effort involved the European Union judicial cooperation agency Eurojust, the EU police agency Europol, and several other European countries.

In Germany, four suspects were affiliated with the Free Palestine Movement, an armed militia in Syria. They are accused of killing and attempting to kill civilians, as well as torture. The suspects were involved in a violent crackdown on a peaceful protest in al-Yarmouk, Damascus, on July 13, 2012, resulting in six deaths and numerous injuries. Some also allegedly abused civilians and handed over individuals to the Syrian Military Intelligence Service for incarceration and torture.

Sweden arrested three individuals but did not disclose their identities. The Swedish Prosecution Authority will decide by Saturday whether to detain or release them. [AP]

(dql)

The two sides of Nicosia: 50 years after the Turkey invading Cyprus, what did the leaders say?

On July 20, 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus in the name of a peace operation after a coup was formed against the Cyprus government. The dispute tore the country apart. The last UN-backed negotiation in Switzerland failed in 2017. [Reuters]

On July 20, 2024, the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey, held events in memorial of the invasion 50 years ago in their joined Capital, Nicosia. [Alja Zeera]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attended the celebration, reinforcing his stance for the two-state solution. According to Erdogan, the operation 50 years ago is an act of peace. [Alja Zeera]

While the Turkish Cypriots were in celebration, the Greek Cypriots across the buffer zone gathered to mourn. The Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis join the mourning with Nikos Christodoulides, President of the Republic of Cyprus. [Reuters]

In contrast to Erdogan, Mitsotakis stated that the acceptable resolution for the island's future is a unified federation in which all citizens are Cypriots and Europeans without any foreign forces. [Reuters]

Greece and Turkey are both NATO members, and the Cyprus issue is a constant source of tension between the two countries. [Reuters]

(ycl)

Turkey opens first abroad earthquake monitoring station in Azerbaijan

Turkey has made a significant advancement in its international cooperation efforts by opening its first earthquake monitoring station abroad, located in Shusha, Azerbaijan. This new facility, established by Türkiye's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), marks a milestone in the "deep-rooted and strong cooperation" between the two nations. [TRT World]

The station is equipped with advanced technology, capable of monitoring seismic activity worldwide. The installation, a joint effort between AFAD and the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, features a

100-meter deep well housing two high-sensitivity earthquake sensors. These sensors are designed to measure both ground speed and acceleration with exceptional precision, capturing even micro vibrations without interference from surface noise. [TRT World]

Turkish officials highlighted the symbolic significance of this project, noting that the "Derinkuyu" earthquake monitoring station in Shusha symbolizes the deepening of ties between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, countries with a long history of friendship and cooperation. [TRT World]

(ab)

Turkey and Armenia hold fifth meeting to advance normalization of relations

In a continued effort to improve bilateral relations, Türkiye and Armenia convened their fifth meeting of Special Representatives for the Normalization Process. The talks, held at the Alican-Margara border crossing, mark another step towards easing historical tensions between the two nations. [TRT World]

According to a statement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, the representatives reaffirmed the agreements made in their previous discussions. Key topics included assessing the technical requirements needed to open the Akyaka/Akhurik railroad border gate, an important step in enhancing connectivity during ongoing regional developments. [Hürriyet Daily News]

Additionally, both parties have agreed to simplify visa procedures for holders of diplomatic and official passports, facilitating smoother interactions and fostering goodwill. The representatives reiterated their dedication to continuing the normalization process without preconditions, aiming to achieve full normalization between the two countries. [TRT World]

(ab)

Turkish foreign minister meets with Russian foreign minister at ASEAN conference

On July 26th, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Laos.

The pair discussed bilateral relations and energy and economic partnerships. The ministers further discussed the Israel Palestine conflict, Syria, and other regional conflicts.

Türkiye partnered with ASEAN in 2010 and became a sectoral dialogue partner with the partnership in 2017. ASEAN's trade volume has grown from $6.5 billion in 2010 to $14.6 billion in 2023. [Hurriyet Daily News]

(ts)

Ukraine claims successful strike on Russian submarine

Ukraine's military claims to have destroyed on August 2 a Russian Kilo-class submarine, the Rostov-on-Don, while it was anchored at a port in occupied Crimea. The attack occurred in Sevastopol, where the submarine was reportedly undergoing testing. Ukrainian forces also targeted and destroyed four S-400 air defense systems protecting the peninsula. The Russian defense ministry has not commented on the incident.

Launched in 2014, the Rostov-on-Don was one of four submarines in Russia's Black Sea fleet capable of launching Kalibr cruise missiles. Intelligence officials in the UK previously noted that the submarine likely suffered catastrophic damage during a missile strike in September while in a Sevastopol shipyard. Ukraine claims the submarine was worth USD 300 million.

This attack is the latest in a series of assaults on Russian naval forces in Sevastopol. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukraine claims to have significantly damaged or sunk at least 15 Russian warships, including the Black Sea fleet's flagship, the Moskva. [BBC]

Ukraine has also conducted drone attacks on major airfields and oil depots in Russia on August 3, targeting the Morozovsk airfield and facilities in Rostov, Kursk, and Belgorod regions. These strikes follow Russia's launch of over 600 guided air bombs towards Ukraine in a week. [Al Jazeera]

(dql)

New British Prime Minister Starmer, Irish counterpart Harris meet for first time, vow to repeal troubles legacy

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris pledged to improve UK-Irish relations over pints of Guinness at Chequers. The meeting marked the first foreign leader hosted by Starmer, following Labour's victory in the general election, ending 14 years of Conservative rule. The leaders discussed resetting relations and addressing Northern Ireland's trade rules post-Brexit.

Starmer announced the scrapping of an amnesty scheme for Northern Ireland's ex-soldiers and militants, a move welcomed by Dublin. They agreed on annual summits to enhance cooperation, with Starmer set to visit Dublin on September 7. [Reuters]

Speaking at Blenheim Palace to the European Political Community, Starmer emphasized resetting relationships and renewing trust with Europe. Harris praised Starmer, noting a positive shift in UK-Irish relations and presented him with a Donegal GAA jersey. The leaders' rapport signals a potential "gamechanger" in UK-EU relations, contrasting with previous administrations' approaches. [Irish Examiner]

(nm)

British, Spanish prime minister discuss youth mobility scheme

(lm) British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has discussed a potential youth mobility scheme with his Spanish counterpart Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. The proposal was made during a private meeting at the European Political Community summit held at Blenheim Palace earlier this month. Starmer reportedly did not reject the idea and indicated he would consider it.

The proposal aligns with recent calls for a scheme that would allow young people to live, study, or work in the EU for a limited period. This comes after Starmer’s predecessor, Rishi Sunak, rejected a similar offer from the European Commission in April, which would have allowed individuals aged 18 to 30 free movement for up to four years. At that time, Labour had no plans for such a scheme but emphasized improving the UK's working relationship with the EU within established boundaries.

Labour's recent election manifesto stated there would be "no return to ... freedom of movement," but a bilateral deal with Spain would not necessarily break this pledge. The UK currently has youth mobility schemes with 13 non-EU countries, which require applicants to get a visa, provide evidence of sufficient funds, and pay a health service surcharge. [The Guardian]

(fs)

Italy's General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo concludes official visit to Iraq

General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo, commander of Italy's Joint Forces Summit (Covi), in mid-July, concluded a three-day official visit to Iraq. During this visit, he met with Iraqi military leaders and Italian soldiers deployed in the country. The Italian delegation, including Ambassador Maurizio Greganti, was welcomed at the "Union III" military base in Baghdad by Lieutenant General Lucas Schreurs, commander of the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).

General Figliuolo's visit included meetings with key Iraqi defense officials, such as General Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah and General Qais Khalaf al-Muhammadi, where they discussed regional security and bilateral defense collaboration. In Erbil, he visited Italian soldiers involved in Operation Inherent Resolve/Prima Parthica, who provide training to Kurdish Peshmerga and Zeravani forces to combat Daesh. [Agenzia Nova]

Norway's foreign minister denied visit to Israel

Israel's foreign ministry unveiled on July 16, that Foreign Minister Israel Katz has denied his Norwegian counterpart Espen Barth Eide's request to visit Israel, protesting Norway's critical stance toward Israel and support for a Palestine state.

Katz cited for his move Oslo's recognition of Palestine, refusal to designate Hamas as a terrorist organization, and support for South Africa's case against Israel in The Hague. [Times of Israel]

Norway, along with Ireland and Spain, officially recognized Palestine on May 28 [EiR No. 6, June/2024].

(dql)

Dutch court rejects claim government is evading export ban on F-35 parts to Israel

A Dutch court has dismissed allegations from human rights organizations that the Netherlands is circumventing an export ban on F-35 fighter jet parts destined for Israel. The Hague District Court found no evidence to support the claims by Oxfam Novib, Pax Nederland, and The Rights Forum, which argued that the Dutch government was bypassing the ban by sending parts to the United States, from where they were subsequently shipped to Israel.

In February, an appeals court ruled that the Dutch government must stop exporting F-35 parts to Israel due to the risk of these parts being used in strikes on Gaza, which could violate international law. Although the Dutch government appealed this ruling to the Supreme Court, it stated that it was adhering to the order by halting direct exports to Israel.

In June, the human rights organizations returned to court, asserting that the Netherlands was evading the ban through indirect shipments via the U.S. and demanded a fine for the alleged breach. However, the court ruled that the organizations were interpreting the earlier judgment too broadly. The court upheld the Dutch government's stance, which maintained it could not track the parts once they left the Netherlands and cautioned that further restrictions might jeopardize global military supplies of F-35 parts during a time of heightened international tensions.

The Netherlands is a key location for F-35 logistics, housing one of three European regional warehouses for the fighter jet. During a hearing in June, government lawyer Reimer Veldhuis warned that restricting exports beyond Israel could impact the militaries of other countries operating F-35 jets.

The human rights groups expressed their disagreement with the court's decision and are considering further legal actions, stating it is unacceptable for the Netherlands to remain complicit in what they consider violations of the laws of war by Israel in Gaza.

The broader case will be taken up by the Dutch Supreme Court in September.

The context of these legal battles is the ongoing conflict in Gaza, which began with a surprise attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7, resulting in significant casualties and hostilities. Israeli military actions have

since caused extensive destruction in Gaza, with reported deaths exceeding 38,000 according to Gaza's Health Ministry, and have displaced much of the territory's 2.3 million population. The conflict has severely disrupted humanitarian efforts, leading to widespread hunger and fears of famine. [Voice of America]

(lm)

Russia-Saudi agricultural trade increase

On July 25, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Patrushev discussed bilateral cooperation with the Saudi Minister for the Environment, Water and Agriculture, Abdulrahman Abdulmohsen Al Fadley. The two representatives emphasised the strategic nature of relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, which are based on active political dialogue.

They Agricultural trade is essential, reaching USD 1 billion dollars a year, with Russian grain exports accounting for more than 60% of trade in 2023 and almost 90% in 2024.

Patrushev expressed confidence in the potential for trade growth and the interest of Russian companies in increasing exports of cereals, fats and oils, confectionery and halal meat products, as well as cooperation in the field of nature conservation. [Russian Government]

(hs)

Sweden's Iraq aid program to end

On July 18, the Swedish government announced it will end development aid to Iraq due to improved conditions in the country. Johan Forssell, Sweden's international development minister, stated that Iraq is now a middle-income country with adequate resources to care for its population.

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) will begin phasing out their operations, aiming to conclude by June 30 of next year. Sida's work focused on poverty reduction, human rights, gender equality, and climate change adaptation, while FBA trained Iraqi youth in dialogue and mediation post-ISIS.

Forssell mentioned that ending these programs would allow Sweden to enhance cooperation with Iraq in trade, the environment, and migration.

This comes after diplomatic tensions between Iraq and Sweden arose following the burning of the Quran an Iraqi refugee in Sweden last year, with Swedish permitting what the refugee described as a protest, the action, citing freedom of expression.

leading to Iraq expelling the Swedish ambassador and recalling its charge d'affaires. Protestors in Baghdad set fire to the Swedish embassy, while Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani warned that Iraq would sever diplomatic ties with Sweden if another Quran burning protest occurred. [Rudaw]

More recently, early July the Swedish Foreign Ministry confirmed that three Swedish citizens have been sentenced to death in Iraq for their involvement in a shooting, adding that a fourth may also face the same punishment for a separate crime. The government summoned Iraq's chargé d'affaires in June to protest the death sentence of one of the three involved in the shooting. [Reuters]

(dql)

Turkish President Erdogan prepared to initiate dialogue with Assad

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has indicated the possibility of inviting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for discussions, emphasizing Turkey's readiness to respond positively if Assad makes efforts to improve bilateral relations. Highlighting the historically amicable relations between the two nations, Erdogan expressed his willingness to normalize relations and mentioned that an invitation could be extended at any time. He also pointed out the supportive positions of Russia and Iraq in this initiative. [BBC Türkçe]

Erdogan has called on all peace advocates to support his "historic" initiative for peace in Syria, highlighting Turkey's ongoing efforts to relieve the suffering in the region. Following his return from the NATO summit in Washington, DC, Erdogan emphasised the significance of both U.S. and Iranian support for these positive developments. [TRT World]

Syria has highlighted that normalizing relations with Turkey should be based on returning to the pre-2011 status, which it maintained is essential for the security, safety, and stability of both nations. The Syrian

government highlighted that the interests of both countries are rooted in a strong relationship rather than conflict or hostility. [SANA]

Erdogan stated that a fair peace in Syria would greatly benefit Turkey. He announced that he has tasked Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan with the anticipated meeting with Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. Fidan will engage with his counterparts to establish a comprehensive roadmap for the talks. Erdogan emphasized the importance of Syria's territorial integrity for Turkish interests. He underlined that initiating a new era in Syria-Turkey relations is crucial for achieving this fair peace. The process has reportedly progressed positively, with hopes for concrete steps to be taken soon. [Sözcü]

Turkey and Syria's relations have been tense since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Turkey supported opposition groups, whereas the Assad regime permitted the YPG, considered a threat by Turkey, to operate in northeast Syria. Following that Turkish military started operations in Northern Syria. Syria's condition for normalizing relations involves Turkey withdrawing its military forces from northern Syria. However, recent statements from both nations' leaders have revived the possibility of renewed negotiations. [BBC Türkçe]

(ab)

Armenia holds military drills with US amidst strained relations with Russia

On July 15-24, Armenia carried out joint military drills with the U.S., signaling efforts to tighten the relation with the U.S.

