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

Europe in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

No. 9, September/2024

Brought to you by CPG

Dear Readers,

Welcome to this belated issue of Europe in Review (EiR), which, at least for the time being, will also be the last.

Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, our funder ended financial support for EiR at the end of 2023. This particularly affected the positions of our two valued Deputy Editors-in-Chief.

Our passion for recapping the latest developments in politics and international relations across the continent motivated us to continue producing EiR without funding for a while. However, a series of unfortunate events has now left the editorial team so depleted that continuing the format has become an unsustainable burden for the core team, despite our strong dedication to EiR and its readers. With heavy hearts, we have therefore decided to discontinue the format. Should we succeed in securing new funding, we will gladly resume our work on EiR. In the meantime, we will focus our efforts on its older sister format, Asia in Review.

Please allow me to express our sincere gratitude for your loyalty and readership. We hope you will consider

subscribing again should EiR return in the future.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the entire EiR team—especially Peter Kononczuk, Glen Carey and Duc Quang Ly— for their invaluable contributions and for making EiR a trusted source of information on European affairs and developments.

With my very best wishes,

Henning Glaser

Editor-in-Chief

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

Main Sections

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

Top Stories - Editors' Pick

Kyiv launches surprise offensive on Russian soil as Moscow further advances in Eastern Ukraine

Throughout August, Ukrainian forces have continued the incursion into Russia's Kursk Oblast that was launched on August 6 while Russia has further advanced in Eastern Ukraine, currently pressing for Pokrovsk the fall of which would effectively mean the loss of almost the entire Donetsk region. Both sides have intensified aerial attacks against each other.

Ukraine counteroffensive in Kursk

On August 6, Ukraine launched a cross-border surprise counteroffensive in Russia's Kursk region advancing with thousands of troops, drones, and Western-made weaponry. [CNN 1]

Since then, a federal state of emergency is currently in place in the Kursk region, with evacuations underway in border areas. The Russian Emergencies Ministry reports that as of September 9, 197 temporary shelters across 28 Russian regions are accommodating over 11,500 residents from the Kursk region, including more than 3,500 children.

According to the Russian Defense Ministry's, Kiev has suffered overall losses in the Kursk region, including over 11,420 troops, 89 tanks, and 74 armored personnel carriers. [TASS]

On the other side, on September 6 President Volodymyr Zelenskyy claimed in a statement made during the 24th Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany that Ukraine's incursion has resulted in approximately 6,000 Russian casualties. Ukrainian forces have gained control over about 1,300 square kilometers and around 100 settlements in the region. [The Kyiv Independent 1]

Russian Major General Apti Alaudinov, who leads Chechnya's Akhmat special forces in Kursk, reported that Russian forces have regained control of about 10 settlements amid reports from September 11 saying Russia has launched its first major counterattack in the region from the west. [ABC News] [Reuters]

The incursion's ultimate goals remain unclear and the assessments of it effects disputed. [The Eurasian Times] [Newsweek 1]

In an interview given three weeks after launching the offensive, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky

justified for the first time the operation, calling it part of a broader "victory plan" to position his country strongly for future peace negotiations and claiming that the operation was successful in slowing down the Russian advance toward Pokrovsk. [Le Monde] [The Kyiv Independent 2]

Similarly, General Oleksandr Syrskii, Ukraine's top military commander, defended the Kursk offensive, arguing in an interview on September 5 that the offensive was working as Russia had failed to advance on a key area of the eastern front in Ukraine for six days. While conceding the situation in Pokrovsk was "the most problematic" for Ukrainian forces, Syrskii underscored that the ability of Russian forces to maneuver and deploy reinforcements had been curtailed, resulting in a decrease in artillery shelling and the intensity of the offensive. [Al Jazeera 1]

On the other side, Russian President Vladimir Putin – speaking at Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on September 5 – reaffirmed that the Kursk incursion failed to make Russia "redeploy troops from one sector to another and to stop our offensive in key sectors, primarily Donbass," adding that the offensive "accomplished nothing." [President of Russia]

Fighting in Kursk and Russian accusations against Ukraine of an attempted attack on the Kursk nuclear plant prompted Rafael Grossi, head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, to warn of increased risks at the facility. Located near the site of Ukraine's ongoing military counteroffensive, the plant has shown signs of drone strikes, although Grossi did not specify the perpetrators. He highlighted the plant's vulnerability, noting its reactor lacks a protective dome, making it susceptible to artillery, drone, or missile strikes. Despite these risks, the plant is reportedly operating under "close to normal conditions." [Politico] [AA]

Russian forces close to taking Pokrovsk

On September 8, Russia has claimed full control over Novohrodivka, a town in eastern Ukraine, as its forces push towards the strategically crucial city of Pokrovsk. [Reuters 1]

Novohrodivka is located 12 km from Pokrovsk, a vital road and rail hub. Located on a key supply route for Ukrainian-held outposts, the city is near Ukraine's largest coking coal mine, essential for its steel industry. Control of Pokrovsk is seen as a critical step for Russia to incorporate the entire Donbas region and disrupt Ukrainian supply lines, boosting its campaign to capture Chasiv Yar. Squeezing Ukrainian access to local

roads could hinder Kyiv's ability to defend territory around Pokrovsk and allow Russia to consolidate its front line.

Zelensky has acknowledged the difficult situation and announced plans to bolster Ukrainian forces in the area. The Pokrovsk area hosts industrial facilities that Ukraine is likely using to fortify defenses, while Russia is expected to employ glide bombs against these sites. Ukraine's surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region on August 6 aimed to divert Russian forces from the eastern front, but Moscow has continued to concentrate its efforts on Pokrovsk, with its most capable units reportedly deployed there. [Reuters 2]

Russia ramps up aerial strikes following Kursk incursion

Ukraine's surprise offensive in Kursk prompted Russia to intensify its aerial strikes on Ukrainian cities.

According to the Ukrainian Air Force, on September 7 Ukraine's defense systems successfully intercepted 58 of the 67 Shahed drones launched by Russia, targeting multiple locations, including Sumy, Kherson, Poltava, and Kyiv. [CNN 2]

Ukrainian officials also reported that a Russian air attack on Ukraine's western city of Lviv on September 4 killed seven people and injured at least 40 people. It damaged schools, medical facilities, and other buildings. [Al Jazeera 2]

The assault on Lviv came after a deadly bombardment in Poltava in central Ukraine a day earlier, where more than 50 people were killed in an attack on a military institution and a nearby hospital. [The Kyiv Independent 3]

Kharkiv saw drone and bomb attacks on August 30, September 1, and September 9. [Al Jazeera 3] [Euroactive] [Gwara Media]

Strikes were reported in the eastern Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia regions and the western Volyn and Zhytomyr regions on August 26. [CNN 3]

Ukrainian launches drone attacks against Russia

On September 11, Russian regional authorities reported a drone attack in Murmansk Oblast, located behind the Arctic Circle. This incident led to temporary flight restrictions in the area. Murmansk Oblast, situated about 1,500 kilometers from Ukraine and near the borders with Finland and Norway, is home to the Olenya Airbase, which houses strategic bombers used in strikes against Ukraine, and the Severomorsk naval

base of the Russian Northern Fleet. [The Kyiv Independent 4]

On September 10, Ukraine launched its largest drone attack on the Moscow region yet killing at least one woman and damaging dozens of homes, according to Moscow regional governor. The assault also caused disruptions of Moscow's airports, leading to the diversion of around 50 flights from Moscow's airports. Russian authorities reported the destruction of at least 20 Ukrainian drones in the Moscow region, as well as 124 drones in eight other regions. Kyiv stated that Russia had attacked Ukraine with 46 drones overnight, 38 of which were intercepted. [CNN 3]

In an earlier development, the Russian defense ministry stated that on September 1 Russian air defenses intercepted 158 Ukrainian drones overnight, including two over Moscow, with most of the drones targeting the Kursk (46), Bryansk (34), Voronezh (28), and Belgorod (14) regions. Additional drones were shot down in the Tver and Ivanovo regions. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin reported that debris from one of the drones caused a fire at an oil refinery. [NPR]

Earlier in August, Ukrainian drones launched attacks on Russian airfields in the Kursk, Voronezh, and Nizhny Novgorod regions on August 14 and on Moscow and its surrounding region on August 21. [CNN 4] [Al Jazeera 4]

A Ukrainian security source described this as the "biggest attack" on Russia's airfields, targeting bases in the Kursk, Voronezh, and Nizhny Novgorod regions. The drone strikes coincide with Ukraine's ground incursion, which has displaced tens of thousands of Russians and left the Kremlin struggling to repel Kyiv's forces.

Lift on restrictions on use of long-range weapons discussed at Zelensky-Blinken-Lammy meeting

Facing Russia's intensified aerial warfare, Ukraine has ramped up its efforts to secure more air defenses from the U.S. and its allies and to gain approval for the use of Western-supplied long-range weapons against military targets inside Russia. [Al Jazeera 4]

During a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and British Foreign Secretary David Lammy on September 11, Zelensky reiterated his call to lift restrictions on the use of long-range missiles within Russia, stressing the importance of removing these limits and noting that Ukraine relies heavily on long-range strikes and cannot prevail without them. Although U.S. President Joe Biden has permitted

Ukraine to use missiles against Russian targets, the range is restricted by U.S. policy. [Newsweek 2]

In his strongest hint yet that the White House is about to lift the Blinken indicated that the U.S. has been willing to adjust its policy as battlefield conditions evolve and reaffirmed that this approach would continue. Blinken and Lammy said they would report back to US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [The Guardian]

In addition, Blinken and Lammy pledged nearly USD 1.5 billion in additional aid to Ukraine. Blinken announced over USD 700 million in humanitarian assistance, while Lammy confirmed USD 782 million in aid and loan guarantees. The funds primarily aim to strengthen Ukraine's energy grid, which has been targeted by Russian attacks ahead of the coming winter. [AP News 1]

Ahead of their meeting with Zelensky, Blinken and Lammy formally accused Iran of supplying short-range ballistic missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine and announced new sanctions on Moscow and Tehran. Blinken revealed that Russian personnel had been trained in Iran to use the Fath-360 missile system, which has a range of up to 75 miles (120 kilometers). He warned that these missiles could be deployed in Ukraine within weeks, allowing Russia to target objectives further from the front line. [AP News 2]

(dql)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Western Europe

Belgian Flemish farmer's union challenges nitrogen decree in constitutional court

The Belgian Flemish farmers' union, Boerenbond, has launched legal proceedings against the Flemish government's nitrogen decree, which mandates significant reductions in nitrogen emissions by 2030. The union argues that the decree unfairly targets the agricultural sector while favouring industry, violating the constitutional principle of equality.

The decree's strict reduction targets, particularly the "PAS reference 2030" for agricultural emissions, are also contested for lacking sufficient scientific basis and for imposing additional burdens on farmers who have already taken steps to reduce emissions. Boerenbond has filed three separate petitions with the Constitutional Court, utilising different law firms to challenge various aspects of the decree. [De Tijd] [Brussels Times]

The union has expressed frustration that the legal route was their last resort after more than 20,000 objections and alternative proposals were ignored. Boerenbond calls on Flemish policymakers to adopt a more balanced emission reduction policy that considers the interests of all sectors and provides legal certainty for farmers. [vrt]

The Constitutional Court is expected to rule on the case next year, with potential implications for the future of nitrogen regulation in Flanders. [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Audi Brussels management refuses visit by delegation of MPs

Audi Brussels management has refused a visit by a parliamentary delegation to its Forest site while operations remain suspended, according to MP Denis Ducarme, chair of the Social Affairs Parliamentary Committee. The visit, originally suggested by the carmaker's unions in July, was intended to address the potential closure of the factory. Despite repeated efforts, the parliamentary services could not establish contact with Audi Brussels, prompting Ducarme to express his frustration to the board.

The refusal comes amid protests by workers, following Volkswagen's decision not to allocate a new model to

the factory, putting nearly 3,000 jobs at risk. Audi Brussels staff, who had not returned to work after a summer closure, are protesting the restructuring plans. Management is exploring alternatives, including finding investors or new production lines, but workers and union leaders are calling for faster action to secure jobs. A works council is scheduled for September 17 to address the situation. [Brussels Times]

(lm)

Belgian livestock sector faces bluetongue crisis

Belgium's livestock sector is grappling with a bluetongue outbreak, prompting the government to declare cattle and sheep farming as crisis sectors. Bluetongue, a viral disease spread by insects, has already affected over 500 farms across Belgium, particularly in Antwerp, Liège, and Limburg. The disease, while harmless to humans, is fatal to ruminants like sheep and cattle, posing significant economic challenges.

The first Belgian cases were reported in Limburg, where four sheep died, and 30 others were quarantined. Public health institute Sciensano is investigating the viral strain. The outbreak mirrors rising cases in neighbouring countries, with thousands of farms impacted across the Netherlands, Germany, and France. [MSN]

Belgium's Minister of Agriculture, David Clarinval, indicated that the crisis declaration aims to support farmers by streamlining social security payment relief, easing the financial burden on the affected sector. [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Belgian deputy PM sparks controversy over 'transphobic' book recommendation

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister David Clarinval has sparked controversy by endorsing *Transmania: Investigation into the Excesses of Transgender Ideology*, a book criticised for promoting transphobic views. Clarinval's social media endorsement has drawn backlash from LGBTQ+ groups and critics, who argue the book spreads harmful stereotypes about transgender people. [Brussels Times] [Le Soir]

In response, former Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo issued an open letter condemning transphobia and urging respect for gender identity. Di Rupo highlighted Belgium's history of expanding rights for marginalized communities, including the legalization of same-sex marriage and protections for transgender individuals. He warned that Transmania reflects an ultra-conservative effort to roll back these freedoms and called on progressives to continue defending diversity and human dignity. [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Belgian ministry of defence to invest at least 11 billion EUR by 2030

Belgium's Ministry of Defence plans to invest over 11 billion EUR in new equipment by 2030. Major expenditures include 900 EUR million for two ground-to-air missile systems and 793 EUR million for 12 to 14 new helicopters, including heavy and search-and-rescue models. The investment package also covers previous commitments, such as F-35 fighter jets, new armoured vehicles, and next-generation warships. [Brussels Times]

(gvc)

Belgian court sentences Jihadists to jail

On September 9, Belgian court in Brugge sentenced two members of a Muslim terrorist cell for planning attacks on Jewish and other targets. Abubakar S. received a 15-year sentence, while his wife was sentenced to eight years. Four accomplices, including Abubakar's brother, received suspended sentences and fines, and a seventh defendant was acquitted.

The group had devised concrete plans in the summer of 2023 to target a Jewish neighborhood and a gay bar in Antwerp, intending to trap police and emergency services. [Jewish News Syndicate]

(dql)

Former EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier appointed French prime minister to end political turmoil

Former EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier has been appointed as France's new prime minister by President Emmanuel Macron, succeeding Gabriel Attal. His appointment comes almost two months after France's snap elections, which left the political landscape fragmented. Barnier, a prominent figure in France's right-wing Les Républicains (LR) party, now faces the challenges of forming a government capable of surviving a vote of no confidence and setting policy priorities in a politically fragmented National Assembly, with no party holding a clear majority.

His appointment has caused discontent among left-wing parties, particularly the New Popular Front (NFP), whose own candidate was rejected. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the radical France Unbowed, criticized the decision, calling for protests. Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally has indicated they will not join Barnier's government but will judge his policies on key issues like cost of living, security, and immigration.

Known for his role as the EU's lead Brexit negotiator, Barnier faces the challenge of navigating the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) party, which now holds significant sway in the French Parliament. The left-wing Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) union has refused to support any right-leaning government, leaving the RN as potential kingmakers. RN President Jordan Bardella has stated they will judge Barnier based on his policy decisions on key issues like purchasing power, security, and immigration.

Barnier has been critical of the far right, accusing them of wanting to leave the EU despite their public stance. He previously ran on a hard-right platform during the 2021 LR presidential primaries, advocating for policies that would have breached EU law, including a moratorium on immigration.

His appointment comes at a critical time, with a looming October 1 deadline to present a budget bill to Parliament. [Euractiv] [BBC] [CNN]

Over 100,000 people protested across France against the appointment of Barnier. Trade unions and NPF members organized the demonstrations, expressing anger over the rejection of their candidate.

According to the interior ministry, 110,000 people protested nationwide, with 26,000 in Paris; however, protest leaders claimed the number was as high as 300,000.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the radical France Unbowed party led the Paris protest, calling for significant mobilization and criticizing Macron's decision as a

“coup.” Demonstrators used slogans such as “denial of democracy” and “stolen election” to voice their frustration. [BBC]

(lm)

Man arrested after attempted arson of a synagogue

An as-of-yet unnamed suspect has been caught after attempting to set fire to a synagogue in the southern French town of la Grande-Motte on Saturday. He was arrested after an overnight manhunt involving 200 officers the suspect was arrested the next day in Nimes following a wound sustained in a firefight with the police.

The arsonist had set fire to several of the synagogue’s doors as well as vehicles outside, at a time when worshippers were expected to arrive, in what has been described as ‘an antisemitic attack’ by France’s prime minister Gabriel Attal. [France24]

(axc)

Increased calls for French MEP to face inquiry after attending pro-Gaza protest in Jordan

Rima Hassan is a newly elected Member of the European Parliament who has affiliated herself with the French far left. She has recently undertaken a tour of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, and for her strong pro-Palestine views she has been made a controversial figure in French politics. Le Pointe, a French magazine, first reported that Ms. Hassan was seen at a pro-Gaza protest in which slogans favorable to Hamas were chanted. After the publishing of the article, dozens of centrist French MPs have called for her immunity to be lifted for her to be prosecuted for the glorification of terrorism. In response, Ms. Hassan labeled these accusations as “fake news” and that she should not be held responsible for the chants of others. The National

Unexpected drop in unemployment rate in Q2 2024 is welcome news for President Macron

The French national statistics agency, INSEE, released data on Friday August 9th demonstrating that France's unemployment rate had declined to 7.3% in Q2 2024 from 7.5% in Q1. This news comes as a positive surprise given the agency had previously predicted that unemployment would remain stable in the second quarter before rising to 7.6% by the end of the year. [Euronews]

The promise of economic success has been one of the cornerstones of president Macron's government following 2017 pledges to "liberate work and the spirit of enterprise". To this end Bruno Lemaire, France's Economy and Finance Minister, took to X to share the positive development, highlighting the importance of stability to economic growth. This final statement is particularly noteworthy following the disturbances surrounding the recent European and legislative elections. [X]

While very unpopular among the wider-public, contributing to the year-long 'gilet jaunes' movement beginning in 2018, during his first term, Macron's economic reforms have contributed to unemployment in France declining from 9.6% in 2017 to 7.3% in Q2 2024. [Trading Economics]

(axc)

Heavy rain reduces French soft wheat production by an anticipated 25% in 2024

On August 9th France's ministry for Agriculture announced that consistently heavy rain patterns since autumn 2023 have negatives impacted the country's soft wheat harvest. Rain-delayed planting has resulted in a less bountiful harvest with approximately 11% left field coverage compared to 2023.

The ministry stated "As of August 1, 2024, cereal harvests are still underway, delayed by humidity and stormy episodes in July. Yields are revised downwards for all of these crops,".

At a time when global food prices have skyrocketed due to the disruption caused by the Ukraine war, this forecast of a reduced harvest in the worlds' third largest wheat exporter will undoubtedly be received as unwelcome news. [Euractiv]

(axc)

France calls on citizens in Lebanon to leave the country due to security concerns

Following an ongoing escalation of tensions in the levant, France, alongside the United States and the UK, has called on its citizens visiting or staying in Lebanon “to make their arrangements now to leave Lebanon as soon as possible”. The French foreign ministry has shared travel advice for the country's estimated 33,000 citizens currently in the country. Whilst commercial flights out of the country are still operating, more and more flights ordinarily scheduled to fly to Beirut from France are getting suspended owing to the increased security risks following deadly rocket fire into Israel from Lebanon. [RFI]

(axc)

German court lifts publishing ban on controversial compact magazine

A German court has lifted a temporary publishing ban on Compact magazine, pending a final ruling on efforts to permanently outlaw the publication. Described by the government as a "mouthpiece of the right-wing extremist scene," Compact has a circulation of 40,000 and a significant social media presence. The interior ministry had sought the ban last month, citing concerns that the magazine undermines Germany's constitutional order.

The administrative court in Leipzig acknowledged evidence of Compact violating human dignity but prioritized press freedom in its decision to overturn the ban. Compact’s editor-in-chief, Juergen Elsaesser, praised the ruling as a victory and expressed optimism about the magazine’s chances in the ongoing appeal. The interior ministry, however, defended its position, arguing that the magazine's content could incite actions against the constitutional order and asserting that it would continue to challenge Compact based on security intelligence. Compact is associated with the radical wing of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a party under state surveillance for its perceived threat to democracy. [Reuters]

(nm)

Green politician files complaint against far-right AfD

German Green Party politician Bernhard Stengele has filed a legal complaint against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) leadership in Thuringia, accusing them of incitement to hatred. The complaint targets AfD figures Björn Höcke and Stefan Möller, who allegedly referenced a song by Nazi sympathizer Franz Langheinrich in their state election program. The use of Nazi symbols is illegal in Germany. Stengele, a leading Green candidate in the upcoming September state election, has argued that Langheinrich's work is inseparable from his extremist views. The complaint was lodged with the Erfurt public prosecutor's office and made public on August 5. Möller has denied the accusations, and the AfD has dismissed the complaint as a misuse of the legal system. Despite controversies, recent polls show the AfD gaining significant support in Thuringia and Saxony. [Politico]

(nm)

German government faces crisis as far-right AfD rises in eastern elections

The future of Germany's government is in jeopardy as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) gains ground in upcoming regional elections in Thuringia and Saxony, potentially delivering a severe blow to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's center-left coalition.

AfD leaders have rallied supporters with speeches tapping into regional grievances, positioning the election as a battle for Germany's future. Meanwhile, Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD) struggles, polling at just 5%, raising concerns about its survival in state parliaments. [Deutsche Welle]

The rise of the AfD, fueled by discontent over economic challenges and fears related to migration, represents a broader threat to German democracy. The party's success could destabilize Scholz's government, which already faces internal divisions. Additionally, the elections in Thuringia and Saxony, followed by another in Brandenburg, could mark a turning point for the SPD and its coalition partners, the Greens and the Free Democrats (FDP). [The Guardian]

The prospect of the AfD winning in these regions has forced the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to consider unlikely alliances, including with the newly formed Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW). Despite differing ideologies, both parties share skepticism towards NATO and the West, reflecting lingering sentiments from the former East Germany.

As the elections loom, the outcome could reshape Germany's political landscape, with significant implications for the national government and its stance on key issues like migration, NATO, and relations with the United States. [Deutsche Welle]

(nm)

Knife attack at festival in Solingen leaves three dead, several injured

A knife attack at a festival in Solingen, western Germany, left three people dead and several others injured on Friday, according to local reports. The attacker fled the scene, prompting a large police response, including helicopters and emergency vehicles. Authorities have urged the public to avoid the area. [Deutsche Welle]

The festival was part of the city's 650th anniversary celebrations. The Solinger Tageblatt reported three fatalities, three very seriously injured, three seriously injured, and one other person wounded. The attack follows a series of knife crimes in Germany, with authorities vowing to intensify efforts to combat such violence. [ANSA]

(nm)

March in Berlin amplifies calls for LGBTQ+ constitutional protection

In July, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Berlin for Christopher Street Day (CSD), a massive demonstration in support of LGBTQ+ rights. Among the marchers was Wanja Kiber, who shared his story of coming out after moving to Germany from Kazakhstan. Initially met with shock and silence from his family, Kiber now sees his father as an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights, underscoring both personal resilience and the need for broader legal protections.

A key demand at the event was the amendment of Germany's constitution to explicitly ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Currently, Article 3 of the constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender, race, and religion, but does not mention sexual identity. Despite support from the governing coalition, the amendment faces opposition from conservative parties, notably the CDU/CSU, which argues that existing protections are sufficient.

Prominent figures, including German pop singer Herbert Grönemeyer, urged the crowd to continue pushing for this change, emphasizing that inclusion in the constitution would be a significant step toward social acceptance. Advocates argue that this amendment is overdue, highlighting the historical exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals from legal protections in Germany. [Deutsche Welle]

(nm)

Germany considers extending border controls amid success in curbing migration

Germany may extend its border controls beyond December 15 due to their success in curbing smuggling and irregular migration, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser announced. Speaking in Goerlitz on the Polish border, Faeser stated that controls will remain until the European asylum system is operational, likely by the end of 2025. The EU's recent agreement on new asylum rules, a significant breakthrough after years of disputes, is set to address irregular arrivals. Germany implemented stricter border measures with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Switzerland in response to a surge in asylum requests. Berlin will need to inform the European Commission of any extension. [Reuters] [Deutsche Welle]

(nm)

Germany considers taking stakes in defence firms to bolster arms industry, report reveals

The German government is considering taking stakes in arms-makers and defence projects in "strategic cases," according to a draft paper reported by Handelsblatt on Thursday. This proposal is part of a broader strategy to bolster Germany's arms industry amid Europe's defence ramp-up following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A spokesperson for the economy ministry noted the paper is not yet finalized, and the defence ministry had no immediate comment. If approved, the strategy could lead to more frequent government investments in strategically important companies and projects. Germany already holds a 25% stake in defence electronics firm Hensoldt and is exploring further deals, including potential

investments in Thyssenkrupp's warship division. [Reuters]

(nm)

German military base sealed off after suspected sabotage

Germany's Cologne-Wahn military base was briefly sealed off on August 14 following a suspected act of sabotage. Early reports indicate a hole was found in the fence near the base's water processing plant, prompting fears of contamination. Personnel were advised not to use the tap water while authorities conducted tests. Military police, local police, and the military intelligence agency MAD are investigating the incident, though no trespassers were found.

Security at the nearby NATO air base in Geilenkirchen was heightened as a precaution. [Deustche Welle]

(nm)

Germany issues arrest warrant for suspect in Nord Stream sabotage

Germany has issued an arrest warrant for Volodymyr Z., a Ukrainian diving instructor, in connection with the 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines. The attack, which resulted in gas leaks, has been under investigation by Germany, Denmark, and Sweden. German authorities believe Z., along with at least two other Ukrainian accomplices, planted explosive devices on the pipelines. Z. was last reported to be living in Poland but is now believed to be in hiding, possibly in Ukraine. Polish authorities were unable to act on the warrant before Z.'s disappearance. The investigation continues as no direct links between the suspects and the Ukrainian government have been found. [Deutsche Welle]

(nm)

German police raid target alleged people-smuggling ring

On September 4, German police launched a large-scale operation to dismantle a suspected people-smuggling ring responsible for illegally transporting at least 140

individuals into the country through the Balkans. The coordinated raids spanned five states, with the main focus on the eastern city of Jena in the state of Thuringia, where the smuggling network allegedly housed individuals after their arrival in Germany. Additional searches were conducted in other parts of the country, including Baden-Württemberg, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein, and North Rhine-Westphalia.

During the raids, five individuals were arrested, all of whom were described as key figures within the smuggling operation. These suspects included three Syrian nationals and two individuals of Iraqi citizenship, all arrested in Thuringia. Police said the group consisted of 18 suspects, aged between 23 and 57, and operated on various levels, from drivers to more organized roles. Investigations revealed that the smugglers had been active since at least December 2022, and their operations were financially driven, charging EUR 700 (USD 775) for transportation into Germany from Slovakia, and EUR 500 (USD 555) for continued transportation to neighboring countries.

The smugglers used the informal "Hawala" transfer system, which operates outside the formal banking system and is outlawed in Germany, to facilitate payments. Two of the intermediaries, known as "hawaldars," were identified as suspects in the case. The authorities were able to track down the smuggling network after intercepting several vans used to transport individuals across borders, a method the group favored to carry out its operations.

The operation is part of ongoing efforts by Germany's federal police, who are responsible for securing the country's borders, to crack down on illegal immigration. It also comes at a time of heightened political attention on migration issues in Germany. Recent events, such as a fatal knife attack in Solingen, combined with the electoral success of the anti-immigration party Alternative for Germany (AfD) in state elections in Thuringia and Saxony, have further underscored the urgency of addressing illegal immigration and border security. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

German growth forecast downgraded to zero percent

Germany's GDP growth forecast for 2024 has been downgraded to zero percent by the Ifo Institute, a leading research centre. This reflects concerns about

persistent low productivity and weak manufacturing, indicating that sluggish growth could become a long-term issue for Europe's largest economy.

Initially expected to grow by 0.4 percent, Germany's revised outlook points to structural problems, such as insufficient investment, an aging population, and rising competition from China. The ongoing energy crisis, spurred by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has also caused long-term damage to energy-intensive industries.

Despite recent reductions in energy prices, Germany remains vulnerable to future shocks, which have altered companies' manufacturing strategies. The Ifo report follows similar growth downgrades, including from the European Commission, which projected a meagre 0.1 percent growth in 2024. Germany's economy also faces entrenched challenges, with domestic and external demand remaining weak, delaying any substantial recovery. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Munich shooting at Israeli Consulate, police suspect terror

On September 5, an incident occurred in Munich near the Israeli Consulate and a Nazi-era museum, where an 18-year-old Austrian national fired at police officers with an old carbine rifle fitted with a bayonet. Police returned fire, striking the man, who later died from his injuries. Authorities suspect the attack was a terrorist act, potentially connected to the consulate and the memorial for the Israeli athletes killed in the 1972 Munich Olympics. The attacker was known to Austrian authorities for his suspected ties to Islamist groups, specifically the al-Nusra Front, which has links to al-Qaeda.

Bavaria's counterterrorism unit is leading the investigation, and security services are analysing the suspect's motives. The incident has raised security concerns, especially in light of ongoing tensions in the Middle East and the protection of Jewish and Israeli institutions in Europe. German officials, including Bavarian Premier Markus Söder, highlighted the significance of the incident happening on the anniversary of the 1972 Munich Olympic attack, although further investigation is ongoing. Israeli President Isaac Herzog condemned the attack and praised the swift action of the security forces. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Far-right AfD and left-wing BSW shake up German politics in state elections

In a startling shift for German politics, parties on both the extreme right and left delivered a significant blow to the country's mainstream political establishment in the September 1 state elections. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured the highest number of votes in Thuringia and placed second in Saxony, two of Germany's 16 federal states. Meanwhile, the far-left Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which was recently formed, placed third in both states, highlighting the growing political fragmentation in the country.

Both Thuringia and Saxony were once part of former East Germany before reunification in 1990, and the rise of these radical parties reflects ongoing dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The AfD's strong performance, in particular, underscores the increasing appeal of populist rhetoric in regions that have long felt economically and socially left behind. [Bloomberg]

What makes this electoral shift even more concerning for traditional parties is the convergence of views between the far-right AfD and the far-left BSW. Despite being on opposite ends of the political spectrum, both parties share common stances on key issues: they are both anti-immigration and advocate for a pro-Russia stance. Both parties have called for Germany to cease its military support for Ukraine, a stance at odds with the policies of the governing coalition. [The Guardian]

This populist surge is seen as a warning for Chancellor Scholz's government, which consists of a three-party coalition made up of Scholz's center-left Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP). Together, these mainstream parties garnered less than 15% of the vote in both Thuringia and Saxony, a stark reflection of the public's growing disillusionment with established political forces.

The success of AfD and BSW in the eastern states has added pressure ahead of the upcoming September 22 elections in Brandenburg, the state surrounding Berlin. Brandenburg's results are expected to further test the resilience of Scholz's coalition, with both radical parties aiming for a strong showing. [Bloomberg]

As Germany prepares for its next federal election, just over a year away, the growing popularity of fringe parties is reshaping the country's political landscape. Mainstream parties, particularly Scholz's government, will need to reassess their strategies to address the concerns of voters who feel increasingly alienated from traditional politics.