The ten-day "Eagle Partner" war games aim to improve the interoperability of units involved in international peacekeeping missions. They involved Armenian peacekeepers, US Army soldiers for Europe and Africa and the Kansas National Guard.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has been Armenia's most important economic partner and ally. Formerly part of the Soviet Union, landlocked Armenia is home to a Russian military base and is part of the Moscow-led security alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization. However, relations between Armenia and Russia have become increasingly tense since Azerbaijan conquered the Karabakh region in a lightning campaign last year, ending three decades of rule by Armenian separatists.

The Armenian authorities accused the Russian peacekeepers, deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh following hostilities in 2020, of failing to prevent Azerbaijan's attack. Moscow rejected the accusations, stating that its troops had no mandate to intervene. [Military Times]

(nl)

Czech Republic secures USD 138 million deal for US missile systems to boost defence

The Czech Republic has finalized a USD 138.26 million agreement with the United States to acquire advanced missile systems, including Hellfire missiles and the Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS). The deal, recently approved by the US State Department, marks a significant step in the Czech Republic's defence modernization strategy amid rising regional threats.

The agreement includes 200 Hellfire Air-to-Ground Missiles (AGM-114R), four Hellfire Captive Air Training Missiles, and 600 APKWS II units, along with support equipment and training materials. This acquisition aims to enhance the Czech military's readiness and interoperability with NATO allies, reflecting a commitment to strengthening defence capabilities and integrating with allied forces.

The systems, developed by Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems, are expected to bolster the Czech Republic's role within NATO and support unified defence strategies. [Airforce Technology]

(nm)

Defense agreement with US approve by Finnish parliament

On July 1, Finland's parliament unanimously approved US-Finnish Defense Cooperation Agreement, a defense treaty granting Washington access to 15 Finnish military bases for potential use by US forces. It also permits the US to bring defense equipment, supplies, and soldiers to Finland and establishes military zones accessible only to US personnel.

Signed in December [EiR No. 1, January/2024], aims to strengthen cooperation between the two nations in

crisis situations and enhance Finland's security. Similar agreements have been signed by 11 other NATO countries, including Sweden, Norway, and Denmark.

Finland began negotiating the deal after applying for NATO membership in May 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [AA]

(dql)

US B 52-bombers cross Finnish airspace

In a historic first, two US B-52 Stratofortress bombers, accompanied by two KC-135 Stratotankers and one KC-46 refuelling plane, flew over Finnish airspace on July 21. The bombers, on a training mission, travelled south from Norway over Finnish Lapland, while the tankers originated from Poland, as tracked by Flight radar.

Finnish Defence Minister Antti Häkkänen commented that this operation was routine for a NATO member state, demonstrating deterrence and defense. He emphasized the importance of visible, concrete actions, highlighting the United States as a key ally for Finland.

The Russian Ministry of Defence sent fighter jets to intercept two US strategic B-52 bombers. It stated that at no point Russian airspace was violated. [Yle] [The Barents Observer]

(dql)

United States foiled Russian plot to assassinate CEO of German arms manufacturer supplying Ukraine

US and German intelligence services foiled a Russian plot to assassinate Armin Papperger, CEO of Rheinmetall, Germany’s leading arms manufacturer. The plot, which was uncovered by US intelligence earlier this year, was the most advanced among several Russian schemes targeting defense industry executives in Europe who are supporting Ukraine.

Rheinmetall, a major supplier of military equipment and ammunition to Ukraine, ramped up production following Russia’s invasion in 2022 and announced plans to open an ammunition factory in Ukraine, a move that particularly incited Russian anger.

The revelation of the assassination plot prompted increased warnings from NATO officials about the seriousness of Russia's sabotage campaign, and NATO has been enhancing intelligence sharing among member states to better identify and counter these threats. However, Russia's willingness to resort to assassination has raised challenging questions about how NATO should respond. The alliance's Article 5 states that an armed attack on one member is an attack on all, but defining Russia’s covert activities as such complicates the response.

[CNN] [The Guardian]

(lm)

Greece signs deal to buy 20 US-made F-35 jets in major military overhaul

Greece has approved the purchase of 20 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters from the United States as part of a significant military overhaul. Defense Minister Nikos Dendias stated that this acquisition would bolster Greece's deterrent capabilities in the region. The deal, valued at USD 3.5 billion for the first 20 jets, includes an option for an additional 20 aircraft, potentially bringing the total deal to USD 8.6 billion. Deliveries of the fifth-generation jets from Lockheed Martin are expected to start in 2028.

This purchase is part of Greece's decade-long military modernization program following financial challenges and ongoing tensions with Turkey, particularly over maritime boundaries. Turkey was excluded from the F-35 program in 2019 due to its acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system.

Government spokesman Pavlos Marinakis emphasized that the current modernization effort is the most significant in decades. Greece has also acquired advanced French Rafale fighter jets to enhance its air capabilities.

Lockheed Martin's Bridget Lauderdale highlighted the F-35's role in strengthening Greece's sovereignty and operational capability. Greece joins 18 other nations in the F-35 program, including the United States, Britain, Italy, and Japan. The U.S. State Department had approved the potential sale of up to 40 F-35 aircraft, including engines, communications devices, electronic warfare systems, training, logistics, and maintenance support. [Associated Press]

(lm)

Second US 2 billion US military loan deal for Poland announced

On July 8, the United States announced a second USD 2 billion foreign military financing deal with Poland to support the country's defense modernization efforts.

This agreement, part of a broader program, will fund the purchase of U.S. defense equipment, including F-35 aircraft, Patriot missile systems, and Abrams tanks.

This follows a previous USD 2 billion deal signed in September 2023. [Reuters] [Department of State, USA]

(dql)

Poland signs agreements on purchasing US Apache helicopters for USD 240 million

On August 5, Polish Deputy Minister of National Defense Paweł Bejda signed two offset agreements worth a total of USD 240 million with Boeing and General Electric for the purchase of AH-64E Apache helicopters. The deal includes a USD 95 million agreement with Boeing and a USD 145 million agreement with General Electric.

The contracts cover the repair of helicopter components at facilities in Lodz and Deblin, Poland, and the training of engineers for maintenance.

The AH-64E Apache, a key attack helicopter used by the US Army since the 1980s, is believed to significantly enhance Poland’s military capabilities. [AA]

(dql)

Slovakia receives first 2 of 14 new F-16 fighter jets from US

On July 22, Slovakia received the first two of 14 new F-16 military jets from the United States, following a two-year delay caused by the coronavirus pandemic and a chip shortage. President Peter Pellegrini, who was the prime minister in 2018 when the USD 1.8 billion deal was signed to replace obsolete Soviet-made MiG-29 jets, welcomed the F-16s' arrival at the Kuchyna air base. The remaining jets will be delivered gradually over the next two years.

Slovakia had grounded its MiG-29s in summer 2022 due to a lack of spare parts and expertise after Russian technicians left following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The government later decided to donate its fleet of 13 MiG-29s to Ukraine, becoming the second NATO member to provide warplanes to Ukraine.

Since then, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary have guarded Slovak airspace. The new government, led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, who campaigned on an anti-American platform, condemned the jet donation and threatened legal action. Fico, opposing military support for Ukraine and EU sanctions on Russia, came to power after last year's parliamentary elections. [AP]

(dql)

US Pentagon greenlights sale of H-1Z attack helicopters to Slovakia

The US State Department has approved Slovakia's request to purchase 12 AH-1Z attack helicopters from Bell Textron, valued at USD 600 million. The deal includes 1,680 AGR-20 Advanced Precision Kill Weapon Systems (APKWS), 26 T-700 GE 401C engines, and 14 Honeywell embedded global positioning/inertial navigation systems. It also encompasses communications equipment, helmet-mounted display systems, and AN/APX-123A identification friend-or-foe systems.

This potential sale aims to enhance Slovakia’s defense capabilities and support US foreign policy and national security by strengthening a NATO ally.

The AH-1Z Viper, originally developed for the US Marine Corps, is a twin-engine helicopter designed for effective air-to-air and air-to-ground engagements. It offers a minimal logistics footprint and ease of maintenance, with a top speed of 200 knots and a range exceeding 310 nautical miles. [Defense Post]

(dql)

Slovenia, Brazil sign transport and tourism agreements

On July 4, Slovenia and Brazil signed agreements to enhance air connectivity and tourism cooperation. Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Brazilian

Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira met in Brasília to formalize these accords during Fajon's three-day visit.

The air transport agreement aims to improve flight connections and potentially establish scheduled flights between the two countries. The tourism memorandum will promote tourism exchanges, build ties between tourism organizations, and stimulate investment in the sector.

Brazil is Slovenia's primary trading partner in Latin America, accounting for over half of Slovenia's trade with the region. Last year, trade reached EUR 253 million, making Brazil Slovenia's 35th largest global trading partner.

During the talks with Vieira, Fajon highlighted Brazil as a key economic and political partner, with potential for collaboration in renewables, AI, digitalization, space, and water management. The ministers also discussed EU-Latin America relations and global issues, including the Russian aggression in Ukraine and conflicts in Gaza and the Middle East. [The Slovenia Times] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenia]

(dql)

Sweden, US discuss joint priorities in the Indo-Pacific

The United States hosted Sweden for a dialogue on the Indo-Pacific on August 5 in Washington, D.C., co-chaired by Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Swedish State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Jan Knutsson. The U.S. delegation included senior officials from the Department of State, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense.

The discussions focused on joint priorities to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific, including upholding international law and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, enhancing maritime and security cooperation, and strengthening relations with Pacific and Indian Ocean island nations. They emphasized the importance of developing critical ties between NATO Allies and NATO's Indo-Pacific partners to address security challenges.

Both sides expressed concern over China's support for Russia's defense industry and North Korea's growing military cooperation with Russia and human rights issues. They also committed to enhancing economic

opportunities and resilience in the Indo-Pacific region. [The Korea Times]

Additionally, they discussed Russia's illegal war against Ukraine, developments in the Middle East, and shared U.S.-Swedish policy interests and security concerns in the Arctic. [Department of State, USA]

(dql)

Sweden, US to cooperate on nuclear energy

On August 1, Swedish Energy Minister Ebba Busch announced an agreement with the United States to collaborate on advancing nuclear power technology, highlighting the benefits of this partnership for both nations and their respective labor markets.

A memorandum of understanding between the Swedish Ministry of Climate and Enterprise and the US Department of Energy, the agreement will involve exchanging knowledge on policy, research, innovation, supply chains, financing, and advanced nuclear fuel development.

The agreement comes after in November last year, Sweden, which currently operates six nuclear reactors across three plants, unveiled a roadmap for a significant increase in nuclear power to meet future electricity needs. Initial plans include building reactors with a combined capacity of at least 2,500 megawatts by 2035, followed by further expansion by 2045. [Alarabiya News] [Ministry of Climate and Enterprise, Sweden]

(dql)

Sweden, US sign 6G cooperation agreement

Sweden and the US have signed a bilateral agreement to collaborate on developing 6G technologies. The agreement involves identifying synergies and creating a joint ecosystem for 6G research and development. This includes utilizing new spectrum allocations, introducing new technologies in existing frequency bands, and encouraging global harmonization of frequency bands for 6G and future wireless services.

Under the agreement, both countries will explore long-term research collaboration and potential funding in

areas such as resiliency, security, privacy, AI-enabled technologies, efficient use of communication resources, cybersecurity, edge computing, distributed intelligence, sustainability, and spectrum management.

They will also promote the joint use of test beds, open architectures, advanced micro-electronics, dynamic spectrum management, optical science, and network and computer science.

In April, the Swedish Research Council and Vinnova signed a five-year declaration of intent with the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to facilitate research and innovation collaborations, with 6G identified as a key technology area. [Mobile Europe]

(dql)

Swiss' UBS Group AG questioned by US Senator over USD million tax evasion case

UBS Group AG has been questioned by US Senator Ron Wyden regarding its acquisition of Credit Suisse Group AG and whether Credit Suisse failed to report an American accused of evading USD 350 million in taxes. This inquiry is part of a broader investigation into whether Credit Suisse has continued to assist Americans in hiding assets from the IRS, despite a 2014 plea deal in which the bank agreed to end such practices.

Senator Wyden, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, sent a letter to UBS CEO Sergio Ermotti, following the indictment of Douglas Edelman, a former military contractor accused of concealing profits from the IRS. Wyden's letter highlights new evidence suggesting Credit Suisse's significant role in Edelman's alleged tax evasion.

Edelman, who was arrested in Spain and faces extradition to the US, allegedly hid his profits using undisclosed foreign bank accounts and false documents. He is accused of moving money through various countries and creating entities in multiple offshore locations to hide assets. Credit Suisse had previously told Edelman to move his money or disclose his assets to US authorities due to increased scrutiny.

The Justice Department is currently investigating Credit Suisse's compliance with the 2014 plea deal, under which the bank was supposed to identify undeclared accounts to the IRS. The plea deal came after Credit Suisse pleaded guilty and paid USD 2.6 billion for helping Americans evade taxes.

Senator Wyden has asked UBS for an updated number of previously undeclared accounts and details on Credit Suisse's actions regarding Edelman's accounts. This inquiry follows a similar case in March, where another individual was indicted for using Swiss banks, including Credit Suisse and UBS, to hide assets from US tax authorities over several decades. [SWI]

Swiss watchdog scrutinises UBS vetting of wealthy Credit Suisse clients

In related developments, Switzerland's financial regulator, FINMA, is closely scrutinizing UBS's vetting process for transferring wealthy clients from Credit Suisse. The regulator reviewed UBS's compliance procedures to ensure that risky clients from Credit Suisse do not pose problems for the banking giant. This scrutiny includes examining UBS's filtering technology and "know your client" rules used to identify potential risks, such as money laundering.