The rise of AfD and BSW signals a shift toward populist, anti-establishment politics that could have long-term implications for Germany's role in Europe and the broader international community. [Bloomberg]

(nm)

Who is Sahra Wagenknecht? The left-wing rebel shaking up German politics

Sahra Wagenknecht, a prominent figure in German politics, is making headlines again as her newly founded political party, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), gains traction in recent state elections. The party has shocked Germany's political establishment by securing a strong third-place finish in both Thuringia and Saxony, highlighting the discontent among left-wing voters.

Wagenknecht, a self-described "left conservative," has been a divisive figure throughout her political career. Born in East Germany and raised in East Berlin, she has long been associated with the far left, including her previous leadership role within the Die Linke party. However, her split from Die Linke earlier this year, after a public fallout over ideological differences, has allowed her to carve out a new path that appeals to voters disillusioned by mainstream leftist policies. [The Times]

Her BSW party, which managed to secure 15.8% of the vote in Thuringia and 11.8% in Saxony, focuses on key issues that deviate sharply from traditional left-wing positions. Wagenknecht has been an outspoken critic of immigration policies and advocates for a more conservative approach, particularly regarding the number of refugees Germany should accept. She has also voiced strong opposition to Germany's continued support of Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, calling for diplomatic solutions and an end to military aid.

Wagenknecht's views on foreign policy, especially her pro-Russia stance, have drawn criticism and comparisons to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Both parties share a critical view of NATO and favor stronger relations with Russia, which has led

some to describe her as a populist figure who transcends typical left-right divisions. This alignment on key issues has seen her praised by AfD supporters, despite her ideological origins on the far left. [DeutscheWelle]

Wagenknecht's economic policies, however, remain firmly rooted in left-wing ideals. She supports increased social spending, high wages, and state ownership of key industries. Her controversial stance on migration and foreign policy, coupled with her calls for greater focus on Germany's working class, have made her a polarizing but undeniably influential figure.

As Wagenknecht continues to make waves in German politics, her BSW party is expected to challenge the political status quo further in upcoming elections, particularly as the left grapples with her growing influence and appeal among disillusioned voters. [Euronews]

(nm)

Ireland Risks Losing Data Centres Without New Power Agreements

Eirgrid, the operator of Ireland's electricity network, has issued a stark warning about a potential "mass exodus" of data centres if new connection agreements are not secured. In a recent presentation, Eirgrid pointed out that power supply pressures, which have been a concern since 2016, were brought to the Minister for Transport's attention in 2021 due to a critical power generation deficit. Despite strong relationships with tech companies, the ongoing uncertainty around new connections remains a significant issue. The potential departure of major data centres could derail Ireland's ambitions in the ICT sector, particularly in AI development.

Eirgrid stressed the importance of developing a credible transition plan instead of a shutdown, advocating for the prioritization of critical projects and collaboration with innovative, low-carbon operators. They dismissed the unrealistic expectation of "zero carbon" data centres, comparing it to demanding "zero carbon" aircraft for increasing airport traffic. The state should coordinate new projects with planned grid expansions and recognize the transition period to a zero-carbon grid. This presentation, shared with the IDA amid ongoing debates over data centre development, emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, strategic approach to energy policy. [Irish Independent]

(nm)

Ireland intensifies crackdown on illegal migration

Ireland's efforts to return asylum seekers to the EU countries where they first arrived, as mandated by the Dublin Regulation, have largely fallen short. Over the past four years, Ireland requested the transfer of more than 2,750 asylum seekers, but only 31 were successfully returned. The Department of Justice acknowledged that the current system for inter-country transfers is ineffective and "not fit for purpose." [Irish Independent]

During the same period, Ireland received 626 requests from other EU nations to take back asylum seekers and agreed to 182 of them, with only 54 transfers completed. The Dublin Regulation is intended to ensure that asylum applications are processed in the first EU country of arrival, but many asylum seekers continue to move to other countries. The challenges of the current system have led Ireland to support the new EU Migration and Asylum Pact, which seeks to create a more equitable and efficient asylum process across member states.

To address illegal immigration, Ireland has introduced increased fines for airlines and ferry companies that fail to ensure passengers have proper travel documentation. These fines, which have risen from €3,000 to €5,000, are part of a broader crackdown that also includes new visa requirements, enhanced border management, and targeted operations against passengers destroying documents mid-flight. [The Journal]

These initiatives have contributed to a significant reduction in undocumented arrivals at Dublin Airport, with numbers expected to drop by 50% this year. By mid-July, 1,067 deportation orders had been issued, and 303 asylum seekers opted for voluntary return, bringing the total returns this year to 397. [The Journal]

(nm)

Ireland to welcome Afghan refugees

Ireland will provide refuge to 50 Afghan refugees in both 2024 and 2025, Tánaiste Micheál Martin announced on Wednesday, marking the third anniversary of the Taliban's return to power. The

Taliban's rule has led to widespread human rights abuses, with women and girls suffering severe restrictions on education, employment, and basic freedoms.

Describing the situation in Afghanistan as "one of the worst in the world," Mr. Martin condemned the Taliban's "gross human rights abuses" and urged for the reversal of its "discriminatory and draconian" decrees. He highlighted the ongoing threats faced by the Afghan people, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances.

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) will prioritize women at particular risk due to their activism in human rights, justice, politics, media, education, and other vulnerable spheres. This move follows the IRPP's 2021 initiative, which allocated 650 refugee places for those most at risk under the Taliban regime.

Mr. Martin also called attention to the plight of ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Hazara people, who have faced "horrendous human rights abuses" under Taliban rule. With 23.7 million people in Afghanistan in need of humanitarian assistance this year, Ireland's commitment to aiding refugees underscores the dire situation in the region. [Irish Examiner]

(nm)

Prime Minister warns Ireland "not immune" to terrorism amid rising threat levels

Ireland is not immune to the threat of terrorism, the Prime Minister, Simon Harris, has warned. Speaking at an event in County Carlow, Harris emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant against the risks of terrorism and extremism. His comments follow a recent report indicating that the Garda Commissioner has raised the threat level from moderate to substantial, signalling that an attack is now considered likely.

Harris, who has personally faced threats against himself and his family, reassured the public that the police are closely monitoring the situation and are fully supported in their efforts to maintain safety. He highlighted the resilience of Ireland's communities, urging the public not to let a small number of extremists distort the country's values. Although Harris did not confirm changes to security policy, he expressed confidence in the robustness of existing

laws and the commitment of gardaí to ensure a safe environment for all, especially as the next election approaches. [Breaking News]

(nm)

Prime Minister Harris condemns violence against politicians at Michael Collins commemoration

At a ceremony commemorating the 102nd anniversary of Irish freedom fighter, Michael Collins', death, Taoiseach Simon Harris condemned attempts to silence elected politicians through violence and intimidation. Speaking in west Cork, Harris emphasized the enduring relevance of lessons learned from Ireland's turbulent past, highlighting the values of peace, diversity, and dialogue. He warned against the rise of hate and violence, particularly on social media, and called for the protection of democracy. Harris also pledged to address housing issues, ensure equal education, and combat divisive rhetoric on migration, urging unity in upholding Ireland's founding principles of freedom, equality, and opportunity. [Breaking News]

(nm)

Ireland sees largest population growth in 16 years, driven by record immigration

Ireland’s population surged by nearly 99,000 people over the past year, marking the largest increase since 2008, according to official figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). The population reached an estimated 5.38 million by April 2024, with most of the growth—79,300 people—attributed to net migration. This is the highest level of net migration since 2007.

Immigration levels hit 149,200, while emigration was recorded at 69,900. The influx included 30,000 returning Irish citizens and significant numbers from other EU countries and Ukraine. Immigration has become a contentious issue, particularly in light of Ireland’s existing housing crisis. Right-wing protests have erupted in response to the arrival of asylum seekers, with some incidents of violence reported. As housing and immigration dominate public concerns, these issues are likely to be central in the upcoming general election. [BBC]

(nm)

Monaco swears in new Minister of State

The new Monégasque head of state officially began his duties on the second of September after his appointment in July. Mr. Guillaume Didier is the successor to Mr. Pierre Dartout who served in the role from 2020 onwards. Following an institution ceremony headed by the reigning Prince Albert II, Mr Didier was presented a roadmap of projects for the new minister of state to prioritise, with a focus on environmental sustainability, urban planning and security. [Monacolife]

(lm)

New Dutch government to stop funding shelters for failed asylum seekers

The new right-wing Dutch government has announced plans to stop approximately EUR 30 million in funding for shelters housing asylum seekers whose residency applications have been rejected. These shelters, located in major cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and Eindhoven, are set to close on January 1, 2025.

Immigration minister Marjolein Faber, a member of Geert Wilders's far-right Freedom Party, justified the decision by stating that those in the shelters had their asylum claims rejected and should have left the country. This move marks the end of "bed-and-board" assistance introduced in 2018. The only remaining options for these individuals will be emergency accommodations run by charities or churches, or they may face homelessness.

The coalition government, which took office in July, is also considering legislation that could temporarily stop accepting asylum seekers, potentially putting the Netherlands at odds with EU regulations. Minister Faber acknowledged that the Netherlands is facing a refugee accommodation crisis, as cities like Utrecht struggle to cope with an influx of refugees, particularly from Ukraine. [The Irish Times]

(gvc)

Dutch army to have its own tank unit for the first time in 10 years

The Netherlands' defense ministry has unveiled an ambitious plan to modernize and "future-proof" the country's military in response to escalating global threats, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine and rising geopolitical tensions. The plan, described as the most significant in the nation's recent military history, aims to enhance national defense and meet NATO commitments through major investments in military capabilities.

Key initiatives include the acquisition of additional F-35 fighter jets and the reestablishment of a Dutch tank battalion—crucial elements in strengthening the country's defense posture. The plan, outlined in a defense white paper on September 5, also addresses concerns about geopolitical threats from Russia and China. While Russia seeks direct confrontation with the West, China is seen as undermining the international legal order through more subtle, systemic methods. These challenges have prompted the Netherlands, along with its NATO allies, to address capability gaps and ensure military readiness for future conflicts.

Beyond tanks, likely the Leopard 2, the white paper calls for procuring new anti-submarine frigates and advanced naval weapons systems. It also emphasizes the need to tackle personnel shortages, which have hindered the Dutch military's ability to meet deployment requirements. To resolve this, the ministry plans substantial investments in recruitment and training, aiming to expand the military's manpower and ensure sustained operations.

The defense budget will increase by EUR 2.4 billion (USD 2.66 billion) annually, bringing total spending to EUR 24 billion (USD 26.6 billion). This significant budget boost ensures that the Netherlands' military expenditure remains above NATO's 2 percent of GDP benchmark. The timing is notable, as it comes just before former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte is set to take over as NATO Secretary General. [Reuters] [abc news]

(lm)

Swiss prosecutors probe alleged electoral fraud scam

Swiss prosecutors are investigating allegations of electoral fraud related to the collection of signatures for popular initiatives. Companies are accused of manipulating signature collections, with some allegedly forging signatures to meet the requirements for

referendums. House searches and interviews have been conducted as part of the probe.

The case gained attention when organizers of the Citizens Service initiative noticed an unusually high number of invalid signatures and filed a complaint. The association Incop, responsible for collecting some of these signatures in exchange for money, is under scrutiny, with accusations that some sheets were copied from older petitions.

While no political pattern has emerged, several initiatives from both right-wing and ecological groups were affected, including the "Stop the blackout" pro-nuclear initiative and the SVP neutrality initiative. The Federal Chancellery also filed a complaint, and cases of forged signatures have been reported in both French- and German-speaking regions of Switzerland.

Some political figures, such as Zurich Green National Councillor Balthasar Glättli, are calling for a ban on commercial signature collection to prevent further fraud. [SWI]

(lm)

Swiss Greens lodge Federal Court appeal against 2022 pensions vote

The Swiss Green Party has lodged an appeal with the Federal Court to challenge the outcome of a 2022 vote that narrowly approved raising the retirement age for women from 64 to 65. The vote, which passed with just 50.5 percent of support, has come under scrutiny after it was revealed that government statistical forecasts about the pension system's financial health were miscalculated.

The Greens, alongside the Social Democratic Party, argue that the vote's result was based on incorrect information. They are seeking clarity before the new retirement age takes effect on January 1, 2025. The Federal Social Insurance Office recently revised its forecast, estimating CHF 4 billion (USD 4.7 billion) less in pension system expenditure by 2033 than previously projected. [SWI]

(lm)

Swiss trial opens of parents accused of supporting Islamic State

The trial of two parents accused of financially supporting their son, who left Switzerland in 2015 to fight for the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, began on August 19 at the Swiss Federal Criminal Court. The mother, a 60-year-old former hotel worker, is currently being questioned, while the father, absent due to health issues, will be summoned later.

The son initially told his parents he was going on vacation but later became an IS fighter. The mother claims she knew nothing about IS or Syria and stayed in contact with her son, who later expressed a desire to return home. Despite the son posing with weapons and threatening to carry out an attack in Switzerland, the mother insists he was coerced.

The parents are accused of sending over CHF 50,000 (EUR 53,296) to their son between 2016 and 2019. The mother argues that the money was intended to help him escape with his wife and child, not to support IS. She believes her son was manipulated and denies he is a terrorist. The trial continues in Bellinzona, Switzerland. [SWI]

(lm)

Risk of terror attack in Switzerland higher than before

The terrorist threat in Switzerland has increased since the start of 2024, according to Christian Dussey, director of the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service (FIS). This rise is largely due to a new campaign by the Islamic State calling for attacks in Europe, amplified through social media. Dussey highlighted that the most likely threat comes from isolated individuals inspired by jihadism, such as the knife attack by a 15-year-old on an Orthodox Jew in Zurich in March.

The number of arrests related to Islamist terrorism in Europe this year already exceeds last year's total, with Switzerland particularly affected. In April, three teenagers were arrested on suspicion of terrorist activities. Dussey linked the radicalization of youth to social media and psychological issues.

The FIS collaborates closely with foreign intelligence services to counter the Islamist threat, exchanging around 20,000 intelligence notes annually. Dussey also noted the ongoing impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which has led to hybrid warfare involving espionage, cyber-attacks, and disinformation, further straining the FIS’s already limited staff. Discussions are

underway to increase staffing to meet these challenges. [SWI]

(lm)

Switzerland offers cash prize to get munitions out of lakes

Switzerland's Defense Department is offering a cash prize of CHF 50,000 (EUR 53,296) for the best ideas to safely retrieve munitions dumped in several Swiss lakes, including Lake Lucerne and Lake Neuchatel. For years, the military used the lakes as disposal sites for old munitions, believing the practice was safe. However, concerns have risen about potential explosions and environmental contamination from highly toxic TNT in the water and soil. The task of removing the munitions, estimated to cost billions, is complex due to factors like poor visibility and challenging lake conditions. [BBC]

(lm)

Switzerland lifts ban on development of nuclear power plants due to geopolitical tension, climate targets

The Swiss government has announced plans to lift the ban on constructing new nuclear power plants (NPPs), which has been in place since 2018. This decision is driven by rising energy demands, climate goals, and geopolitical uncertainties, with the government seeking a more flexible approach to energy policy. Switzerland currently relies on four aging nuclear reactors for about one-third of its electricity, with the Beznau, Gösgen, and Leibstadt plants still operational, while the Mühleberg plant was decommissioned in 2019.

The lifting of the ban aligns with changing public opinion and recent legislative developments, including the "Electricity For Everyone At All Times" initiative, supported by center-right parties. However, the Federal Council rejected the initiative in favor of a simpler counter-proposal, which will be presented later this year. The government emphasized the need for "openness to technology" to meet future energy needs in a climate-friendly and secure manner.

Energy Minister Albert Rösti acknowledged that new nuclear power plants are not a short-term solution, but

preparations must begin now to keep options open for the long term, potentially within 15 years. Rösti also highlighted how factors such as decarbonization, the war in Ukraine, population growth, and obstacles to renewable energy projects have reshaped Switzerland's energy strategy.

While some municipalities have expressed readiness for new NPPs, such as Döttingen (for Beznau 3) and Leibstadt (for Leibstadt 2), experts believe the process will be slow. Legal changes, financing, permits, and opposition are expected to delay any new construction until at least 2040, with operational plants possibly emerging by the mid-2040s. [Fortune] [Nuclear Engineering]

(lm)

Four hopefuls left in race to lead UK Conservatives; Mel Stride eliminated

The race to lead the UK Conservative Party has narrowed to four candidates after former Work and Pensions Minister Mel Stride was eliminated in the latest round of voting on September 10. The contest, triggered by the resignation of former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak after the party's disastrous performance in the July 2024 election, will determine the future leader tasked with revitalizing the party after its worst electoral defeat.

Robert Jenrick, a right-wing candidate and former immigration minister, currently leads the pack with 33 votes. Jenrick gained prominence after resigning from his ministerial role, criticizing the government's asylum seeker policies as too lenient. His platform focuses on tough immigration measures, including capping legal migration at tens of thousands and advocating for Britain to leave the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to address rising immigration levels. Jenrick's hardline stance has resonated with many party members concerned about immigration.

In second place with 28 votes is Kemi Badenoch, a former trade minister. Unlike Jenrick, Badenoch has refrained from suggesting a specific cap on immigration numbers or leaving the ECHR. Instead, she argues that the immigration system is broken and advocates for reform by removing civil servants who are resistant to strict deportation policies. Badenoch's platform appeals to those in the party seeking a more pragmatic approach to immigration, without fully endorsing the extreme measures proposed by Jenrick.

Former Security Minister Tom Tugendhat and former Foreign and Interior Minister James Cleverly both received 21 votes, keeping them in the running. Both candidates are seen as more centrist options, aiming to restore unity within the deeply divided party.

The race, which will continue until the final vote by Conservative Party members on November 2, is difficult to predict due to the small number of MPs and the secretive nature of the members' voting process. The new leader will inherit a party in turmoil, having seen its parliamentary seats plummet from 360 in 2019 to just 121 after the July election. The Conservatives have gone through four leaders since former Prime Minister David Cameron resigned after the 2016 Brexit referendum, with each leader struggling to unite the party and navigate the challenges of post-Brexit Britain.

All remaining candidates have pledged to return the party to its traditional conservative values of small government, low taxes, and personal freedoms. However, they differ significantly on how to address the key issue of immigration, which has become a central concern for voters as public services remain stretched. Whoever emerges victorious will face the enormous task of rebuilding the party, mending internal divisions, and regaining public trust ahead of the next general election, due by mid-August 2029. [Reuters]

(lm)

British Home Secretary orders review of counter-extremism strategy, set to classify ‘extreme misogyny’ as extremism

On August 18th, British Home Secretary Yvette Cooper ordered a review of the U.K.'s counter-extremism strategy. Announcing her intentions to regulate those "pushing harmful and hateful beliefs," Cooper promoted the review as a long overdue policy review necessary to "map and monitor extremist trends" and "identify any gaps in existing policy."

In addition to surveying the rise of far right and Islamist extremism, the review will examine hatred of women as a rising radicalized ideological trend. The Home Office says the new strategy will "respond to growing and changing patterns" of extremism across the U.K. [BBC]

Cooper has commissioned a review to inform the development of a new counter-extremism strategy,

which Labour promised in its June manifesto. The review is set to be complete by October. [The Guardian]

(lm)

Labour party begins to scrap anti-strike law

On August 6th, the U.K. government announced plans to repeal the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act of 2023. Introduced last year, the bill enabled employers to require striking employees to maintain "minimum service levels" (MSLs) while striking.

As per the Strikes Act, employers in public sectors such as education services and border security could call employees to work even while they were striking. Unions that failed to maintain demands for "minimum service levels" would lose organized labor protections.

The bill's repeal will appease critics who have labeled the bill as inflammatory and debilitating to worker's rights to strike. Trades Union Congress, Britain's national organization of trade unions, argued that as many as one in five British workers – roughly 5.5 million people – could lose the right to strike due to the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act. Since the bill's imposition, companies have never actually exercised the "minimum service levels" provision, a fact which critics have further cited in arguing that the provision was merely incendiary: Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner told The Observer that the bill worked "only in poisoning industrial relations." [The Guardian]

Senior Conservative M.P.s, on the other hand, argue that the MSL provision is essential in staving off the crippling effects of labor strikes, which have gripped England, particularly in the wake of rising inflation.

In a UK.gov press statement, officials committed to rolling back the "minimum service levels" provision within the new government's first 100 days via the "Employment Rights Bill." [GOV.UK]

(lm)

Ex-UK police officer appears in court charged with multiple sex offences

Former UK police officer Mark Tyrrell, 55, appeared in court on September 4, facing 17 sexual offense

charges, including two counts of rape. The alleged crimes involved a woman he met while on duty with the Metropolitan Police. Tyrrell is also charged with perverting the course of justice, accused of deleting messages, lying to police, and pressuring the victim to give a false account. Additionally, he faces misconduct charges for engaging in an inappropriate relationship during his police duties. Tyrrell, who retired in 2023 after being suspended in April, will next appear in court on October 2. [Reuters]

(lm)

Britain needs extra USD 1.3 trillion investment for economic growth, report says

A recent report by the UK financial services lobby group Capital Markets Industry Taskforce has revealed that Britain needs an additional GBP 1 trillion (USD 1.3 trillion) in investment over the next decade to achieve economic growth. This would require GBP 100 billion annually, especially in energy, housing, and venture capital, to help reach Prime Minister Keir Starmer's goal of 2.5 percent annual growth, which the UK has struggled to achieve since before 2008. The report suggests reallocating capital from the GBP 6 trillion in the UK's pensions and insurance sector.

Specifically, the economy needs GBP 50 billion per year for energy investments to meet net-zero goals, GBP 30 billion for housing, and GBP 20-30 billion for venture capital. The report also proposes that the government incentivize investments, such as by reducing taxes on shares for retail investors.

A separate report from think tank New Financial highlights that UK pension funds invest significantly less in domestic equities than other advanced markets. The government is reviewing its pension system to increase domestic investments, following successful models from Canadian and Australian pension schemes. [Reuters]

(lm)

UK watchdog gives funds anti-greenwashing rule extension

The UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has extended the compliance deadline for sustainable fund

"naming and marketing" rules aimed at curbing greenwashing. Firms now have until April 2025 to meet these requirements, although they must still submit applications to comply with the Sustainability Disclosure Requirements (SDR) by October 1, 2024. The SDR is designed to ensure transparency in sustainability-related claims made by funds, incorporating new reporting, disclosure standards, and rules to prevent greenwashing.

The FCA's decision allows firms, particularly those needing to alter product names or use sustainability labels, more time to meet the standards. However, industry leaders warn against complacency, urging firms to maintain momentum in implementing these changes. The new rules require any references to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) claims in products to be fair, clear, and not misleading. [Reuters]

(lm)

Britain launches strategic foreign policy reviews

The UK Foreign Office has launched three strategic reviews of its foreign policy, aiming to strengthen the country's global influence. These expert-led reviews will focus on improving Britain's diplomatic relationships, optimizing its aid development work, and aligning foreign policy with economic and trade goals.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy emphasized the importance of integrating diplomacy and development to boost the UK's international presence. The Labour government, in power since July 2024, has prioritized long-term peace in the Middle East, resetting relations with the European Union, and reaffirming its strong commitment to NATO. The reviews are expected to conclude by the end of the year. [Reuters]

(lm)

UK military satellite launches to boost space power

The UK has launched its first dedicated Earth-imaging military satellite, named Tyche, designed to identify battlefield troop positions and vehicles. This is part of a broader plan to develop a network of satellites using various sensors by 2030.

This marks the UK's first wholly owned imaging capability, as it previously relied on allies like the U.S. for surveillance. The satellite was commissioned by UK Space Command and built by Surrey Satellite Technology Ltd. It was born from the UK's 2021 Space Command Paper and 2022 Space Defence Strategy, which committed GBP 970 million over 10 years to the Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTARI) program. [BBC]

(lm)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Eastern Europe

Referendum on constitutional reforms in Armenia planned for 2027

Armenian Justice Minister Grigor Minasian announced that a referendum on Armenia's new constitution, as requested by Azerbaijan, is likely to be held in 2027. Minasian, who leads the Constitutional Reform Council, stated that the new constitution will be thoroughly developed with public input and expert consultation.

The Constitutional Reform Council, formed in 2022 by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, was initially tasked with amending the existing constitution. However, in May, Pashinyan expanded the council's mandate to draft an entirely new constitution by January 2027, due to Azerbaijani demands related to territorial claims and the removal of references to Armenia's 1990 declaration of independence.

Azerbaijan has insisted on removing a preamble referring to this declaration, which cites the 1989

unification act between Soviet Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. The only way to address this demand is through a new constitution enacted by referendum. In June, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev insisted that concluding a peace deal with Armenia is "impossible" under an unchanged Armenian Constitution. [AA]

Prime Minister Pashinyan has denied accusations of enacting a new constitution under Azerbaijani pressure but acknowledged that peace with Azerbaijan would be difficult while the 1990 declaration is referenced.

Opposition politician Edmond Marukian, a member of the council, has publicly opposed the new constitution, accusing Azerbaijan of using this issue to avoid signing a peace deal and of potentially making further demands. Civic activists on the council have also expressed concerns about omitting the 1990 declaration, but they are outnumbered by other members who are likely to support Pashinyan's decision.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev renewed demands for constitutional changes in late April following the transfer of four disputed border areas from Armenia to Azerbaijan, a move condemned by Armenian opposition leaders as likely to prompt further demands from Baku. [Free Europe/Freedom]

(dql)

Agendas for regular sittings of Armenian National Assembly approved

(dql) On September 6, the Armenian National Assembly Council, led by President Alen Simonyan, convened to discuss and approve the agendas for the eighth session of the eighth convocation and the regular sittings scheduled for September 9. The Council also finalized the sequence for debating agenda items, which include 44 items. [ARMENPRESS]

(dql)

Former Nagorno-Karabakh President prioritizes Armenia's security amid discussions on possible return

Samvel Shahramanyan, former President of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh), who relocated to Armenia with over 100,000 forcibly displaced individuals after the

Azerbaijani takeover in September last year, reaffirmed in an interview on September 2 that Armenia's security is his top priority. He assured that his actions would not endanger Armenia's security or disrupt ongoing governmental processes. Shahramanyan also expressed his willingness to negotiate with Azerbaijani authorities on the possibility of return and to cooperate with relevant Armenian bodies.

When asked about the return of captives held in Azerbaijan, Shahramanyan acknowledged ongoing efforts but refrained from providing details. He also disclosed that no plan has been submitted to the government so far.

Pashinyan had earlier stated that some former Nagorno-Karabakh officials' views on the return of Armenians were unrealistic and contrary to Armenia's national interests. [ARMENPRESS]

(dql)

Ruling party wins parliamentary election in Azerbaijan

(dql) In the September 1 parliamentary elections, Azerbaijan's ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), led by President Ilham Aliyev, emerged as the dominant force, securing 68 seats in the 125-seats National Assembly.

The Central Election Commission revealed the initial results, which showed that 44 independent candidates were elected. Additionally, the Civic Solidarity Party won three seats, the Justice, Law and Democracy Party secured two seats, and several smaller parties, including the Great Azerbaijan Party and the Azerbaijan National Independence Party, each won one seat.

With a voter turnout of 37.27% from approximately 6.4 million registered voters, the election saw 990 candidates vie for 125 parliamentary seats. [AA]

This marks the seventh parliamentary election in Azerbaijan after in June the Azerbaijani parliament decided to dissolve itself and requested President Aliyev to call for snap elections to the legislature. The parliament argued that a new composition was needed to represent Azerbaijan effectively after the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. [Caspian News]

International Election Observation Mission for Azerbaijan of the Organization for Security of Co-

operation in Europe concluded that the elections “took place in a restrictive political and legal environment that does not enable genuine pluralism and resulted in a contest devoid of competition,” despite being efficiently prepared. [OSCE]

(dql)

Researcher detained in Azerbaijan on treason charges

Bahruz Samadov, an Azerbaijani activist, political analyst, and PhD candidate at Charles University in Prague, has been arrested on charges of treason. Samadov denies the allegations, stating in court, "I only wanted peace. I have not betrayed my country."

On August 23, the Sabail District Court in Baku ordered his pretrial detention for four months under Article 274 of the Azerbaijani Criminal Code.

Pro-government media reported that during the trial, Armenian citizens allegedly involved in the case were named. Samadov disappeared on August 21, and after his family lost contact with him, individuals claiming to be from the State Security Service searched his apartment, confiscating documents and computers. [Jam News]

Rights activists voiced suspicion that his detention is part of a broader crackdown by the Azerbaijani government on opposition figures and independent journalists. [Human Rights Watch]

Gulnoza Said, Europe and Central Asia program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, expressed concern, emphasizing that Samadov’s critical reporting does not constitute treason. She called for evidence of the charges or his immediate release. Samadov, a doctoral student at Charles University in Prague, is known for his incisive analysis on regional affairs, including Azerbaijan’s campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Jeffrey Trimble, chair of Eurasianet's board, also condemned the arrest, urging Azerbaijani authorities to clarify the situation transparently or release Samadov. [eurasianet]

(dql)

Belarus president pardons 30 convicted in antigovernment protests

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has pardoned 30 individuals convicted for their involvement in antigovernment protests from four years ago. This decision, described as a "humane gesture," includes seven women and 23 men, many of whom are parents of young children. The pardon follows a series of similar releases, with Lukashenko having previously freed 18 people in early July.

The pardoned individuals include trade union leader Vasil Berasnieu, former opposition candidate Ryhor Kastusiou, and Kseniya Lutskina, a former state TV journalist with a brain tumor. Despite these actions, nearly 1,400 people remain imprisoned for dissent, and thousands have fled Belarus.

The 2020 protests, sparked by allegations of electoral fraud, led to a severe crackdown by Lukashenko, who has been in power for 30 years. The repression intensified after Belarus allowed Russia to use its territory for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. [Al Jazeera]

(dql)

State funding for political parties to be cut in Estonia

Under the 2025 budget, state funding for political parties in Estonia will be reduced by 10 percent, as announced by Prime Minister Kristen Michal. He emphasized that the cuts would affect political parties just as they impact other sectors. The reduction will lower the total allocation from EUR 5.19 million to EUR 4.67 million, with the largest party, Reform, losing EUR 190,000 of its EUR 1.9 million funding.

Minister of Regional Affairs Piret Hartman acknowledged the cut would impact parties' operations, requiring them to find alternative revenue sources or reduce spending. Minister of Education Kristina Kallas echoed the sentiment, stating that political parties must face the same budget cuts as other public services. [ERR]

(dql)

Estonia launches competition to host a major foreign munitions firm

The Estonian Centre for Defense Investments launched a competition for a munitions producer to be established at a military base in 2025. Aiming to begin producing combat ready ammunition in the first half of the coming year. [Defense News]

The winning producer will be granted approximately 8,900 square meters of space at the Ämari military base for up to five years. Officials did not state specific munition types, only that it would cover “ammunition or combat ammunition containing explosives”.

This move is hoped to relieve Estonia of the current heavily reliance on other European nations for ammunition production.

(bw)

Estonia renews defense sniper lineup

Near the end of August, snipers from the Estonian Defence Forces and the Defence League conducted firing exercises with their newly acquired Sako sniper rifles. The new sniper rifle selected to bolster Estonian sniper capabilities is the Sako TRG M10 from Finnish company Sako.

Featuring cutting-edge optical and thermal sights, for better efficiency in weather conditions as well as a modular design. The TRG M10 is already in service in with many neighbouring countries including Sweden. [Estonian World]

(bw)

Georgia enforces “Foreign Agent” law amidst Constitutional disputes

On August 1, a controversial bill that threatens to discredit thousands of media outlets and civil society organizations of serving foreign powers as “agents” went into effect in Georgia. This follows two months of international warnings about the law's potential to hinder further Western integration and widespread local protests, which were dismissed by the ruling Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia party.

The new law requires independent organizations and media outlets that receive 20 percent or more of their funding from foreign sources to register publicly, widely criticized for implying they are "serving foreign interests." Numerous challenges to the law's legitimacy are still ongoing, including an appeal by President Salome Zurabishvili to the Constitutional Court. While several prominent organizations have pledged to oppose the law, there are concerns that smaller NGOs may struggle to cope with the associated fines.

The Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, passed in May [EiR No. 6, June/2024], comes more than a year after the ruling party and its allies abandoned a similar bill that labeled foreign-funded groups as "agents." In mid-April, tens of thousands of Georgians faced severe crackdowns and violent responses during protests against the revised bill, which critics argue resembles Russian legislation that has severely restricted independent media and public dissent.

The law conflicts with Article 78 of the Georgian Constitution, which requires officials to "take all measures within the scope of their competencies" to ensure Georgia's integration into the European Union and NATO. Government officials have consistently rejected claims that the legislation is "Russian" or labels groups as "foreign agents," despite its potential to similarly stigmatize organizations, akin to the situation in Russia. [Radio Free Europe]

Meanwhile, on September 2, the deadline for registering as “organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power” under the new law passed. According to the Ministry of Justice, 476 organizations applied for registration during the one-month voluntary registration period. Starting September 3, the Ministry of Justice can forcibly register additional CSOs, impose fines, and conduct monitoring activities. The registered organizations represent only about 1.5% of Georgia’s total CSOs, which are estimated to number over 30,000.

On August 29-31, the Constitutional Court held hearings on the law, prompted by five appeals, including one from Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili. The Court has yet to decide on the admissibility of the claims and whether to temporarily suspend the law's provisions. [Civil Georgia]

(zh/dql)

Contentious family values bill passes second hearing in Georgian parliament

On September 4, a controversial anti-LGBTQ+ bill passed its second reading in the Georgian Parliament. Titled "On Family Values and Protection of Minors," the bill closely mirrors the Russian anti-LGBTQ+ law adopted in 2013, marking it as the second significant piece of legislation in Georgia modeled after restrictive Russian laws. The first was the foreign agent bill, which was passed in May 2024 (see article above). [1 TV 1]

The bill includes restricting media content and prohibiting promotion of same-sex relationships and gender-affirming measures. It is set for final approval in the third reading, scheduled for the week of September 17, shortly ahead of parliamentary elections on October 26.

The ruling Georgian Dream party, which has been using homophobia as part of its election campaign strategy and called the election a referendum on "moral degradation or traditional values", will need to secure at least 113 out of 150 seats in Parliament in the upcoming elections to pass the bill. The party currently commands 74 seats and is supported by People's Power party and the European Socialist with nine and fours seats respectively. [Global Voices] [1 TV 2]

This legislative comes as Several opposition parties are boycotting the autumn session of the Georgian Parliament, which began on September 3. The boycotting parties include the United National Movement – Strength in Unity, Group of Reforms, Lelo, Eurooptimists, Freedom, and For National and Democratic State. These opposition groups continue their boycott in protest of the current political situation. [1 TV 3]

(dql)

Georgia's Prime Minister confirms ruling party to go against opposition

Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze has confirmed that the ruling Georgian Dream party plans to seek a ban on all opposition political forces in the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for October 26. Speaking to journalists, he argued that these forces are interconnected with the pro-Western United National Movement (UNM), the main opposition party. He suggested that legal action against them would be justified by their alleged criminal objectives.

When asked which opposition parties might be targeted, Kobakhidze specified that the focus would be

on the opposition coalition surrounding the UNM and related parties, including Ahali and Droa, two young pro-European political parties founded this year and in 2021, respectively. Kobakhidze also said he would target any politicians associated with the United National Movement in the past or present.

In addition, the prime minister indicated that the decision to ban these groups may involve more than just the Constitutional Court. He proposed that the prosecutors' office could initiate investigations, or a parliamentary commission might be formed.

Kobakhidze concluded that the revocation of parliamentary mandates would logically follow such a ban, asserting that it is unacceptable for representatives of what he described as a criminal political force to hold parliamentary seats. [Civil Georgia]

(zh)

Latvian government announce freeze of political party funding

On September 6, Latvian Prime Minister Evika Siliņa announced that state funding for political parties will be frozen next year. This decision, which has been supported by coalition partners, is part of broader austerity measures due to required budget cuts.

The government is implementing austerity measures that include restricting spending on goods and services, capping salary increases, and freezing positions in state and municipal institutions. Additionally, tax changes are planned to increase revenue for security priorities. [LSM]

The Ministry of Finance also announced that personal income tax, the minimum wage, and the non-taxable minimum will rise next year. [The Baltic Times]

(dql)

Latvian media council bans divisive Russian channels

Latvia's National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) has so far banned 142 Russian TV channels from transmission and distribution within the country. Initially banning only state-produced media outlets

such at RT (Russia Today) the NEPLP have extended bans to comedy and entertainment shows.

This follows research such as "*StratCom Laughs: In Search of an Analytical Framework*" published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom) in Riga in 2017, which studied the use of comedy in Russian media for strategic communication purposes. It also highlighted how humour was used to discredit Western political figures by Central Russian TV that was broadcast to domestic and international audiences. [Public Broadcasting Latvia]

Opinion polls indicated that Russian and Latvian speakers watched Russian entertainment shows and perceived them to be relatively harmless. However, Sigita Struberga, Secretary General of the Latvian Transatlantic Organisation (LATO), posited all Russian media including entertainment was closely monitored by the state to push political views. Struberga noted the use of historical comedic devices such as anecdotes, popular during the Soviet era and claimed Russian entertainment operated under the pretence of freedom through comedy to spread its crafted disinformation.

These bans began in 2023 as fears of Russian ideological advancement into Latvia boiled. In September 2023, the Latvian parliament supported a concept that would essentially ban all Russian-language state-owned media outlets by 2026. That was based on Lithuanian security authorities' analysis on cultural threats and risks to national security and the state. [RBC-UKRAINE].

(bw)

Latvian government allocates EUR 13 million to support smaller companies

The Latvian government has approved over EUR 11 million in additional support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to promote exports, with EUR 2 million earmarked for the development of dual-use products and technologies. This funding aims to provide continuous state support amid volatile market conditions, helping businesses reorient and expand into new markets.

Furthermore, The Latvian Investment and Development Agency (LIAA) will assist through consultations, business events, participation in trade shows, and export guidance.

The development of dual-use technologies will involve collaboration between LIAA and the Ministry of Defense to evaluate applications. [LSM]

(dql)

Military Officials propose recruiting women for compulsory military service

Latvian National Armed Forces (NBS) Commander Leonīds Kalniņš proposed the conscription of women for mandatory national defence service as worries about reaching target recruiting numbers next year rise [Baltic News Network].

The National Defence Service Law was passed by the Seima on April 5th, 2023, which mandated the introduction of conscription military service for men on a randomised selection basis.

This year saw the first round of conscripts for Latvian service and goals have been set for 1000 recruits in the next year with hopes of eventually reaching 4000 recruits per year.

Later in the month, Latvian Minister of Defence Andris Sprūds wrote on X, "...I support the mandatory conscription of women into the national defence service. 2028 could be the optimal time to start it" [X]. Sprūds reiterated his statements in a TV interview later and stressed that necessary preparations had to be completed to accommodate the change, in the military, parliament and wider Latavian society [Baltic News Network 2].

In 2023, Latvia leads Baltics in female representation in the military where women make up 16.5% of army personnel. Compared to the 12.2% of Lithuania and 9% of Estonia. [CEPA]

Kalniņš has also regarded "quality, efficiency and discipline are much higher in the units where women serve" drawing from his experience in the National Guard.

The support of these high-ranking officials shows momentum in the Latvia's urgent boost in national security measures in the context of the neighbouring war. As Latvia is a NATO member, trends like this in increasing military power is likely to continue and intensify.

(bw)

More than 1740 candidates registered for general elections in Lithuania

Lithuania's Central Electoral Commission (VRK) has completed candidate registration for the general election scheduled for October. A total of 1,740 candidates will compete for seats in the 141-member Seimas, the Lithuanian parliament.

Half of the seats will be allocated through party lists that meet the 5-percent threshold, with the remaining seats contested in 71 single-mandate constituencies.

In comparison, the 2020 elections saw 1,754 candidates, while 1,415 were registered in 2016. The Seimas elections are set for October 13, with runoffs in single-member constituencies occurring two weeks later if no candidate achieves a majority. [Lithuanian National Radio and Television]

(dql)

Ruling party chairman seeks cooperation with opposition party for upcoming Lithuanian legislative election

Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis has called for discussions with the Social Democrats (LSDP) due to concerns that the rising Nemunas Dawn party, led by ex-MP Remigijus Žemaitaitis – known for his antisemitic views – might shift the country's political direction.

Landsbergis, who chairs the ruling Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), suggested that his party is open to both public and private talks with the opposition LSDP to address the influence of radical political forces.

He emphasized the need for serious internal discussions and invited the LSDP to explore collaborative strategies, even privately, to counteract the potential shift in direction from Western alignment. Landsbergis also criticized President Gitanas Nausėda for lacking a clear stance on radical forces, suggesting that the president should demonstrate leadership by advocating for measures to exclude such forces from the government. [Delfi 1]

Landsbergis' move comes after a poll in August showed that the Nemunas Dawn party has overtaken

his party in voter support. According to the poll's results the LSDP leads with 12.9% support in July, though this is a 0.9% decrease from June. The Nemunas Dawn party, particularly popular among voters in district centers and rural areas, has gained 1.5% to reach 10.2%. The TS-LKD has dropped to third place with a steady 10.1% support. The Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS) has risen to 8% support, up from 5.7% in June. The Democrats For Lithuania, led by former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, follow with 7.1%, an increase from 5.8%. The Liberal Movement, led by Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, is now in sixth place with 6.4%, up from 5.9% in June. The Freedom Party (3.2%) and the Labour Party (2.1%) fall below the 5% threshold needed for parliamentary seats. [Delfi 2]

TS-LKD, along with the Liberal Movement party and the Freedom Party, forms a three-party government coalition. The coalition holds a slim majority of 73 seats in the 141-member Seimas.

(dql)

Lithuania to raise minimum pay from next year on

On August 28, the Lithuanian government approved a rise in the monthly minimum gross wage to EUR 1,038 and the hourly minimum wage to EUR 6.35, effective from 2025. This increase was proposed by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour.

The monthly minimum wage will see a 12.34% increase of EUR 114 from the current EUR 924, while the hourly minimum wage will rise by 12.38% or EUR 0.70 from EUR 5.65 set for 2024. The Cabinet also recommended that social partners consider setting higher minimum wage rates in their collective agreements.

The labour ministry estimates that the monthly net income for the lowest earners will rise by EUR 69 to EUR 777, surpassing the projected at-risk-of-poverty threshold of EUR 732 for 2025. According to the State Social Insurance Fund Board (Sodra), about 100,000 workers in Lithuania earned the minimum wage or less in May 2024, including approximately 13,000 in budgetary institutions. [Delfi]

(dql)

Lithuania increases military spending

Lithuania plans to invest EUR 1.2 billion over the next decade in acquiring new military equipment, as announced by Defense Minister Arvydas Anušauskas. This investment will focus on enhancing the country's defense capabilities, including the purchase of infantry fighting vehicles, artillery systems, and other advanced military technologies.

The spending is part of Lithuania's broader strategy to bolster its national defense in response to the growing security threats in the region, particularly in light of Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine. This is builds upon the plan confirmed by Lithuania's parliament in March which expected at least 3% of gross domestic product to be spent on defence from 2025 onwards. As of June, this year, over 3% of GDP has already been used on military spending in the country. [Reuters]

The plan highlights Lithuania's commitment to strengthening its armed forces and ensuring that they are well-equipped to meet modern security challenges. This investment is also aligned with the country's efforts to meet NATO's defense spending requirements, further reinforcing its role as a member of the alliance. The acquisition of new military equipment is expected to significantly enhance Lithuania's defense posture over the next decade. [Lithuanian National Radio and Television]

(bw)

Lithuanian army receives German submachine guns

On August 29, the Lithuanian defense ministry announced that the country's Armed Forces has acquired a batch of MP7 A2 submachine guns valued at EUR 1.3 million. Manufactured by German firearms manufacturer Heckler & Koch, these submachine guns were selected for their light weight, high rate of fire, and superior penetrative performance.

While they are widely used by military and police forces in 24 NATO countries, this is the first time the Lithuanian military has introduced this type of weapon. [Delfi]

(dql)

Moldovan electoral agency adopts regulation on postal voting

On August 8, Moldova's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) approved two key regulations regarding postal voting for the upcoming October 20 presidential election and EU membership referendum.

The first regulation details the digital identification process for remote voters requesting postal voting, ensuring verification of their identity and registration. The second outlines the procedures for counting, consolidating, and displaying postal voting results. [Moldpres]

(hs)

Moldova divided over EU membership

Concurrently to be held on October 20, Moldova's presidential election and EU membership referendum come at a critical moment. President Maia Sandu has aligned the two votes, aiming to secure re-election by capitalizing on strong public support for EU integration.

However, this approach has also galvanized pro-Russian opposition forces. Former President Igor Dodon, a prominent pro-Russian figure, has withdrawn from the race and endorsed former Prosecutor-General Alexandru Stoianoglo, consolidating opposition to Sandu.

Public opinion is sharply divided, with many expressing skepticism toward the West and sympathy for Russia, reflecting the broader polarization linked to the Ukraine war. Sandu's pro-Western stance faces challenges from Russian interference, including disinformation campaigns, energy disruptions, and support for separatist movements within Moldova.

Moldova remains reliant on electricity from a Russian-controlled power plant in Transnistria. With the gas transit contract expiring at the end of 2024, failure to renew it could lead to a severe energy crisis, affecting both Moldova and Transnistria.

As the election nears, these intertwined political and economic issues will shape Moldova's immediate future, with major implications for its stability and EU ambitions. [Crisis Group]

(hs)

Moldovan government eyes 30% renewable electricity consumption by 2030

Moldova aims to meet 30% of its electricity needs with renewable energy by 2030. To achieve this, the government plans to launch tenders for 60MW of solar PV capacity between September 2024 and January 2025, with individual projects capped at 1MW. The price cap for solar PV has been set at €86.7/MWh, and the guaranteed fixed price from the auction cannot exceed MDL1.67/kWh.

Currently, Moldova has 76.9MW of installed solar PV capacity and 115.3MW of distributed solar. The government sees potential for over 4.6GW of solar capacity. To encourage investor participation, the Ministry of Energy will prioritize connection approvals for successful bidders and plans to reform legislation to enhance the auction process.

Recent reforms include a shift to net invoicing for smaller producers and a 15-year fixed rate for solar PV plants. Moldova also allows renewable energy producers to export electricity to Ukraine and Romania, contributing to the country's goal of increasing energy independence and transitioning to green energy. [PV Tech]

(dql)

Russia to allocate funds from federal budget for defense and reconstruction in regions hit by Ukrainian attacks

On August 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved measures to support the Belgorod, Bryansk, and Kursk regions following Ukrainian attacks.

Funding from the federal budget will cover local defense units and damages to industrial and agricultural facilities. Evacuated children will have access to education in other regions, with remote learning options available.

The government will also ensure uninterrupted mobile and internet services, prepare heating systems for winter, and provide one-time financial aid. Additionally, federal support will be allocated to restore or replace damaged housing and help evacuees find employment. [Kremlin Telegram]

(hs)

Telegram creator Pavel Durov's arrested

On August 26, Pavel Durov, the founder of Telegram, was arrested in Paris, raising concerns about the future of the messaging app that has played a critical role in Russia's war on Ukraine. Founded in 2013, Telegram has transformed from a niche communication tool into a global phenomenon, widely used by Russian citizens and military forces alike. With its strong encryption and privacy settings, Telegram became the primary platform for uncensored news, military coordination, and propaganda during the conflict.

Durov's arrest, linked to criminal activities on the app and his lack of cooperation with law enforcement, has prompted fears of a significant disruption in Russia's military operations. Telegram is not only used to communicate military information but also to share real-time battlefield updates, making it a key tool in Russia's war strategy. The platform's unregulated nature has made it a repository for some of the most gruesome combat footage, changing how information spreads during wartime.

The arrest has also sparked concerns about the app's financial viability and the future of its privacy protections. French authorities may seek access to private chats, which could undermine Telegram's perceived security and lead to a mass exodus of Russian users. Russian authorities have previously tried and failed to block Telegram, but the latest developments have prompted state officials and intelligence agencies to reconsider their reliance on the platform. [Le Monde] [Euronews] [Spectator]

(hs)

Ukraine bans religious groups tied to Moscow

On August 24, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a new law banning religious groups with ties to Russia. This move is seen as targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). The UOC has been accused of promoting pro-Russian propaganda since the early stages of the Russian invasion. Despite declaring independence from Russian influence, the church has historically been subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. [AP]

The UOC has accused the government of sowing division among Ukrainians. However, a survey conducted in April by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that 63% of Ukrainians believe the church should be banned entirely.

The new gives religious groups nine months to sever ties with Moscow. If they fail to comply, the law allows the government to shut them down. [CNN]

(ycl)

Ukraine foreign minister Kuleba resigns ahead of cabinet reshuffle

On September 4, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba submitted his resignation, following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's announcement of an imminent cabinet reshuffle aimed at strengthening the government two and a half years into Russia's invasion.

Since assuming office in 2020, Kuleba has played a central role in Ukraine's diplomatic efforts to counter Russia's aggression, securing international support and advocating for Ukraine on the global stage. He became the highest-ranking Ukrainian official to visit China since the war escalated in February 2022. [Euronews]

On September 5, the Ukrainian parliament approved the cabinet changes announced earlier. Andrii Sybiha, a seasoned diplomat and former deputy foreign minister and ambassador to Turkey, succeeded Dmytro Kuleba as the new foreign minister. Sybiha, who previously played a key role in overseeing foreign policy and strategic partnerships in President Zelenskyy's office, will now focus on Ukraine's NATO integration. Kuleba is expected to take on a new role centered on this integration effort.

The reshuffle also included the appointment of deputy prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration Olha Stefanishyna as deputy minister for European integration, with an expanded portfolio that now includes the justice ministry. Oleksiy Kuleba, previously the Deputy Head of the Office of the President, was appointed deputy prime minister for reconstruction, regions, and infrastructure. Additionally, 31-year-old Herman Smetanin, head of state-owned Ukrainian Defence Industry JSC, was named minister for strategic industries, overseeing domestic arms production.

Commenting on the reshuffle, Zelensky emphasized the need for heightened government activity, stating, “It is crucial that the government operate as actively as possible – more actively than before – at all levels.” [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera 4]

(dql)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southeastern Europe

Republika Srpska President Dodik denies secession plans from Bosnia

Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska, has denied claims that the Bosnian Serb entity has ever pursued a policy of secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dodik stated that Republika Srpska has not challenged the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Bosnia under the terms of the Dayton Agreement. (Radio Free Europe)

While denying any secessionist intentions, Dodik emphasized that Republika Srpska retains "the right to a political fight for its status" within the framework of the Dayton Agreement.

Dodik’s remarks came a day after CIA Director William Burns visited Sarajevo, following what a U.S. government official described as "worrying secessionist rhetoric and actions" in the region. (Radio Free Europe)

(ab)

Bulgaria passes law banning LGBTQ+ teaching in schools

On August 7, the Bulgarian Parliament voted to adopt new amendments to the Law on School and Pre-School Education, banning the promotion of ideas and views related to "non-traditional sexual orientation or determination of gender identity other than biological." [Novinite]

In a debate that lasted around four hours, lawmakers deliberated over the exact definition of what qualifies as non-traditional sexual orientation propaganda and its possible implications. They eventually convened on a definition stating: "Non-traditional sexual orientation is different from the generally accepted and embedded in the Bulgarian legal tradition concept of emotional, romantic, sexual or sensual attraction between persons of opposite sexes." [Novinite]

The bill's main proponents, the relatively pro-Russian party "Revival" (Vazrazhdane) led by Kostadin Kostadinov, contend that recent public efforts to normalize non-traditional sexual orientations are unacceptable and violate the constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Advocates for the bill argue that promoting socio-cultural models of non-traditional sexual orientation near schools is inconsistent with Bulgarian legal traditions. Kostadin Kostadinov defended the bill against criticism, stressing the need to prevent such education at a tender age.

In the first reading, out of 171 representatives, 154 voted "in favor," eight "against," and nine abstained. Seven deputies from "We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria" (WCC-DB) and one from GERB voted "against." After the first reading, the deputies proceeded to debates in the second reading, where WCC-DB did not support the bill, and their entire group voted "against." [Novinite]

The new provisions were supported by "Revival" as well as other parties including GERB, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), "There Is Such a People" (TISP), and various factions of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Despite objections from "We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria" (WCC-DB), which saw seven deputies vote against the first reading and 33 in opposition during the second, the bill passed with a significant majority. [Novinite 2]

The amendments, which were defined in part by a Wikipedia entry cited by the democratic coalition

representative Elisaveta Belobradova, have received blowback from many progressive groups. The legislative changes were described by some non-governmental organizations and MPs as discriminatory and conflicting with both European and Bulgarian human rights legislation

Critics of the bill argue that it is more about "cheap populism" than addressing genuine issues in the education system. They believe the bill sets a dangerous precedent, conflicting with fundamental human rights and European standards. Opponents also note that the bill's definition of "non-traditional sexual orientation" appears to be based on a Wikipedia entry, lacking legal clarity.

Former BSP leader Kornelia Ninova criticized the bill for introducing discriminatory content and mentioned sexual health materials in schools. In response, Georgi Georgiev from GERB warned that the bill could set a troubling precedent, potentially conflicting with European human rights conventions and Bulgaria's constitution. [Novinite 2]

The swift passage of the bill has generated significant controversy and debate, with concerns about its impact on education and human rights in Bulgaria. Civil rights organizations have strongly objected, arguing that the new law violates fundamental human rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights and UN conventions.

Rights NGOs such as Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) have urged lawmakers not to pass the changes, saying they "breach basic human rights", including those enshrined in the country's constitution as well as EU laws and international conventions. [France 24]

A protest was staged in Sofia's "Nezavisimost" square demanding the bill's rejection and measures against student harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. [Novinite 3]

(pt)

Bulgaria faces seventh election in three Years

Bulgaria is heading towards its seventh parliamentary election since 2021 as their president, Rumen Radev, was once again unsuccessful in naming a new Prime Minister.

This comes after the "There Is Such a People" (ITN) returned the unfulfilled third and final mandate that Radev offered the small populist party in his hopes that they could form a new government. [Sofia Globe]

The Speaker of the National Assembly, Raya Nazaryan, refused President Rumen Radev's offer to be the next acting Prime Minister. [Novinite]

President Radev now has two months to select a new caretaker prime minister to propose a government and prepare for the upcoming vote.

Radev mentioned that the list of potential candidates had been narrowed down, with Raya Nazaryan being the only new addition. However, Nazaryan reiterated her opposition to taking on the role, arguing that high-profile political figures would not contribute to productive dialogue or enhance public trust in the political process during the election campaign. [Novinite]

So far, only Dimitar Glavchev has confirmed his willingness to continue leading a caretaker government, while the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) anticipates a new acting prime minister.

According to Bulgaria' Constitution, the president must issue a decree to appoint a cabinet and set a date for early elections.

The Constitution mandates that the head of state appoints an interim government and arranges new elections within two months and are currently anticipated to take place in early October.

Before setting the official date, President Rumen Radev must consult with potential caretaker prime ministers and parliamentary groups. Following these consultations, he will issue a decree, likely to schedule the election for October 13 and appoint the interim cabinet. The Constitution mandates that the head of state appoints an interim government and arranges new elections within two months. [Novinite]

(pt)

Bulgarian president postpones election

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev refused to appoint a caretaker government on August 19. Radev's choice will now delay the country's parliamentary elections that were previously announced for October 20.

“There will be no swearing-in in parliament tomorrow, the elections are postponed until after October 20, and the current caretaker cabinet will continue to perform its duties until a new caretaker government is formed,” stated Radev on Facebook. [Politico]

This decision comes amidst a deepening political crisis in Bulgaria surrounding a rift stemming from the controversial re-nomination of Kalin Stoyanov as interior minister.

The president and the parliamentary opposition view Stoyanov as an ally of Delyan Peevski, a Bulgarian oligarch sanctioned by both the U.S. and U.K. for corruption and current chairman of Bulgaria’s ethnic Turkish party, the Movement for Rights and Freedom party (DPS).

In a Facebook post on Monday, Radev stated that “ensuring calming of the political situation and holding fair elections” is “obviously impossible” if Stoyanov continues in his role. [Politico]

Former Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov also took to Facebook to criticize Stoyanov, writing ““Kalin Stoyanov became an example of the captured country. Radev acted correctly, did not run away from responsibility and used his powers under the Constitution.” [Politico]

Radev mentioned that he had requested Gorica Grancharova-Kozhareva, the designated acting prime minister responsible for forming a caretaker government, to consider appointing someone other than Stoyanov as interior minister, but she declined.

Grancharova-Kozhareva’s current cabinet suggests retaining most current ministers in their positions, including Stoyanov, who has served as interior minister since June 2023.

Stoyanov has accused the reformist opposition We Continue the Change / Democratic Bulgaria alliance of working with the president to scrutinize him, stating on Facebook, “I will not back down at a time when an attempt is being made to take control of the system.”

(pt)

Greek leftist opposition leader ousted as Syriza enters uncharted waters

Stefanos Kasselakis, leader of Greece's main opposition Syriza party, was ousted from his position

after a no-confidence vote by the party's central committee on September 8. The vote, which passed 163 to 120, marked the end of Kasselakis' turbulent year-long leadership. His tenure was marred by internal conflict, with critics accusing him of authoritarianism and being ideologically out of sync with the party's traditional leftist values. Eight committee members abstained, while three submitted blank votes.

Kasselakis, 36, who had no previous political experience with Syriza and was a political outsider living in Miami before his candidacy, took over leadership after the resignation of former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Tsipras had stepped down following Syriza's devastating defeat in back-to-back elections in May and June 2023 to the conservative New Democracy party. Kasselakis gained sudden popularity after a viral video detailing his life story, which resonated with a party base eager for renewal. He was seen as a fresh face who could rejuvenate Syriza, especially after its electoral failures.

However, Kasselakis' past, which included a career at Goldman Sachs and a brief period as a registered Republican in the U.S., as well as his policy proposals—such as advocating for stock options for employees—alienated many within Syriza's old guard. They viewed his positions as too moderate and inconsistent with the party's leftist roots. His heavy reliance on social media and populist messaging also drew criticism, with some members likening him to former U.S. President Donald Trump. Despite this, Kasselakis managed to fend off his initial detractors, many of whom left the party to form the New Left, which has struggled to gain traction.

Over time, Kasselakis' confrontational leadership style and growing internal disputes alienated more members of Syriza. His inability to deliver improved electoral results, particularly in the June 2024 European elections where Syriza's share of the vote dropped further, damaged his standing within the party. Criticism mounted, and his response only escalated tensions, ultimately leading to the no-confidence motion.

Kasselakis reacted to the vote by saying he felt "liberated" and criticized Syriza's bureaucracy for overturning the decision of the party base. He expressed disdain for the secret ballot process, preferring an open vote, and controversially compared those who supported the secret ballot to collaborators from World War II, sparking outcry among members.

The party will now hold an extraordinary congress within the next three months to elect a new leader. Several candidates are expected to run, including lawmakers Pavlos Polakis and Sokratis Famellos, and MEP Nikolas Farantouris. Farantouris, in a recent interview, defended the legacy of the Syriza government under Alexis Tsipras and expressed his readiness to lead the party.

When Kasselakis was initially elected, voter turnout for the party leadership was high, with over 150,000 participating in the first round and 136,000 in the second. Syriza's voting rules allow even non-members to participate by declaring themselves "friends" of the party and paying a small fee, a system similar to that of other major Greek political parties like New Democracy and Pasok.

Syriza's leadership turmoil comes at a time when the ruling New Democracy party is also seeing a decline in popularity. However, Syriza has been unable to capitalize on this, with the socialist Pasok party now overtaking Syriza in polls. Syriza's next leader will face the challenge of unifying the party and restoring its political fortunes as it competes in a fractured left-wing political landscape. [Euractiv] [Voice of America]

(lm)

Greek Supreme Court prosecutor opens investigation into mass fish deaths

Supreme Court prosecutor Georgia Adelini has launched an investigation into the mass fish deaths in Lake Karla and the Pagasitikos Gulf near Volos, central Greece. The investigation will focus on why the dam gate between Lake Karla and the Pagasitikos Gulf was left open and who made the decision to do so.

The issue stems from historic floods last year that displaced fish from their freshwater habitats. Experts believe the fish died when they entered the saltwater of the Gulf, as no net was placed at the river's mouth to prevent their passage. Greek authorities are now removing hundreds of thousands of dead fish from the area. [ekathimerini]

(lm)

Greeks see widespread corruption in health system

A recent Eurobarometer survey revealed that 89 percent of Greeks believe corruption is widespread in the country's National Health System (ESY), making it the most distrusted in the EU. The survey, conducted between February 7 and March 3, 2024, included 1,002 Greek citizens and 26,411 EU participants. In addition to healthcare corruption, 71 percent of Greeks see political parties as corrupt, 68 percent distrust politicians at all levels, and 67 percent believe corruption exists in the awarding of public tenders. In contrast, only 27 percent of EU citizens overall view their healthcare systems as corrupt. [ekathimerini]

(lm)

Greek Prime Minister admits investing more in defense out of fear of Turks

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis admitted that Greece's increased defense investments stem from concerns about resolving long-standing issues with Türkiye. Speaking at the Thessaloniki International Fair, he acknowledged that despite efforts to improve relations, Greece still sees the need to boost its military capabilities due to unresolved disputes, particularly over maritime zones in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, related to Türkiye's "Blue Homeland" doctrine. Mitsotakis suggested that if these issues could be fully resolved, Greece would not need to invest so heavily in its armed forces.

Relations between Greece and Türkiye have been marked by tensions over issues such as irregular migration, territorial sovereignty, and energy exploration, but both countries have taken steps toward normalization, including confidence-building measures and a friendship declaration. However, disputes in the Aegean persist, and both nations recently secured arms deals with the U.S., raising concerns about further militarization in the region. Despite these efforts at rapprochement, Mitsotakis emphasized the ongoing challenges and Greece's need for a strong deterrent. [Daily Sabah]

(lm)

Greek Air Force Chief discusses advancements in military aviation, F-35 acquisition, global defense impacts

In a recent interview, Lt. Gen. Dimosthenis Grigoriadis, Chief of the Hellenic Air Force General Staff, detailed Greece's progress in military aviation. Key modernization efforts include completing the acquisition of 24 Rafale jets by the end of 2024 and the scheduled arrival of eight F-35s by 2030. Greece will receive the most advanced F-35 model, Block 4/TR3, which will feature the latest technological upgrades. Training for Greek pilots and technicians is set to begin in the U.S. in 2028.

Grigoriadis also discussed plans to acquire Boeing KC-135 Stratotankers for aerial refueling and highlighted the impact of global events, such as the war in Ukraine, on rising defense costs. Greece is further enhancing its air force's capabilities with cutting-edge weaponry, including the Meteor missile, AIM-120D AMRAAM, AGM-158 JASSM, and additional systems such as Rampage and SPICE. [Greek City Times]

(lm)

Kosovo shuts down Serbian governing structures in the north

On August 30, Kosovo authorities closed five institutions linked to the ethnic Serb minority, prompting immediate criticism from the U.S. and raising tensions with Serbia.

Kosovo's Minister of Local Administration, Elbert Krasniqi, stated that these institutions in the Serb-majority north violated Kosovo's constitution. The U.S. embassy in Kosovo expressed concern over Pristina's actions, warning they negatively impact the Serb and other minority communities.

Serbia continues to support the Serb minority, refusing to recognize Kosovo's 2008 independence. The long-standing Kosovo-Serbia tensions remain unresolved, with EU-facilitated normalization talks making little progress, especially after a violent incident last year involving masked Serb gunmen and Kosovo police.

The EU and U.S. are urging both sides to implement agreements made by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti in 2023. Meanwhile, Pristina has announced plans to reopen a key bridge in Mitrovica, closed for over a decade due to tensions between Serbs and Albanians. The bridge remains a flashpoint of unrest.

Additionally, Kurti's unilateral closure of six branches of a Serbia-licensed bank in northern Kosovo earlier

this year has further strained relations with Western powers. Unrest in northern Mitrovica has grown, prompting NATO peacekeepers (KFOR) to increase their presence in the region.

Kosovo's upcoming parliamentary elections on February 9 are expected to serve as a test for Kurti, whose party secured a landslide victory in 2021. [ABC News] [The Guardian]

(dql)

45 indicted in Banjska terrorist attack case

On September 11, Kosovo's special prosecutor indicted 45 individuals in connection with last year's terrorist attack in the norther village of Banjska, which has drawn significant national and international attention.

Among those charged is Milan Radoicic, a former deputy head of the Serb List party, who is believed to be one of the main organizers. Radoicic had previously claimed full responsibility for the attack, stating he did not inform Belgrade authorities.

The attack occurred on September 24, 2023, when Serb militants targeted Kosovo police in Banjska, northern Kosovo, killing one officer. The assailants sought refuge in a local monastery, prompting a swift response from Kosovo police, who regained control, killed three militants, and seized a large cache of weapons. Kosovo's Interior Minister, Xhelal Svecla, reported that around 80 gunmen, believed to be ethnic Serbs, had crossed from Serbia in armored vehicles. [bne]

(dql)

Romania's finance ministry announces fiscal amnesty bill

On September 3, the Romanian Ministry of Finance released a draft emergency ordinance for fiscal amnesty. The proposal allows companies with state debts as of August 31, 2024, to eliminate interest and penalties by paying the principal amount and submitting a request by November 25. Individuals may reduce their principal debt by up to 50%. The Ministry aims to collect 9 billion lei from this amnesty for companies.

The explanatory note to the bill highlights that the total uncollected budgetary claims amount to RON 71.8 billion (EUR 14.4 billion), with RON 60.5 billion in principal tax obligations and RON 11.3 billion in accessory obligations. [Spotmedia]

(dql)

Romanian police raid home of controversial internet influencer

On August 21, Romanian police raided the residence of internet influencer Andrew Tate, who faces trial on charges of human trafficking, rape, and forming a criminal gang to exploit women. Romania's anti-organized crime agency, DIICOT, conducted searches at four locations in Bucharest and Ilfov County, focusing on allegations of human trafficking, trafficking minors, sexual intercourse with a minor, influencing statements, and money laundering. DIICOT stated that further hearings will be held at its headquarters.

The Bucharest Tribunal ruled in April that the case against Tate and his co-defendants met legal criteria for a trial, although no date has been set. Following their arrest in 2022, the Tate brothers were initially held in detention, then moved to house arrest, and later restricted to Romania. In July, a court overturned a decision allowing them to leave the country within the EU.

In March, the Tate brothers also faced extradition requests from the UK for sexual assault allegations dating from 2012-2015. The Romanian court granted extradition, contingent on the conclusion of their Romanian legal proceedings. [AP News]

(dql)

Thousands protest lithium mining project in Serbia

Around 27,000 protesters gathered in Belgrade on August 11 to oppose the planned lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley, home to one of Europe’s largest lithium deposits. Anglo-Australian company Rio Tinto leads the mining project and has sparked significant controversy, with environmental activists warning of irreversible damage to the region’s ecosystem. Protesters voiced concerns over potential contamination of land and water, calling for a permanent ban on lithium and boron mining in Serbia.

The project was halted in 2022 after widespread protests led the Serbian government to revoke Rio Tinto's mining license. However, the decision was overturned last month following a court ruling and a shift in government policy. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has since reassured the public that strict environmental safety measures will be enforced.

Rio Tinto's USD 2.4 billion project could potentially supply up to 90% of Europe's lithium needs, crucial for electric vehicle batteries. The European Union has praised the project as a significant step for Europe's energy transition. However, activists argue that Serbia is being sacrificed to meet growing global demand for lithium. [BBC]

EU reaffirms commitment amid protests

The European Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to a strategic raw materials partnership with Serbia, despite ongoing protests against Rio Tinto's lithium mining project. The Commission emphasized that environmental standards for the project must align with EU regulations.

President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić has claimed that foreign powers are behind the protests, accusing them of attempting to destabilize his government. The European Union has dismissed these allegations, denying any involvement in foreign interference. The European Commission remains focused on maintaining the partnership with Serbia while ensuring compliance with environmental standards. [EuroNews]

(ga)

Serbia plans to lift 35-year ban on nuclear power

Serbia is poised to lift a 35-year ban on nuclear power plants, marking a significant shift in its energy policy. The Serbian government is exploring nuclear energy to address rising energy demands, improve energy independence, and reduce carbon emissions.

This shift follows a memorandum of understanding signed in April with France's EDF to develop a nuclear energy program. The government is now debating proposed amendments to the energy laws, which would introduce a new chapter on nuclear energy.

The proposed amendments outline a three-phase program, starting with a feasibility assessment, moving to program development, and concluding with

implementation. If approved, these changes will repeal the 1980s Law on the Prohibition of Nuclear Power Plants in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The amendments also include plans for developing thermal energy and hydrogen as part of a broader effort to diversify Serbia's energy sources. [News.Az]

(ga)

Serbia to increase pensions by 11% starting December 1

Serbia will increase state pensions by 11% effective December 1, as announced by President Aleksandar Vučić. The adjustment will take effect earlier than the initially planned January 2025 increase. This follows a 14.8% pension increase in January 2024.

The average pension, which was RSD 45,719 (EUR 390) in June 2024, is set to rise further. As of the second quarter of 2024, Serbia had approximately 1.65 million pensioners and 2.37 million employed individuals. The Finance Ministry projects the average pension will reach EUR 650 by 2027. Consumer prices in Serbia rose 4.3% year-on-year in July, up from 3.8% in June. [SeeNews]

(ga)

New constitution to be debated in Turkish parliament next year, Speaker says

Turkish Parliament Speaker Numan Kurtulmus announced that discussions on a new constitution are expected to begin in October 2025. Speaking on Habertürk, Kurtulmus emphasized that the current constitution, drafted after the 1980 military coup, is outdated and no longer reflects Turkey's democratic goals. Over the next year, there will be extensive talks with political parties and the public to refine proposals.

While President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has long advocated for a new constitution, critics view this move as an attempt to consolidate power under the guise of reform. Kurtulmus downplayed debates around amending key articles that define the state's secular and unitary nature, dismissing them as unnecessary. However, many see these discussions as part of Erdogan's broader strategy to reshape Turkey's political landscape to his advantage. Critics also argue that the push for constitutional change serves as a

distraction from pressing socio-economic issues. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

On anniversary of AKP establishment, senior figures say party deviated from guiding principles

On August 14, the 23rd anniversary of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), senior figures engaged in self-criticism, accusing the party of straying from its founding principles. Established in 2001 by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other conservative politicians, the AKP initially focused on expanding freedoms, improving welfare, and fighting corruption. However, critics now argue that the party has deviated from these goals, turning into an oppressive force, especially since Turkey's transition to a presidential system in 2017, which consolidated Erdogan's power.

Former AKP members, including Orhan Miroglu, Yasin Aktay, and Mehmet Metiner, voiced concerns that the party has distanced itself from the people, adopting a nationalist and bureaucratic mentality. Miroglu called for a return to the party's original guiding principles, while Metiner criticized the AKP for becoming a "party of the state." Bülent Arinc, an AKP co-founder, acknowledged the party's challenges but expressed optimism that it could still recover.

Despite these internal critiques, Erdogan celebrated the AKP's "success story" and expressed confidence in its continued dominance, while encouraging party members feeling fatigued to take a break rather than deliver subpar work. [Turkish Minute 1]

Two lawmakers, 13 mayors join ranks of AKP

During the AKP's 23rd anniversary celebrations, two lawmakers from Turkey's nationalist IYI (Good) Party and 13 mayors from various opposition parties joined the party. The new members, including lawmakers Seyithan Issiz and Ahmet Ersagun Yucel, left their party after being elected in May 2023. The mayors, mostly from the Islamist New Welfare Party (YRP), along with independents and one from the IYI Party, shifted to the AKP, which is currently facing declining popularity.

The inclusion of YRP mayors, despite tensions after the YRP outperformed the AKP in some local elections, raised attention. Additionally, the AKP accepted a mayor from the pro-Kurdish DEM Party, which it often

criticizes for alleged ties to terrorism. Reports also suggest that the AKP aims to attract more lawmakers through financial incentives. [Turkish Minute 2]

President Erdogan should leave on a high note, former ally says

Against the backdrop of the AKP's declining popularity, Metin Kulunk, a former close ally of President Erdogan and ex-lawmaker from the AKP, has urged Erdogan to consider stepping down while still at the height of his political influence, warning that his support base is steadily eroding. In an interview with 12punto, Kulunk pointed to the significant electoral defeat suffered by the AKP in the March 31 local elections, where the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) outperformed the AKP for the first time in decades, especially in major cities like Istanbul and Ankara.

Kulunk suggested that Erdogan's legacy would be better preserved if he voluntarily stepped down before further loss of support. He also raised concerns about economic difficulties, growing wealth inequality, and external pressures from Western powers regarding Turkey's defense strategies, such as the S-400 missile system. [Turkish Minute 3]

(lm)

Turkey's opposition fails to restore ousted MP's seat in session marked by violence

An extraordinary session in the Turkish parliament on August 16, intended to restore jailed MP Can Atalay's seat, ended in failure and violence. Atalay, from the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP), was elected in May 2023 but later jailed for his involvement in the Gezi Park protests and stripped of his parliamentary status. Despite two rulings by the Constitutional Court in his favor, his seat was not restored.

During the session, a violent brawl broke out when AKP MP Alpay Ozalan attacked TIP lawmaker Ahmet Sik, who condemned the government's treatment of Atalay. Opposition lawmakers were injured in the altercation, and both Sik and Ozalan were later sanctioned.

The session was convened after the Constitutional Court's August 2024 decision declaring Atalay's removal "null and void," but the ruling was not discussed due to the AKP's refusal, preventing progress on restoring Atalay's seat. The opposition

criticized the session as an attack on democracy and public will. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Former opposition leader to sue ex-ally over ‘betrayal’ accusations

Meral Aksener, former leader of the nationalist IYI (Good) Party, announced plans to sue ex-Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu over accusations of betrayal. Kilicdaroglu had criticized Aksener for her actions during their alliance, the "Table of Six," which united opposition parties to challenge President Erdogan in the 2023 presidential election. Kilicdaroglu lost to Erdogan, and the alliance dissolved amidst internal disputes.

Aksener, who briefly opposed Kilicdaroglu's candidacy before rejoining the alliance, later had a controversial meeting with Erdogan, fueling further accusations of disloyalty. In response, Aksener plans to file lawsuits against Kilicdaroglu and Victory Party leader Umit Ozdag, who also accused her of betraying the opposition alliance. Aksener denies the allegations, stating they are baseless slander. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Former CHP leader faces prison for statements defending victims of gov’t crackdown

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the former leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), faces over three years in prison after a court accepted an indictment accusing him of "praising crime and criminals." The charges stem from Kilicdaroglu’s public statements defending victims of the government's crackdown on dissent, including jailed Kurdish leader Selahattin Demirtas and detained journalists.

The indictment was filed in response to a complaint by members of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in 2022. It includes allegations that Kilicdaroglu made remarks supporting Demirtas and others targeted under counterterrorism laws. The charges are based on Article 215/1 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes public praise of crime and criminals.

Among the cited incidents are Kilicdaroglu's 2019 criticism of Demirtas's imprisonment, his defense of CHP lawmaker Sezgin Tanrikulu's remarks on Turkey's use of armed drones, and statements made about Kurdish militias. Current CHP leader Ozgur Ozel condemned the charges as politically motivated, orchestrated by the MHP to silence opposition voices. He vowed strong resistance to any attempt to imprison Kilicdaroglu, promising to stand by his predecessor. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Mine owned by Turkish MP faces scrutiny over hazardous conditions

A coal mine in Manisa, western Turkey, owned by AKP lawmaker Ferhat Nasiroglu, is under scrutiny for hazardous working conditions, according to the Independent Mine Workers' Union. Videos shared by the union reveal miners working in flooded areas, risking electrocution and gas leaks, and handling dangerous chemicals without protective gear. The union also raised environmental concerns, claiming contaminated groundwater is seeping into local water sources, endangering communities.

Additionally, workers lack basic accommodations, such as proper break areas, and operate heavy machinery without safety harnesses. The mine's conditions led to an eight-day protest after workers were dismissed for union activity. The union directly accused Nasiroglu of violating occupational safety laws, while Turkey remains one of the worst countries for labor rights, according to the International Trade Union Confederation. In the first half of 2024, 878 workers died in workplace accidents across the country, highlighting ongoing safety issues. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Two detained after revealing alleged plot to kill Turkish journalist

Two men have been detained in Turkey following the release of a video alleging a plot to assassinate journalist Murat Agirel. The video, widely circulated on social media, features a masked man, identified as O.O., threatening Agirel and accusing organized crime leader Mahsun Kurucay of contracting his murder. Y.K., who filmed the footage, was also detained.

Police arrested the suspects in Izmir, seizing guns, drugs, and other items from their homes. O.O. has been linked to multiple crimes, while Y.K. has a less extensive record. The investigation began after Agirel, a columnist for Cumhuriyet newspaper, shared the threatening video, which also hinted at a politician's involvement. Agirel, who has previously reported threats, filed a new criminal complaint but noted that authorities have yet to provide him with personal protection, despite escalating threats following the release of his book exposing criminal activity in Turkey. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Military school graduates' secularist chants under investigation

Turkey's Ministry of Defense has launched an investigation into newly commissioned military officers who chanted a secularist slogan referencing Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, after their graduation ceremony on August 30.

The chant, symbolizing Turkey's secular roots, ignited a political debate. While some praised the cadets for honoring Ataturk's legacy, pro-government figures criticized the act, claiming it revived sentiments from Turkey's past coups. Erdogan's government, which has curtailed the military's political power since a failed coup in 2016, sees this as a potential breach of military discipline. [Turkish Minute]

(lm)

Wildfires Sweep Western Turkey, Forcing Thousands to Evacuate

Wildfires are ravaging Turkey's western provinces, with İzmir hit particularly hard. Over the past two days, the fires have scorched more than 1,600 hectares, prompting the evacuation of around 3,583 residents across İzmir, Aydın, Bolu, Muğla, and Manisa. (Hürriyet Daily News)

In İzmir's Karşıyaka district, a picnic-sparked blaze destroyed 17 homes, displacing 105 people. Firefighting efforts involve five planes, 14 helicopters, and hundreds of personnel. NASA data shows 5,019 hectares have been burned across affected regions. While no casualties have been reported, the fires are severely impacting wildlife and ecosystems, with the

situation expected to worsen due to ongoing heatwaves and unpredictable winds. (Duvar English)

(ab)

Brawl Erupts in Turkish Parliament During Session on Jailed Ex-MP

A violent brawl broke out in the Turkish Parliament during an extraordinary session as tensions flared between ruling and opposition lawmakers. The altercation, which left two opposition members injured, erupted while the Parliament was in session to discuss the legal status of jailed ex-MP Can Atalay. (Duvar English)

The incident occurred when a ruling AKP lawmaker launched an attack on Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) lawmaker Ahmet Şık as he was speaking. The confrontation quickly escalated, leading to a chaotic scene with punches and kicks exchanged on the Parliament floor, where bloodstains were later visible. (Hürriyet Daily News)

The extraordinary session had been convened during the Parliament's recess to address the situation of Can Atalay, a TİP lawmaker who was elected in the 2023 elections. Atalay's parliamentary status was controversially stripped due to a conviction in the Gezi Park case, despite multiple rulings from the Constitutional Court declaring the decision unlawful. (Duvar English)

The clash highlights the increasingly heated atmosphere in Turkish politics, as the Parliament grapples with contentious issues and growing divisions between the ruling party and opposition forces. (Duvar English)

(ab)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Southern Europe

Cyprus suffers a tourism crisis in summer 2024

Cyprus' tourism sector is experiencing an unprecedented crisis, with an estimated loss of 30,000 tourists resulting in a financial blow of EUR 35.5 million. This downturn has left hotels across the island grappling with low occupancy rates, overshadowing what was expected to be a robust year for the industry. [TTW]

Several factors have contributed to this sudden decline in tourist numbers, including the current crisis in the Middle East, tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and the sluggish UK economy.

The future of Cyprus' tourism sector appears challenging. With ongoing global issues and the immediate financial crisis, the industry is in a state of panic. The Cyprus Hoteliers Association and tourism officials are expected to implement strategic measures to mitigate the impact and attract visitors back to the island.

President of the Cyprus Hoteliers Association, Thanos Michaelides highlights additional factors contributing to the current situation: the crisis in the Middle East, which is in proximity to Cyprus; the tension between Russia and Ukraine; and the fragility of the British economy, Cyprus's main source market. [Preferente]

(df)

'We are making history,' Italian PM Meloni says as Brothers of Italy marks two years in power

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her far-right Brothers of Italy party recently celebrated nearly two years in power with a key meeting to review their accomplishments and plan for the future, focusing on the 2025 budget law. The government must comply with the European Union's fiscal rules, which require bringing Italy's deficit-to-GDP ratio below 3 percent by 2026. Meloni hailed the party's progress, emphasizing Italy's low inflation and record-high employment rates compared to other G7 countries. She pledged continued policies supporting businesses, families, and workers, while outlining tax cuts and employment as priorities in the 2025 budget. [Euronews 1]

Italian minister admits trying to hire lover as consultant

However, the meeting was overshadowed by a controversy involving Culture Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano, who stood accused of attempting to hire his former lover, social media influencer Maria Rosaria Boccia, using public funds. The scandal broke after Boccia announced her new advisory role on Instagram, a claim the ministry denied. Boccia later shared documents and photos of herself accompanying Sangiuliano on business trips.

Sangiuliano, who is married, later confirmed he had offered Boccia a position but withdrew it after being advised of a conflict of interest due to their romantic relationship. He apologized to his wife and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, offering his resignation, which Meloni refused. Sangiuliano emphasized that no public funds were used for the trips, and Boccia had no access to confidential documents.

This is the second scandal in the culture ministry this year, following the resignation of Undersecretary Vittorio Sgarbi in February over accusations of laundering stolen artwork. [POLITICO] [EuroNews 1]

Despite these challenges, Meloni remains popular in recent polls, but how her government manages both political and fiscal challenges will be critical for maintaining stability and completing its five-year term, a rare achievement in Italian politics.

(lm)

Key milestone reached in campaign to repeal Italy's Regional Autonomy law

A significant milestone has been reached in the campaign to repeal Italy's Regional Autonomy law, as over 500,000 signatures have been collected, enough

to call for a referendum on the issue. The Calderoli law, which grants more power to regions, particularly in controlling tax revenues and public services such as health and education, has been heavily criticized for potentially increasing regional inequalities, especially between the wealthier north and the poorer south.

The Democratic Party, the Five Star Movement, and the Green-Left alliance led a summer campaign against the law, arguing it would exacerbate poverty and worsen public services in southern regions. Critics, including the European Commission, have raised concerns about the risks the law poses to national cohesion and public finances, warning that it could deepen regional disparities.

Further complicating matters, the Sardinian regional government has passed a resolution to challenge the law in the Constitutional Court, arguing that it undermines regional autonomy. The court's decision on the referendum's admissibility is now awaited. If the referendum proceeds, a majority turnout will be required to meet the quorum and determine its outcome. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Alleged left-wing plot to investigate Meloni's sister sparks political feud in Italy

A political feud has erupted in Italy following allegations of a left-wing plot to investigate Arianna Meloni, the sister of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. The controversy began with an editorial in the right-wing newspaper Il Giornale, which claimed that a coalition of left-leaning newspapers, the judiciary, and political opponents was attempting to launch an investigation into Arianna Meloni's involvement in government appointments, including at public entities like Rai and Trenitalia.

Giorgia Meloni reacted strongly, stating that such allegations were "very plausible" and accusing her political opponents of using underhanded tactics to undermine her government. She likened the situation to an abuse of power aimed at defeating a democratically elected government. The allegations stem from Arianna Meloni's role as head of the political secretariat of the Brothers of Italy party.

Former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and his Italia Viva party were quick to respond, with Renzi dismissing the claims of a conspiracy as a "joke." The situation has

added to growing tensions between the media and Meloni's government, with international organizations raising concerns about government interference in media, particularly regarding the public broadcaster Rai. The European Commission's recent Rule of Law report also flagged concerns about media freedom in Italy, which Giorgia Meloni dismissed as being based on "fake news" from certain media outlets. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Italy's abortion divisions sharpen under Meloni's leadership

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Italy's divisions over abortion rights have sharpened. Meloni, Italy's first female prime minister and a conservative, has personally opposed abortion but promised not to abolish the 1978 law legalizing it. Instead, her government has focused on implementing other aspects of the law, such as prevention and support for motherhood. Meloni's ruling coalition passed laws allowing groups that support motherhood into abortion clinics and proposed a "motherhood income" for low-income pregnant women. During her hosting of G7 leaders, she also removed references to "safe and legal abortion" from the summit's final statement to avoid offending Pope Francis.

Despite Meloni's assurances, obstacles to accessing abortion in Italy persist. Bureaucratic, cultural, and practical challenges hinder access, with around 63 percent of gynecologists, and over 80 percent in the south, acting as conscientious objectors, refusing to perform the procedure on ethical grounds.

Anti-abortion groups remain influential in Italy, with strong ties to lawmakers in the ruling coalition. These groups have intensified their efforts to shift public opinion against abortion, aiming for its eventual repeal, although no legal changes are currently planned. Pro-choice advocates argue that while financial support for pregnant women is important, women should not face stigma or pressure when making reproductive choices. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Italy's foreign minister says country needs more African students

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani has called for an increase in the number of African students studying in Italy, potentially intensifying tensions within the ruling coalition over immigration and citizenship rights. Tajani, a member of the center-right Forza Italia party, made the remarks while discussing the Mattei Plan, an Italian development initiative aimed at African countries, likening it to a modern-day Marshall Plan. He also supports granting citizenship to foreign minors who complete most of their education in Italy, a proposal opposed by the coalition's hard-right parties, including Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Matteo Salvini's League.

Italy lags behind other EU nations in attracting foreign students, issuing about 25,000 study permits in 2022 compared to 105,000 by France and 70,000 by Germany. The lower numbers are attributed to limited international use of the Italian language and challenges in finding work within the country. Tajani's proposal aims to address these issues while fostering stronger ties with African nations. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Portugal to fine businesses that use national flag to sell alcohol

Three companies will be fined for using the Portuguese flag to sell alcohol, as announced by Portugal's Directorate-General for Consumer Affairs (DGC),

The companies that violated the advertising code could be fined between €2,493.98 and €24,939.89. [Sloboden Pecat]

The DGC examined 232 alcohol-related advertisements as part of an investigation that took place between July 8 and July 15. These advertisements were posted on 53 websites and social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, and a total of 20 companies were surveyed. [Euronews]

These specific violations of the law only applied to social media marketing, and not to more conventional forms of advertising like the television or the radio.

This is not the first time the Portuguese government penalizes businesses for utilizing national symbols to promote alcohol. In 2023, two comparable offenses set off state disciplinary procedures, yet these cases have not been resolved. [Euronews]

(fs)

YouTube suspends a Portuguese extreme-right group's account for inciting hatred online

The far-right Portuguese ultranationalist Grupo 1143's YouTube channel has been shut down for violating its policy against hate speech after receiving queries about its activities from the New York Times newspaper.

Grupo 1143 is led by Mario Machado, a 47-year-old neo-Nazi activist who has served time in prison for assault, racial discrimination and other crimes. The number 1143 represents the year Portugal gained its independence. [Reuters]

The group was accused of creating a "toxic brew of bigotry online" that encouraged physical violence both at home in Portugal and in other countries throughout Europe, such as Germany and Ireland. [Euronews]

A YouTube spokesperson said that “any content that promotes violence or encourages hatred of people based on attributes such as ethnicity or immigration status is not allowed on our platform, and we are committed to removing the content as soon as possible.” [TPR]

Earlier this year, the group organized anti-Islamic and anti-immigration demonstrations. One of these took place in Porto in April, and two attacks on migrants in May resulted in them being severely beaten or clubbed at their homes. The group has denied responsibility for the attacks. [Reuters]

Machado, who claimed that his group is "the biggest Portuguese nationalist organization" of the past five years, rejected the platform's decision. [Euronews]

Grupo 1143's X (former Twitter) and Telegram accounts are still active.

(fs)

Chega advocates for a nationwide immigration referendum

Far-right party Chega has announced its intention to propose to the Portuguese parliament a national referendum on the creation of quotas for immigrants,

as a way to limit the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country every year.

The plan is to make the proposal before discussion on the State Budget for 2025 starts, and it will add “another element to the negotiations,” leader of Chega André Ventura said. [Espresso]

While the referendum's approval is not a definite requirement for voting in favor of the budget, it is "important" in order to define his party's position. [Espresso]

The referendum initiative is another example about the fact that Chega is “betting on immigration as a flag for his party.” [Portugal Resident]

The party has organized a protest in Lisbon on September 21st against what it refers to as "uncontrolled immigration," citing "insecurity in the streets" as its reason. [Portugal Resident]

(fs)

5.3 magnitude earthquake hits Portugal

An earthquake with an estimated magnitude of 5.3 on the Richter scale hit Portugal on August 26, according to the US Geophysical Institute (USGS) and the Euro-Mediterranean Seismological Centre. It was also felt in west of Spain and Morocco. [Euronews]

The earthquake was registered at 5.11am Portuguese time at a depth of 19 kilometers, with its epicenter being in the Atlantic, south of Portugal capital’s Lisbon. It was not big enough to cause a tsunami [Sur in English]

Following the earthquake, the Portuguese government said in a statement that it was "in close coordination with all the relevant services." It also confirmed that there were no reports of material or personal damage, appealing to the population to remain calm and follow the advice of the National Emergency and Civil Protection Authority. [Euronews]

Portugal had not experienced a stronger earthquake since 2009, when a 5.6-magnitude tremor struck the south coast of the country.

(fs)

Salvador Illa is sworn in as the new president of Catalonia after decades of separatist rule

Spanish socialist politician Salvador Illa, who was Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's health minister during the Covid-19 pandemic, took the oath of office as president of Catalonia after more than ten years of separatist rule in the region.

Illa achieved an absolute majority (68 votes) in the first voting, receiving 42 votes from his own party PSC, 20 from leftist pro-independence ERC and six from leftist Comuns Sumar. The support of these two parties was key, after the Socialists won the most seats in a regional election in May but were unable to secure a majority. [RTVE]

The rest of the groups in the regional chamber, the pro-independence Junts per Cat (right), CUP (extreme left) and Aliança Catalana (extreme right), as well as the conservative Popular Party, and the far-right Vox, voted against. [France 24]

Illa declared he would use his presidency to bring the Catalan people together against the "divisive, demagogic and populist approaches" that are advancing and endangering coexistence and "civil unity." [Euronews]

The vote was overshadowed by the disappearance of separatist leader Carles Puigdemont (leader of Junts per Cat and former president of Catalonia), who, having spent seven years in self-imposed exile, defied a pending arrest warrant for his involvement in the 2017 secession attempt. Puigdemont appeared at a rally in Barcelona and then disappeared before police could apprehend him. [RTE]

(fs)

Catalan separatist leader Carles Puigdemont evades capture on return to Spain

Catalan separatist leader and former president of the region Carles Puigdemont defied an arrest warrant to appear at a rally in Barcelona after seven years of self-imposed exile in Belgium, before driving away in a local police officer's car.

Puigdemont had earlier declared that he would be in Spain on August 8, the day that the parliament of

Catalonia was due to swear in a new president. After arriving to Barcelona, he delivered a speech to a large crowd of supporters while being surrounded by dozens of police officers, who did not try to arrest him. [SCMP]

According to a spokesperson for the Catalan interior department, authorities believe that after Puigdemont finished his speech, he got into a police officer's white car and drove away, starting a frantic search. The Mossos d'Esquadra, the regional police force of Catalonia, announced that two of its officers, including the car's owner, had been arrested as part of their investigation into Puigdemont's whereabouts. [Reuters]

The Mossos said that "during the course of this rally and taking advantage of the number of people around him, (Puigdemont) fled the scene in a vehicle that the Mossos tried to stop, but were unable to do so." They also argued that the arrest was planned to be made "at the most appropriate time so as not to generate public disorder." [RTVE]

The hunt for Puigdemont caused traffic chaos in Barcelona and along the French border due to police roadblocks and boot searches. Some Puigdemont supporters engaged in combat with the police, attempting to break through the perimeter around the park that houses the regional parliament building. Police officers had to use batons and pepper spray to deter them. [Reuters]

The Spanish parliament passed an amnesty law in May pardoning everyone involved in the unsuccessful 2017 secession attempt. However, the Spanish Supreme Court claimed that the amnesty law cannot be applied to Puigdemont and two of his close collaborators as they are also accused of embezzlement, maintaining the arrest warrants. [RTVE]

In the end, Puigdemont managed to cross the border and returned to exile in Waterloo (Belgium).

(fs)

Irregular immigration in Spain surges in the first half of 2024

31,155 undocumented migrants entered Spain between January and August, which is 66.2% more than the 18,745 who entered the Iberian nation during the same period last year, according to a Spanish Interior Ministry report. [Infobae]

Almost 30,000 of them arrived by sea on small boats.

Many of these undocumented migrants who make it to Spanish territory come from Mauritania and the Sahel region, where the ongoing violence is forcing thousands of people to flee their homes. [Euractiv]

Spain is a major entry point for migrants into the European Union, with routes including the dangerous Atlantic crossings to the Canary Islands from West Africa and the Spanish-Moroccan border crossings. [China Daily]

Migration has become an increasingly sensitive political topic in Spain. Far-right political groups, such as VOX, have utilized the immigration issue to attack Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's progressive socialist government, demanding tougher measures to curb it.

The Spanish People's Party leader and opposition leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, has called on the government to declare a state of “migratory emergency" in the whole country. Last month, the People´s Party parliamentary spokesman Miguel Tellado proposed using the army to handle the crisis. [Euractiv 2]

(fs)

Sunflower oil dethrones olive oil due to rise in prices in Spain

Sunflower oil has overthrown olive oil as the kitchen's most used oil, as consumers switch to less expensive alternatives due to growing costs.

Spanish consumers purchased 107 million liters of olive oil overall in the first half of 2024, as opposed to 179 million liters of sunflower oil, Spain's biggest olive oil bottling association Anierac said. [Independent]

Until this year, olive oil had been the most popular cooking oil in Spain. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, olive oil accounted for 62% of sales by volume in 2023, while sunflower oil represented nearly 34%. [Reuters]

According to official data, the average cost of a bottle of sunflower oil was €1.86 per liter last year, while the more expensive varieties of olive oil could reach up to €6 per liter, a 50% increase compared to 2022. [Reuters]

“It is clear that olive oil consumption is falling in Spain,” spokesman for Anierac Primitivo Fernández said. “There are households that used to buy only olive oil and for the first time are now buying sunflower oil and olive oil.” [Independent]

Spain is known for being the world's largest supplier of olive oil, after surpassing Italy a few years ago. However, over the previous two years, heatwaves in the spring and a long drought decreased olive harvests, causing olive oil prices to reach record levels. [Reuters] [Euroweekly News]

Last June, the value added tax on olive oil was lowered by the Spanish government to make it more affordable.

(fs)

Spanish minister Escrivá appointed as new Bank of Spain chief

Digital Transformation Minister Jose Luis Escrivá has been appointed as the governor of the Bank of Spain for the next six years by the Socialist government, sparking controversy regarding the independence of the institution.