UBS aims to complete the client transfers in phases, starting with clients in Singapore and Hong Kong by the end of 2024, followed by those in Switzerland by 2025. [Reuters]

(lm)

Major Russian cybersecurity firm leaves USA

In July, Russian cybersecurity company Kaspersky Lab announced that it will "gradually wind down" its US operations and lay off its US-based employees following a US Department of Commerce ban on selling its products in the United States. This move ends nearly two decades of the company's operations in the country.

Kaspersky Lab stated that the decision was made after evaluating the impact of US legal requirements, which rendered business opportunities in the country no longer viable. The Commerce Department announced the ban in June, citing national security concerns that the Russian government could use Kaspersky's software to surveil Americans through hacking or data collection, claims which Kaspersky has denied.

US government agencies were already banned from using Kaspersky software, but the Commerce Department's recent move to prevent its sale in the US is unprecedented. This action is based on new legal authorities derived from executive orders signed by

Presidents Joe Biden in 2021 and Donald Trump in 2019. [CNN] [Courrier International]

(hs)

Turkey scales back 23-billion-dollar agreement with U.S. for F-16 fighter jets

Turkish officials are paring back on their 23-billion-dollar defense contract to modernize NATO's second largest fleet of F-16 fighter jets. The move comes amidst Turkish spending cuts and efforts to secure an agreement with the U.S. to produce fighter jet parts domestically.

Since 2021, Ankara has negotiated for the purchase of 40 of *Lockheed Martin*'s newest generation of F-16 fighter jets, 79 modernizing kits for its current fleet, and hundreds of bombs and missiles. U.S. regulators approved the deal after Turkey ratified Sweden's entry into the NATO alliance. [Reuters]

However, according to a Bloomberg report, Turkey is renegotiating the arrangement following domestic spending cuts and an increased desire to prop up domestic production of defense systems.

At a news conference in Washington on 11th of July when asked about the reportedly faltering deal July 12th, President Erdogan evaded the question, stating, "The issue regarding these spare parts is something we always discuss."

In response to the President's comments, a Lockheed Martin official affirmed the company's commitment to the deal, stating that it is "confident the F-16 Block 70 and V upgrade package represents the best mix of advanced 21st Century Security capabilities, enhanced NATO interoperability, and affordable operating and life cycle costs for Turkey."

The deal, which slated jet delivery for 2030, would serve as a stopgap measure to retire Turkey's aging F-4 fleet as Ankara seeks to produce a Turkish fighter jet. Originally, Turkey was slated to purchase around 100 of Lockheed's most advanced jet, the F-35, but Washington blocked the deal in response to Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system. Turkey has refused to abandon the S-400 but signaled willingness to negotiate with Washington on ways to lift the F-35 embargo. [Bloomberg]

(ts/gc)

Armenia and Iran reject report on USD 500 million arms deal

Armenia and Iran have firmly rejected a report of London-headquartered new television channel *Iran International* claiming they had concluded contracts for the delivery of Iranian weapons worth USD 500 million, and that the deals are part of a broader agreement on intelligence cooperation, military relations and training, as well as on developing bases on Armenian soil." [Iran International]

While the Armenian defense ministry dismissed the report as containing "fictitious, fabricated content," Iranian ambassador in Yerevan Mehdi Sobhani accused the media outlet of spreading "untrue information and one-sided analyses about Iran."

Iran International is believed to maintain links to the government of Tehran's regional rival Saudi Arabia. Iranian authorities described the channel as a terrorist organization, accusing it of inciting antigovernment riots.

Iran has repeatedly issued warnings against efforts to sever its border and transport links with Armenia in response to Azerbaijan's demands for an extraterritorial corridor to its Nakhichevan exclave through Syunik, the only Armenian region bordering Iran. Sobhani emphasized that this issue is a "red line" for Tehran.

At the same time Iranian leaders have also voiced concern over Armenia's shift towards the West amid worsening relations with Russia, its traditional ally. During a March meeting with Armenian Defense Minister Papikyan, former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the importance of keeping "outsiders" out of regional affairs.

Despite this, Yerevan has continued to strengthen military ties with the United States and other Western powers, hosting a joint U.S.-Armenian military exercise in July 15-24 (see article below). [Asbarez]

(nl)

Belarus, China conduct joint military exercise

China and Belarus recently concluded the 11-day joint "Eagle Assault 2024" exercise, that was held from July

9-19. Notably, the joint drills were conducted at the Brestski training ground in Belarus, less than two miles from the Polish and by extension NATO border and only 17 miles from Ukraine at a potentially decisive period of the Ukraine war.

It came shortly after Belarus acceded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the organization's summit in Astana, Kazakhstan (see article in this edition), which underscored that the SCO member states pursue an alternative vision to the Western concept of the international liberal order as it emerged after the end of the cold War and – at least in the self-perception of the member states – a growing significance of the SCO as a non-Western counterweight to Western influence in the world system. The exercise also came just before the start of the NATO summit (July 9-11) in Washington, with support for Ukraine being a key agenda item.

The joint counter-terrorism exercises involved troops from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) 80th Group Army. These drills included mixed-team training, hostage rescue operations, and counter-terrorism missions. In addition, a live-fire session simulated the seizure of an airport under terrorist control. Chinese and Belarusian troops used drones for reconnaissance, then parachuted into designated areas from helicopters to capture the airport. The exercises also involved PLA attack helicopters and ground assault vehicles. [Halldale] [Global Times]

(hs/dql)

North Korea promises to deepen ties with Belarus

On July 24, North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui hosted a banquet for his visiting Belarusian counterpart Maxim Vladimirovich Ryzhenkov, pledging to comprehensively expand their bilateral relations. The banguet was part of Ryzhenkov's three-day visit to North Korea.

Choe and Ryzhenkov agreed on the next steps to further develop the legal framework and intensify cooperation between their ministries, as well as in multiple areas, such as healthcare, education, agriculture and sport. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belarus]

Ryzhenkov, further, highlighted that both Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un are keen on strengthening their

countries' relations based on mutual trust, respect, and understanding.

While North Korean state media did not provide details about a bilateral meeting between the diplomats, experts believe that Ryzhenkov's visit was likely focused on fostering trilateral cooperation between Belarus, Russia and North Korea.

The three countries are Western sanctions: North Korea because of its advancing nuclear program, Russia due to its invasion of Ukraine, and Belarus for supporting Russia's invasion and its widely criticized 2020 election along with human rights abuses. [Yonhap News Agency] [AP News]

(dql/jf)

Belarus-Saudi meeting on trade

On August 5, Belarusian Ambassador to Russia, Aleksandr Rogozhnik, met with Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Russia and concurrently to Belarus, Abdulrahman Bin Suleiman Al Ahmed, in Moscow to discuss economic cooperation.

Key issues on the bilateral agenda were addressed, particularly in politics, trade, and economy. The necessity of developing a robust legal framework and planning upcoming contracts was highlighted. Following the agreements from the third Belarusian-Saudi intergovernmental committee meeting in May 2024, specific steps to boost trade and economic cooperation, such as signing bilateral framework documents, were proposed. Machine building, agriculture, and industrial cooperation were pinpointed as promising areas. Al Ahmed underscored the importance of developing relations across various sectors, with an optimistic outlook on sustaining the current motion in bilateral relations. [BelTA]

The recent meeting reflects Russia's broader, strategy to pivot towards Eastern economic partnerships, aiming to solidify trade and investment ties amidst ongoing Western sanctions.

This shift is part of Russia's efforts to mitigate the impact of sanctions, and it is looking to strengthen its regional development and its economic resilience by deepening relations with powerful partners in Asia and the Middle East. [Euronews] [Russian Government]

(hs)

France and Indonesia strengthen defense ties with Rafale fighter jet trial flight

On July 25, Indonesian Vice Marshal Tedi Rizalhadi, Commander of the National Air Operations Command, conducted a trial flight on a Rafale fighter jet, highlighting the strengthening defense relations between Indonesia and France.

This event took place at Halim Perdanakusuma Air Force Base, East Jakarta, as part of the Pegase 2024 mission activities, which saw Indonesia as one of the Indo-Pacific countries visited. Prior to the 70-minute flight, Rizalhadi underwent a health test and safety briefing, with high-ranking Indonesian Air Force officials and Pegase mission commander Brigadier General Guillaume Thomas in attendance.

Indonesia has ordered 42 Rafale fighter jets from Dassault Aviation France, with contracts for the third phase of the purchase now effective. Brigadier General Edwin Adrian Sumantha, head of the public relations bureau of the Ministry of Defense, confirmed that the first Rafale aircraft is expected to arrive in early 2026. [Antara]

(si)

Thailand to send 900 berry pickers to Finland

Finland and Thailand have agreed on 900 Thai workers to be send to the Scandinavian country for berry picking after the Southeast Asian signalled willingness agreed to approve their visas.

This agreement was reached during virtual meeting between Thai Minister of Labour Pipat Ratchakitprakarn, and Finnish Minister of Employment Arto Satonen on July 26. The agreement ensures the safety, welfare, and benefits of the workers, with strict checks on visas and work permits.

So far this year, Thai authorities have refused to issue exit permits for the seasonal work over allegations of exploitation and mistreatment of foreign seasonal workers by Finnish berry firms. [shengen.news] [Thaiger]

The Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, too, had earlier halted Schengen visa applications for wild-berry pickers at the Finnish Embassy in Bangkok. This

suspension was part of efforts to address trafficking concerns and ensure fair labour practices. [Helsinki Times]

Future legislative changes may extend the Seasonal Workers Act to include wild-berry pickers, with expected implementation by the 2025 harvest season. The Finnish authorities ensured efficient processing times, with decisions being made within 20 to 35 days. [Daily Finland]

(dql/rs)

China rejects German accusations of conducting cyberattack

The Chinese embassy in Berlin has dismissed accusations from Germany regarding a 2021 cyberattack on a German government agency. In a statement released on August 1, the embassy labeled the allegations as "groundless" and accused Germany of "anti-China political manipulation." This comes after Germany accused China of cyber espionage targeting its federal cartography agency and summoned Beijing's ambassador to lodge a complaint. [Botschaft der Volksrepublik China in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in German]

Germany joins a growing list of countries, including the United States, Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and New Zealand, which have accused China of cyber-espionage activities. In response, China has consistently denied any involvement in such actions and maintains that it, too, has been a victim of cyberattacks.

The Chinese embassy's statement reiterated China's firm opposition to all forms of hacker attacks and emphasized that China does not permit any country or individual to engage in cyberattacks from within its territory or using its infrastructure. The embassy called on Germany to cease its "anti-China political manipulation and public opinion smears" under the guise of cybersecurity concerns.

The German Interior Ministry attributed the cyberattack to Chinese state actors based on intelligence services' information. Despite these claims, China continues to deny all such accusations and stresses its commitment to combating cyber threats. [AP] [Reuters]

(rl)

Germany to bar Chinese companies' components from core parts of its 5G networks starting 2026

Germany will ban critical components made by Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from the core of its 5G networks starting in 2026. Interior Minister Nancy Faeser announced that these components would be excluded from 5G core networks by the end of 2026, and from critical management systems in 5G access and transport networks by 2029.

The decision follows extensive risk assessments and negotiations with major telecom operators, including Deutsche Telekom, Vodafone, and Telefonica. Faeser emphasized the importance of protecting Germany's communication infrastructure from espionage and sabotage, stating that the move aims to safeguard the nation's security and reduce dependency on single suppliers.

Huawei responded, asserting that there is no specific evidence of cybersecurity risks associated with its technology and that it will continue to promote cybersecurity improvements and digitalization in Germany.

This move aligns Germany with other Western nations like the United States, Britain, and Sweden, which have already restricted or banned Huawei from their 5G networks. These countries have cited fears that Beijing could use the technology for espionage or to disrupt critical communications infrastructure, accusations that Huawei has consistently denied.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government has outlined a strategy that acknowledges a "systemic rivalry" with China, emphasizing the need to reduce economic dependencies while maintaining trade relations and cooperation on global issues like climate change. [AP] [Reuters]

(rl)

Japan, Germany to bolster security cooperation in Indo-Pacific

In a strategic move to counter increasing military assertiveness from China, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have agreed to enhance security cooperation in the

Indo-Pacific region. The leaders met in Berlin on July 13 and confirmed plans to create an economic security framework addressing concerns over China's subsidized overproduction of electric vehicles and other key products.

The new framework seeks to deepen policy coordination on a range of issues, ranging from protecting emerging technologies, strengthening supply chains for key goods such as hydrogen, critical minerals and semiconductors, to promoting cooperation in fields such as artificial intelligence, cyber and next-generation information and communications infrastructure.

Kishida emphasized the importance of this cooperation, citing challenges to security environment in the Indo-Pacific region posed by China and North Korea.

In addition to security cooperation, the two leaders also agreed to hold high-level intergovernmental talks in Germany next year to address a wide range of global and regional issues. Scholz highlighted the commonalities between the two nations despite the geographical distance and announced that defense and foreign ministers from both countries would hold 'two-plus-two' security talks in Japan soon.

This meeting followed Kishida's attendance at the NATO summit in Washington. During discussions with Scholz, Kishida expressed "grave concern" over North Korea's deepening military cooperation with Russia, which Scholz labeled as a "clear violation of UN sanctions." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan]

As part of their strengthened defense collaboration, Japan and Germany's acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA), signed in January (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5), came into effect of July 12, simplifying the sharing of food, fuel, and ammunition between Japan's Self-Defense Forces and the German military. A German frigate is scheduled to visit Japan this summer, while a Maritime Self-Defense Force training squadron plans a stop in Hamburg.

Interior Minister Nancy Faeser recently announced Germany's decision to bar the use of critical components made by Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in its 5G networks, highlighting Germany's cautious approach to Chinese technological influence. [Euronews] [The Japan Times]

(rl)

Germany and Japan hold first joint fighter exercise

From July 22 to 25, the German Air Force engaged in the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) exercise Nippon Skies, showcasing three Eurofighters and one A400M aircraft. This exercise, part of the 2024 Pacific Skies deployment, highlights the growing defense cooperation between Japan and Germany, focusing on enhancing interoperability and mutual understanding.