Although the governor and the deputy of the central bank can be appointed by the government, it is customary in Spain to consult with the major opposition party before making such appointments. Both picks have traditionally been highly qualified technocrats or economists not involved in politics. [Reuters]

“This decision means the central bank governor will be initially perceived as partisan and not as independent, and that is a very bad thing,” a senior central bank official said. [FT]

"The government intends to control and hijack an institution such as the Bank of Spain," leader of the opposition conservative People's Party (PP) Alberto Núñez Feijóo said. The Socialist Party argues that it was the PP who established a precedent when it suggested Luis de Guindos to be appointed vice president of the European Central Bank after he had been the minister of economy in a government led by the PP. However, De Guindos' appointment was approved on the recommendation of the Council of the European Union. [Reuters]

The governor's position has been vacant since former bank chief Pablo Hernández de Cos, who was appointed by a PP government during its final stages in 2018, resigned in June at the end of his six-year term. [FT]

(fs)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Central Europe

Teens arrested in foiled suicide attack plot at Taylor Swift concert in Vienna

A 19-year-old Austrian who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group (IS) was plotting a suicide attack at a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna. The teenager confessed to planning the attack with explosives and knives and was arrested along with another suspect on August 7, while the third suspect, an 18-year-old Iraqi citizen, was arrested on August 8.

The plot, which included a plan to drive a car into the crowd, was thwarted with the help of international intelligence. Authorities found chemicals, technical devices, and weapons at the 19-year-old's home. The attacks aimed to target the sold-out concert at Ernst Happel Stadium, which has now been canceled. [BBC]

CIA provided intelligence informations to Austrian authorities

The CIA has revealed that the suspects were aiming to kill tens of thousands of fans, disclosing that the agency's warning led to arrests in Austria and thwarting the plan. The plot's exposure was praised by

Taylor Swift, who expressed gratitude for the authorities' intervention. [EuroNews]

(ga)

Austria to start deporting Afghan nationals with criminal records

The Austrian government has announced that deportations to Afghanistan are now permissible on a case-by-case basis due to changes in the security situation there. This decision follows a July ruling by the Austrian Constitutional Court and comes as part of Austria's broader plan to address the issue of deportations.

The Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum stated that deportations would focus on Afghan nationals with criminal records, aligning with the ongoing efforts to address asylum applications from countries with significant security concerns, including Syria and Afghanistan.

The Austrian government has been working on implementing these deportations and is coordinating with other European nations on the matter. [EuroNews]

(ga)

Austria's far-right Freedom Party unveils election program focused on economy, immigration, and social policy

Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPO), which is favorite to win the general election on September 29, revealed its campaign manifesto on August 21.

The party's program emphasizes economic reforms, stricter immigration policies, and social changes. Key proposals include eliminating new taxes, offering tax breaks and subsidies for young workers and homebuyers, and incentivizing longer work hours and apprenticeships.

The party advocates for reducing asylum approvals, enforcing "remigration" for law-breaking migrants, and linking welfare benefits to citizenship. Socially, the FPO seeks to constitutionally define two sexes and improve conditions for medical staff.

The FPO further plans to increase police funding, outlaw “political Islam,” and enhance direct democracy by allowing citizens to initiate and repeal laws and vote out government officials. [Reuters]

(ga)

Czech Senate greenlights postal voting for Czechs abroad

The Czech Senate has approved a bill permitting Czechs living abroad to vote by mail, expected to be implemented for the 2025 general elections. This law aims to make voting easier for citizens in remote locations, where traveling to a diplomatic mission is difficult and costly.

Though the law has been in development for two decades, it faced opposition from the right-wing opposition ANO party, which initially supported it but later changed its stance.

The new law affects around 600,000 Czechs living abroad. [Radio Czech International]

(dql)

Wages increase in Czech Republic

According to data released by the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ), the Czech economy experienced a positive development in the second quarter of this year, with average gross wages rising by 6.5% year-on-year, reaching 45,854 Czech crowns ($2,060). After adjusting for inflation, this marks a real increase of 3.9%. The median wage also rose by 5.8%, reaching 38,529 crowns, though a gender pay gap persists, with men earning more than women.

Wage growth was uneven across sectors. Healthcare and social care experienced the largest increase (11%), while water supply and waste management saw a 7.8% rise. However, some sectors did not see real-term wage increases.

Analysts voiced cautious optimism, with predictions of real wage growth continuing through the year. Despite this, wages in real terms are still at 2018 levels, reflecting ongoing economic challenges like high inflation. Although the wage growth is a positive sign, slower growth in the public sector and difficulties in

certain industries indicate a long path to full recovery. [Czech Daily]

The unemployment rate in August remained steady at 3.8%, with around 280,000 people out of work. Czech employers offered more than 260,000 job vacancies, marking the ninth consecutive month where job seekers outnumbered available positions. However, the number of job openings saw a slight increase compared to July, the first rise since the first quarter of the year. [Czech Radio]

(nl)

Czech Constitutional Court delivers landmark decision on home births

The Czech Constitutional Court has ruled in favor of allowing midwives to assist home births, setting a significant legal precedent. Although Czech law permits home births, it previously barred midwives from attending them, restricting their services to hospitals or providing pre- and post-natal care. The ruling highlights the contradiction in the law, which allowed home births but forced women to give birth without professional assistance.

Judge Jan Winter clarified that midwives' assistance in home births would not be considered state-guaranteed healthcare, meaning the state would not bear responsibility for complications.

The decision was welcomed by human rights advocates, but Judge Winter stressed that lawmakers must address the legal inconsistencies, calling the current regulations complex and unpredictable. The Czech Health Ministry announced to review the ruling before making any official comments. [Radio Czech International]

(dql)

Croatia to introduce new property tax

Croatian Finance Minister Marko Primorac announced the forthcoming introduction of a new property tax in Croatia on August 31. The proposal aims to expand the current tax system, which will now include both long-term and short-term rental properties. The plan involves transforming the existing tax on holiday homes and adjusting its limits.

The new tax will apply to all property owners, except for those who live in their property or have a long-term lease of at least ten months. The tax base and range will be expanded to shift the tax burden from labor to property, with taxpayers being determined in March 2025 for the current year. [Total Croatia]

(ga)

Croatia to reintroduce compulsory military service amid regional tensions

The Croatian government will reintroduce compulsory military service starting January 1, 2025, in response to escalating regional tensions, particularly following Russian aggression in Ukraine and increased military activity in the Balkans.

The government has also enhanced salaries and benefits for military personnel and is proceeding with planned modernization and equipment upgrades in line with NATO agreements. This move aligns with similar actions by other European nations, such as Latvia, which reinstated conscription last year due to security concerns, and Serbia, which is considering reactivating its draft. [AP News]

(ga)

Ukraine nationals suspected in port arson incident in Croatia

Croatian authorities announced on August 17 that they are searching for three Ukrainian nationals believed to be responsible for a fire at Medulin port that destroyed 22 boats on May 14. The fire caused damages estimated at EUR 2 million and was ignited by a Molotov cocktail thrown by one of the suspects.

The suspects, identified as a 28-year-old and two 25-year-olds from Ukraine, entered Croatia from Poland and accessed the marina early in the morning. No injuries were reported, but the case is under investigation, and an international arrest warrant is being prepared for the suspects who are currently not in Croatia. [The Kyiv Independent]

(ga)

Croatia to extend foreign workers' permits to three years

Croatia's Ministry of Labour announced that it will extend the validity of residence and work permits for foreign workers from one year to three years, starting soon. This change aims to simplify job transitions and make it easier for foreign workers to switch employers. Alongside this, Croatia plans to enhance accommodation standards for these workers.

Currently, there are around 143,000 foreign workers employed in Croatia, with most coming from non-EU countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. Despite a significant foreign workforce, Croatia continues to face labor shortages in various sectors. In response, the country issues approximately 20,000 work permits monthly and has issued over 85,000 residence permits so far this year. [Schengen News]

(ga)

Croatian energy prices to rise by 10-15%

Croatian energy prices are set to increase by 10 to 15%, Finance Minister Marko Primorac announced on September 3. The increase in electricity and gas prices will follow a gradual reduction in current subsidies, which are deemed increasingly unsustainable. The fuel subsidies have also been largely phased out, with recent reductions and eventual abolition.

Minister Primorac clarified that the price hike would not reach the 20 to 30% levels speculated in some media reports. He emphasized that reducing subsidies is necessary to reflect long-term market conditions and encourage energy efficiency and alternative energy use. [Total Croatia]

(ga)

Police chase ends with crash injuring 10 migrants in Croatia

A van fleeing from police crashed near the Bosnia-Herzegovina border in Croatia on September 9, injuring 14 people, including several young children. The van, which had Swiss plates, was stopped by authorities for overloading and irregular entry. The driver sped away but lost control and hit a streetlamp.

The injured, mostly Syrian nationals, were taken to the hospital. Authorities suspect the incident is linked to a human trafficking operation intended to transport migrants into Western Europe. The van was rented under false pretenses, with the owner expressing surprise over its use. [Info Migrants]

(ga)

Hungarian parliament denies LGBTQ conference request

Opposition parties in Hungary requested to hold a conference on LGBTQ issues in the Parliament on September 3 but were denied by Speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér, citing the need to protect Parliament's dignity.

Despite the rejection, the conference was held at George Soros' Central European University (CEU) in Budapest. The Hungarian government views LGBTQ ideology as a threat to family values, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán emphasizing parental control over sex education. [Hungary Today]

(ga)

Hungarian government promises equal support for church and state schools

The Hungarian government announced that religious and national minority schools will receive the same level of support as state-run and municipal schools. State Secretary Miklós Soltész emphasized this during the opening of the renewed local church school, which was renovated with HUF 1.15 billion in government funding.

Since 2018, 5,680 schools and kindergartens across Hungary have been renovated or expanded, with a total investment of HUF 1,400 billion. Church and minority schools will benefit from free textbooks and teacher pay raises, aligning with state school policies. [Hungary Today] [Hirado]

(ga)

Hungary enforces mobile phone ban in schools, sparks protests

The Hungarian government has implemented a ban on mobile phone use in schools to minimize digital distractions and enhance students' focus and performance starting September 2. Under the new regulation, students are allowed to bring phones to school but must give them to a designated teacher before classes begin.

However, a local high school named Imre Madách in Budapest resisted this new regulation and has chosen not to enforce the ban. This stance led to the dismissal of the school's principal by the Ministry of the Interior, prompting protests from students and staff. [Hungary Today]

A demonstration took place outside the Interior Ministry, where students, teachers, and supporters protested the dismissal of Imre Madách high school's principal. The protest was in response to a recent government decree banning mobile phones in schools, which is linked to increased disciplinary actions against educators

Meanwhile, government officials stated that most Hungarians support the new mobile phone restrictions, aimed at minimizing online bullying and enhancing classroom focus. The government has also distributed 450,000 laptops to students and plans to provide an additional 100,000 this year. [Daily News Hungary]

(ga)

Polish president and government clash of bill on Russia-related commission

Polish President Andrzej Duda has vetoed a bill from the ruling coalition that seeks the abolition of a commission established by the former Law and Justice (PiS) government to investigate Russian influence in Poland. This commission was criticized for its potential to undermine democracy and the rule of law, with concerns from both the US government and the European Commission.

The commission, viewed as a politically motivated move by PiS against opposition figures, including incoming Prime Minister Donald Tusk, had its report recommending restrictions on these figures' public office eligibility. Following Tusk's new ruling coalition's dismissal of the commission's members and the passage of the bill to dissolve it, Duda's veto returned the legislation to parliament.

A presidential veto can be overturned by a three-fifths majority in parliament, which the current government lacks. The reasons for Duda's veto were not disclosed, but it is noteworthy as he had previously supported the commission and appointed two advisors to it.

The government has yet to comment on Duda's decision or its next steps regarding the commission. Meanwhile, Tusk has initiated a new commission to investigate Russian and Belarusian influence from 2004 to 2024, explicitly naming PiS deputy leader Antoni Macierewicz as a focus of the investigation. [Notes from Poland]

(dql)

Nominal pay increase to continue in Poland

Forecasters predict that nominal wage increases will continue in Poland, but at a slower pace. In July 2024, Polish employees saw an average monthly wage increase of 10.6% compared to the same period last year. Experts attribute this wage growth to Poland's high inflation rate, which was 4.2% in July.

They notes that the wage increase significantly outpaces inflation, indicating a rise in real wages and that companies are raising wages to keep pace with inflation and to attract and retain talented employees amid a severe labor shortage, exacerbated by demographic trends. [Euronews]

(nl)

Polish Constitutional Court stops government's changes to school religion classes

Poland's Constitutional Tribunal (TK) has temporarily suspended the government's planned changes to the organization of religion classes in schools. This decision is pending a review of a claim submitted by the head of the Supreme Court, at the request of the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations, asserting that the changes are unconstitutional.

Currently, religion classes in Poland, predominantly Catholic catechism, are taught by church-selected teachers and curricula, with lessons hosted and

funded by public schools. While optional, these classes are attended by a majority of Polish students.

The proposed changes would allow schools to group students from different year levels into the same religion classes, rather than restricting them to single cohorts. Critics, including the Catholic Church and the Polish Ecumenical Council, maintain that the changes should have been negotiated with religious institutions, could jeopardize the jobs of religion teachers, and might restrict access to religious education, thus infringing on parents' constitutional rights to raise their children according to their beliefs. [Notes from Poland]

(dql)

Art community signs support letter for dismissed Slovak National Gallery director

Three hundred sixty artists, gallerists, and curators signed an open letter supporting Alexandra Kusá, the former head of Slovakia's National Gallery, who was dismissed from her position at the National Theatre. Culture Minister Martina Simkovicova removed both Kusá and theatre head Matej Drlicka in early August, a move viewed by many Slovakians as politically motivated.

The letter, calling for Kusá's reinstatement, argues that this decision undermines the independence of the cultural sector and harms Slovakia's international cultural reputation. [Euronews]

(nl)

Protests against Slovakia's authoritarian Prime Minister

Thousands of Slovakians protested against Prime Minister Robert Fico's coalition government following dismissals in state-funded cultural and art institutions that sparked public outrage. On August 12, demonstrators gathered at National Uprising Square in Bratislava, the Slovakian capital, to express their dissatisfaction.

Last year's protests criticized the government and judiciary for failing to combat corruption, the country's stance on Russia, and restrictions on press freedom. This August, the focus shifted to actions by the Ministry of Culture, specifically the dismissal of Culture Minister

Martina Simkovicova. Protesters called for her removal after she dissolved the public broadcaster RTVS, replacing it with the Slovak Television and Radio (STVR). This move is seen as giving the government more direct political influence over Slovak citizens.

The Czech Republic's public broadcaster has ended its cooperation with the Bratislava station due to concerns about journalistic standards. These standards were compromised by antisemitic remarks made by Lukas Machala, the ministry's chief of staff, and his admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Simkovicova has faced criticism for her LGBTQ+ hostile views, particularly following an interview with topky.sk, where she claimed, "Europe is dying out, babies are not being born because of the excessive number of LGBTQ+ people." [Le Monde] [DW]

Meanwhile, on August 16, Slovak opposition parties said they would force a parliamentary vote regarding the dismissal of the country's justice and culture ministers and the release of the former prosecutor sentenced for corruption. [US News]

(nl)

Slovak education minister not willing to implement anti-LGBTQ+ measures in schools

Slovak Education Minister Tomáš Drucker has refused to implement proposed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation from the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS). The SNS, part of Slovakia's ruling coalition with Prime Minister Robert Fico's Smer party and the social-democratic Hlas (Voice) party, plans to introduce a law in September aimed at ensuring school education remains neutral and focused on traditional values.

Drucker, aligned with the Hlas party, stated that he will not apply the proposal, emphasizing that educational content should be determined by experts and teachers, not influenced by political agendas. This disagreement could widen the rift within the coalition, as some members of Smer and SNS support restricting LGBTQ+ rights.

The tension comes amid broader unrest in Slovakia, where protests have erupted over recent decisions by Slovak Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová, who has been criticized for undermining media freedom and cultural independence (see article above). [Politico]

Similar anti-LGBTQ+ laws adopted in Bulgaria and Hungary have also sparked protests and human rights condemnation. [eunews]

(dql)

Slovenian Court of Audit reveals major flaws in government projects

The Slovenian Court of Audit disclosed significant issues in two major Slovenian government projects on September 4, monitoring a EUR 7.7 million purchase of an unsuitable building for court use and a EUR 6.5 million procurement of 13,000 laptops intended for digital inclusion.

The report revealed that the Justice Ministry failed to follow proper procedures when buying the building, neglecting essential inspections and cost assessments, and acquiring it without allocated funds. Also, the Finance Ministry's reallocation of funds for the purchase was considered inappropriate. This mishandling has led to an ongoing investigation into possible abuse of office.

The audit also criticized the Ministry of Digital Transformation for its handling of the laptop purchase, which did not adequately assess the need for the laptops or establish a legal framework for their distribution in time. Consequently, many laptops remain unused, with expired warranties adding to the financial waste.

These findings have sparked political repercussions, including a vote of no confidence against Digital Transformation Minister Emilija Stojmenova Duh and previous resignations, including that of the justice minister. [The Slovenia Times]

(ga)

Slovenia reports a decrease in irregular migrants

Slovenian authorities reported a 4% decrease in the number of irregular migrants for the first seven months of 2024, totaling 25,786. A new migrant processing center was opened on August 8 at the former Obrezje border crossing near Croatia. It can handle up to 100 migrants at a time, streamlining their processing before they are transferred to asylum centers. [Info Migrants]

Meanwhile, entries by Afghans fell by nearly a third to 3,711, and Turkish entries rose by 120% to 2,186. Conversely, figures for Moroccan, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Russian migrants decreased significantly. The local police in the eastern border with Croatia handled 83% of illegal entries.

Smuggling cases increased from 197 to 308, with 337 smugglers apprehended. Fewer migrants expressed intent to seek asylum, with applications falling by 18% to 3,073. As of August 14, 574 asylum seekers were in Slovenian centers, while 1,177 individuals with approved protection status resided in the country. [The Slovenia Times]

(ga)

Slovenia adopts tax changes aimed at boosting competitiveness, faces business criticism

The Slovenian government enacted a series of tax changes aimed at boosting economic competitiveness and supporting research and development on August 30. The new measures include tax incentives for highly qualified workers under 40 who return to Slovenia after working or studying abroad, and for foreign nationals with high salaries. Startups will also benefit from deferred tax liabilities on stock options.

The reforms also modify the flat-rate tax system for sole proprietors, lowering the income ceiling from EUR 100,000 to EUR 60,000 and from EUR 50,000 to EUR 30,000 for part-time workers. Entrepreneurs have criticized this move, though trade unions support it as a way to address issues with self-employment contracts.

Other changes include adjustments to VAT thresholds, extended tax breaks for green and digital transitions, and new VAT rates for sugary drinks. The government is also introducing a new tax reporting system for vending machines.

Despite these updates, business associations have expressed dissatisfaction, arguing that the reforms are inadequate and were adopted without sufficient consultation. The Finance Ministry has indicated that these changes are the first step in a broader tax reform strategy. [The Slovenia Times]

(ga)

Constitutional Law and Politics in Northern Europe

Danish government sees major reshuffle

In a major cabinet reshuffle, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen appointed on August 29 six new ministers in her three-party centrist government. This brings the total number of ministers to 25, the largest in 30 years, surpassing the 1993-1994 Cabinet of Social Democratic Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, which had 24 ministers.

Among the new appointments is Torsten Schack Pedersen, who will head the newly established Ministry of Emergency Preparedness, Climate Change, and Cybercrime. The reshuffle also introduced two other new ministries: Marie Bjerre, formerly Minister for Digitalization and Gender Equality, was appointed Minister for European Union Affairs, preparing for Denmark's upcoming EU presidency in the second half of 2025. Jeppe Bruus, the outgoing Taxation Minister, will now lead a new ministry coordinating Denmark’s green policy, crucial for achieving the country's goals of 70% emissions reductions by 2030 and net-zero by 2050.

Rasmus Stoklund will replace Bruus as Taxation Minister, and Caroline Stage Olsen will take over Bjerre’s previous role as Digitalization Minister. The gender equality portfolio will now be managed by Environment Minister Magnus Heunicke. In a notable surprise, Copenhagen Mayor Sophie Hæstorp Andersen was appointed Minister of Social Affairs,

replacing Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil, who left the government.

Frederiksen, leader of the Social Democratic Party, formed the current majority government in 2022, consisting of her center-left Social Democrats, the center-right Liberal Party, and the centrist Moderates. [AP News]

(dql)

Denmark's supreme court rules in favor of evacuation of child from Syrian camp

On August 28, the Danish Supreme Court, Højesteretten, ruled that an eight-year-old boy, who has been trapped in the al-Roj prisoner camp in Kurdish-controlled Syria since 2019, must be offered evacuation and support by Denmark's foreign ministry.

Overturning lower court decisions, the ruling found that not offering evacuation violated the European Convention on Human Rights.

The court also mandated that his mother, who will be evacuated alongside him, be allowed to return to Denmark, despite losing her Danish citizenship. The court highlighted that evacuating the boy without his mother would be impractical and assisting them both would not be an unreasonable burden.

This decision affects the last child in the camp with Danish connections. Lobby groups have long campaigned for the evacuation of Danish-affiliated children from the camp, known for its harsh conditions and for housing former ISIS militants and sympathizers. While Denmark has generally offered assistance to children, the government has been reluctant to help their parents, some of whom have had their citizenship revoked. This policy has effectively left many children without assistance, as they would have to be separated from their mothers to receive help. [The Local Denmark]

(dql)

Danish government delays energy island construction

Denmark has delayed the construction of its planned North Sea "energy island," a project estimated to cost DKK 200 billion (USD 29.8 billion), by three years.

Energy Minister Lars Aagaard cited rising costs and high interest rates as the reasons for the delay, noting that the project would now require an additional DKK 50 billion (USD 7.5 billion) in state support.

The artificial island is designed to collect power from surrounding offshore wind turbines and distribute it back to the mainland. Due to increased raw material costs and higher interest rates, Aagaard stated that the project is currently not viable but may be redesigned to include power cables connected to Germany.

This project is one of several major energy islands planned for the North Sea, including the Princess Elisabeth energy island being constructed by the Jan de Nul Group. [Construction Briefing]

(dql)

Inflation in Denmark drops to three-month low in July

Inflation in Denmark dropped to 1.1% in July, down from 1.8% in June. This marks the lowest rate since April and falls short of market expectations. The slowdown was primarily driven by a significant reduction in housing and utilities prices, which offset higher costs for transport and food.

The annual average inflation rate also decreased slightly, reaching 1.1% in July compared to 1.3% in June. Core inflation similarly declined to 1.0% in July from 1.3% in June. Consumer prices rose by a seasonally adjusted 1.10% in July on a monthly basis, the highest increase in a year, following a flat result in June.

Analysts anticipate that inflation will accelerate through December, leading to a higher average in the second half of the year compared to the first. However, inflation is expected to decrease overall in 2024 due to the impact of previous interest rate hikes and a high base of comparison. A potential risk to this outlook is stronger-than-expected private consumption growth. [Focus Economics]

(dql)

Facial recognition for police investigations to be implemented in Sweden to come by year-end

The Danish government has confirmed plans to implement facial recognition technology for police investigations of serious crimes, supported by a coalition of political parties. This decision is driven by increasing gang violence and cross-border criminal activity. The technology will be used in cases involving murder, rape, and severe violence but will not extend to real-time monitoring.

Previously, Danish police used facial recognition mainly for passport control and victim identification. Now, the police will incorporate object and facial recognition technology to streamline the review of video footage, expediting investigations. The new system is expected to be operational in Copenhagen by the end of 2024.

Political figures and organizations have raised concerns about privacy, stressing that the technology must be carefully regulated and limited to the most serious cases. A trial period evaluation will be conducted to address these concerns. [Biometric Update.com]

Last year, Swedish authorities estimated that 62,000 people in Sweden were linked to criminal gangs, with recruitment often occurring in socially disadvantaged immigrant neighborhoods. Most of the violence takes place in Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. In contrast, Denmark has also experienced gang violence but on a smaller scale, with 1,257 individuals identified by authorities as connected to organized crime at the end of last year. [euronews]

(dql)

Anti-whaling activist remains detained in Greenland

On August 16, the Nuuk district court in Greenland has ruled that Canadian-American environmentalist and anti-whaling campaigner Paul Watson will remain in custody in Greenland following his arrest in July, as authorities process an international arrest warrant for his potential deportation to Japan.

The court extended Watson's detention until September 5, while the legal proceedings continue. Watson, who founded the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and is known for his direct-action tactics against whaling, plans to appeal the court's decision. Watson, 73, was arrested on July 21 after his ship, the John Paul DeJoria, entered Nuuk harbor. His activism has made him a polarizing figure, with some praising his efforts to protect marine life and others labeling

him an eco-terrorist. The Danish Justice Ministry stated that Greenlandic authorities must determine whether the conditions for deportation are met under local law, with the final decision to be made by Danish authorities in Copenhagen. The timeline for this decision remains unclear. [the local dk]

On August 1, Japan expanded its commercial whaling activities to include fin whales, the second-largest animal species on the planet. This decision adds to a catch list that already includes minke, Bryde's, and sei whales. According to a fisheries agency official, the rationale behind this decision is based on the belief that there are sufficient resources of fin whales, with a plan to hunt 59 of them this year (see AiR No. 32, August/2024, 1).

Activists have called for Watson's release, expressing concern that if deported to Japan, he could face up to 15 years in prison for causing injury during an attack on a Japanese whaler. Watson, originally a member of Greenpeace, has long been at odds with the organization over his controversial methods. [yahoo! News]

(rl)

Finland's government coalition adopts 2025 draft budget

Finland's four-party coalition, led by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo and comprising the National Coalition Party, Finns Party, Christian Democrats, and Swedish People's Party, announced on September 3 the conclusion of initial work on the 2025 state budget, stating that a formal proposal would be submitted to Parliament on September 23.

Core budget elements include tax increases, such as a 1.5 percentage point rise in VAT and higher taxes on sweets and tobacco next year. At the same time, the tax credit for household expenses will be reduced. While social and healthcare spending will rise, funding for NGOs in these sectors will be cut by about 20%. One key issue is the potential capital investment in infrastructure, including a new high-speed rail line between Helsinki and Turku, which remains under debate.

The coalition had lengthy discussions during budget talks in April, aiming to reduce Finland's borrowing. However, due to the worsening economic situation, the state ended up taking on more debt. Finance Minister Riikka Purra's budget proposal now includes a

EUR 12.2 billion deficit, with potential for more austerity or borrowing if the economy declines further. [Yle 1]

The draft budget has drawn strong criticism from the opposition. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Centre Party have expressed concerns that the government's austerity measures. SPD MP Antti Lindtman criticized the government for focusing on austerity without effective growth strategies. He highlighted the declining construction sector and the weak employment growth in Finland. He also criticized the allocation of funds, arguing that spending on private healthcare is coming at the expense of public health services and ordinary Finns.

Meanwhile, Centre Party MP Antti Kaikkonen argued that the budget's cuts and tax increases could impede economic recovery. He called for stronger policies to boost employment and entrepreneurship, criticizing specific measures such as the reduction in household tax deductions and the increase in VAT, which he believes will adversely affect both businesses and individuals.

The business sector also voiced concerns. The Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) contended that the proposed VAT increase would negatively impact the economy and consumer prices. The Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK) suggested that while tax increases might be necessary, the government's emphasis on spending cuts and reductions in vocational education funding could be problematic. [Yle 2]

(dql)

Finnish government greenlights resolution on anti-racism action plan

On September 5, the Finnish government adopted a resolution on an action plan to combat racism and promote equality, that it had submitted to Parliament in August last year. The plan outlines 62 measures aimed at improving social cohesion, increasing awareness of equality, and addressing racism and discrimination, particularly in education and the workplace. Resources will be allocated to strengthening proven practices.

Key objectives of the action plan include dismantling societal structures, especially in the labor market, that foster inequality; fostering positive relations between population groups; promoting better access to the

labor market; and expanding knowledge on racism. [Finnish Government]

The resolution's approval follows an announcement in early August by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's four-party coalition government, which includes the far-right Finns Party – the second-largest party in Parliament – that it will launch the campaign later in the month. The campaign targets organizations across various sectors, including business, sports, culture, and civic groups, and aims to promote concrete actions to combat racism and discrimination in Finnish society. [Yle 1]

This initiative responds to the far-right and racism scandals that rocked Orpo's government in the summer of last year. A series of controversies involving old far-right and racist social media posts by newly appointed Finns Party ministers nearly led to the collapse of the governing coalition in its early months. [Yle 2]

While questions have been raised about the Finns Party's commitment to the campaign, on August 28, Minister of Finance Riikka Purra clarified that the party remains committed to the government's report and action plan to combat racism. However, just a day earlier, Jani Mäkelä, leader of the Finns Party Parliamentary Group, dismissed the anti-racism campaign, questioning the very existence of the problem it seeks to address. [Helsinki Times]

(dql)

Finnish government accused of climate inaction

Finnish environmental organizations, including Greenpeace Finland, have filed a lawsuit against Finland, accusing the government of violating the country's Climate Act by failing to meet its climate targets.

Filed with Finland's Supreme Administrative Court, the lawsuit argues that the current right-wing government is neglecting its obligations under the Climate Act due to inadequate climate action.

Greenpeace Senior Policy Advisor Kaisa Kosonen criticized the government for canceling agreed measures and refusing to update Finland's outdated climate plan for land use and forestry, which she sees as breaches the Climate Act.

The lawsuit comes after in 2022 Finland committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2035 and net negative emissions, thereafter, positioning itself as a leader among industrialized nations. [IceNews] [Greenpeace]

(dql)

Finland's Minister of Transport and Communications doubles as interior minister

Minister of Transport and Communications Lulu Ranne of the far-right Finns Party – member of the Finland's four-party coalition, led by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo – will temporarily also serve as Interior Minister for the remainder of the year. Finnish President Cai-Göran Alexander Stubb appointed her as Minister of Transport, Communications and the Interior on August 30. [Daily Finland]

This rare dual role has been prompted by Ranne's predecessor Mari Rantanen's decision to step down from the Interior Ministry citing her child's serious illness. Rantanen, also from the Finns Party, plans to return to the office from the beginning of next year, at least at this point.

Her appointment has faced criticism from the opposition, particularly concerning the demanding nature of the Interior Minister role amidst challenges like migration issues. [Yle]

(dql)

Finnish Non-Discrimination Ombudsman criticizes government's reform plans for Non-Discrimination Act

In an August 13 joint statement, Finland's Non-Discrimination Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children, and the Ombudsman for Equality expressed strong opposition against the government's proposal to remove the requirement for daycare centers and early childhood education programs to develop equality plans. They argued that the proposal conflicts with constitutional and legal commitments to equality and anti-discrimination.

The Non-Discrimination Act mandates that authorities, private entities with public administration duties, education providers, and employers assess and

promote equality in their activities. This includes the obligation to create an equality promotion plan which the previous government extended to early childhood education and care organizers in June 2023.

The Ministry of Justice proposed the changes to reduce bureaucracy and costs, but the ombudsmen warn that it could negatively affect children at risk of discrimination. They highlight that discrimination issues, including bullying and loneliness, are prevalent in early childhood education. [Yle]

(dql)

Norway's monarchy faces decreasing support

A recent survey reveals historically low support for Norway's monarchy, with only 40% opposing the idea of Crown Prince Haakon being the last king. Conducted by Norstat, Northern Europe's largest data collector for all types of surveys, the survey shows that 35% of Norwegians now favor replacing the monarchy with a presidency, a significant increase from less than 20% a few years ago. Meanwhile, around 25% remain undecided. [NewsInEnglish.no]

(dql)

Norwegian government proposes easing restrictions on abortion law

On August 23, Norway's government announced a proposal to ease abortion restrictions, allowing women to terminate pregnancies up to the 18th week, marking the first major legal change in nearly 50 years. Currently, abortion is legal until the 12th week, although many women request and are granted abortions after this period.

Justifying the proposal, Health Minister Jan Christian Vestre noted that almost no one is denied abortion after the 12th week, adding that the government's reform of the country's Abortion Act of 1978 reflects current practices and affirms women's right to self-determined abortion as a core value in Norway.

The Norwegian Institute of Public Health reported that while the abortion rate has remained historically low, there was a 6.7% increase in 2022, with 12,814 terminations performed. The vast majority of abortions

occur before the 9th week and are mostly medication-based.

To pass, the bill requires 85 votes in Norway's 169-member parliament, and around 80 lawmakers have expressed support so far. However, the Center Party, which together with the Labour Party forms the minority government coalition, opposes extending the abortion limit beyond 12 weeks. [AP News]

(dql)

Norwegian government seeks to lift climate injunction against three oilfields

On September 4, Norway's government requested an appeals court to lift injunctions against the development of three oil and gas fields. This action is part of a broader effort to overturn a previous ruling that invalidated the permits for these fields on environmental grounds.

In January, a lower court ruled that Norway's Energy Ministry had failed to adequately assess the climate impact of the fields' future oil and gas use – referred to as scope three emissions. This lawsuit was brought by Greenpeace and its partner, Nature and Youth.

The government argues that the negative impacts of maintaining the injunctions – both societal and financial – outweigh the benefits claimed by the environmental organizations. They warned of potentially significant financial losses if the injunctions remain in place. The combined investments in the three fields totals NOK 140 million Norwegian (USD 13 million).

Environmental lawyers argue that the injunctions are necessary to prevent "irreparable harm" by curbing new fields that would increase CO2 emissions. Despite Norway's commitment to the Paris climate accords and a net-zero emission target by 2050, critics highlight that recent field developments, such as Equinor's Breidablikk and Aker BP's Tyrving, contradict these goals. The Yggdrasil field, also operated by Aker BP, is expected to start production in 2027. [Reuters]

(dql)

Norwegian grocery chains fined in antitrust case

The Competition Authority, Norway's competition watchdog, has fined the country's three largest grocery store chains – Norgesgruppen, Rema, and Coop – a total of NOK 4.9 billion (USD 466 million) after finding them guilty of antitrust violations that may have led to higher consumer prices. The ruling, which aligns with an earlier decision, found that the companies had engaged in illegal collaboration, weakening competition for years. Norgesgruppen received a NOK 2.3 billion fine, while Rema and Coop were fined NOK 1.3 billion each.

The case focused on the chains' use of "price hunters" to survey rivals' stores, with mutual access granted to competitors' outlets. While the companies claimed this practice promoted competition, the regulator argued it reduced market rivalry.

All three companies denied wrongdoing and announced plans to appeal the decision. The fines are significantly lower than the initial NOK 21 billion proposed by the authority in 2020, after determining the violation was less severe than first thought. [Reuters]

(dql)

Norway to implement zero-emission rules for passenger ships in UN protected fjords

Starting January 1, 2026, Norway will enforce zero-emission requirements for passenger vessels in its five UNESCO World Heritage fjords: Nærøyfjord, Aurlandsfjord, Geirangerfjord, Sunnylvsfjord, and Tafjord. Initially, the regulations will apply to vessels under 10,000 gross tons, such as sightseeing ships and ferries, with larger vessels required to comply by January 1, 2032.

This phased approach allows Norway to continue attracting larger cruise ships, which are crucial to the country's tourism revenue but currently lack zero-emission technology.

County municipality boats are exempt from these requirements for now. Additionally, vessels must use shore power when docking in these fjords. The village of Flåm, located at the end of Aurlandsfjord, will receive funds from the Norwegian Parliament to develop shore power facilities.

Norwegian Minister of Climate and Environment Andreas Bjelland Eriksen emphasized that the new rules aim to preserve the fjords and are part of the

government's efforts to promote sustainable tourism. The policy is intended to foster technological innovation, reduce emissions, and maintain the fjords as desirable tourist destinations. [The Maritime Executive]

(dql)

Sweden's foreign minister announces departure from politics

Sweden's Foreign Minister Tobias Billström announced on September 4 that he will leave the Swedish government, marking a surprising exit from politics. Billström, who played a key role in guiding Sweden's NATO membership and supporting Ukraine, stated that this decision had been considered for some time. He became foreign minister in October 2022 when Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson formed a coalition government.

Sweden, alongside Finland, sought NATO membership in May 2022 in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After 18 months of delays, Sweden's bid was finalized in early 2024, overcoming objections from Hungary and Turkey. Billström highlighted the challenges of navigating Sweden through this NATO process.

Billström also announced that he would be leaving his seat in the Riksdag but has not yet revealed his future plans. [Associated Press]

(lm)

Sweden puts Quran burners on trial for hate crimes

On August 28, two men in Sweden, Salwan Momika and Salwan Najem, were charged with "agitation against an ethnic or national group" for burning Qurans in front of mosques and public places. The Quran burnings, which occurred on four occasions, sparked global outrage, particularly in the Muslim world, leading to protests and boycotts of Swedish products.

Momika, a Christian refugee from Iraq, stated his intent was to protest against Islam. Despite efforts to deport him for providing false information on his residency application, Swedish authorities have halted the process, fearing torture if he returns to Iraq.

The Quran burnings led to protests in various countries, including Iraq, where protesters stormed the Swedish embassy. The incidents also prompted the United Nations Human Rights Council to approve a resolution on religious hatred, although the U.S. and EU abstained due to concerns about free speech.

In a related case, Swedish-Danish activist Rasmus Paludan has also been charged for a similar Quran burning in 2022. [Al Jazeera] [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Sweden's 'largest environmental crime': 11 people on trial accused of illegally dumping waste

Eleven individuals, including the former CEO of waste management company Think Pink, went on trial in Sweden on September 3 for what is described as the country's largest environmental crime. The company is accused of illegally dumping at least 200,000 tonnes of waste at 21 locations across 15 municipalities. Prosecutors claim toxic materials, including arsenic, lead, and carcinogenic chemicals, were released into the air, soil, and water, causing fires and significant environmental damage. Damages sought amount to nearly EUR 23 million, primarily from municipalities forced to clean up the waste.

Think Pink's former CEO, Bella Nilsson (now Fariba Vancor), and her ex-husband Thomas Nilsson face charges of serious environmental and economic crimes. The other accused face charges including aiding and abetting environmental crimes. All defendants deny the charges, with Bella Nilsson claiming the accusations are part of a plot by rival companies. The trial, involving a 45,000-page investigation and 150 witnesses, is expected to continue until May 2025. [EuroNews] [The Guardian]

(lm)

Swedish government to increase healthcare investments in 2025 budget

The Swedish minority government, which holds 103 of the 349 seats in Parliament, along with its ally, the Sweden Democrats (who hold 79 seats), has proposed substantial investments in healthcare for the 2025 budget. A total of SEK 2 billion (EUR 175 million) will be

allocated as targeted grants, distributed according to regional healthcare needs. Additionally, SEK 1 billion (EUR 87.5 million) in performance-based funding will be directed towards improving accessibility and reducing queues in the healthcare system. The government will also invest SEK 100 million in establishing a national healthcare coordination system, with a total of SEK 250 million planned for this initiative in 2025. Furthermore, SEK 50 million will be allocated for the introduction of precision health, a method that tailors medical care based on individual patient conditions. [Sweden Herald]

(dql)

Aviation tax to be scrapped in Sweden

On September 3, the Swedish right-wing government, led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, announced it would abolish the flight tax. This tax was introduced by the previous left-wing administration in 2018 to mitigate the climate impact of air travel. The tax, which varies based on flight distance, aims to reduce emissions by discouraging air travel.

Kristersson argued that eliminating the tax is crucial for maintaining strong domestic flight connections and preserving Sweden's status as an international hub. He reaffirmed the decision aligns with long-term climate policies and Sweden's travel needs.

Although the minority government coalition of Moderate Party, Christian Democrats and Liberals, supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, had considered reducing the tax, they decided to eliminate it entirely, effective July 1, 2025.

Environmental groups criticized the move, warning it would increase travel and emissions. The Swedish Society for Nature Conservation denounced the decision as a setback for climate policy. The Swedish Climate Policy Council had previously criticized the government's environmental measures, including reduced fuel taxes, for jeopardizing climate goals and failing to meet Sweden's 2030 commitments.

Global aviation contributes approximately 2.5% of global carbon emissions, surpassing the annual emissions of Brazil and France combined. [Le Monde]

(dql)

Major wind power project in Sweden put on hold

On September 2, Swedish state-owned utility Vattenfall announced a temporary halt to the Kriegers Flak offshore wind project in Sweden, originally set for commissioning in 2028 with an expected annual output of 2.7 terawatt-hours (TWh).

The project was deemed uneconomical due to the lack of a connection point provided by Sweden's Transmission System Operator (TSO), forcing Vattenfall to consider building its own connection, which would increase costs by about 25%. As a result, no final investment decision has been made, and other offshore wind projects in the country face similar delays.

The offshore wind industry is grappling with rising costs, driven by increased raw material prices and supply chain disruptions, which are further complicated by geopolitical tensions. Vattenfall is cautious about committing to further investments in Sweden, awaiting regulatory clarity on grid connections and improved market conditions.

This situation highlights the broader industry trend where investment decisions are increasingly dependent on market conditions and regulatory stability. [energynews]

(dql)

No of people leaving Sweden to surpass no of immigrants in 2024

(dql) Data presented by Swedish Migration Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard reveal that – for the first time in decades – more people are leaving Sweden than arriving, marking a shift attributed to the government's restrictive migration policies.

The data showed that 5,700 more people emigrated than immigrated from January to May 2024, with the number of asylum applications at its lowest since 1997.

This decline in asylum applications is not new. In 2016, asylum applications dropped to 28,939 from 162,877 in 2015, following the government's decision to tighten migration policies. Sweden, once known for its liberal immigration stance, began restricting entry and encouraging voluntary returns, particularly of people from countries like Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. Since October 2022, the minority government of Moderate

Party, Christian Democrats and Liberals, led by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and supported by the far-right Sweden Democrats, has continued these restrictive policies focused on limiting access to asylum, encouraging voluntary departures, and ensuring deportations. (DW)

(dql)

Swedish police arrest terrorism suspect

A national prosecutor disclosed on September 4, that the Swedish police detained an individual suspected of a terrorism-related crime, adding that the investigation is ongoing with full intensity.

The alleged crime occurred in August, but further details were not provided. [Reuters]

(dql)

Sweden to boost its crossing capabilities

Automotive and arms manufacturer General Dynamics European Land Systems (GDELS) has been awarded a contract for a fourth batch of M3 amphibious bridge and ferry systems for the Swedish Armed Forces. Signed with the

Swedish Defence Materiel Administration, the country's defence procurement agency, on September 5, this order seeks to boost Sweden's ability to overcome aquatic obstacles.

The M3 is regarded as the fastest and most modern amphibious bridge and ferry system globally, capable of transporting heavy military vehicles such as Leopard 2, M1A2 Abrams, and Challenger 2 main battle tanks. Operated by just two soldiers, the M3 is highly automated, reducing operating costs while offering flexible deployment as either a bridge or multi-bay ferry. The M3's all-terrain design allows rapid deployment in varied climates and terrains, from tropical regions to arctic conditions. It is compatible with other bridging systems like the SRB and IRB, allowing for joint operations with NATO allies.

Sweden's current military vehicles, including the Stridsvagn 122 main battle tank, CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, and BvS 10 armoured personnel carriers, can easily integrate with the M3 system, enhancing Sweden's amphibious capabilities. [Army Recognition]

(dql)

International Relations/Geopolitics/EU Governance

Hungary bickers with EU Commission over Ukraine’s oil blockade

Tensions between Hungary, Ukraine, and the EU have escalated over Ukraine’s decision to block oil shipments to Hungary and Slovakia from Russia's Lukoil, a significant player in the region's oil supply chain.

This decision has prompted Hungary and Slovakia to file a formal complaint with the European Commission (EC), alleging that Ukraine has violated the terms of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. [Hungary Today 1]

The center of the dispute regards the potential risks this blockade poses to the energy security of Hungary and Slovakia, both of which rely heavily on Russian oil imports.

In a recent press conference in Brussels, European Commission spokesperson Balázs Ujvári suggested that there is no immediate threat to the security of oil supplies. "On the basis of the information available to us and in line with the analysis on internal security, it appears that the sanctions imposed by Ukraine on Lukoil will not affect the oil transit operations of commercial companies through the Friendship pipeline as long as Lukoil is not the formal owner of the oil," Ujvári stated. [Hungary Today 2]

These findings followed detailed discussions between EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denis Shmihal, with the EC urging Hungary and Slovakia to provide further information if necessary.

Despite these reassurances, Hungarian officials have expressed deep concerns. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó has been particularly vocal, warning of the inadequacies of alternative oil supply routes, such as those provided by the Croatian oil pipeline operator JANAF.

Szijjártó also took aim at Croatia, accusing the country of exploiting the situation by raising transit fees and imposing short-term contracts on oil transportation. He suggested that these actions further demonstrate the EU's inability to protect the energy interests of its member states.

Szijjártó criticized JANAF for charging "unreasonably high and unfair prices" for its services, noting that costs have reportedly increased fivefold since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. He questioned JANAF's capacity to compensate for any loss of oil from the Russian pipeline, stating that "JANAF cannot compensate for a possible loss of the Russian pipeline, as it does not have the necessary capacity." [Hungary Today 2]

The Hungarian government's demonstrated frustration with the European Union's response to the situation. Tamás Menczer, communications director for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP party, suggested on national television that Brussels, possibly under the influence of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, may have encouraged Ukraine to cut off oil supplies. Menczer emphasized that while Hungary has legal options to address the situation, it is not interested in "blackmailing Ukraine."

Adding to the criticism, Barna Pál Zsigmond, Parliamentary State Secretary of the Ministry of EU Affairs, accused both Brussels and Ukraine of pressuring Hungary to "join the pro-war side." Zsigmond lamented the lack of a substantial reaction from EU leadership, arguing that the Commission is "playing for time" instead of taking immediate action to address Ukraine's move. He stressed that under the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Ukraine cannot disrupt the transit of energy products to EU member states. [Hungary Today 3]

To resolve the issue, Hungary and Slovakia have initiated a pre-arbitration consultation process with the European Commission. They are seeking support

from an institution that, according to Hungary, was "originally created to help" its member states.

Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, has not minced words in his critique of the European Union's handling of the situation. Speaking at the recent MCC Feszt organized by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, Szijjártó accused the EU of weakness and inaction, suggesting that the bloc's response—or lack thereof—could only be explained by a coordinated strategy from Brussels. "The EU cannot be so weak as to tolerate a decision by a candidate country that threatens the energy supply of an EU member state. This idea can only come from Brussels," Szijjártó declared. [Hungary Today 3]

The dispute has also drawn international attention, with Russian Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova alleging that the United States is orchestrating events to maintain the EU's dependence on American energy resources.

According to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Zakharova linked the EU's stance to its reluctance to enter long-term energy contracts with Russia and its opposition to the Nord Stream pipeline. [Hungary Today 3]

Hungary remains firm in its opposition to Ukraine's blockade of oil shipments, with Szijjártó stating that if Ukraine's actions threaten Hungary's energy security, the country will not agree to any payment for resources as part of a peace agreement.

The ongoing dispute underscores the complex interplay of energy politics in Europe and the challenges the EU faces in maintaining unity among its member states amid external pressures. The Russia-Ukraine war continues to sow division amongst its member states and Hungary in particular, based on their longstanding opposition to the wider EU sentiment of unconditional support to Ukraine.

As economic security conflicts like this arise between Ukraine and official EU member states, the institution must navigate the challenge of balancing its strong pro-Ukraine stance—while attempting to prepare the country for hopeful future membership—with the responsibility to safeguard the interests of its existing members, even when their policy views diverge.

(pt)

Italy to delay budget plan until October, after EU deadline

Italy will miss the European Union's budget submission deadline due to pending revisions of economic growth data by ISTAT, which are expected to impact the budget figures. The government will now unveil its new budget plan in early October to incorporate these revisions, although a preliminary discussion on the plan will occur on September 17. Despite these delays, officials suggest the revisions won't significantly alter the fiscal outlook, which aims to reduce the budget deficit to below 3% by 2026 in compliance with EU requirements. [Euractiv]

(lb)

EU, UK, US, Israel sign world's first AI Treaty

On September 5, the European Union (EU), United Kingdom, United States, and Israel signed the world's first treaty aimed at protecting human rights in artificial intelligence (AI) technology during a ceremony in Vilnius, Lithuania. The Framework Convention on AI and human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, adopted by the Council of Europe in May, focuses on regulating AI's impact on human rights. However, civil society groups criticized the treaty for being watered down, with private sector involvement largely excluded under pressure from countries like the US. The treaty primarily covers the public sector and its contractors.

Other signatories include Andorra, Georgia, Iceland, Moldova, Norway, and San Marino. The treaty was designed to avoid conflicts with the EU's AI Act, meaning its significance for EU member states and non-EU countries is limited. Critics argue that the text contains broad principles, loopholes, and blanket exemptions, calling on governments to implement it meaningfully. Further discussions will focus on a non-binding methodology for assessing the impact of AI on human rights, though EU countries are unlikely to participate as they implement the AI Act. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Draghi's EU Competitiveness Report briefing disappoints, lacks concrete policy proposals

On September 4, Mario Draghi presented his much-anticipated report on Europe's future competitiveness to EU diplomats and parliamentary group leaders, but it was met with criticism for lacking concrete policy proposals. The former European Central Bank president focused on the challenges Europe faces, including high energy prices, lack of innovation, and climate change, but provided no specific solutions. EU diplomats described the presentation as "underwhelming" and vague.

The report is expected to be divided into five sections: increasing productivity, reducing dependencies, climate change, social inclusion, and sector-specific proposals. However, Draghi did not address topics such as common borrowing or defense.

Political reactions were mixed. Manfred Weber of the European People's Party (EPP) and Bas Eickhout of the Greens both noted the lack of specificity, while Left Group leader Manon Aubry criticized the competitiveness focus as overlooking social issues. Other leaders, like Valérie Hayer of Renew and Assita Kanko of the European Conservatives, offered more neutral responses, simply expressing interest in the report's upcoming release. [Euractiv]

(lm)

EU Agriculture Report Calls for Shift to Targeted Support and Sustainable Farming Incentives

The EU's "Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture" has concluded with recommendations to shift away from land-based subsidies, focusing more on supporting small farmers and incentivizing sustainable practices. After eight months of discussions, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented the 110-page report on 4th September, calling for a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to offer targeted income support to those who need it most. The report advocates for new incentives for green farming, a temporary Agrifood Just Transition Fund, and promoting healthier, sustainable diets. It also proposes the creation of a European Board of Agriculture and Food to guide future policy developments. These conclusions will inform von der Leyen's vision for EU agriculture, set to be unveiled by March 2025. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Eurogroup President Urges UK and EU to Strengthen Cooperation on Financial and Capital Markets

Paschal Donohoe, president of the Eurogroup of eurozone finance ministers, called for Britain and the EU to build on their "first steps" to rebuild trust and deepen cooperation on shared challenges during a speech in

London on 3rd September. Addressing UK financial leaders, Donohoe highlighted discussions with UK finance minister Rachel Reeves on pensions reform and long-term savings to boost capital markets, alongside efforts to advance the EU's capital markets union. He praised the improved UK-EU relations under Prime Minister Keir Starmer and welcomed the UK-EU Memorandum of Understanding on Financial Services. Donohoe emphasized the importance of a unified capital markets union for addressing key issues like the green transition. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Council of Europe urges Italy to boost anti-corruption efforts

The Council of Europe has urged Italy to strengthen its efforts against corruption and conflicts of interest, particularly among top officials, according to a report by its anti-corruption body GRECO. The report, published on August 28, criticizes Italy's existing anti-corruption framework as overly complex and calls for a unified integrity framework for high-ranking officials, along with a common code of conduct. GRECO also highlighted the need for stricter rules on gifts, lobbying, and post-employment activities, as well as more robust sanctions for breaches. Additionally, the report raised concerns about the lack of gender diversity in Italy's law enforcement leadership.

The Italian government, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, must address GRECO's 19 recommendations, with progress to be reviewed in 2026. Despite some improvements, Italy remains a high-risk country for corruption, ranking 17th among EU member states in Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Czechia renews calls to postpone EU anti-deforestation law

The Czech Agriculture Ministry has requested that the European Commission delay the implementation of the EU's new anti-deforestation law, citing concerns over its unclear impact on businesses and their unpreparedness due to insufficient information. The ministry emphasized the need for more time and proper guidelines to minimize potential negative effects on companies and supply chains. Czechia joins other EU countries, including Austria, Finland, and Italy, in seeking a postponement of the regulation, which aims to reduce the EU's contribution to global deforestation. The law, effective since June 2023, is set to be fully implemented by December 2024. [Euractiv]

(lb)

European Parliament President Metsola in Warsaw urges EU reform to cope with enlargement

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, during a visit to Poland, emphasized that the European Union's current structure would be inadequate for a bloc with over 30 members, highlighting the need for reform as EU enlargement progresses. After meeting with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Metsola described EU enlargement as the bloc's "strongest geopolitical tool" but stressed the importance of adapting the Union's structure and strengthening its security architecture in cooperation with NATO. Metsola also identified key challenges for the EU, including competitiveness, the cost-of-living crisis, job creation, and sustainable development. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Von der Leyen Gambles on Parliamentary Vote for Commissioner Approval Amid Gender Parity Criticism

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has opted to put her team of commissioner-designates to a vote in the European Parliament, rather than asking member states to reconsider their picks, despite a lack of gender parity in the nominations.

With only seven out of 27 member states proposing women candidates, von der Leyen faces criticism from centrist MEPs, but her strategy could shift responsibility back to member states if nominees fail parliamentary scrutiny. By allowing the Parliament to exert its influence, von der Leyen may strengthen her mandate and reinforce the balance of power within EU institutions. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Environmental campaigners take European Commission to court over emissions rule for 2030

Environmental campaigners have taken the European Commission to court, challenging its 2030 emissions rules as inadequate for meeting the Paris Agreement's climate goals. The non-profit groups Climate Action Network and the Global Legal Action Network argue that the EU's national emissions limits for sectors like transport and agriculture are unlawful, as they would not sufficiently reduce greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming within 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The European Commission has requested the case be dismissed, but the Court of Justice of the European Union's General Court has granted the case priority status, potentially leading to a hearing in 2025. [First Post]

(lb)

Italian central bank chief calls for a common EU fiscal capacity

At Italy's annual Catholic summit in Rimini on Wednesday, Bank of Italy President Fabio Panetta emphasized the need for the EU to establish a "common fiscal capacity" to ensure peace and prosperity. Speaking at the Meeting for Friendship Among People, Panetta argued that the EU requires significant reforms to address challenges such as fragmented budgetary policies, advocating for a centralised fiscal policy to strengthen cohesion and support strategic investments. He also highlighted key areas for focus, including the environmental and digital transitions, and called for expanding the single market and completing the banking union. Panetta urged Italy to effectively implement the Next Generation EU and pursue structural reforms to boost productivity. [Euractiv]

(lb)

EEAS Secretary-General Stefano Sannino visited Iceland

EEAS Secretary-General Stefano Sannino visited Iceland on 8-9 August 2024 for bilateral consultations with senior Icelandic officials. In Reykjavík, Sannino met with Foreign Minister Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir to discuss international developments and EU-Iceland cooperation, focusing on EEA cooperation, Arctic affairs, and support for Ukraine. He also held talks with other key government figures, including the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Additionally, Sannino visited the NATO base in Keflavík, where he was briefed on Iceland's defense policy and its contributions to NATO. Sannino emphasized Iceland's importance as a close EU partner. [European External Action Service]

(lb)

Ukraine receives €4.2bn from EU as part of recovery plan

Ukraine has received nearly €4.2 billion from the European Union as the first installment under the Ukraine Facility, a four-year plan that provides up to €50 billion in grants and loans to support the country's recovery from Russia's aggression. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal announced that another tranche is expected by year-end, with funds directed toward social and humanitarian needs. This financial aid comes as Ukraine launched a surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region, capturing over two dozen settlements in an effort to curb Russian shelling. President Volodymyr Zelensky defended the operation as a necessary step toward peace, while the EU reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's right to self-defense. [RFI]

(lb)

Commissioner Breton Urges Musk to Comply with EU Law ahead of Trump Interview

EU Commissioner Thierry Breton sent a letter to Elon Musk on Monday, urging him to ensure that social

media platform X (formerly Twitter) complies with the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). The letter, which came ahead of Musk's live-streamed interview with former U.S. President Donald Trump, emphasized X's responsibilities as a "Very Large Online Platform" (VLOP) under the DSA, requiring it to prevent the spread of harmful content and disinformation. The move sparked backlash, with X CEO Linda Yaccarino and Trump's campaign accusing the EU of overreaching, while tensions between X and the EU continue to escalate over social media regulation. [Jurist.org]

(lb)

Italy's beach clubs shut down to protest EU law

Thousands of Italian beach clubs staged a strike on August 9, 2024, closing their umbrellas in protest against EU rules that will require their licenses to be awarded through a competitive bidding process starting next year. These beach businesses, often passed down through generations, argue that the new regulations threaten 300,000 jobs and disregard their investments. The strike reflects growing tensions between the powerful beach club lobby and the Italian government, which has delayed implementing the EU directive since 2006. While some politicians support the beach clubs, others, like the Greens and Left Alliance, urge the public to reclaim public beach access. [Politico]

(lb)

EU and China come to blows over electric vehicle imports during tariff discussions

China's commerce ministry criticized the European Union's preliminary ruling on imported electric vehicles (EVs) on August 9, 2024, alleging that the decision lacked factual and legal basis and breached World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. In response, China initiated WTO dispute settlement procedures, challenging the EU's temporary countervailing measures and reserving the right to pursue further legal action against the proposed provisional duties on these imports. This move escalates trade tensions amid the growing global EV market.

On 22 August, the European Commission defended its provisional tariffs on China-made EVs, asserting compliance with WTO and EU regulations despite legal experts' concerns about procedural lapses. The Commission revised the tariffs from a maximum of 38.1% to 36.3% but maintained that its actions were based on sound evidence and aligned with international rules. The ongoing dispute over EV tariffs could have significant global trade implications, with China expected to file a second complaint against the EU's final tariffs, due by 30 October.

Adding to the tensions, China announced an anti-subsidy investigation into EU dairy imports, including cheese, milk, and cream, on 21 August. This probe follows complaints from the Chinese dairy industry about EU subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy, escalating the trade conflict between Beijing and Brussels. The investigation comes just after the EU softened its tariffs on Chinese EVs. China is a crucial market for EU dairy, with exports valued at €1.76 billion in 2023. EU officials have vowed to defend their dairy sector and are also managing ongoing investigations into EU pork and spirits exports. The European Commission continues to monitor these developments closely, aiming to resolve disputes while balancing trade relations with China. [Reuters] [Euractiv] [Euractiv]

(lb)

Hungary defends relaxed entry rules for Russian and Belarusian workers amid EU security concerns

Hungary's recent decision to relax entry rules for Russian and Belarusian "guest workers" has sparked security concerns across the EU, with Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson warning that the move could undermine EU sanctions and potentially allow individuals to gain permanent residency, posing a threat to the Schengen Area. Johansson demanded an explanation from Hungary by 19 August but received no response until Wednesday (21 August). In a letter to Johansson, Hungary defended its immigration program, which allows "guest workers" to stay for up to five years and could pave the way for permanent residency. Hungary’s Interior Minister Sándor Pintér assured that the program complies with EU regulations, includes rigorous screening, and prioritizes the security of both Hungary and the Schengen zone. Meanwhile, Hungary’s Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó dismissed the allegations of security risks as "plain lies," asserting that thorough checks

remain in place. The European Commission is currently reviewing Hungary's response, while the issue is expected to be addressed at next week's EU foreign and defence ministers meeting in Brussels, with several Baltic and Nordic countries expressing similar concerns. [RFI] [Euractiv]

(lb)

Hungary bickers with EU Commission over Ukraine's oil blockade

Tensions between Hungary, Ukraine, and the EU have escalated over Ukraine's decision to block oil shipments to Hungary and Slovakia from Russia's Lukoil, a significant player in the region's oil supply chain.

This decision has prompted Hungary and Slovakia to file a formal complaint with the European Commission (EC), alleging that Ukraine has violated the terms of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. [Hungary Today 1]

The center of the dispute regards the potential risks this blockade poses to the energy security of Hungary and Slovakia, both of which rely heavily on Russian oil imports.

In a recent press conference in Brussels, European Commission spokesperson Balázs Ujvári suggested that there is no immediate threat to the security of oil supplies. "On the basis of the information available to us and in line with the analysis on internal security, it appears that the sanctions imposed by Ukraine on Lukoil will not affect the oil transit operations of commercial companies through the Friendship pipeline as long as Lukoil is not the formal owner of the oil," Ujvári stated. [Hungary Today 2]

These findings followed detailed discussions between EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denis Shmihal, with the EC urging Hungary and Slovakia to provide further information if necessary.

Despite these reassurances, Hungarian officials have expressed deep concerns. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó has been particularly vocal, warning of the inadequacies of alternative oil supply routes, such as those provided by the Croatian oil pipeline operator JANAF.

Szijjártó also took aim at Croatia, accusing the country of exploiting the situation by raising transit fees and

imposing short-term contracts on oil transportation. He suggested that these actions further demonstrate the EU's inability to protect the energy interests of its member states.

Szijjártó criticized JANAF for charging "unreasonably high and unfair prices" for its services, noting that costs have reportedly increased fivefold since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. He questioned JANAF's capacity to compensate for any loss of oil from the Russian pipeline, stating that "JANAF cannot compensate for a possible loss of the Russian pipeline, as it does not have the necessary capacity." [Hungary Today 2]

The Hungarian government's demonstrated frustration with the European Union's response to the situation. Tamás Menczer, communications director for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP party, suggested on national television that Brussels, possibly under the influence of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, may have encouraged Ukraine to cut off oil supplies. Menczer emphasized that while Hungary has legal options to address the situation, it is not interested in "blackmailing Ukraine."

Adding to the criticism, Barna Pál Zsigmond, Parliamentary State Secretary of the Ministry of EU Affairs, accused both Brussels and Ukraine of pressuring Hungary to "join the pro-war side." Zsigmond lamented the lack of a substantial reaction from EU leadership, arguing that the Commission is "playing for time" instead of taking immediate action to address Ukraine's move. He stressed that under the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Ukraine cannot disrupt the transit of energy products to EU member states. [Hungary Today 3]

To resolve the issue, Hungary and Slovakia have initiated a pre-arbitration consultation process with the European Commission. They are seeking support from an institution that, according to Hungary, was "originally created to help" its member states.

Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, has not minced words in his critique of the European Union's handling of the situation. Speaking at the recent MCC Feszt organized by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, Szijjártó accused the EU of weakness and inaction, suggesting that the bloc's response—or lack thereof—could only be explained by a coordinated strategy from Brussels. "The EU cannot be so weak as to tolerate a decision by a candidate country that threatens the energy supply of an EU member state. This idea can only come from Brussels," Szijjártó declared. [Hungary Today 3]

The dispute has also drawn international attention, with Russian Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova alleging that the United States is orchestrating events to maintain the EU's dependence on American energy resources.

According to the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Zakharova linked the EU's stance to its reluctance to enter long-term energy contracts with Russia and its opposition to the Nord Stream pipeline. [Hungary Today 3]

Hungary remains firm in its opposition to Ukraine's blockade of oil shipments, with Szijjártó stating that if Ukraine's actions threaten Hungary's energy security, the country will not agree to any payment for resources as part of a peace agreement.

The ongoing dispute underscores the complex interplay of energy politics in Europe and the challenges the EU faces in maintaining unity among its member states amid external pressures. The Russia-Ukraine war continues to sow division amongst its member states and Hungary in particular, based on their longstanding opposition to the wider EU sentiment of unconditional support to Ukraine.

As economic security conflicts like this arise between Ukraine and official EU member states, the institution must navigate the challenge of balancing its strong pro-Ukraine stance—while attempting to prepare the country for hopeful future membership—with the responsibility to safeguard the interests of its existing members, even when their policy views diverge.