The drills, conducted around Chitose Air Base in Hokkaido, involved combined refueling operations and formation flights with Japanese F-15s. They also included tactical exchanges related to the F-35 fighter jet, emphasizing the deepening military ties between the two nations.

These exercises follow Germany's participation in Arctic Defender in Alaska, demonstrating a strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific region. [Allied Air Command] [South China Morning Post]

Earlier this month, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed during a bilateral meeting in to enhance security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, confirming plans to create an economic security framework addressing concerns over China's subsidized overproduction of electric vehicles and other key products.

The new framework seeks to deepen policy coordination on a range of issues, ranging from protecting emerging technologies, strengthening supply chains for key goods such as hydrogen, critical minerals and semiconductors, to promoting cooperation in fields such as artificial intelligence, cyber and next-generation information and communications infrastructure. In addition to security cooperation, the two leaders also agreed to hold high-level intergovernmental talks in Germany next year to address a wide range of global and regional issues. Scholz highlighted the commonalities between the two nations despite the geographical distance and announced that defense and foreign ministers from both countries would hold 'two-plus-two' security talks in Japan soon (see AiR No. 29, July/2024, 3).

(rl)

Germany to join United Nations Command to monitor inter-Korean border

On August 2, Germany officially became the 18th member of the United Nations Command (UNC) in South Korea. The UNC primarily mediate affairs in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between South and North Korea.

Boris Pistorius, German defense minister, vowed to help protect South Korea's border and highlighted the interconnectivity between European security and Indo-Pacific security in his speech during the accession ceremony. [Deutsche Welle]

(ac)

Germany and the Philippines commit to defense deal by year's end

Germany and the Philippines have agreed to finalize a broader defense cooperation arrangement by the of this year to support the international rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

During discussions in Manila, visiting German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius and Philippine Defense Minister Gilberto Teodoro agreed to collaborate on military training and weapons procurement. This partnership aims to support a rules-based order, secure freedom of navigation, and protect trade routes amid escalating tensions in the South China Sea.

Teodoro emphasized that the Philippines, aiming to modernize its military, views Germany as a potential supplier of advanced military capabilities in areas such as command and control, anti-access aerial denial, and maritime and aerial domains.

Pistorius, in turn, reiterated Germany's support for the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which invalidated China's claims over most of the South China Sea and emphasized the importance of strengthening maritime borders. He also stated that Berlin's commitments in the region are focused on maintaining stability and are not directed against any specific nation. [Bangkok Post] [Philippine News Agency]

Germany recently joined the US-led United Nations Command in South Korea, becoming the 18th nation in a group committed to defending South Korea in the event of war. This visit to Manila by a German defense minister marks the first as the two countries celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations. [Deutsche Welle]

(rr)

Italian government to offer defunct Stellantis brands to Chinese automakers

Italy's government is contemplating a strategic move to transfer defunct automobile brands owned by Stellantis to Chinese manufacturers. This proposal is part of an initiative to encourage foreign investment in the country's automotive sector by attracting Chinese automakers to establish manufacturing operations in Italy. [Sole] [Reuters]

The brands in question, Innocenti and Autobianchi, ceased operations in the 1990s. Innocenti, known for producing an Italian version of the British Mini during the 1960s and 1970s, was acquired by Fiat, now a part of the Stellantis conglomerate. Autobianchi, a former subsidiary of Fiat, was renowned for its production of upscale city cars like the A112 and Y10. [Corriere]

According to the report, Italy's Industry Minister has already registered versions of these brands at the national patents and brands office, employing different graphics from those registered by Stellantis. The ministry is exploring the feasibility of this transfer under a law enacted in December, which allows the government to take control of unused brands for at least five years. The plan involves offering these brands to companies, including foreign entities, willing to invest in Italy or relocate manufacturing activities to the country.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's nationalist administration has frequently clashed with Stellantis, accusing the automaker of neglecting its historical production sites in Italy. While ongoing discussions with Stellantis aim to increase Italian production to one million vehicles per year, the government is also seeking to diversify and expand the domestic automotive industry by attracting new international players. [Voce]

(vm/pk)

Italy to offer defunct Stellantis brands to Chinese automakers

Italy's government is reportedly considering taking over defunct auto brands owned by Stellantis and offering them to Chinese companies to encourage them to establish factories in Italy.

The brands in question are Innocenti and Autobianchi, both shut down in the 1990s. The plan, which involves the appropriation of these brands under a new law, aims to attract foreign investment and boost Italy's automotive industry. Innocenti was known for producing the Italian version of the British Mini in the 1960s and 1970s, while Autobianchi produced upmarket city cars. [Asia Business Outlook]

The move is seen as part of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's strategy to revive Italy's industrial base and reduce dependency on Stellantis, which has been criticized for neglecting its historic production sites in Italy.

The industry ministry has registered versions of the two brands at the national patents and brands office, differentiating them from those registered by Stellantis. Although the ministry has not commented, Stellantis said it has not been informed of the government's plans.

The government aims to boost Italian vehicle production to 1 million units per year and attract a Chinese automaker to Italy. This initiative follows ongoing discussions with Stellantis and the unveiling of the Serbian-made Panda model at Fiat's historic Turin headquarters, marking Fiat's 125th anniversary.

Industry Minister Adolfo Urso, who attended the event, urged Stellantis to reinvigorate its manufacturing activities in Italy. [Reuters]

(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, traveling 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)

Montenegro to extradite cryptocurrency fraudster to South Korea

Do Kwon, co-founder of Terraform Labs and a fugitive, is set to be extradited from Montenegro to South Korea, following a ruling by the Balkan nation's appellate court on August 1. This decision upholds an earlier ruling by the High Court of Podgorica, which favored South Korea over the U.S., both of which seek Kwon's extradition on charges related to the USD 40 billion collapse of the Terra/LUNA ecosystem in May 2022. The collapse was part of a series of major crypto failures, including FTX.

Kwon, who went on the run after Terra's downfall, was arrested in Montenegro in March 2023 for using a fake Costa Rican passport. Initially sentenced to four months for falsified documents, he remained in prison until March of this year when he was released on bail, with his real passport confiscated.

The August 1 ruling aims to resolve the prolonged debate over whether Kwon should be extradited to South Korea or the U.S. Kwon previously resisted extradition to the U.S., leading to various court decisions and delays.

The final decision on his extradition rests with Montenegro's Minister of Justice. Montenegro's Prime Minister, Milojko Spajic, has been reported as a personal investor in Terraform Labs.

No date for Kwon's extradition has been set yet. [CoinDesk]

(dql)

Norwegian foreign minister meets Chinese counterpart

On July 26, Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide held a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Laos.

Highlighting the significant increase in bilateral trade, Wang affirmed China's willingness to deepen political mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation with Norway, inviting Norwegian companies to explore the Chinese market and participate in green transformation efforts.

Eide, for his part, also confirmed Norway's readiness to strengthen communication for upcoming high-level exchanges, while reiterating Norway's adherence to the one-China policy, opposition to tariffs on electric vehicles, and commitment to cooperating on climate change, according to Chinese state media.

Wang also discussed China's stance on the Ukraine crisis and the Palestinian issue, with Eide noting Norway's support for Palestinian statehood and appreciation for China's efforts in promoting Palestinian reconciliation [CGTN]

(dql)

Norwegian citizen arrested on suspicion of espionage for China

On July 1, Norway's domestic security agency, Police Security Service (PST), arrested a Norwegian citizen on suspicion of attempting to spy for China.

This incident occurs within the context of PST's annual threat assessment, which highlighted China as a significant intelligence threat in 2024. The assessment cites the following key factors: the deteriorating relationship between China and the West, China's ambitions over supply chains, and its positioning in the Arctic. [PST]

This arrest follows other recent espionage cases in Norway, including the 2022 arrest of an academic suspected of spying for Russia.

Norwegian-Chinese relations have been strained in the past, notably after the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, leading to a freeze in bilateral relations. Diplomatic ties were restored in 2017. [AP News]

(jm)

Norwegian government blocks sale of private land on Svalbard archipelago amid Chinese purchase interest

The Norwegian government has halted the sale of the last privately owned land on the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard to prevent its acquisition by China, citing concerns that the sale could compromise national security and stability in the region, as foreign ownership might challenge Norwegian legislation. Trade and Industry Minister Cecilie Myrseth emphasized that any sale would require state approval.

The property, Sore Fagerfjord, covering 60 square miles of mountains, plains, and glacier, was listed for EUR 300 million.

Situated between mainland Norway and the North Pole, Svalbard is strategically significant as Arctic ice melts and geopolitical tensions rise, particularly between Russia and the West. The 1920 Svalbard Treaty grants signatory countries, including Russia (since 1935) and China (since 1925), rights to exploit its mineral resources, despite Norwegian sovereignty.

Lawyer Per Kyllingstad, representing the sellers, noted interest from Chinese buyers, but critics argue the property's value is limited due to its remote location and protected status, which restricts construction and transport. In 2016, Norway bought a nearby private land parcel for EUR 33.5 million, also near Longyearbyen.

(dql)

Iranian authorities arrest Norwegian-Iranian citizen

On July 2, Iranian security forces arrested Hadi Zaheri, a dual Iranian-Norwegian citizen and professional bodybuilder, in Sardasht, West Azerbaijan province during a family visit. Zaheri, originally from Sardasht and living in Norway for 17 years, is a bodybuilding coach and competitor with international accolades.

According to Oslo-based NGO Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, he was summoned to the Sardasht Intelligence Office for questioning on the day of his

arrest. Following several hours of interrogation, security forces raided his family's home, took him into custody, and transferred him to an undisclosed location. Intelligence agents also confiscated the passports of Zaheri, his wife, and their two children, complicating their ability to leave the country. [Hengaw]

The reasons for Zaheri's arrest and any potential charges against him remain unknown. [Iran Wire]

(dql)

Poland utilizes China's European rail link to counter Belarus

Polish President Andrzej Duda has threatened to close the Malaszewicze rail border crossing with Belarus, a crucial route for China's overland exports to Europe. This move aims to pressure China into stopping Belarus' orchestrated migrant flows into Poland.

During his late June visit, Duda linked migration issues with freight transit, threatening to cut off the key export route. Since then, migrant flows from Belarus into Poland have reportedly decreased by 70%. Belarusian dictator Lukashenka has been using migrants to create unrest in Poland and the EU.

Due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Belarus route has become essential for Chinese goods to reach Europe. After his trip to China on July 2, Duda announced a 33-hour closure of the Malaszewicze crossing, which Poland's foreign minister suggests may have contributed to the reduction in migrant flows. [Bloomberg] [RailFreight.com]

In July, China and Poland inaugurated the first regular rail connection between the two nations, aiming to bolster trade under China's Belt and Road Initiative. [Euro News]

(dql)

Polish forces attend South Korean K9 howitzer training program

Polish troops – alongside Australian and Egyptian counterparts – participated in a South Korea-initiated education program on the K9 self-propelled howitzer.

The three-week program, which was conducted in July, aimed to enhance the countries' operational understanding of South Korean weapons systems. A total of 14 personnel from the three countries took part in the program, receiving training on the K9's operation and maintenance at the Army's Artillery School in Jangseong, located 250 kilometers south of Seoul and engaging in combined live-fire drills with South Korean personnel. [Yonhap News Agency]

In July 2022, Poland signed a framework agreement to purchase 672 South Korean K9 howitzers. This was followed by a second deal concluded in December last year for an additional 150 K9 howitzers. [Reuters]

(dql)

Russia, China Arctic activities

Russia and China on July 26 refuted U.S. warnings regarding their escalating military and economic activities in the Arctic, where climate change is intensifying competition.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks highlighted the increasing collaboration between Russia and China in the Arctic, noting China's substantial investment in Russian energy projects and their joint military exercises near Alaska.

This comes as the Pentagon unveiled its 2024 Arctic strategy, which underscores the strategic importance of the region amid rising temperatures and diminishing ice coverage. The U.S. strategy acknowledges the increased risks of accidents and environmental damage as human activity in the Arctic grows, emphasizing the need for U.S. forces to be prepared for potential contingencies.

Both Russia and China defended their Arctic policies. Beijing emphasized its commitment to peace and stability, while Moscow stressed that their cooperation promotes predictability and is not aimed at other nations.

The melting polar ice is driving nations to explore the region's valuable resources and new shipping routes. Canada's defence ministry recently announced plans to significantly expand its submarine fleet to bolster its Arctic presence. [CBS News]

(hs)

Russian-Chinese energy cooperation meeting held

On July 23, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak and China's Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang chaired the 21st Russian-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Energy Cooperation in Moscow. They discussed collaboration in oil, gas, coal, nuclear, and renewable energy, emphasizing strategic relations.

Both sides signed a protocol to enhance energy cooperation and investment. [Russian Government]

(hs)

Russia, China conduct joint naval exercise in Gulf of Finland

On July 30, Chinese warship Jiaozuo, a Type 052D guided-missile destroyer joined the Russian corvette Soobrazitelny in anti-mine and search and rescue operations in the Gulf of Finland.

The Gulf of Finland, separating NATO members Finland and Estonia, is accessible from St. Petersburg. Finland, sharing a 1,330km border with Russia, joined NATO last year following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. NATO has been closely monitoring China's military cooperation with Russia, including recent joint naval patrols near South Korea's Jeju Island and exercises near Zhanjiang, China.

This comes shortly after Chinese troops also participated in an anti-terrorist exercise with Belarus, a key Russian ally, near the Polish border and close to Ukraine. This drill occurred shortly after Belarus accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and NATO's Washington Summit Declaration, which expressed concern over China's deepening partnership with Russia and its support for Russia's defense industry. [South China Morning Post]

(dql)

China and Russia conduct live-fire naval exercises in South China sea

China and Russia last week conducted live-fire naval exercises in the South China Sea, reinforcing their military cooperation amid rising tensions with the United States. The three-day drills, involving at least

three vessels from each country, included joint air defense and anti-submarine exercises.