(pt)

Hungary threatens to send asylum seekers to Brussels

If forced to maintain a top EU court ruling that Budapest must adopt a “no-detention” refugee policy, Hungary’s government has stated that it is ready and willing to send every migrant trying to enter its country to Brussels instead. [Politico]

At their government’s weekly briefing on August 22, a minister in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s office stated, “After the asylum procedure, we will offer all migrants at the Hungarian border the opportunity to be transported to Brussels voluntarily and free of charge…If Brussels wants migrants, it can have them.”

This sentiment comes in response to a EUR 200 million fine issued against Hungary in June after the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled Budapest was ignoring EU asylum laws as well as an earlier judgment against it.

Back in 2020, The European Union's Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg ruled that Hungary had failed to comply with the EU's rules on the treatment of migrants, claiming that Budapest was "unlawfully detaining" asylum-seekers and deporting them before they could appeal the rejection of their applications.

The court ordered Hungary to change its policies, but Orbán's government, led for years now by his right-wing Fidesz party, ignored the injunction, a response the ECJ slammed in its June ruling as an "unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law." [Politico]

In addition to the EUR 200 million fine issued in June, Hungary must pay an additional €1 million for each day it fails to comply with the court's ruling.

Budapest is now exploring the possibility of filing a lawsuit and recovering some of the costs of this fine but has expressed that if they are unable come to a reasonable agreement with the European Commision on these rulings, they will consider employing the unprecedented strategy of giving their asylum seekers a one-way ticket to Brussels.

(pt)

EU requests clarification on Hungary's National Card scheme

The European Commission has issued a second request to Hungary, seeking additional clarifications regarding its National Card scheme.

Brussels has expressed serious concerns over Hungary's recent decision to expand its National Card scheme to include Russian and Belarusian citizens, raising the potential for espionage and circumvention of sanctions.

The scheme provides certain nationalities with a streamlined process for obtaining work permits, along with the option for family reunification. It is valid for two years and can be extended for an additional three years, potentially leading to long-term residency.

Originally, the National Card was limited to Ukrainian and Serbian citizens. However, in July, it was expanded to include citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moldova, North Macedonia, Montenegro, as well as Russia and Belarus. [Euro News]

The European Commissioner for Home Affairs, expressed "serious" concerns regarding the inclusion of Russia and Belarus in the scheme, stating that it poses a potential threat to the security of the "entire" Schengen Area, as she remarked on Wednesday.

She openly questioned the rationale behind treating two "hostile" nations in the same way as six EU candidate countries, emphasizing that the economic benefits of bringing in guest workers from Russia and Belarus seemed "limited" and "disproportionate" compared to the internal risks. She referenced recent cases of sabotage, espionage, and cyber-attacks to highlight these concerns.

The Commissioner for Home Affairs made clear however that her department has not identified any violations of EU law and, as a result, will not pursue legal action against Orbán's government—at least not until the internal assessment is completed.

The Commission is still reviewing Hungary's responses to a letter sent on 1 August. According to Johansson, Hungary's answers left certain aspects "unclear," prompting the Commission to send a second letter seeking clarification on two key points of the National Card scheme: Why does Hungary deem the extension to Russian and Belarusian citizens necessary and appropriate given the current geopolitical context? And why does Hungary not implement differentiated security checks for Russian and Belarusian applicants, despite the heightened security risks? [Euro News]

The deadline for Hungary to reply is 11 September.

When asked whether the changes to the National Card scheme warranted Hungary's expulsion from the Schengen Area, the commissioner responded stating, "Suspension of a member from the Schengen Area is a very, very significant decision, and I don't really see that happening." [Euro News]

Hungary's Minister of European Affairs, on the other hand, explained that the extension of the National Card to Russian and Belarusian citizens was necessary to address labor shortages in Hungary and to provide employers with a "simplified procedure" for attracting foreign workers. He emphasized that the changes complied with EU law and did not weaken entry and visa requirements.

"The National Card system does not pose any national security, public safety or public order risks for Hungary or the European Union," she said. "The National Card system contains certain facilitations related to employment. It complies with the rules related to visa issuance and entry in all respects." [Euro News]

This Hungary-EU dispute emerges as the latest conflict between Brussels and Budapest is unfolding alongside another ongoing quarrel over a EUR 200 million fine imposed by the European Court of Justice, which Hungary has thus far refused to pay.

(pt)

EU boosts semiconductor production with introduction of TSMC 10 billion euro Dresden plant aiming for chip sovereignty

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen attended the groundbreaking of Taiwanese chip giant TSMC's new Dresden plant, marking a significant step in the EU's push to boost semiconductor production under the Chips Act. The EU approved a €5 billion state aid scheme for the €10 billion facility, a joint venture with Bosch, Infineon, and NXP, aimed at strengthening Europe's semiconductor supply for industries like automotive. While Germany's Intel project faces delays, Chancellor Olaf Scholz defended state subsidies, emphasizing the strategic importance of securing chip production in Europe. The Chips Act aims to ensure 20% of global chip production occurs within the EU by 2030. [Euractiv]

(lb)

EU halts free imports of Ukrainian honey

The European Commission announced on 20 August that Ukrainian honey imports have exceeded the tariff-free limit set under the EU's autonomous trade measures (ATMs), prompting the reintroduction of tariff quotas. The ATMs, introduced in 2022 to support Ukraine’s agrifood sector amid the Russian invasion, were extended in June but set maximum import volumes for seven sensitive products, including honey. With Ukrainian honey imports surpassing the 44,417.56-tonne limit, they will now be subject to tariff quotas under the 2016 EU-Ukraine trade agreement, with additional imports facing duties. This move comes

amid growing tensions from European farmers over Ukrainian agricultural imports. [Euractiv]

(lb)

Ireland urges review of EU-Israel agreement

Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris has called for an urgent review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement considering the "growing humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza. This appeal follows reports of an Israeli airstrike on a Gaza school compound that killed around 100 people. Harris expressed profound concern over the escalating death toll, which is nearing 40,000, and noted a significant drop in aid deliveries to the region. The United Nations has confirmed that aid truck entries into Gaza have halved, with only 24 out of 67 planned aid missions to northern Gaza being facilitated by Israel this month. Harris condemned the heavy civilian casualties and reiterated Ireland's demand for an immediate ceasefire and the unconditional release of Israeli hostages. He emphasized the need for accountability for those responsible for war crimes and urged that the EU's human rights clauses be upheld, warning that the world is on the brink of a catastrophic situation and calling for stronger international intervention. [Irish Independent]

In a related development, Ireland has imported over €1.5 billion worth of goods from Israel so far this year, with total imports reaching €3.6 billion in 2023. Labour TD Sean Sherlock has suggested a temporary halt in trade with Israel might reflect public sentiment against the ongoing conflict. He also advocated for the passing of the Occupied Territories Bill to show solidarity with the Palestinian people and to signal disapproval of human rights violations. In response to the escalating situation, Taoiseach Simon Harris and Tánaiste Micheál Martin have advised against travel to Israel, citing limited options for assisting Irish citizens if the situation worsens. Additionally, Harris defended President Michael D. Higgins' congratulatory note to Iran's new president, emphasizing Ireland's commitment to maintaining diplomatic relations despite fundamental disagreements. [Irish Mirror]

(nm)

Ireland legally able to ban trade with Israeli-occupied West Bank, experts say

The campaign to introduce a trade ban between Ireland and the Israeli-occupied West Bank has gained significant momentum after two prominent EU law experts confirmed the legality of such a measure. Professors Takis Tridimas and Panos Koutrakos, both leading experts in EU law, stated that the Irish government is fully entitled to pass the Occupied Territories Bill. The Bill, first proposed by Senator Frances Black in 2018, would ban trade with illegal Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories.

The legal opinion challenges earlier advice given by former Attorney General Seamus Woulfe, who argued that the bill would breach EU law. The professors' analysis highlights key European Court of Justice rulings that allow member states to deviate from EU law on public policy grounds to protect fundamental rights. Their argument is further bolstered by a recent International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling, which determined that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land is illegal.

The ICJ ruling mandates that all states refrain from economic dealings with Israel that support its presence in the occupied territories. This development prompted Taoiseach Simon Harris to request updated legal advice from the current Attorney General, Rossa Fanning.

Senator Black expressed frustration over the deteriorating situation for Palestinians since she first introduced the bill. She criticized ongoing land grabs and the expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank, calling it "clear hypocrisy" for Ireland to condemn these actions while still trading with the settlements.

Social Democrats spokesperson Gary Gannon echoed this sentiment, urging the Irish government to take action. He described the Israeli actions in Gaza and the West Bank as relentless and criticized the international community for its inaction. The Occupied Territories Bill has become a central issue in Ireland's foreign policy debate, with strong calls for its enactment. [Irish Independent]

EU Commission Vice President to visit Armenia for visa liberalization talks

Vice President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas, is scheduled to visit Armenia on September 9 to launch the Visa Liberalization Dialogue with the EU. The European Commission has highlighted in a statement that Armenia must implement reforms in border security, migration, and the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms related to travel.

During his visit, Schinas will meet with Armenian President Vahagn Khachaturyan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan, and Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan. He will also deliver a speech at Yerevan State University. [New.am]

The decision to start the Visa Liberalization Dialogue was agreed upon by EU foreign ministers in July. [Eurasianet]

(dql)

Hungary's EU meetings boycotted by Estonian ministers

Estonia has decided that its ministers will stay away informal EU ministerial meetings hosted by Hungary, as it believes Hungary has misused its position during its presidency of the Council of the European Union. Estonia's government explained that Hungary's actions, such as Prime Minister Viktor Orban's uncoordinated visit to Moscow, undermine EU unity and its foreign policy toward Russia.

While Estonia will continue to send officials to represent its views at these meetings, it will not take part in meetings at the ministerial level. Estonia will also maintain its involvement in official EU meetings in Brussels.

Estonia, along with Germany, Finland, and Lithuania, is boycotting the Hungarian-hosted meetings, a stance echoed by the European Commission, which has decided not to send its members to high-level meetings in Hungary. [ERR]

(dql)

EU condemns Georgian government's push for contentious "family values" legislation

The European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's diplomatic arm, has issued a statement condemning the rushed adoption of the so-call bill on "On Family Values and Protection of Minors" in its second reading by the Georgian parliament (see article in this edition). The EU highlighted that this legislation undermines the fundamental rights of the Georgian people and risks further stigmatization and discrimination against parts of the population.

The statement expressed the EU's regret that such impactful legislation was passed without adequate public consultation or a thorough analysis of its compliance with European and international standards, particularly regarding the rights of LGBTI individuals and issues of gender identity.

In response to these concerns, the EU called on Georgian authorities to reconsider the entire legislative package. It warned that this proposal, along with restrictions on civil society imposed by the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence (see article in edition), would place additional strain on EU-Georgia relations, reminding Georgia that its accession process is effectively stalled and urged the government to recommit to the path of EU integration.

In June, the Venice Commission criticized Georgia's draft law and urged significant revisions including recognizing same-sex couples, removing discriminatory language, deleting provisions that restrict gender reassignment and the use of gender-neutral terms, as well as eliminating bans on assemblies and educational content related to non-heterosexual relationships. [Euromaidan Press]

(dql)

Lithuanian former lawmaker seeks EU court review of state violations of his right to freedom of expression

Former Lithuanian lawmaker Remigijus Žemaitaitis, leader of the Nemunas Dawn party, has petitioned the European Court of Human Rights to review alleged violations of his freedom of expression by the Lithuanian state.

Žemaitaitis claims he faced persecution from state authorities due to his Facebook and media comments on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and his criticism of Israeli actions. He argues that the right to freedom of expression includes not only the right to share neutral opinions but also critical and provocative views.

Žemaitaitis emphasizes that his legal action aims to protect the right of Lithuanians to freely express dissent and criticize the government.

He resigned from Parliament in early May after the Constitutional Court found that he had breached his oath of office with antisemitic statements and violated the Constitution. [Delfi]

(dql)

EU aid package for Ukrainian energy infrastructure, refugees in Moldova announced

On September 6, the European Union announced a EUR 40 million aid package to support vulnerable Ukrainians ahead of winter. The funds will be used to repair damaged buildings, provide electricity and heating, and offer shelter. Additionally, EUR 5 million of the aid will assist Ukrainian refugees in Moldova.

This latest package brings the EU's total humanitarian funding for Ukraine to nearly EUR 1 billion since Russia's invasion began in February 2022. [Radio Free Europe]

(dql)

Cyprus gets ready for evacuations in the Near East

As the conflict in the Middle East intensifies, several airlines have suspended flights to Israel, making Cyprus a key transit point. The EU member state is expected to receive a significant number of evacuees soon.

Cyprus has already been involved in providing aid to civilians in the Gaza Strip and may now face an influx of evacuees and refugees from the region. Many travelers, who were originally heading to Israel, have found themselves stranded in Cyprus.

Cypriot authorities announced that they have completed preparations for the anticipated arrival of people evacuated from Lebanon and Israel. The Middle East has seen rising tensions following an attack on Iran that resulted in the death of Ismail Haniyeh, the former political leader of Hamas. [EP]

In a statement released in May, Cypriot Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos confirmed that the government has made provisions to implement the ESTIA plan if needed. This plan, first introduced in October 2023, outlines the procedures for receiving, accommodating, and repatriating third-country nationals escaping conflict zones. [DW]

(df)

Support for refugees could plunge Cyprus into an armed conflict

Due to its geographical location, Cyprus has been identified as a potential target for attacks. On 19 June, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned that Cyprus would be regarded as 'part of the war' if Israel were to use its airports or bases to launch attacks against Lebanon.

In response, the Cypriot government has consistently stated that it has never allowed its facilities to be used by another country for hostile actions, and it will not do so in the future. At the end of July, Foreign Minister Konstantinos Kombos reaffirmed Cyprus' stance of neutrality, emphasizing that 'Cyprus has never been part of the crisis, but part of the solution, as has been internationally recognized.' [DW]

Cyprus has also activated a second plan, known as NAFKRATIS, which facilitates the evacuation of EU or third-country nationals from Lebanon via Cyprus or manages the increased flow of refugees by sea. In relation to Lebanon, Cyprus is maintaining close contact with Canada and Germany, as many citizens from these countries are currently in Lebanon.

(df)

Italy's Prime Minister Meloni secures executive vice presidency in EU Commission

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has secured an executive vice presidency in the European Commission for Italy, despite initial concerns that her party's stance against the reappointment of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen could hinder this effort. Fulvio Martusciello, leader of Forza Italia (EPP) in the European Parliament, confirmed that Italy would play a significant role in the next Commission, with 14

commissioners from the European People's Party (EPP), and one of the four executive vice presidencies going to Italy. Italian Minister of EU Affairs, Raffaele Fitto, is expected to assume this role, possibly overseeing economic affairs and the EU's pandemic recovery fund, worth hundreds of billions of euros.

Other key appointments include Valdis Dombrovskis from Latvia, who will focus on EU expansion and Ukraine reconstruction; France's Thierry Breton, who will handle industry and strategic autonomy; and Spain's Teresa Ribera, who will oversee ecology and digital affairs. Estonia's outgoing leader, Kaja Kallas, is also expected to be named an executive vice president, likely managing foreign policy. [Voice of America]

This represents a political win for Meloni, as she has been advocating for Italy to take a leading role in the European Union since the June elections, where her party gained strength. This achievement comes despite Italy not being part of the pro-European majority in Parliament, which includes the EPP, S&D, Renew, and Greens. [Euractiv]

(lm)

EU still far from swine fever vaccine as concern grows

The European Union remains far from developing a vaccine for African swine fever (ASF), a highly contagious virus affecting pigs, as concerns rise amid outbreaks in Italy, Germany, and Poland. ASF, harmless to humans but deadly for pigs and wild boars, has hit Italy's northern Lombardy region particularly hard, where the majority of the country's pigs are raised. With 18 outbreaks in Lombardy alone, authorities are imposing transport restrictions and culling infected pigs.

The European Commission warns that scientists are struggling to create a vaccine, with ASF posing unique challenges compared to past viruses like COVID-19 or rabies. Despite Vietnam approving a swine fever vaccine, the EU remains skeptical about its safety and effectiveness due to limited shared data.

In Italy, the disease is causing economic strain, especially in the ham industry. The Parma Ham Consortium reports skyrocketing prices for cured meats, as culls have reduced the pig population by around 50,000 this year. Exports of Italian pork to key markets, including China and Japan, have also been blocked, exacerbating financial losses for farmers and

impacting the country's renowned ham production. [Euractiv]

(lm)

Portugal receives EU assistance to tackle wildfires in Madeira

The European Commission is mobilizing aid to Portugal in its fight against a wildfire close to Ribeira Brava, Madeira.

Two “rescEU” firefighting Canadair planes have been deployed by the Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) from Spain in response to Portugal's activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. [European Commission]

Nearly 5,000 hectares of vegetation have been burned by the fire, which broke out on August 14 and is mostly located in mountainous regions with steep slopes and challenging access. [Reuters]

Strong wind and high temperatures have been hindering firefighting efforts, but there have been no reports of damage to residences or vital infrastructure. [Euronews]

Wildfires are an increasingly common event due to climate change, affecting regions like Southern and Eastern Europe, North America and parts of Asia.

(fs)

Lisbon city council to appeal €1 million fine for sharing anti-Putin activists’ data with Russia

Lisbon City council will file an appeal against a court ruling fining the municipality around €1 million for disclosing the personal information of Russian activists to the embassy of Russia in Portugal, in a case known as “Russiagate”.

“Lisbon City Council confirms that it will appeal the €1 million fine imposed by the Administrative Court of Lisbon relating to the sending of data on Russian activists in 2021, during the presidency of Fernando Medina,” the current executive of the city council led by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) mayor Carlos Moedas, said. [Euractiv]

Portugal's National Data Protection Commission (CNPD) fined the municipality €1.25 million in January 2022 for "communicating the personal data of event organisers to third parties," a violation of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. It found 225 instances of communication breaches in the municipality about protests, marches, or parades. [Lusa]

The demonstrators, who opposed Vladimir Putin's government, had called for Alexei Navalny, the head of the Russian opposition by that time, to be freed during a demonstration in January 2021. After learning that Lisbon City Council had released their data, they successfully argued that it had jeopardized their safety and the safety of their relatives in Russia. [Euractiv]

Chinese activists also fear that some of their personal data has been passed to China during the past years. [PR]

(fs)

EU considers sanction against Slovakia over rule of law violations

On September 8, Bloomberg reported that the European Commission is preparing proposal to censure Slovakia in response to Prime Minister Robert Fico's decision to abolish the Special Prosecutor's Office last December. The Office oversaw corruption cases involving EU funds. [EiR No. 1, January/2024]

The European Commission is considering two proposals to address the issue. The first proposal involves using the EU's conditionality mechanism, which could lead to a partial freeze of the near EUR 13 billion in cohesion funds allocated to Slovakia. The second proposal could result in Slovakia losing all or part of the EUR 2.7 billion from its Recovery and Resilience Plan. These measures will allow the Commission to withhold funds if it reasonably believes that the rule of law or the EU's financial interests are at risk.

The process is still in its early stages and requires approval from Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. If penalties are imposed, Slovakia would become the second EU member state, after Hungary, to face such measures. [Euroactive] [BNN Bloomberg]

(nl/dql)

Slovenia nominates Marta Kos as EU Commissioner following gender equality push

Slovenia has nominated Marta Kos, a former diplomat, as its new European Commissioner following a request from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to increase female representation. Kos's nomination came after Slovenia's original candidate, Tomaž Vesel, withdrew.

The move is part of a broader effort by von der Leyen to achieve gender parity in the next 'college' of Commissioners, which will lead the European Commission's work for the next five years. Slovenia joins other EU countries, including Romania, that have replaced male candidates with female ones in response to von der Leyen's call.

Kos, who has served as Slovenia's ambassador to Germany, Switzerland, and Latvia, brings extensive diplomatic experience to the position. The new Commission structure, including policy portfolios, is expected to be announced shortly. [EuroNews]

(ga)

Former Danish climate and energy minister nominated as EU commissioner

Denmark has nominated Dan Jørgensen to join European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's second team of European Union (EU) commissioners, as confirmed by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen confirmed on August 28.

Jørgensen's nomination was part of a broader cabinet reshuffle that also included the creation of a new minister for the European Union role, in preparation for Denmark's presidency of the Council of the EU in late 2025 (see article in this edition).

Jørgensen, a social democrat, has a strong background in EU affairs, having served as a member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2013, where he was vice chair of the environment committee. He later served as Denmark's minister for food, agriculture, and fisheries, and more recently as minister for climate and energy, and minister for development cooperation and global climate policy.

Jørgensen is considered a strong candidate for an energy and climate portfolio, competing with Spain's

Teresa Ribera, or potentially a role related to international partnerships due to his experience as development minister. [Politico]

(dql)

Finland to stay away from informal political meetings hosted by Hungary

Finland has decided not to participate in informal meetings hosted by Hungary for the time being, meaning that none of its ministers or political secretaries will attend these meetings. However, Finland will be represented at the official level.

This decision was made during an August 22 meeting of the Ministerial Committee on European Union Affairs, which discussed Finland's participation in informal ministerial meetings during Hungary's EU Council Presidency.

The Committee described the decision as a "response to Hungary's actions during its Presidency," alluding to recent visits by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Russia and China. [Finnish Government] [Yle]

Hungary began its EU Council Presidency on July 1 and will hold it until the end of the year.

(dql)

Slovenia begins UN Security Council presidency, announces key debates and initiatives

Slovenia commenced its first presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the 2024–2025 term on September 1. Slovenia's presidency will feature a series of significant events and discussions aimed at addressing global security issues.

The key events include a High-level Open Debate on Leadership for Peace, scheduled for September 25, to be chaired by Slovenian Prime Minister Dr. Robert Golob. This debate will focus on the future role of the Security Council and its effectiveness in conflict resolution.

Slovenian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Tanja Fajon will chair a Security Council session on Afghanistan on September

18, emphasizing education for women and girls. The following day, she will lead a debate on Israeli settlements in the West Bank, showing the Middle East peace process.

Minister Fajon will further host an annual closed-door meeting with the League of Arab States on September 26, discussing cooperation and peace solutions in the Middle East. Slovenia aims to refresh and invigorate discussions within the UNSC, with a focus on women's participation in Afghanistan and the Middle East peace process. The presidency will also include debates on peacekeeping operations, with a broader UN membership participation expected.

The September agenda includes regular and emergency sessions on global issues such as Gaza, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, and DR Congo. Slovenia anticipates additional discussions on Ukraine and potential resolutions regarding Sudan's sanctions and the Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti. The UNSC will operate through open briefings and closed consultations, with Slovenia allowing broader participation in specific discussions. [Republic of Slovenia]

(ga)

Chief prosecutor of IRMCT visits Serbia for war crimes discussions

Chief Prosecutor of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) Serge Brammertz visited Serbia from September 3 to 5 in preparation for his biannual report to the UN Security Council. During his visit, Brammertz met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Minister of Justice Maja Popović, Acting Chief War Crimes Prosecutor Dušan Knežević, and EU Ambassador Emanuele Giaufret.

The discussions focused on war crimes cases, judicial cooperation, and the search for missing persons. Brammertz emphasized the need for Serbia to handle an influx of war crimes cases from Bosnia and Herzegovina and reaffirmed concerns about trials in absentia and the length of proceedings.

Following his visit to Serbia, Brammertz plans to meet with officials in Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and will present his next report to the UNSC later this year. [UN IRMCT]

(ga)

Baltic Nations join for 35th anniversary of the Baltic Way

The presidents of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia gathered to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Baltic Way, a peaceful demonstration that occurred on August 23, 1989. During this historic event, nearly two million people formed a human chain across the three Baltic countries, symbolizing their collective desire for independence from Soviet rule.

The anniversary was marked by various events in Lithuania, including a joint meeting of the presidents and a ceremony at the Freedom Monument in Riga, emphasizing the significance of solidarity in their continued pursuit of freedom and democracy.

This commemoration served as a reminder of the Baltic Way's pivotal role in the Baltic nations' independence movements, highlighting the impact of non-violent protest. It also came at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia, underscoring the region's ongoing commitment to defending their sovereignty and democratic values in the face of external threats. [Baltic Times]

(bw)

Croatian cybersecurity company to train cyber police across Europe

INsig2, a Zagreb-based digital forensics and cybersecurity company, secured a EUR 7 million contract from the European Commission’s Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). This four-year project is funded by the Union Anti-Fraud Programme (UAFP) and involves training European cyber police in digital forensics and analytics. The company will oversee the education of investigators from EU member states and other regions supported by EU projects.

Training is scheduled to commence in November 2024, covering diverse aspects of digital forensics, including investigations of Windows, Mac, and Linux systems, mobile devices, network and internet forensics, drone forensics, and encrypted data analysis. The program also includes training on financial fraud prevention, big data analytics, and open-source intelligence.

INsig2's role will encompass organizing training sessions across multiple EU countries, equipping classrooms, and managing logistics for participants.

Over the years, the company has trained around 2,000 investigators from approximately 50 countries, showing its global reputation and expertise in digital forensic training. [Total Croatia]

(dql)

Estonia mulls renting out of vacant prison cells

Estonian Justice Minister Liisa Pakosta has proposed renting out vacant prison cells to selected countries, such as the U.K., Sweden, and the Netherlands, which are experiencing overcrowding. The plan could generate an estimated EUR 30 million for Estonia. Pakosta emphasized that Estonian prison guards would manage the foreign inmates, and safety would be the top priority, excluding prisoners eligible for day release. She highlighted Estonia's highly regarded correctional system and low recidivism rates as additional advantages.

Tartu Prison, which is largely empty, is a potential facility for the initiative. Alternatives to the rental plan, such as selling or mothballing the prison, are considered less profitable or too costly. The proposal could create up to 400 jobs and would involve approximately 250-500 inmates, with pricing dependent on agreements with client countries.

Pakosta noted that the U.K. has shown significant interest in the initiative due to its severe prison overcrowding, which has worsened following recent disturbances and riots. The U.K. plans to release 5,500 inmates to alleviate pressure on its prison system, and the media there has also reported on Estonia’s potential EUR 30 million revenue from the scheme. [ERR]

(dql)

US, EU, UK, Canada impose new sanctions on Belarus

The United States, European Union, United Kingdom, and Canada announced coordinated sanctions against Belarus on August 9, marking the fourth anniversary of the country’s contested presidential elections. These measures, aimed at the Belarusian government and entities, were driven by Belarus's support for Russia's war in Ukraine and ongoing human rights abuses within the country.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 19 individuals, 14 entities, and one aircraft linked to supporting Russia's military efforts and generating revenue for Belarusian elites. This includes logistics companies involved in transporting goods to Russia, a research entity in natural sciences, three private cargo airlines, and a developer of precision systems. OFAC also issued General License No. 101, allowing certain transactions related to civil aviation safety until September 10.

The European Council imposed sanctions on 28 individuals responsible for human rights violations, including officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, judges, and people linked to the Belarusian state media. They face asset freezes and travel bans within the EU, reflecting the ongoing crackdown on those involved in internal repression.

The UK targeted four prison officials and three defense entities for their roles in Belarus's military support to Russia. They are subject to asset freezes and restrictions on trust services, adding to the UK's growing list of over 150 Belarusian entities and individuals under sanctions.

Canada added 10 individuals and six entities to its sanctions list under the Special Economic Measures (Belarus) Regulations. The targets include judges involved in the suppression of dissent, military coordinators, and entities within Belarus's defense sector. The sanctions freeze their assets within Canada and prohibits them to enter the country under local immigration laws.

These coordinated sanctions underscore the international community's condemnation of Belarus's actions and commitment to addressing human rights abuses and support for Russia's aggression. [Sanction News]

(hs)

US military aircraft lands on Finnish soil for first time

On September 4, two U.S. Air Force F-35 Lightning II jets from the 48th Fighter Wing, Royal Air Force Lakenheath, UK, made a historic landing on a Finnish highway during the BAANA 2024 exercise.

Part of the Finnish Air Force's routine training, BAANA 2024 prepares its forces to disperse aircraft across the country if needed. The participation of the U.S. jets

demonstrates NATO's ability to deploy air power from unconventional locations and reflects strengthened allied force reflects efforts to enhance cooperation among NATO members.

Since Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 [EiR No. 5, May/2023], U.S. and Finnish forces have participated in several joint exercises, including a June air superiority exercise at Ramstein, Germany, with nine national air forces. [Fox News]

Finland to participate in NATO nuclear exercise?

Finland is reportedly planning to take part in NATO's "Steadfast Noon" nuclear exercise this October. The participation in the exercise would mark the country's first involvement since joining the alliance.

Set to take place in UK, Danish, and Dutch airspace, the exercise, which does not involve live nuclear weapons, includes roles such as providing logistical and air support, with participating aircraft not equipped to carry nuclear arms. The list of participating aircraft included a Finnish Air Force F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet.

Neither the Office of the President of Finland nor the Ministry of Defence commented, and NATO has only provided general details, stating that around a dozen member states typically participate, with final confirmation closer to the event. Despite national legal restrictions preventing the deployment of nuclear weapons on Finnish soil, the country's political and military leadership has not ruled out involvement in NATO's nuclear deterrence.

While Finland did not participate in last year's exercise, it has been involved in nuclear planning discussions within NATO since joining. [Yle]

(dql)

Finland takes part in EU multinational Baltic Sea operation

Finland's coast guard is participating in a multinational maritime operation in the Baltic Sea running from August 14 to October 30. Coordinated by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the operation aims to enhance regional cooperation and strengthen maritime security in one of the world's busiest sea regions. It involves activities such as border

surveillance, oil spill management, rescue operations, and monitoring of fishing and maritime traffic, and integrates EU services, including satellite and drone technology, with national coast guard capabilities.

Experts from various Finnish agencies, along with EU countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, participate. The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) will also contribute. [Yle]

(dql)

Pavel Durov, founder of Telegram messaging app arrested at French airport

Pavel Durov, the Russian-born billionaire and founder of the popular but controversial messaging app Telegram, was detained at Le Bourget airport near Paris on August 24. He was charged with various violations related to the platform, including allegations that Telegram was used for illegal activities such as child sexual abuse material, drug trafficking, and organized crime. [Financial Times] [Reuters]

After four days of questioning, Durov was released from custody on August 28. French prosecutors announced that he would appear in court for a possible indictment, as part of a broader judicial inquiry involving 12 criminal violations.

Notably, French authorities used a rarely invoked 2004 cryptography law, a move that caused alarm within the tech industry. Specifically, two of the charges against Durov are related to providing encrypted messaging services without proper declaration to French authorities, as required by the law. These charges surprised many in the tech world, as they target Telegram's use of encryption, a feature common among messaging apps like WhatsApp and Signal.

The 2004 French law obligates companies offering cryptography tools to notify France's cybersecurity agency, ANSSI, and provide technical details and source codes. While similar regulations exist in countries like China, where state surveillance is a concern, this law had rarely been used in Western democracies, making Durov's case a precedent.

Against this backdrop, the charges have raised concerns about state overreach and prompted fears of regulatory crackdowns on encrypted communication. Several experts, including lawyers and industry officials, noted that they had never encountered

prosecutions under this law before. The tech industry has remained largely silent, with major encrypted messaging platforms like Signal and WhatsApp declining to comment on the case. [POLITICO]

Moreover, the arrest has sparked political reactions. Russia criticized the detention as politically motivated, while French President Emmanuel Macron insisted that the arrest was part of an independent investigation, unrelated to politics. Macron reaffirmed France's commitment to upholding freedom of expression within legal frameworks. Telegram, in defense, maintained that it complies with EU regulations and continues to improve its content moderation practices.

Durov's arrest also drew international attention from countries like the UAE, where he holds citizenship, and Iran, whose Supreme Leader commented on the case. Meanwhile, the United Nations expressed human rights concerns, highlighting the case's complexity and the need for proportional regulation of social media platforms. The UN Human Rights Office is considering publishing guidelines to ensure such cases adhere to international human rights standards. [Voice of America] [South China Morning Post]

(axc/lm)

Georgia joins first-ever international AI treaty

On September 5, Georgia, along with the European Union, United States, United Kingdom, Andorra, Iceland, Norway, Moldova, San Marino, and Israel have signed the Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law in Vilnius. This is the first-ever international legally binding treaty designed to ensure that AI systems are fully consistent with human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

The treaty establishes a legal framework covering the entire lifecycle of AI systems. It aims to promote AI development and innovation while managing the risks it may pose to human rights, democratic principles, and the rule of law.