The exercises, which took place over three days, involved at least three vessels from each country and included joint air defense drills and anti-submarine maneuvers. Wang Guangzheng of the PLA Navy's Southern Theatre Command stated that these exercises enhance the ability of both nations to respond to maritime security threats. The participating vessels set off from Zhanjiang in Guangdong province, though the exact locations of the drills within the contested South China Sea were not specified.

This move follows US arms sales to Taiwan in June (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4), prompting China to suspend nuclear arms talks with the US.

The exercises emphasize the deepening military and trade ties between China and Russia, particularly after US sanctions. Concurrently, the US and Philippine coast guards held joint training in the same region. [Reuters] [USNI News]

(rl)

Swiss and Mongolian presidents strengthen bilateral relations

Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa welcomed Swiss President Viola Amherd for a state visit from August 2-4.

The leaders held a meeting at the State Palace in Ulaanbaatar, expressing mutual satisfaction with the expanding friendly relations between their countries. They highlighted the democratic values underpinning their cooperation in politics, trade, economy, investment, culture, education, and humanitarian efforts.

Khurelsukh acknowledged Switzerland’s support for Mongolia’s democratic transition and development. The meeting also focused on enhancing cooperation in addressing global challenges like climate change, desertification, and environmental degradation. [Mongolian News Agency]

(to)

Switzerland, Laos conclude air services agreement

On July 26, Laos and Switzerland signed a new bilateral agreement on scheduled air services, replacing the outdated 1999 accord.

This new agreement enhances operational flexibility for airlines, allowing unlimited airline designations and code-share flights, thereby increasing flight frequency and variety. Designated airlines can now operate direct flights without frequency limitations, streamlining travel and fostering closer economic ties between the two nations. [Laotian Times]

(dql)

Ukrainian foreign minister visits China

Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, visited China on July 23 and met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Guangzhou on July 24. One of the purposes of this visit, according to Kuleba, was to "seek common ground". [AP News]

The meeting between Wang and Kuleba lasted for more than 3 hours, which was later described by the Ukrainian diplomat as "deep and concentrated". This is the first time for Ukrainian Foreign Minister to visit China after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The relations between the two countries had thus grown tense because of Beijing's warm ties with Moscow. [AP News]

According to China's foreign ministry, both sides agreed to enhance cooperation in various fields, including ensuring global food security, with Wang saying China will continue to increase food imports from Ukraine. China is currently Ukraine's largest trading partner and the largest exporter of Ukraine's agricultural products. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China]

On Russia, Kuleba reinforced during his visit Ukraine's two principles before engaging in any peace talk with Russia. One is for Moscow to show respect to the integrity of Ukrainian territory and sovereignty, and the second is that no agreement about Ukraine should be made without Ukrainian participation. According to Kuleba, Ukraine can negotiate whenever Russia is ready to do it in good faith. [Reuters 1]

China has long positioned itself as a neutral peace maker, while keeping a close relationship politically

and economically with Russia. The country's stance was criticized this month at the NATO summit. A "decisive enabler" was what the military alliance chose to describe China in this war.

Facing NATO's criticism, China urged the alliance to "reflect on the root cause" of the war, and "stop shifting blame." The statement reflected the country's usual attitude to Russia's opposition to NATO, which is also corresponding to Wang's statement in this meeting. One of the four principles he mentioned said "the legitimate security concerns of any party should be taken seriously." [Reuters 2]

(ycl/jg)

Indian Prime Minister Modi's Vienna visit highlights Ukraine conflict and bilateral cooperation

During his first visit to Vienna in 41 years on July 9-10, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the need for dialogue and diplomacy to resolve the Ukraine crisis. Modi's discussions with Austrian Chancellor Nehammer focused on the importance of peace over battlefield solutions and touched on global conflicts, including the conflict in the Middle East.

The leaders underscored the need for a peaceful resolution and the role of dialogue in achieving stability. Modi also highlighted the expansion of bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, green energy, and technology.

The visit aimed to strengthen ties between India and Austria as the leaders underscored the need for a peaceful resolution and the role of dialogue in achieving stability.

Modi also highlighted the expansion of bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, green energy, and technology. [The Wire] [Hindustan Times]

(nm)

Turkish President Erdogan and Indonesian President-elect Subianto discuss strengthening bilateral ties

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Indonesia's President-elect and Defense Minister

Prabowo Subianto on July 30 at the Presidential Complex, focusing on strengthening bilateral ties and addressing key regional issues. [Anadolu Ajansı]

During the meeting, the leaders discussed ways to strengthen cooperation between Turkey and Indonesia, highlighting the deep historical and cultural ties that bind the two nations. President Erdogan emphasized the potential for growth in several sectors, including defense, the economy, and energy. [TRT World]

The discussions also addressed the need for closer collaboration on international platforms such as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the G20, and MIKTA. Erdogan emphasized the importance of a unified stance and joint initiatives in these global arenas to address shared challenges. [TRT World]

(ab)

United Kingdom, India launch technology security initiative to boost economic growth

The United Kingdom and India have introduced a new technology security initiative aimed at enhancing economic growth and deepening bilateral cooperation. The initiative focuses on collaboration in essential technologies such as critical minerals, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and telecommunications. It also aims to strengthen ties in climate change, trade, technology, and education.

The announcement was made during British Foreign Secretary David Lammy's inaugural visit to India. During discussions with his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar, the duo also agreed to enhance defense and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and discussed global issues, including the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Lammy's visit was part of the new British Labour Party government's strategy to reset relations with Europe and the Global South. London aims to "reset and relaunch" UK-India relations, particularly by restarting formal talks on a free trade agreement, which began in 2022 but have not yet reached a breakthrough. The goal of the trade deal is to double the two countries' trade from the 2022 level of USD 50 billion by 2030. Although previous rounds of negotiations were suspended due to elections in both countries, there is

optimism for progress under the new initiative. [AP News] [The Hindu]

(wh)

United Kingdom, Philippines seek to expand ties on maritime domain awareness

London and Manila are seeking to strengthen cooperation on maritime domain awareness (MDA), as discussed during the 2nd Philippine-UK Maritime Dialogue in London on July 5. Senior officials from both countries deliberated on enhancing collaboration in several maritime areas, including the safety of merchant shipping vessels and seafarers, cybersecurity challenges, strategic communications, crisis management, the law of the sea, marine environment, and ocean governance.

Key participants included DFA Assistant Secretary Marshall Louis Alferez and UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) officials. Both sides expressed commitment to implementing the dialogue's outcomes and agreed action points. Additionally, the Philippine delegation visited the UK's Joint Maritime Security Centre and Maritime Trade Operation Information Centre in Portsmouth.

The Philippine-UK Maritime Dialogue serves as a bilateral platform for exchanging views on maritime and ocean-related matters and expanding maritime cooperation. The inaugural dialogue was held in Manila in February 2023. [Philippine News Agency]

(lm)

UK and Laos deepen climate cooperation

On July 26, Laos and the United Kingdom signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Green Economy Framework. The signing took place during a bilateral meeting at the National Convention Centre in Vientiane, coinciding with the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

The MoU was signed by Laos' Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saleumxay Kommasith, and the UK's Secretary of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Rt Hon David Lammy MP.

Under the agreement, both nations agree to promote the reduction of carbon emissions in economic activities to achieve cleaner, more sustainable industrial practices and advance environmental protection; to incorporate climate risk assessments into policy and planning to enhance resilience against climate change; to empower communities to adapt to and withstand the impacts of climate change; to reduce dependency on fossil fuels and promote renewable energy sources; and to upholding open, connected, and rules-based markets within the green economy. [The Star]

(dql)

France backs Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara

France has shifted its long-standing position to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, backing Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan as the sole solution to the territorial dispute. President Emmanuel Macron conveyed this stance in a letter to King Mohammed VI, marking a significant departure from France's historical neutrality. This move aligns France with the United States, Israel, Spain, and several African nations that support Morocco's claim.

The Western Sahara conflict dates back to 1975 when Morocco annexed the region following Spain's decolonization. The annexation led to a conflict with the Polisario Front, supported by Algeria, which seeks independence for the region. The United Nation has recognized the Polisario as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people, but efforts to hold a referendum on the territory's status have stalled over voter eligibility and the conduct of the referendum.

France's new position is seen as a "game-changer" due to its influence as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which oversees the peacekeeping mission in the region. In response, Algeria condemned France and Morocco as "colonial powers" and accused France of making a morally and legally dubious decision. Algeria also announced it would withdraw its ambassador to France. [Reuters] [France24]

(lm)

MoU on political consultations between Norway and Uganda signed

Norway has entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Political Consultations with Uganda. The agreement was signed on July 23 by Kristin Hermansen, Ambassador of Norway to Uganda, and Ugandan Foreign Minister Gen. Abubakhar Jeje Odongo.

The move comes as Norway has closed its embassy in Kampala this month, following a decision on October last year. [APA News]

In a meeting with Jeje Odongo prior to the signing of the MoU, Hermansen reaffirmed her country's continued commitment to maintaining and growing its relationship with Uganda despite the embassy closure. [The Independent]

(dql)

Serbia concludes free trade agreement with Egypt

Serbia has signed a free trade agreement with Egypt during President Aleksandar Vucic's visit to Cairo. The agreement aims to enhance economic and commercial ties between the two countries. [Ansa]

(lm)

Turkish general meets Libyan prime minister to discuss military cooperation and training programmes

Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Army Metin Gürak visited Tripoli on July 15. This is his first official visit to Libya after he took the position in August 2023. Gürak brought not only a delegation but also Turkish president Recap Tayyip Erdogan's message to the Libyan government. [Daily Sabah]

The president's message was said to emphasize the historical relation between Libya and Turkey, which can be dated back to the Ottoman Empire. This bond between the two countries is constantly mentioned by Turkish authority when facing Tripoli. [Daily Sabah] [Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affair]

During the meeting of Gürak and Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, the issues of joint military exercises, cooperations and training programmes between the Turkish Defense Ministry and general staff and their Libyan counterparts were discussed. [Daily Sabah]

Together with Gürak, Türkiye's Ambassador to Libya also attend the meeting. Dbeibeh, on the other hand, was accompanied by Libyan Chief of General Staff Muhammad Ali Ahmad al-Haddad and Libya's Deputy Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Salah Al-Namroush. [Daily Sabah]

(ycl)

Türkiye and Somalia sign offshore energy deal

Türkiye and Somalia have signed an agreement for hydrocarbon exploration and production in the Somalian offshore. The agreement, celebrated in a signing ceremony in Istanbul on July 18, was attended by Turkey's Energy and Natural Resources Minister Alparslan Bayraktar and Somalian Petroleum and Mineral Resources Minister Abdirizak Omar Mohamed. [Hürriyet Daily News]

Under the terms of this agreement, Türkiye has secured exclusive rights to explore and produce hydrocarbons across three designated blocks, each spanning an area of 5,000 square kilometres. The Turkish minister detailed that two of these blocks are situated approximately 50 kilometres offshore, while the third lies about 100 kilometres from the coast. [Hürriyet Daily News]

Bayraktar announced plans to dispatch the research vessel Oruç Reis to the region by late September or early October. The vessel, which will be staffed by a 50-member crew and accompanied by five support vessels, is set to undertake a significant seismic survey, which will be pivotal in identifying potential drilling sites. This extensive research effort is expected to last several months, paving the way for possible future discoveries. [Daily Sabah]

Describing the accord as a "historic step" for both nations, the Turkish minister expressed optimism that the collaboration would not only bolster energy production but also strengthen the bilateral relationship. Mohamed, for his part, emphasized the mutual benefits of the agreement, highlighting the

potential for enhanced cooperation and economic growth once production begins. (Daily Sabah)

Earlier this year, Turkey and Somalia entered into an agreement focused on offshore oil and natural gas cooperation, building on their relationship following the signing of a defence agreement in March. (Hürriyet Daily News)

(ab)

Turkey and Niger sign major agreement to enhance bilateral cooperation

Turkey and Niger have reached an agreement to strengthen cooperation across key sectors, including energy, mining, intelligence, and defence. This move comes as Niger has requested the withdrawal of Western military personnel and terminated mining contracts with several Western companies. [Daily Sabah]

The new accord highlights a significant shift in Niger's strategic partnerships, aiming to replace Western influences with closer ties to Turkey. This collaboration is set to expand Turkey's involvement in Niger's economic and security landscape, reflecting a broader realignment in the region's international relations. [Reuters]

Niger, known for having Africa's highest-grade uranium ores, is also the world's seventh-largest producer of uranium. This partnership reflects a strategic move to leverage Turkey's expertise in energy development and to strengthen Niger's significant mineral resources. [Reuters]

Turkey has long had a strong relationship with Niger and seeks to build on agreements reached during a visit earlier this year by Niger's Prime Minister Ali Mahamane Lamine Zeine to Ankara. Turkish investments in Niger cover various sectors, including energy, services, and construction.

Türkiye also played a significant role in health care through the Turkey-Niger Friendship Hospital, which has been operational since 2019 and expanded in 2021. The Turkish Maarif Foundation runs 13 schools and dormitories in Niger. [Daily Sabah]

(ab)

Turkish ship delivers vital aid to Sudan

A Turkish ship carrying more than 2,400 tons of humanitarian aid has arrived in Sudan, providing essential support to the conflict-affected country. The shipment, organized by Türkiye's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), was handed over to Sudanese authorities in a ceremony on Monday. [Anadolu Ajansı]

The aid consignment includes a diverse range of supplies: 1,986 tons of food, 160 tons of medicine and medical equipment, 128 tons of clothing, 90 tons of hygiene products, and 44 tons of blankets and shelter materials. These resources are intended to address urgent needs in Sudan, which is currently grappling with severe challenges. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Sudan is enduring the world's most severe hunger and displacement crisis, stemming from 15 months of armed conflict between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). [TRT Afrika]

The official handover ceremony saw participation from Turkish embassy officials in Khartoum, alongside key figures from the Sudanese government and humanitarian sector, including representatives from the Sudanese Red Crescent, the acting foreign minister, acting health minister, acting social development minister, and the acting commissioner of the Sudan National Aid Commission. [Anadolu Ajansı]

(ab)

Turkey’s TİKA and Libya's foreign ministry reach new development cooperation agreement

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Libyan Foreign Ministry have signed a significant memorandum of understanding (MoU) to strengthen development cooperation between the two nations. [TRT World]

The Libyan Deputy Foreign Minister noted that this agreement represents a pivotal moment in the collaborative efforts between the two nations, creating opportunities for TIKA to launch and implement various projects throughout Libya. The President of TIKA emphasized the agency's ongoing dedication to supporting the Libyan population since the early 2010s. The new agreement, he explained, establishes a

formal framework that will guide TIKA's current and future initiatives in the country. [TRT World]

(ab)

European Parliament re-elects Ursula von der Leyen as Commission President

Ursula von der Leyen has secured a second term as the President of the European Commission following successful negotiations with various parliamentary groups. She won the secret ballot with 401 votes, surpassing the required 360 majority. This makes her the first president to be elected twice by the European Parliament since 2014.

The coalition that backed her includes the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the center-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D), and the centrist liberals of Renew, supported by the Greens. However, the coalition faced debates on whether to incorporate far-right parties, which gained significant seats in recent elections. Eventually, von der Leyen maintained an open dialogue with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) to secure additional support.

Von der Leyen's re-election was part of broader negotiations that also saw the selection of new EU leaders, including Antonio Costa of Portugal as European Council President and Kaja Kallas of Estonia as the EU's top diplomat, pending parliamentary approval. [Voice of America]

Some observers argue that Von der Leyen's re-election signals a shift towards more business-friendly and conservative policies. Her programmatic speech emphasized protecting the "European way of life," focusing on economic nationalism, conservative values, and external security threats, including migration and defense. Additionally, she proposed a European Democracy Shield to counter foreign information manipulation and a new commissioner for the Mediterranean region to oversee migration control partnerships. [Al Jazeera]

(lm)

European leaders urge against regional war in Middle East

European capitals are attempting to prevent a regional war in the Middle East after a rocket attack killed 12

young people playing football in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on July 27.

Israel said the heavily armed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah is responsible for the strike, accusing the Tehran-backed organization of using an Iranian-made rocket for the strike. The United States and Germany have also put the blame on Hezbollah, which has forcefully denied any involvement. [BBC]

European officials in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom have reached out to counterparts in Lebanon, Israel and Iran to convince them to show restraint.

Paris and Rome in particular are concerned over the hundreds of troops they have stationed in a United Nations peacekeeping mission in the South of Lebanon, where Israel and Hezbollah have frequently exchanged fire in the past month. Italy's Foreign and Defence ministers have repeatedly called for those contingents to be protected. [Politico]

Speaking from an official visit in Beijing, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said she was "very, very worried" about the risk of regional escalation and called on Israel to not fall into the "trap" of retaliation.

She added that the international community should continue sending messages of moderation and that China could help in these efforts given its "solid ties" with Iran and Saudi Arabia. [Times of Israel]

After speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Benjmain Netanyahu, French president Emmanuel Macron called his newly elected Iranian counterpart Massoud Pezeshkian on July 29, urging Tehran to call for restraint in the region.

"Any possible Israeli attack on Lebanon will have serious consequences for Israel," Pezeshkian said in the call, according to Iranian state media. [Reuters]

After visiting the site of the attack, Israel Prime Minister Netanyahu said Israel could not ignore the killing and would respond severely.

On July 30, the Israeli army said it had killed a senior Hezbollah commander in a Beirut airstrike, but members of the Shia militant group said he had survived. [Politico] [Al Jazeera] [BBC]

Amid the rising tensions, Berlin, Rome and London called on their citizens to leave Lebanon, and Paris and Washington asked their nationals to not enter the

country. Multiple European airlines have also cancelled flights to Beirut. [Reuters] [L'Orient le jour]

(qv)

European Union reprimands France, Italy, five other EU countries for breaking budget rules

The European Council has initiated formal actions against France, Italy, and five other EU countries for breaching the bloc's budget rules. This process, known as the "excessive deficit procedure," requires these countries to negotiate plans with Brussels to address their deficit levels, which have exceeded the allowed limit of 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

France's deficit stood at 5.5 percent in 2023, and Italy had the highest deficit at 7.4 percent. Hungary, Malta, Poland, and Slovakia were also included in this procedure due to their high deficits. Romania, which has been under scrutiny since 2020, failed to take effective action and will remain under watch.

The countries must submit medium-term plans by September, outlining how they intend to correct their deficits. The European Commission will then assess these plans in November, providing details on the required measures to achieve fiscal health.

This move marks the first time Brussels has taken such steps since suspending the rules during the coronavirus pandemic and the energy crisis caused by Russia's war on Ukraine. While the commission has the authority to impose fines on countries that do not comply, it has historically avoided doing so to prevent political and economic repercussions. [France24]

(lm)

Nearly every EU country blows major climate plan deadline

Nearly every European Union (EU) country missed the deadline to submit their National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs), jeopardizing the bloc's 2030 climate goals and its 2050 net neutrality ambition. Only the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden met the June 30 deadline, with Italy filing a day late. Most countries were already late submitting drafts last year, which revealed that the EU would not meet its 2030

target of reducing emissions by 55 percent compared to 1990 levels. The European Commission warned of legal action if countries fail to comply.

The NECPs are crucial for implementing EU climate legislation into national action. While some countries like Denmark and the Netherlands made significant updates, others like Sweden and Italy admitted they would fall short of targets. Many countries, including Austria, have yet to submit plans, with Austria facing an infringement procedure that could lead to court battles and fines. Climate activists urge the Commission to enforce compliance, emphasizing that the NECPs are essential for securing investments needed for the transition to climate neutrality. [POLITICO]

(lm)

French law criminalizing clients of sex workers upheld by European rights court

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) upheld a French law that criminalizes clients of sex workers, ruling that it does not violate the European Convention on Human Rights. The law, enacted in 2016, fines buyers of sex up to EUR 1,500, with higher penalties for repeat offenders. Despite its rare enforcement, it was celebrated by advocates aiming to eradicate prostitution.

A group of 261 sex workers, supported by around 20 associations, challenged the law, claiming it endangered their health and safety, pushing them into risky situations and increasing the likelihood of assault and sexually transmitted infections. After their appeal was rejected by French courts, they approached the ECHR in 2019, arguing that the law violated their right to a private life and sexual freedom under Article 8 of the Convention.

The ECHR acknowledged the difficulties and risks faced by sex workers but concluded that French authorities had balanced the competing interests fairly, finding no breach of Article 8. [EuroNews]

(lm)

Polish justice minister asks European Parliament to lift immunity of opposition politicians

Poland's Justice Minister and Prosecutor General Adam Bodnar has requested the European Parliament to lift the immunity of two opposition MEPs from the Law and Justice (PiS) party. The MEPs, former Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński and his deputy Maciej Wąsik, were previously found guilty of abusing their powers while leading Poland's Central Anticorruption Bureau (CBA). In December, they were sentenced to prison and banned from holding public office for five years but received a pardon from President Andrzej Duda.

Despite the ban, Kamiński and Wąsik continued their parliamentary activities and were later elected to the European Parliament, which granted them legal immunity. Bodnar's request to lift their immunity aims to proceed with criminal charges and potentially refer the indictment to court.

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola will refer the request to the parliament's legal affairs committee, which will make a recommendation. The final decision on lifting the immunity will be made by a simple majority vote in the European Parliament. The review of this request is expected to begin in September. [Notes from Poland]

(lm)

European Union snubs Hungary and Slovakia over Ukraine oil sanctions

The European Commission has declined Hungary and Slovakia's request to open formal talks with Ukraine over Kyiv's partial ban on the transit of Russian oil to Central Europe, imposed in June. The sanctions, targeting Moscow's largest private oil firm Lukoil, raised concerns about supply shortages in Budapest and Bratislava, prompting the two countries to allege a violation of a 2014 trade agreement. Despite these complaints, the Commission found no immediate threat to the countries' oil supply and requested further information before considering any legal action. The embargo on Russian oil imports was initially imposed by the EU following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with exemptions for pipeline supplies to Hungary and Slovakia.[Politico]

(lb)

European Commission opens stakeholder participation in drafting general-purpose AI code of practice

The European Commission has invited stakeholders to help draft a code of practice for general-purpose artificial intelligence (GPAI), as part of the AI Act compliance process, according to a press release on July 30. Concerns about the exclusion of civil society and academia have been addressed, ensuring diverse stakeholder involvement, although companies will still have significant influence. An open consultation for public feedback on the code will run until September 10. The Commission aims to finalize the code within nine months, with plenary meetings and working groups led by independent experts overseeing the drafting process. The AI Office will ensure transparency and the final code may gain EU-wide validity through an implementing act.[Euractiv]

(lb)

European Commission pushes for better enforcement tools for the Digital Services Act

The European Commission is enhancing enforcement tools for the Digital Services Act (DSA), focusing on protecting minors, regulating influencers, and addressing addictive design, as outlined in two documents released on July 29. DG CNECT has launched a €12 million tender for companies to develop monitoring tools, including an early warning system for digital threats and tools to assess online marketplace compliance and social media addiction risks. Additionally, a report by the European Board for Digital Services calls for the voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation to become a formal Code of Conduct under the DSA, potentially leading to stricter content moderation and platform audits. [Euractiv]

(lb)

European Commission's new measures for insurers may harm competitiveness, lobby group warns

Insurance Europe has warned that new measures set out by the European Commission for insurers risk undermining efforts to enhance Europe's

competitiveness and private funding capacity. The industry group is urging the Commission to relax capital requirements under the Solvency II framework, arguing that current and proposed rules could limit insurers' ability to support long-term investments crucial for the EU's growth and energy transition goals. Despite recent progress, the group contends that the upcoming Level 2 implementing standards may revert to overly conservative approaches, potentially stifling investment and reducing insurers' capital by €141 billion. They advocate for recalibrations that could significantly increase the industry's risk-bearing capacity and support the broader EU strategic agenda. [Euractiv]

(lb)

European Commission launches Ship Financing Portal to aid green transition in sea freight

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport has launched the Ship Financing Portal, an online platform designed to enhance access to financing for the shipping and maritime industry. The portal centralizes a range of pan-European financing products, offering up-to-date information on grants, loans, and other financial tools from the EU, Member States, and private institutions. Aimed at promoting fleet renewal, retrofitting, efficiency, and environmental sustainability, the portal supports the EU's green transition goals for the maritime sector. Maritime stakeholders, including SMEs and financial institutions, are encouraged to utilize the portal to leverage diverse financing opportunities, reinforcing the EU's commitment to a sustainable and competitive maritime industry. [The European Commission]

(lb)

The European Commission will temporarily enforce restrictions on liquid screening at certain EU airports

Starting 1 September 2024, the European Commission will temporarily enforce a restriction on liquid screening at EU airports using Explosive Detection Systems for Cabin Baggage (EDSCB), reverting the maximum allowed size for liquid containers to 100 ml. This change, not driven by new threats but due to a

technical issue, will align these airports with the existing regulations that limit liquids to 100 ml. Airports that already follow this limit or do not use EDSCB equipment remain unaffected. The Commission is working with Member States and the European Civil Aviation Conference to address the issue and maintain high safety and security standards. [The European Commission]

(lb)

Belgian judiciary and EU report warn of rule of law decline

Belgium's top judiciary officials and a new EU report have raised alarms about the decline of the rule of law in the country. Attorney General Ria Mortier of the Court of Cassation explained that “Insufficient funding and access to an independent judiciary hamper, weakens and undermines a pillar of the rule of law. Such a creeping, silent decline can be much more damaging in the long term than an open attack from outside.” Together with colleagues from the Constitutional Court and the Council of State, Mortier underscored the urgency of addressing these issues in a rare joint press conference, noting previous warnings to politicians went unheeded. [De Standaard]

Pierre Nihoul, president of the Constitutional Court, expressed frustration at the lack of engagement from political leaders. This disengagement coincides with the presumptive ruling N-VA party's critical stance toward the judiciary, raising concerns over their influence on judicial independence. [De Standaard]

Government disregard for judicial decisions, especially concerning asylum seekers and prison conditions, exacerbates the problem. Over 7,000 convictions in Belgium have been issued because asylum seekers were denied the right to humane reception. “That is worrying and simply unacceptable,” Wilfried Van Vaerenbergh of the Council of State believes. “These shortcomings are a serious violation of the rule of law.” [De Standaard]

Correspondingly, the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report published on 24 July identified critical threats to the rule of law in Belgium, including judiciary underfunding, high corruption risks in local government, and "serious concerns" over Belgium’s failure to comply with judgments from domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights. Despite some progress in judicial funding, the Commission noted a lack of data on court proceedings, impeding

efficiency assessments. The report urged Belgium to address structural deficiencies and improve efficiency, especially regarding lengthy proceedings. [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

British government wants new agri-food agreement with European Union

The UK government is seeking to negotiate a new, ambitious agri-food agreement with the European Union to alleviate trade issues between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Nick Thomas-Symonds, the Minister for the Constitution and European Relations, during a visit to Belfast, expressed hope that formal negotiations could commence early next year.

Thomas-Symonds emphasized the importance of Northern Ireland in these negotiations and underscored the need for good faith in implementing the Windsor Framework, a set of arrangements between the UK and the EU intended to address the complexities and challenges posed by the Northern Ireland Protocol, which is part of the Brexit agreement. He mentioned that while conversations with the EU are ongoing, formal negotiations would likely begin early next year after the new EU commission is in place.

The goal of the new sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement is to ease trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland by addressing food safety and animal and plant health standards. The Labour Party has stated it aims to negotiate an agreement that would allow various agri-food goods to be traded between the UK and EU with minimal border checks, potentially eliminating the physical impacts of the post-Brexit Irish Sea border. [BBC]

(lm)

Council of Europe Calls for reform in Monaco

Prince Albert II recently faced a call from European anti-bribery inspectors to stamp out conflicts of interest by providing greater transparency surrounding his role as Monaco's head of state. The Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) has called on Monaco to take resolute steps towards supplementing and extending anti-corruption legislation to be made applicable to government

officials. GRECO states that this would make the Monegasque anticorruption system more consistent and provide guarantees of integrity. GRECO also recommends that these reforms be made applicable to the Head of State as well. [Bloomberg]

(lm)

European Commission approves EUR 2 billion Dutch reactor to produce medical isotopes

The European Commission has approved EUR 2 billion in state aid for the Netherlands to build a new nuclear reactor to produce medical isotopes for cancer diagnosis and treatment. The aid, in the form of loans and equity, will support the PALLAS project, which includes constructing a reactor and a nuclear health center to replace the existing high flux reactor. The new reactor is expected to begin operations in the early 2030s. [Reuters] [NOS]

(gvc)

Three Catalan separatist Members of European Parliament should lose immunity, EU's General Court rules

On July 5, the European Union (EU)'s General Court ruled that three Catalan separatist Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) — Carles Puigdemont, Toni Comín, and Clara Ponsatí — should lose their parliamentary immunity. This decision follows the Spanish Supreme Court's push to prosecute them for their involvement in the illegal Catalan independence referendum in 2017. The ruling is based on a 2021 vote by the European Parliament to waive their immunity, which the separatists argued was politically motivated.

Puigdemont, Comín, and Ponsatí fled Spain after the referendum and were later elected to the European Parliament. Puigdemont, a former Catalan President, stated that he would appeal the decision to the Court of Justice of the EU. The loss of immunity could lead to their extradition to Spain, where Puigdemont still faces charges of aggravated embezzlement and disobedience, despite the sedition charge being dropped. [POLITICO 1]

Spanish Supreme Court shelves Puigdemont terrorism probe

In a related development, two days later, on July 9, the Spanish Supreme Court dropped a terrorism investigation into Puigdemont. The investigation, which began in February, was related to his alleged connections to the Catalan pro-independence group Democratic Tsunami, responsible for various demonstrations in 2019.

Supreme Court magistrate Susana Polo shelved the case after determining that investigating judge Manuel García-Castellón had improperly extended his investigation into the group in June 2021. This procedural error invalidated all subsequent inquiries, including Puigdemont's designation as a target earlier this year.

However, the conclusion of the terrorism probe does not affect the 2017 arrest warrant for embezzlement against Puigdemont. Additionally, the Supreme Court recently rejected a request to apply Spain's new amnesty law to Puigdemont and other Catalan independence leaders. The Spanish government's legal service has appealed this ruling, arguing the court's interpretation of the law was overly literal. [Deutsche Welle]

Meanwhile, Salvador Illa, leader of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), is negotiating to form a stable regional government before the end of August to avoid new elections. [EurActiv] [POLITICO 2]

(df/lm)

EU court prohibits wolf hunting in Spain's Castilla y León due to low national population levels

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that regions cannot authorize wolf hunting if national population levels are low, as in Spain's Castilla y León region. This decision follows the region's authorization to hunt 329 wolves between 2019 and 2022 to protect livestock. The ECJ emphasized that wolves cannot be designated as a huntable species if their conservation status is unfavorable nationally, citing the EU's Habitats Directive which provides strict protection for wolves.

The Spanish association ASCEL brought the case to the High Court of Justice in 2022 and welcomed the ruling. The ECJ insisted that hunting measures must contribute to maintaining or re-establishing a favorable conservation status. A 2019 report from Spain showed an "unfavourable-mediocre" conservation status in regions including Castilla y León, which the regional

authorities did not consider, making their hunting authorization contrary to the directive.

This ruling follows a similar decision against Austria's Land of Tyrol. The European Commission proposed lowering the wolf's protection status in 2023, but further data collection and Council agreement are required. The ECJ stated that regions must use comprehensive and recent scientific data at national, regional, and cross-border levels for decision-making. [Euractiv] [Euronews][El País]

(fs)

EIB allocates additional EUR 2 billion for Central Italy earthquake reconstruction

In a significant development on 16th July 2024, the European Investment Bank (EIB) approved a new EUR 2 billion financing package aimed at supporting the ongoing reconstruction efforts in the central Italian regions affected by the 2016 and 2017 earthquakes. This new commitment raises the total EIB support for these areas to EUR 4.75 billion, nearly 15% of the EUR 27 billion estimated by the Italian government for the entire reconstruction process. [EIB] [Rai]

The financing package, ratified by the EIB Board of Directors, is designed to address both public and private reconstruction needs. It includes a EUR 1 billion direct loan to Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance for the repair and rebuilding of public infrastructure. Additionally, another EUR 1 billion will be channelled through Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), a prominent Italian national promotional institution, to finance the restoration of private, residential, and industrial properties via the banking system. [ANSA]

The agreement ensuring these funds will be utilised according to the sustainability and safety standards mandated by the EIB was signed in Rome by Guido Castelli, the Extraordinary Government Commissioner for Post-2016 Earthquake Reconstruction, and Jean-Christophe Laloux, EIB Director General of Operations.

This new financial initiative underscores the EIB's long-standing commitment to assisting the regions of Abruzzo, Lazio, Marche, and Umbria, which were severely impacted by the seismic events. The bank's ongoing support aims not only to rebuild but also to enhance the resilience and quality of infrastructure and services in these areas.

The EIB, as the European Union's long-term lending institution, plays a crucial role in financing projects that align with EU policy objectives. Over the past five years, the EIB Group has extended over EUR 58 billion in financing for various projects in Italy, spanning infrastructure, innovation, climate and environment, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The announcement of this additional funding highlights the EIB's continued dedication to fostering cooperation and providing substantial support to the earthquake-stricken regions. The collaborative efforts between the EIB, the Italian government, and CDP are pivotal in driving forward the reconstruction and redevelopment of central Italy, ensuring a safer and more sustainable future for the affected communities. [Stampa]

(vm/pk)

Portugal to participate in the European Vaccination Card pilot project

Portugal is set to join the European Vaccination Card (EVC) pilot project, which will be launched in September. The card “aims to empower individuals by consolidating all their vaccination data in one easily accessible location.” It will be available in various formats, including printed cards, mailed copies, and digital versions for smartphones. [Vaccines Today]

It is part of the EUVABECO project (European Vaccination Beyond COVID-19), which is co-funded by the European Commission, and aims at enhancing vaccination practices in the EU.

Latvia, Greece, Belgium and Germany will also be part of the project. [PR]

The EVC is expected to be publicly released in 2026, enabling broad adoption in the whole EU.

(fs)

Denmark joins boycott of EU meetings under Hungarian’s presidency

The Danish government will not send ministers to the informal government meetings taking place in Hungary, the country currently holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union, as announced

by Denmark's foreign affairs minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen. Instead, civil servants will represent Denmark in the informal meetings. [Berlingske]

The decision comes as a protest after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán held talks on a potential Ukraine peace deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the beginning of July without consulting the rest of the EU member states. This angered certain EU leaders, who warned against appeasing Putin and claimed Orbán does not speak for the whole European Union. [Reuters]

"The government wants to clearly distance itself from the Hungarian presidency's handling of Ukraine in the first weeks of the Presidency," Rasmussen said. [Berlingske]

Other countries like Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and Poland announced as well that they would be represented by civil servants. The European Commission also said that the EU commissioners will not attend the meetings. [Reuters] [DR]

Orbán said he was just officially representing Hungary on his tour, even if it took place shortly after taking over the presidency of the Council of the European Union. [DR]

Orbán has long been a fierce critic of the EU's collectively pursued Ukraine-friendly policy.

(fs)

EU's human rights court seeks Finland's response in asylum case of Russian children

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has requested a response from the Finnish government regarding a case involving Russian children granted asylum in Finland but ordered to return to Russia. The children arrived in Finland with their father in 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Despite a preliminary ruling in September 2023 by the Finnish Supreme Court (KKO) directing the children's return to Russia, the case has been brought before the court multiple times at the father's request. The ECHR's preliminary hearing on the matter was announced last week by the Finnish Bar Association's news outlet, Oikeusuutiset.

The father, who opposed Russia's political leadership and feared conscription, arrived in Finland in September 2022 with his then 9- and 11-year-old children, seeking asylum. The children were brought without their mother's consent, who later demanded their return under the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction.

Following an initial dismissal of the mother's claim by the Helsinki Court of Appeal, the Finnish Supreme Court overturned this decision in September 2023, ordering the children's return to their mother in Russia, despite their objections. In December 2023, the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) granted asylum to the father and children, prompting the father to request the Supreme Court to reconsider its decision. He argued that the asylum status significantly changed the circumstances, but the Supreme Court maintained its original decision in January 2024, finding the father's allegations of brainwashing unsubstantiated.

The father has since appealed to the ECHR, questioning whether the Finnish Supreme Court's decision violated the right to family life and if the court's process was fair. The ECHR has stayed the Supreme Court's decision pending its review. [Yle]

(dql)

EU initiates infringement procedure against Finland over non-compliance with waste-related legislation

Finland is among 18 member states of the European Union (EU) against which the European Commission has initiated an infringement procedure for failing to meet the 2020 target of recycling 50% of municipal waste, including paper, metal, plastic, and glass, as outlined in the EU Waste Framework Directive.

In 2022, Finland recycled only 21% of its plastic waste, with 77% being incinerated, the worst performance in the European Economic Area. Additionally, Finland is expected to miss its goal of reducing plastic bag consumption to no more than 40 bags per capita by 2025, with current usage at 55 bags per capita.

The directive on electrical and electronic equipment requires member states to annually collect at least 65% of the average weight of such waste or 85% of the waste generated on their territory. Finland, among other member states, failed to meet these targets.

The infringement procedure allows the commission to issue formal notices to member states, which have two months to respond with corrective measures. If the response is unsatisfactory, the commission may escalate the issue, potentially bringing the case to the Court of Justice of the EU. [Helsinki Times]

(dql)

EU intensifies efforts Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal amid stalled talks

European Council President Charles Michel is renewing efforts to bring a lasting peace to the war-torn region in the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has won at least two wars against Armenia since 2020 but the two sides failed again to return to the table.

Michel held bilateral meetings with the leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan on the sidelines of the European Political Community summit in the United Kingdom in mid-July. Michel has called on the two sides to return to the negotiation table and finalize a peace agreement by making progress on outstanding issues like border delimitation. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, however, failed to find an opportunity to sit down together, with both leaders blaming each other for the deadlock.

Nine months after Azerbaijan launched a military offensive to retake the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, tension are once again rising.

Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense has threatened to take all necessary measures using all means at their disposal for the purposes of self-defense, accusing Yerevan of provocative actions along two countries' shared border [Politico]

Meanwhile, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Vovayi Paschinyan has openly acknowledged that he has no territorial claims against Azerbaijan while even specifying the exact number of square kilometers belonging to Armenia, according to Elchin Amirbayov, Representative of the President of Azerbaijan on special assignments. Amirbayov made this statement during a talk at American think tank Hudson Institute.

Amirbayov urged Paschinyan to "uphold his official position as Prime Minister: that Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan`s internationally recognized territory, Armenia has no claims on it, and that they are

prepared to normalize relations with Azerbaijan and its other neighbors based on this commitment." [Azertag]

(nl)

First EIB-Azerbaijan railway cooperation project completed

The European Investment Bank (EIB) has completed a 10-month project assisting Azerbaijan in improving railway safety and reliability. This advisory support, the first under the Facility for Eastern Partnership Investment in Connectivity (EPIC), resulted in recommendations to enhance operational safety, reduce travel times and costs, and lower greenhouse gas emissions for Azerbaijan Railways.

The EIB's efforts focused on improving safety at level crossings along the 503-kilometre Baku-Boyuk Kesik rail route, a key link connecting Baku and the Port of Baku with Georgia's rail network and the Black Sea, which is part of the core TEN-T network in Azerbaijan.

Funded by the European Union and managed by EIB advisory programme JASPERS, EPIC offers free advisory support and technical assistance to Eastern Partnership countries. Currently, the EIB is supporting ten projects in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine under EPIC. [EU NeighborsEast]

(dql)

Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to Georgia reaffirms support for Georgians who aspire to join EU

On July 29, the Georgian Foreign Ministry met with representatives of EU member state diplomatic missions in Georgia, along with the EU delegation in Tbilisi, to discuss the implementation of the 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, which outlines nine steps for Georgia to follow. [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

After the meeting, Asunción Sánchez Ruiz, the Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to Georgia, confirmed the EU's concerns regarding the latest developments in Georgia, referencing especially controversial "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", widely known as the "foreign agents law", as backsliding in Georgia's accession path and jeopardizing EU candidate status.

He called on the Georgina authorities to reverse the trend. [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

Asked about the EU's future steps and their timeline, Ruiz informed that the EU has already frozen EUR 30 million from the European Peace Facility, downgraded high-level meetings, and is reviewing its support to the Georgian government. [Civil Georgia]

She further indicated that the Georgian foreign ministry “recalled the intention of the Government to be a member of the European Union by 2030, to which we responded that currently, as the leaders agreed on the 27 of June, the relations are de-facto halted on the EU accession path.” [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

Ruiz noted that diplomats hope the upcoming parliamentary elections “will be free, fair and competitive” and emphasized that the EU will be closely monitoring the situation. She reaffirmed that Brussels was “side by side with Georgian people, who have expressed their willingness to join the European Union.” [Georgian Public Broadcaster]

The ‘Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence,’ widely known as ‘foreign agents’ law, introduced by the Georgian Parliament, has sparked significant controversy and concern both domestically and internationally. Modeled after similar legislation in Russia, the law mandates that individuals, media outlets, and organizations receiving more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources register as "foreign agents." [CNN]

(zh)

ECHR confirms removal of Communist candidate from parliamentary election list in Latvia

The European Court of Human Rights has ruled that Latvia's removal of Tatjana Ždanoka from the candidate list for the 2018 parliamentary elections did not violate her rights under the European Convention on Human Rights.

A former member of the Communist Party of Latvia, Ždanoka was barred from standing for election based on Latvia’s Parliamentary Elections Act of 1995, which prevents individuals who actively participated in the Communist Party from running for the Saeima, the Latvian parliament.

The court acknowledged that this action interfered with Ždanoka's right to free elections but found it justified. The removal was lawful, pursued a legitimate aim (protecting Latvia's independence, democratic order, and national security), and was proportionate. The court noted that Ždanoka had failed to distance herself from her Communist Party activities and highlighted Latvia's security concerns due to its proximity to Russia and Russia's previous invasions of Georgia and Ukraine. Therefore, Latvia had not overstepped its margin of appreciation.

Ždanoka had previously been able to run for the European Parliament, as the European Parliament Elections Act of 2004 does not have a similar provision. [Jurist News]

In a related move prior to the Court verdict, Latvia's State Security Service conducted criminal procedural activities at two locations connected to Ždanoka on July 22, seizing data carriers, notes, and documents for further analysis. [Public broadcasting of Latvia]

These actions are part of a criminal investigation into her suspected collaboration with Russian intelligence services, prompted by her loss of parliamentary immunity. The investigation began in mid-March 2024, following allegations that Ždanoka had communicated with the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) since 2004, as revealed by leaked emails. Despite her denial of cooperation with Russian intelligence, the Security Service is scrutinizing her activities, emphasizing that her previous parliamentary immunity had facilitated her alleged support for Russia's geopolitical interests. [Baltic News] [DW]

(bw)

Moldova enters next EU accession application phase

On July 10, during a visit to Chisinau, Moldova, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi launched the bilateral screening process for Moldova's EU accession. Marking the first step in the country's accession negotiations, this initial stage involves assessing Moldova's readiness to adopt and implement EU legislation.

During a meeting with Moldovan President Maia Sandu, Várhelyi discussed the EU-Moldova cooperation and the support Moldova will receive. He commended Sandu for the country's progress in implementing reforms since applying for EU membership.

Várhelyi also met with Prime Minister Dorin Recean and visited the "Train of Suffering" exhibition on the Great National Assembly Square. Marking the 75th anniversary of a major deportation operation, the exhibition features personal records of 4,000 Hungarian prisoners of war interned in post-war Moldova. These records are being digitized by Moldova's National Archives Agency for transfer to Hungary's National Archives. [EU NeighborEast]

The meetings were part of Várhelyi visit to Moldova from July 9-11 that followed the Intergovernmental Conference, which historically opened EU accession negotiations with Moldova on 25 June. [European Commission]

Moldova, which will concurrently hold presidential elections and a referendum on joining the EU on October 20, is polarized between pro-EU and anti-EU factions, with the main obstacle being the region of Transnistria, where Russia holds an unknown number of soldiers. The majority of Romanian/Moldovan speakers—about 80% of Moldova's 2.6 million residents—support EU integration, while ethnic minorities, including Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz who predominantly speak Russian, are generally opposed. The Gagauz, a Turkic Christian group in southern Moldova, are led by pro-Kremlin governor Evgenia Gutul, a supporter of Ilan Shor. Moldova's EU ambassador, Janis Mazeiks, has noted difficulties in engaging with her.

Domestic opinion polls indicate 55-65% support for the EU in the upcoming October referendum. With many Moldovans living and working in the EU, a Yes vote seems likely. Sandu could secure an outright victory in the presidential election with this support. However, Russia's influence remains strong. The Moldovan government fears Russia might incite violence before the referendum. [BBC]

(hs/dql)

Moldova receives EUR 72.5 million in loan and grant from EU

European Commission has provided Moldova with a EUR 50 million loan on favorable terms, followed by an additional EUR 22.5 million in grants. This financial support aims to address Moldova's 2024 financing needs, bolster macroeconomic stability, and facilitate further reforms.

This disbursement is the fourth under the ongoing Macro-Financial Assistance program. It follows the Commission's assessment that Moldova has met the necessary policy conditions, including improvements in public sector governance, the independence of the National Bank of Moldova, and the rule of law.

Brussels also acknowledged that Moldova has made progress in anti-corruption efforts, adopted a new law for the vetting of judges, supported renewable energy initiatives, reformed its Customs Code, and established a National Strategy for Economic Development through 2030.

Totaling EUR 295 million, the Macro-Financial Assistance program is part of the EU's broader support to Moldova amid ongoing challenges, including the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine and energy security issues. [European Commission]

(dql)

Austria nominates Finance Minister Magnus Brunner for European Commissioner

Austria's conservative-led coalition government has announced Finance Minister Magnus Brunner as its candidate for the next European Commissioner. German conservative Ursula von der Leyen was re-elected by the European Parliament for a second five-year term as president of the European Commission two weeks ago.

Brunner's nomination, pending formal approval by the cabinet and the lower house's main committee, is expected to proceed smoothly as both ruling parties have agreed on it. Austria's next parliamentary election is set for September 29, with the new EU Commission likely taking office by October at the earliest.

Germany emphasized that Brunner's nomination is independent of other appointments, denying reports of a broader deal that includes the next governor of the Austrian National Bank.

"Magnus Brunner is an experienced government politician with a high level of expertise in finance, economic and competition policy at national and European level," said Chancellor of Austria, Nehammer. [Reuters]

(nm)

EU top court backs EUR 150 million state loan to Austrian airlines

Ryanair has lost its final appeal against a EUR 150 million state loan granted to Austrian Airlines by Austria in 2020, as Europe's top court sided with EU competition authorities.

The loan, provided to Lufthansa's Austrian subsidiary during the Covid-19 pandemic, was intended to help airlines manage financial strain caused by lockdowns. Ryanair, which had challenged over 20 state aid decisions by the European Commission, argued that such support unfairly advantaged certain carriers.

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) upheld the legality of the loan, stating that member states can offer aid to address damage from exceptional occurrences. This ruling is final and cannot be appealed. [Euronews] [RTE]

Czech Republic nominates Sikela for European Commission role

The Czech government has nominated Jozef Sikela, the current minister of industry and trade, as its candidate for the next European Commission. Prime Minister Petr Fiala highlighted Sikela's proven track record in both the private sector and government as key to this decision.

The appointment reflects the Czech Republic's ambition to secure an economic portfolio in the Commission, a goal it has pursued but not yet achieved. The choice of Sikela over ex presidential candidate, Danuae Nerudova, who is an MEP, Czech economist and professor, raises questions, given coalition dynamics and the EU's preference for gender-diverse nominations. [Radio Prague International]

Despite potential controversy, the government believes Sikela's background strengthens Czechia's bid for an economic portfolio. Drawing parallels with current Commissioner Vera Jourova, experts note that while commissioners bring national perspectives, they must serve broader European interests. Sikela's international and governmental experience positions him well to balance Czech and European priorities effectively. [Radio Prague International]

(nm)

Hungary ordered to pay Brussels EUR 240 million in fines

The European Commission (EC) has fined the Hungarian government EUR 200 million for non-compliance with EU asylum and migration regulations, following a 2020 European Court of Justice ruling and the June 13 ruling of the Court against Hungary for its failure to comply with the 2020 decision.

In a July 16 letter and payment notice, the EC demanded that Hungary details how it will implement the court's judgments. In addition, the EC has called on the government to pay a fine of EUR 200 million within 45 days. The fine could increase by EUR 1 million daily if the government does not pay.

The 2020 ruling highlighted issues such as asylum seekers' access to procedures, the right to legal redress, and illegal detentions in transit zones.

Although Hungary closed the transit zones, it has not fully complied with EU principles. The European Commission's complaint led to the court imposing the fine, citing Hungary's actions as a serious breach of EU law and solidarity. [Daily News Hungary]

(dql)

Slovak populist PM's party likely to stay out of EU Parliament groups for national interests

Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico said his leftist ruling Smer party would remain out of the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group unless the country can uphold its sovereign position on migration and the Ukraine war.

The S&D suspended Fico's populist Smer and its ally Hlas last October following their coalition deal with the far-right ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). [FT] [Reuters] [bne]

Fico, a polarised figure who pledged to end military aid to Ukraine, said in a video message published on July 11 that his party refused to echo the S&D bloc's ideologies that contradict Slovakia's state interests.

"If we have to go somewhere and repeat like parrots what others want and which is in stark contrast with

Slovak national-state interests, then I say in advance that we thank you but our MEPs would rather stay unattached," said Fico.

The populist leader also indicated that Smer would not attach itself to other alliances, including Patriots for Europe, a new right-wing grouping forged by Hungary's nationalist leader Viktor Orban.

Since Fico's comeback last September, critics have voiced concerns that he would emulate Viktor Orban to cement his power by undermining the rule of law while taking a friendlier stance towards the Kremlin.

(ytl)

EU suspends agriculture funds for Albania

Approximately EUR 112 million in EU funds intended to support Albanian farmers have been indefinitely suspended due to previous misuse of similar funds. This suspension affects the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance Rural Development (IPARD) III program, which aims to aid Albania's agricultural sector in preparation for EU membership.

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) identified serious irregularities in the prior IPARD II program, prompting the suspension. Albanian authorities have not provided a timeline for when the funds might be reinstated. An action plan from the Albanian government is still under review by EU structures, and the specifics of how much Albania might need to repay are not yet clear.

Agriculture Minister Anila Denaj reported that the Albanian response to OLAF's recommendations has been submitted, but the exact details remain undisclosed. An external auditor is being engaged to conduct an independent audit, which will help determine the extent of irregularities and inform future discussions. [Tirana Times]

(dql)

European Commission decides to refer three Bulgarian infringement proceedings to European Court of Justice

On July 25, the European Commission (EC) decided to refer Bulgaria to the EU Court of Justice (ECJ) in three infringement proceedings.

In the first case the EC found that Bulgaria failed to correctly transpose EU rules on the right to information in criminal proceedings by the June 2014 deadline. Despite being notified in September 2021, Bulgaria has not fully addressed the Commission's concerns, particularly regarding the directive's scope for suspects of criminal offenses.

In the second case, Bulgaria violated the Services Directive and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union by limiting the provision of temporary cross-border social services to six months per year. The Commission stated that member states cannot set maximum durations for such services.

Lastly, Bulgaria failed to notify the transposition of Directive (EU) 2019/882, the European Accessibility Act, by the June 2022 deadline. Although Bulgaria announced plans to table a draft bill in December 2023, it has not formally notified the Commission.

This referral brings the total infringement cases against Bulgaria to four, including a February referral for failing to finalize river basin management plans. In 2023, Bulgaria faced seven other ECJ referrals on issues like victims' rights, biodiversity, renewable energy, and open data use.

Bulgaria has two months to address these concerns before the EC can refer these cases to the ECJ. [The Sofia Globe]

(dql)

European Union, Serbia sign deal to develop contentious lithium mining project

On July 19, The European Union (EU) and Serbia signed a deal to develop a lithium mining project aimed at securing a critical material for electric vehicle batteries. The agreement, signed after a raw materials summit, involves extensive EU expertise to ensure environmental protection.

The project focuses on Serbia's Jadar mine, identified as Europe's largest lithium reserve, potentially capable of yielding up to 58,000 tons annually. This quantity is sufficient to manufacture approximately 1.1 million electric vehicles per year, a development that aligns with Europe's ambitions to bolster its automotive industry and achieve sustainability targets.

The initiative, led by Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, has garnered interest from major automakers such as Mercedes-Benz and Stellantis, signaling substantial future investments and economic opportunities for Serbia. Despite its economic promise, the Jadar mine has faced local opposition due to concerns over environmental impact, particularly regarding water pollution and community displacement. [Deutsche Welle] [Balkan Insight]

Notably, earlier in the month, the Serbian Constitutional Court overturned a government decision to revoke its permit for the Jadar lithium project. The court found that the government had acted beyond its constitutional authority by revoking the spatial plan established in 2020 to facilitate the project in the Jadar Valley. [Reuters]

Speaking against this backdrop, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, present at the signing ceremony in Belgrade, emphasized the deal's significance in bolstering Europe's industrial autonomy and environmental stewardship. He highlighted the necessity of such initiatives to counterbalance China's dominant position in global lithium production and battery manufacturing. [Deutsche Welle] [Balkan Insight]

(zh/lm)

BYD Invests in automobile production within Turkey following series of recently imposed tariffs

The Chinese Electric Vehicle (EV) manufacturer BYD announced a commitment to build a 1-billion-dollar manufacturing plant in Turkey. The agreement signals expanded efforts of BYD, *Tesla*'s primary competitor, to expand export operations to Europe while also circumventing recently imposed tariffs against vehicles produced in China.

In Istanbul on Monday, July 8th, BYD's CEO Wang Chuanfu and Turkey's Industry and Technology Minister Mehmet Fatih Kaci signed the agreement at a conference alongside Prime Minister Erdogan.

The agreement follows the recent imposition of a series of tariffs against vehicles manufactured in China, which regulators argued undermined European vehicle production due to unfair state subsidies. On July 5th, the European Union levied tariffs ranging from 17.4% to 37.6%, while Turkey's own 40% tariff on Chinese

imports went into effect on July 8th. [ABC News and Reuters]

Due to Turkey's union agreement with the EU, vehicles manufactured in Turkey can be exported freely to EU member countries without additional tariffs. By producing vehicles with Turkey, BYD will both circumvent Turkey's own recent tariffs against Chinese-produced vehicles, as well as E.U. wide tariffs.

According to the agreement, BYD's roughly 1-billion-dollar plant is set to open at the end of 2026. The factory will produce up to 150,000 electric and hybrid vehicles annually and offer up to 5,000 jobs within Turkey. BYD also committed to constructing a research and development center for sustainable mobility technologies within Turkey. [CNN]

(ts/gc)

EU scraps visa requirement for Kosovo Serbs with 'special' passports

The Kosovo government has strongly objected to the EU Council's decision to lift visa requirements for Serbian passports issued by Serbia's Directorate for Kosovo. This new regulation, effective 20 days after its publication in the EU Official Journal, will allow holders of these specific passports to travel freely within the Schengen zone.

Previously, Kosovo residents with these specific Serbian passports could not travel visa-free within the Schengen zone, unlike those with standard Kosovo documents. The decision follows reforms and negotiations that began in 2023, aiming to include these passport holders in the EU's visa liberalisation rules for Serbia.

Serbia lost control over Kosovo in 1999 but has continued to operate parallel state institutions, including issuing passports through the Directorate. These passports, unlike regular Serbian passports, were not covered by the Schengen visa waiver and were only issued in Belgrade. [Balkan Insight]

(ab)

Team:

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