The treaty was adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on May 17, 2024. It was negotiated by the 46 Council of Europe member states, the European Union, and 11 non-member states (Argentina, Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, the Holy See, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Peru, the United States, and Uruguay), with input from private sector

representatives, civil society, and academia as observers.

The treaty will enter into force on the first day of the month following the expiration of three months after five signatories, including at least three Council of Europe member states, ratify it. Countries worldwide are eligible to join and commit to its provisions. [1 TV] [European Commission]

(dql)

NATO urges Russia to remove troops stationed in Georgia

On August 7, NATO urged Russia to withdraw its forces from Georgia, emphasizing that they were deployed without Georgia's approval. This call coincided with the 16th anniversary of Russia's military aggression against Georgia.

The August 2008 war claimed the lives of 170 members of Georgia's Ministry of Defense, 14 Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel, and 224 civilians. The total number of wounded and injured, including military and civilians, reached 2,232, with 1,045 being military personnel.

NATO reaffirmed its support for Georgia's sovereignty, stating that South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain integral parts of the country. [Georgia Today]

Likewise, the United States, the European Union, and other Western countries have reiterated their support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This is the case even though there are hints that the ruling party in Georgia might be turning back toward Moscow.

Despite the pursuit of EU and NATO membership being enshrined in the post-Soviet Caucasus nation's constitution, the current Georgian government's adoption of a law perceived as Russian-style to restrict media and NGOs has undermined both efforts.

Many in the West believe that the ruling Georgian Dream party is moving toward authoritarian policies and anti-Western rhetoric, especially in the wake of the contentious "foreign agent" law's approval, that has entered into force on August 1 (see article in this edition). This law places severe restrictions on NGOs and media that receive more than 20% of their money from elsewhere. Similar to other countries, Russia has

suppressed independent and opposition media using this classification. [Radio Free Europe]

(zh)

Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria to cooperate on energy prices

Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria have teamed up to tackle soaring electricity prices in Southeast Europe, according to Greece's Energy Minister Theodoros Skylakakis. Their joint initiative seeks to address the region's energy crisis, exacerbated by limited access to the broader European market.

The plan involves creating an intervention mechanism to manage extreme electricity prices, seen as a result of insufficient energy interconnections between Central and Southeast Europe, which effectively isolates the region. Despite Greece's substantial solar and wind energy capacity, recent sharp price hikes have occurred due to peak summer demand and inadequate electricity imports from neighboring countries.

Skylakakis criticized the current energy network management system, where operators benefit from market imbalances rather than investing in new interconnections and infrastructure.

The Greek government plans to push for reforms in the European energy market through discussions with the European Commission, aiming to establish a stable and affordable energy supply system for Southeast Europe. [News.Az]

(dql)

Hungary among four EU countries launching Black Sea power line for EU green energy

Hungary, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Romania have launched a major green energy project to install a power line under the Black Sea, aimed at supplying renewable energy from the Caspian Sea to the European Union, announced on September 3 in Bucharest.

The project is a strategic initiative to diversify energy sources and reduce dependence on Russian energy.

The power line will connect Azerbaijan's wind energy resources with EU members Romania and Hungary via Georgia, potentially including Bulgaria.

The feasibility study is set for completion by 2025, and the infrastructure is expected to be operational by 2028-2029. The initiative is intended to enhance energy security, lower electricity costs, and address climate change by providing green energy to Central Europe. [EuroNews]

(ga)

Iceland, six other NATO member states conduct Northern Viking exercise

On September 3, seven NATO countries concluded this year's Northern Viking exercise, focused on defending critical underwater communication lines and sea routes against military threats and sabotage. Held from August 24 to September 3 and led by U.S. Naval Forces Europe, the exercise took place in the GIUK gap, a key naval chokepoint between Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, vital for air and naval traffic between Europe and North America.

The annually held exercise involved 1,200 participants from Iceland, Denmark, France, Norway, Poland, and Portugal. It simulated a threat to Iceland's national security, testing NATO's ability to protect strategic lines of communication. The training included anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare, maritime surveillance, and search-and-rescue operations, utilizing drones, patrol aircraft, radar-equipped vessels, and NATO's Standing Maritime Group One. It addressed conventional military threats and acts of sabotage, reflecting the region's geopolitical significance.

Located at the edge of the eastern Arctic, the GIUK gap is a focal point for international competition due to the region's rich resources and newly accessible shipping routes, accelerated by melting sea ice. Simultaneously, geopolitical developments in the Arctic continue, with China and Russia expanding cooperation in areas like shipping and polar technology. In July, the U.S., Canada, and Finland announced the "Ice Pact" to enhance cooperation on polar icebreaker development. [NATO] [EiR No. 8, August/2024]

(dql)

NATO military drills kick off in Latvia

On September 3, NATO's military exercise Namejs 2024 have begun in Latvia, involving around 11,000 troops from Latvia and other NATO countries, including the U.S., Estonia, Lithuania, and Canada. Running until October 7, the drills aim to enhance defense readiness in response to potential threats from neighboring Russia and Belarus.

The exercises will include joint combat drills with military aircraft and additional fortifications along Latvia's border. [Defence Leaders] [TVP]

(dql)

Lativa, Romania accuse Russia of violating air space

Latvia and Romania, both NATO allies of Ukraine, have reported violations of their airspace by Russian drones. Romania's Ministry of National Defence announced that a Russian drone entered its airspace during nighttime attacks across the Danube River from Ukraine early September 8. F-16 fighter jets were deployed to monitor the situation, and a search for debris is ongoing near the border. There have been no immediate reports of casualties or damage. Romania condemned the "illegal attacks" by Russia.

Latvia reported that a Russian military drone crashed in the eastern part of the country. The Latvian Defence Ministry stated that the drone, which entered from Belarus, crashed near Rezekne. [Ministry of Defense, Latvia]

While this was a rare incident for Latvia, Romania has encountered drone fragments several times since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022.

NATO's outgoing deputy secretary-general, Mircea Geoana, condemned Russia's actions as irresponsible and dangerous, though he noted no evidence of intentional attacks on NATO members. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha criticized the airspace breaches as a reminder of Russia's broader aggression and called for more decisive actions from allies, including enhanced air defense and military aid.

Poland has also reported incidents of Russian missiles or drones violating its airspace. Romanian lawmakers are considering legislation to allow the country to shoot down drones that invade its airspace during peacetime. [Al Jazeera]

(dql)

NATO jets scrambled from Lithuania to intercept Russian aircraft

From August 26 to September 1, NATO jets were dispatched five times from Lithuania to intercept Russian aircraft that breached flight rules in international airspace over the Baltic Sea.

According to the Lithuanian defense ministry, the interceptions involved Russian IL-20 planes flying from Russia to Kaliningrad Oblast without flight plans and with their onboard transponders turned off. In two of the five incidents, Russian pilots maintained radio contact with the regional air control center. [Delfi]

(dql)

Nordic countries join forces to combat spread of Swedish gang crime

Nordic countries, including Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland, are joining forces to combat the spread of Swedish gang crime across the region. A new police hub will be established in Stockholm, with officers from all four countries, to improve real-time information sharing and cooperation. Sweden and Denmark will also exchange police officers to better address gang-related violence.

The initiative comes in response to growing concerns, particularly in Denmark, where Swedish gang members have been involved in violent attacks. Danish Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard criticized Sweden's "sick" culture of violence, blaming poor integration of immigrants for the rise in gang crime. Sweden has the highest rate of gun violence in the European Union, with 55 people shot dead in 2022.

Nordic police are focused on preventing vulnerable youth from being recruited into criminal networks, a problem exacerbated by Sweden’s history of generous immigration policies. Open borders within the EU have facilitated the movement of criminals across the region, leading Denmark to tighten border surveillance with Sweden. Sweden’s government, elected in 2022 on a law-and-order platform, has since toughened immigration policies to address the escalating crime situation. [Reuters]

(lm)

Swiss government publishes long-awaited position on verdict issued by Europe's top rights court

On August 28, the Swiss government released its position regarding the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling in the KlimaSeniorinnen case, a landmark legal battle in which elderly Swiss women claimed that the government's insufficient climate policies violated their right to life. The ECHR ruled in April 2024 that Switzerland's current efforts to combat climate change were inadequate and that the Swiss government had failed to protect its citizens, especially vulnerable groups like the elderly, from the dangers of global warming.

The case, brought forward by a group of senior women known as the KlimaSeniorinnen, argued that climate change poses significant health risks to older people, particularly during heatwaves, and that Switzerland's failure to take stronger action on emissions breached their human rights. The ECHR's decision set a precedent by linking human rights with climate action, stating that the Swiss authorities were responsible for not implementing efficient policies to address climate change.

In its response, the Swiss government defended its climate policies, citing recent legislative efforts like the revised CO2 Act, which aims to halve emissions by 2030, and the Federal Act on a Secure Energy Supply from Renewable Sources, which focuses on expanding renewable energy production. The government argued that these measures, combined with international commitments, meet the ECHR's climate protection requirements.

Despite these claims, environmental groups and independent climate experts remain critical. Climate Action Tracker (CAT), an organization that assesses national climate policies, rated Switzerland's efforts as "insufficient" and emphasized that even with the new laws, Switzerland's 2030 climate target is inconsistent with limiting global warming to 1.5°C, a key threshold in the Paris Agreement. Additionally, CAT raised concerns about Switzerland's heavy reliance on offsetting emissions abroad, suggesting that the country should prioritize domestic reductions.

The Swiss government now faces the challenge of presenting a detailed action plan to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers by October 9, outlining how it plans to comply with the ECHR ruling. This action plan must address both the measures

Switzerland will take to meet its climate targets and the timeline for implementation. Civil society organizations are also expected to submit their observations, ensuring continued scrutiny of Switzerland's climate policies. [SWI 1]

Not one Swiss canton on track for Paris climate agreement

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that, despite some progress, none of Switzerland's 26 cantons is currently on track to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement, according to a ranking by WWF Switzerland published on August 27. While efforts to replace old heating systems with more climate-friendly alternatives have increased, emissions from buildings remain too high. [SWI 2]

(lm)

Switzerland must adapt laws due to EU asylum and migration pact

Switzerland is preparing to adopt parts of the European Union's (EU) asylum and migration pact, which will require significant amendments to its domestic laws. On August 14, the Swiss government launched a consultation on these proposed changes, which will continue until November 14. The amendments are aimed at aligning Swiss legislation with binding developments in the Schengen/Dublin area, which Switzerland is part of.

The changes primarily focus on the Foreign Nationals Act and the Asylum Act. Within the Dublin procedure, which governs responsibility for asylum applications across EU member states and associated countries like Switzerland, the rules on who is responsible for handling asylum claims will largely remain the same. However, the deadlines for responding to applications for responsibility will be shortened, aiming to expedite the process. Additionally, it will become more difficult to transfer responsibility for an asylum application from one Dublin state to another, a move intended to reduce "secondary movements," where asylum seekers move between states to find more favorable conditions.

The amendments will also update the Eurodac Regulation, a key EU system for storing biometric data of asylum seekers and irregular migrants. The revisions will ensure that Eurodac is interoperable with other European IT systems, improving information-sharing between countries. Furthermore, new procedures will

be introduced for the rapid verification of individuals from third countries, enhancing the ability to process and identify migrants more efficiently. [SWI 1]

Swiss political party president wants to tax companies for hiring foreign workers

Against the backdrop of the ongoing negotiations concerning the free movement of workers, Thierry Burkart, president of Switzerland's FDP (Radical Party), has proposed introducing an immigration tax for Swiss companies that hire foreign workers. Burkart believes that while foreign workers play a crucial role in boosting Switzerland's economy and prosperity, they also increase public expenses, such as the need for additional teachers, doctors, and infrastructure.

In an interview with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Burkart explained that this tax would encourage businesses to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of hiring foreign workers. He argues that companies benefit from attracting skilled workers from abroad, but the increasing population results in more costs for public services. By implementing this tax, Burkart believes it would create a more balanced approach, with companies factoring in the broader implications of hiring foreign labor.

Additionally, Burkart called for reforms in Switzerland's own policies to address domestic workforce issues. He criticized the current quotas limiting Swiss students from entering medical studies, pointing out that Switzerland has to import 40 percent of its doctors from abroad. He argues that these restrictions on medical education for Swiss students should be lifted to reduce the country's reliance on foreign medical professionals.

Burkart also emphasized the need for a safeguard clause that would give Switzerland the ability to regulate immigration more effectively. He stated that the EU must be willing to make concessions to Switzerland as part of these ongoing negotiations. [SWI 2]

Swiss voters support bilateral agreements with EU and are willing to compromise

Meanwhile, a survey conducted in July 2024 shows that a majority of Swiss voters support continuing bilateral agreements with the EU and are willing to make compromises in the ongoing negotiations. According to the poll, 65 percent of the 2,000 voters surveyed see clear advantages in the agreements, particularly for the economy, research, and education. Additionally, 79 percent support renegotiating with the EU, recognizing

the importance of these agreements for Switzerland's prosperity and innovation.

Notably, 85 percent of respondents are prepared to compromise on wage protection, and 47 percent are open to adopting the Citizens' Rights Directive. For the first time, 55 percent of voters support continuing the agreements even if it involves adopting EU laws. [SWI 3]

(lm)

Switzerland reconsiders neutrality: closer ties with EU, NATO proposed amid security concerns

Switzerland is rethinking its long-standing neutrality due to growing security concerns, particularly following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A report by Swiss experts, including diplomats and military officials, recommends closer cooperation with the EU and NATO, marking a significant shift after 500 years of non-alignment. The report calls for a "common defense capability" with the West, emphasizing that neutrality has become a point of political debate as Switzerland faces pressures both domestically and internationally to clarify its stance.

The report also urges lifting Switzerland’s ban on arms exports to countries involved in conflict, which has caused friction with nations wanting to supply arms to Ukraine. It recommends deeper military ties with NATO and the EU, including joint training and participation in defense initiatives, without entirely abandoning neutrality. The proposal includes increasing defense spending to 1 percent of GDP by 2030, from the current 0.76 percent.

The report's suggestions have sparked controversy, especially among left-leaning and far-right nationalist parties. Critics argue that Switzerland's closer ties with NATO undermine its neutrality. However, experts contend that Switzerland must adapt to a changing security landscape, particularly to counter hybrid warfare threats like cyberattacks and espionage.

Switzerland’s federal government has already signaled increased collaboration with NATO and the EU on defense matters. Recent efforts include Swiss participation in EU projects on military mobility and cyberdefense, as well as discussions with NATO’s Support and Procurement Agency to explore further cooperation. [POLITICO]

(lm)

Turkish Foreign Minister Engages in talks with EU counterparts in Brussels

Turkish Foreign Minister attended an informal meeting of European Union foreign ministers in Brussels on Thursday. The meeting, held at the European Council headquarters, lasted around two hours and focused on Türkiye-EU relations and regional issues. (Anadolu Ajansı)

During the visit, the Turkish Foreign Minister also held separate meetings with his counterparts from Greece, Spain, and Belgium, as well as with the Prime Minister of Luxembourg. These discussions took place on the sidelines of the main meeting. The Turkish Foreign Ministry did not provide further details about the content of these talks. (Hürriyet Daily News)

(ab)

Türkiye does not have to choose between EU and SCO, says Erdoğan

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has stated that Turkey does not need to choose between strengthening its ties with the European Union (EU) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), dismissing claims that it must align with one over the other. (Hürriyet Daily News)

"While we enhance our relations with the East, we will continue to seek ways to advance our deep-rooted cooperation with the West," Erdoğan said. (Anadolu Ajansı)

Turkey has been in long-standing negotiations for EU membership, while also holding a dialogue partner status with the SCO, a political and security alliance that includes countries such as China and Russia. (Hürriyet Daily News)

Erdoğan emphasized that Turkey can become a "strong, prosperous, and effective" nation by developing relations with both Eastern and Western powers. "Choosing one over the other would harm Turkey rather than benefit it," he said. "We should aim for a win-win approach in our foreign relations." (Anadolu Ajansı)

His comments came in response to criticism from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, who accused the government of favoring the SCO over the EU. (Hürriyet Daily News)

(lm)

Starmer visits Germany and France to bolster U.K.-E.U. ties

Prime Minister Keir Starmer has met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron to bolster U.K.-E.U. ties. Starmer's trips to the E.U. 's top two powers follow his pledge to revive the U.K. economy and repair strained relations with E.U. member states.

Starmer began his tour in Berlin on August 28th, where he spoke with Scholz about the prospect of building a new bilateral treaty to enhance trade and defense production cooperation.

In a press conference alongside Scholz, Starmer stressed that his government's reformed approach would not reverse the U.K.'s exit from the E.U.: "But it does mean a closer relationship on a number of fronts, including the economy, including defense, including exchanges." [Reuters]

France

The next day, Starmer traveled to Paris to meet with President Macron. The pair discussed a commitment to collaborating on defense, energy production, and jointly regulating uncontrolled migration across the English Channel.

The pair also reaffirmed their nations' commitment to supporting Ukraine's defense against Russia as well as reiterated demands to de-escalate the tensions in Gaza. [Reuters]

(lm)

No government consent for overflights carrying weapons to Gaza, confirms Prime Minister Harris

Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris has confirmed that no consent was sought from any Irish Government department for overflights of aircraft carrying weapons

to Israel, following reports that three such flights crossed Irish sovereign airspace this year. The online news outlet *The Ditch* reported that nearly 65 tones of military materials were transported on these flights, citing documents released by Belgian authorities.

Addressing the issue, Mr. Harris stated that he had sought clarification from the Department of Transport and the Department of Defense, both of which confirmed that no requests for consent had been made. "There are very clear consent protocols that would need to be followed for that to happen," Harris said.

Tánaiste Micheál Martin also confirmed that no consents were sought, emphasizing Ireland's policy of military neutrality. A government spokesman added that any foreign military aircraft overflying Irish territory must obtain diplomatic clearance, under strict conditions prohibiting the transport of arms or engagement in military operations.

The spokesman further noted that no exemptions had been granted for the carriage of munitions on civil aircraft to Israel in 2023 or 2024, countering the media reports. [Irish Times]

(nm)

Swiss government wants to ban Hamas from Switzerland for five years

The Swiss government has put forward a proposal to parliament to impose a five-year ban on Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, and its affiliated organizations from Switzerland. This ban would extend to any groups that act under the orders or in the name of Hamas, or those with close ties to the Islamist organization. The government emphasized that to implement the ban, it would need to demonstrate a specific proximity to Hamas for the organizations or individuals in question.

This decision follows growing political pressure, as several Swiss parties have already voiced their support for banning Hamas, given its classification as a terrorist organization by many countries. The proposal includes a consultation process with the security policy commissions to ensure a thorough review of the potential ban's implications.

The Swiss government has opted not to create any new criminal penalties related to this ban. Instead, it will rely on existing provisions within the Swiss

Criminal Code, which already punishes involvement with or support of criminal and terrorist organizations. These penalties can be severe, including custodial sentences of up to 20 years or significant financial penalties.

Additionally, the proposal clarifies that any ban imposed on an organization can be appealed through the Federal Administrative Court, allowing for legal recourse in the case of disputes. [SWI]

(lm)

US, UK spy chiefs warn of deepening Iran-Russia military links

During a joint appearance in London, US CIA Director William Burns and UK MI6 Chief Richard Moore expressed grave concerns about the growing military cooperation between Iran and Russia, specifically focusing on Iran's alleged provision of ballistic missiles to aid Russia's war in Ukraine. Burns warned that if Iran supplies such missiles, it would mark a "dramatic escalation" in their defense partnership. While reports from Bloomberg suggest that Iran has already sent ballistic missiles to Russia, Burns did not confirm whether the transfer had taken place but emphasized that the consequences would be significant if the missiles are used in Ukraine. Moore further highlighted that the use of these missiles would have a clear and devastating impact, leading to civilian casualties and the destruction of Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

Both intelligence chiefs underscored the reciprocal nature of the Moscow-Tehran defense relationship. Burns noted that Russia is helping Iran refine its ballistic missile capabilities, making them more dangerous for use against allies of the US and its partners in the Middle East. This deepening cooperation poses a broader threat to regional stability, particularly in areas where US and European allies are trying to maintain peace.

Despite these escalations, Burns reassured that the Biden administration remains committed to providing military support to Ukraine. However, he also cautioned that the risks of escalation with Russia, including the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons, should not be underestimated. Burns recalled a moment in 2022 when the risk of nuclear confrontation was tangible, but he emphasized that the US and its allies should not be intimidated by Russia's threats.

Burns also revealed that he had met with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Naryshkin, at the end of 2022 to firmly communicate the consequences of any nuclear escalation. This meeting was part of broader efforts by the US to prevent Russia from further escalating the conflict.

In addition to the Iran-Russia partnership, both Burns and Moore criticized Russian intelligence operations in Europe. They accused Russian intelligence services of orchestrating sabotage campaigns in Western countries by hiring local criminals to carry out acts of arson and vandalism. Moore described these tactics as a sign of desperation and a reflection of how "feral" Russian intelligence has become in its operations abroad.

The two intelligence chiefs also touched on the Israel-Hamas conflict, expressing optimism about the potential for a cease-fire. Burns reaffirmed US plans to propose an end to hostilities in Gaza and emphasized the importance of securing the return of Israeli hostages. He added that resolving the conflict could facilitate the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would be a significant blow to Iran's ambitions in the region. Burns suggested that such a diplomatic breakthrough could serve as a powerful counter to Iran's growing influence in the Middle East. [Deccan Herald]

(lm)

EU urged Cambodians rice exporters to following ESG standards

Cambodia's rice exporters are being urged to adopt Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards to meet European Union (EU) market requirements and improve their global competitiveness. The EU, a key market for Cambodian rice, increasingly demands sustainably sourced products, making ESG compliance essential to avoid trade barriers and secure premium market access. By aligning with these standards, Cambodian rice can appeal more to European buyers, access better financing options, and attract long-term investors focused on sustainability, enhancing both their market position and brand value.

Cambodia's rice production is growing, positioning the country as the world's 10th largest producer. The EU remains the top importer of Cambodian rice, followed by China and the ASEAN region. Adopting ESG practices will not only help Cambodian rice exporters

maintain and expand their market presence but also contribute to the country's long-term sustainability and economic growth. [The Asset]

(ma)

European nations participate in Singapore's annual multilateral maritime security exercise

The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) hosted the Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) exercise, a multilateral maritime security exercise led by the United States Navy (USN), from August 12 to 23. The goal was to enhance cooperation and information-sharing to strengthen regional responses against maritime security threats.

This year's 23rd iteration exercise brought together participants from 18 countries, including Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Maldives, Palau, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The exercise featured a five-day shore-based program, including a Senior Leaders' Forum, a maritime security seminar, and a workshop on Vessel Board Search and Seizure (VBSS).

The sea phase of the exercise was conducted at the Changi Command and Control Centre (CC2C) in RSS Singapura – Changi Naval Base. During the sea phase, multinational participants collaborated to analyze real-time maritime information, focusing on identifying vessels of interest in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, as well as the South China Sea. Participating navies and coastguards were tasked to deploy aircraft and ships to investigate potential threats and execute operational responses. [Ministry of Defence Singapore] [The Straits Times]

(ga)

China-EU trade tensions rise as China considers raising tariffs on large engine petrol-power vehicles

Beijing is considering raising import tariffs on large-engine petrol vehicles, following a closed-door meeting with Chinese carmakers and industry associations on

August 23. This move is seen as part of China's tit-for-tat response to the EU's recent tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs).

Large-engine petrol vehicles, such as SUVs and luxury cars, are a key segment for European manufacturers. Last year, China imported 196,000 petrol-powered passenger cars with engines larger than 2.5 liters from the EU, with an import value of USD 17.9 billion – higher than the value of Chinese EVs exported to Europe.

The potential tariff increase on large-engine petrol vehicles comes shortly after the EU imposed provisional tariffs of up to 36.3 percent on Chinese EVs on August 20.

Just a day after the EU's announcement, Beijing also launched an anti-subsidy probe into EU dairy imports, alongside existing investigations into brandy and pork products.

With both sides escalating trade measures, a trade war between the EU and China appears increasingly likely, as affirmed by the EU's top diplomat Josep Borrell. Earlier this month, Beijing also filed a complaint with the WTO against the EU's tariff hikes on Chinese-made EVs. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

(alk)

EU to lower tariff on Chinese-made Tesla EVs

The EU has reduced its planned extra tariff on Tesla electric vehicles (EVs) imported from China from 20.8 percent to 9 percent. Some Chinese companies in joint ventures with EU automakers may also receive lower tariffs on Chinese-made EV imports.

These new tariffs are in addition to the standard 10% duty on car imports, intended to level the playing field and counter what the EU sees as unfair subsidies.

Tesla requested a recalculation based on the specific subsidies it received, leading the EU Commission to verify that Tesla received fewer subsidies from the Chinese government compared to other Chinese EV makers. As a result, the Commission proposed lower duties for Tesla and some other companies.

The Commission, which sets EU trade policy, still believes Chinese EV production benefits from

extensive subsidies and proposed duties on other companies of up to 36.3 percent, slightly lower than the 37.6% initially proposed for companies that did not cooperate with the EU's anti-subsidy investigation.

In retaliation, China's commerce ministry expressed strong opposition, accusing the EU of basing its findings on unilateral facts and urging a more rational and pragmatic approach to avoid escalating trade tensions. Beijing has also launched a challenge at the World Trade Organization earlier this month.

The three companies that cooperated with the EU investigation – BYD, Geely, and SAIC – will receive slightly lower provisional duties than initially indicated. Joint ventures between Chinese firms and EU producers, like Volkswagen's SEAT and BMW's electric Mini, may also benefit from reduced tariffs.

The planned tariffs could become the EU's final measure on Chinese-made EVs once the investigation concludes in about two months. They will need approval from the EU's 27 member states, requiring a qualified majority to be blocked. If not, the definitive duties will apply by October 30. [Reuters]

(alk)

China denies EU officials access to human rights advocate trial

On August 28, EU diplomats were barred from entering a Suzhou courtroom where the trial of two Chinese human rights advocates, Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan, was set to begin. The couple was detained in April 2023 on their way to meet EU officials in Beijing.

In response, the EU condemned the denial of access as "highly regrettable," stating it undermines trust in China's due process and called for the immediate release of the detainees.

Yu, a well-known human rights lawyer, was previously imprisoned from 2018 to 2022 for advocating constitutional reforms. The couple was arrested under the charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," often used by Chinese authorities against activists.

The EU also raised concerns about the sudden detention of two other lawyers who attempted to attend the trial and sought clarification from Chinese authorities.

Amid human rights concerns, the Chinese foreign ministry has previously stated that Chinese authorities handle cases according to the law. [South China Morning Post]

(alk)

China to make "fair" final ruling on EU brandy imports amid trade probe

(to) On September 5, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce pledged to make an "objective" and "fair" final ruling regarding the import of brandy from the European Union, as part of an ongoing trade investigation. The announcement follows concerns that EU brandy is being sold below market prices in China.

China stated that it would not impose provisional tariffs at this stage, deciding to instead conduct further investigations, including field verification checks.

The investigation was launched after complaints from domestic producers, and the final ruling is expected by January 5, though it could be extended under special circumstances.

European producers, including famous brands such as Rémy Martin and St-Rémy, are keeping a close eye upon the situation, as the decision could significantly impact their access to the Chinese market. [Reuters]

India, European Union introduce new funding program to enhance research collaboration

India and the European Union (EU) have launched a new joint funding initiative to enhance research cooperation under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) staff exchanges, part of the EU's Horizon Europe program. This initiative, facilitated by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), will allow CSIR institutes to engage in collaborative research with European and international partners. The program, set for the 2025-2027 period, aims to promote researcher mobility, knowledge-sharing, and long-term collaborations, strengthening scientific and technological ties between India and Europe. This marks a significant step in advancing the political commitment outlined in the EU-India Joint Roadmap 2025.

Since 2014, the MSCA has supported numerous research and innovation projects involving Indian organizations, making India the leading non-European country in participation, with over 2,800 Indian researchers benefiting from the program in the last decade. This new initiative is expected to further accelerate joint innovation and address global challenges by pooling expertise from both regions. [Hindustan Times]

(cr)

EU launches election observation mission for Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election

The European Union has launched an Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) in response to an invitation from Sri Lanka's Election Commission for the upcoming presidential election on 21 September. Led by Chief Observer Nacho Sánchez Amor, a Member of the European Parliament, the mission began on August 14 with a core team of 10 election experts. The mission expanded on August 29 with 26 long-term observers deployed across Sri Lanka's nine provinces.

This mission marks the seventh time the EU has deployed such an observation mission to Sri Lanka since 2000, underscoring the importance the EU places on its partnership with Sri Lanka and its commitment to democratic values. A preliminary statement will be released two days after the election, followed by a comprehensive final report with recommendations for electoral reforms approximately two months later. [EEAS] [Daily Mirror]

(sa)

Indonesia and Malaysia to challenge EU deforestation regulation

Indonesia announced plans to intensify its opposition to the European Union's Deforestation-Free Regulation (UEDR), which aims to ban products linked to deforestation from entering the EU market. In response, Indonesia, along with Malaysia, will send a delegation to Brussels this month to negotiate with the EU, focusing on concerns that the regulation unfairly targets Indonesian palm oil and other forestry products. Eddy Martono, Chairman of the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (Gapki), emphasized that the

Indonesian government is fully supporting efforts to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the UEDR.

Martono pointed out that while large companies in Indonesia have been subject to restrictions under Presidential Instruction No. 5/2019, small-scale farmers could be disproportionately affected by the new EU regulation.

The upcoming Joint Task Force (JTF) meeting on September 12 will be the third such meeting between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the EU. As Europe is Indonesia's third-largest export market, the regulation could also impact other Indonesian commodities, such as cocoa, coffee, rubber, and wood products. [JakartaGlobe]

(si)

Myanmar rights-based group claims some aircrafts from Europe are supporting war crimes in Myanmar

Justice for Myanmar, a rights-based group has revealed an international network of companies that allowed Myanmar's military to access and operate at least ten French-manufactured turbo aircraft over the past 14 years despite a ban on their sale to the Myanmar junta. The aircraft are manufactured by France-based Avions de Transport Regional (ATR), which is owned by Airbus and Rome-headquartered Leonardo. The fuselages and tails are made in Italy, the wings in France, and the engines are supplied by Pratt & Whitney Canada.

Justice for Myanmar's investigation found that international companies, arms brokers, and commercial airlines have transferred ATR aircraft to Myanmar's military, "in some cases hiding the end user in an apparent attempt to evade sanctions." Myanmar and international companies have also sold parts and provided maintenance to the military's ATR fleet. Myanmar junta is now using these aircraft to transport troops and weapons for its nationwide campaign of terror, supporting indiscriminate attacks on civilians that amount to war crimes.

Companies based in the European Union (EU), including ATR and Sabena Technics in France, and Axis Flight Simulation Systems in Austria, ensured that the military's ATRs could keep flying by repairing key components, spare parts, and enabling the training of air force pilots. This was often done through commercial airlines in Myanmar that own ATRs but

have close ties to the military.

Justice for Myanmar is calling on EU governments to urgently block the Myanmar air force and its brokers from accessing spare and replacement parts, receiving flight crew and maintenance training, and accessing instructions needed for the continuing airworthiness of its ATR aircraft. Targeted and coordinated sanctions should be extended to all Myanmar companies supporting the military's ATR fleet, including 24 Hour Group, KT Group, International Gateways Group, and Htoo Group. [Justice for Myanmar] [Myanmar Now]

(tl)

Thai Parliament gives unanimous support to EU-Thailand Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

The Thai parliament has given its unanimous approval to the EU-Thailand Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which is set to take effect in 30 days. This milestone follows the signing of the agreement on December 14, 2022, in Brussels by Thailand's then-foreign minister Don Pramudwinai, alongside key EU figures including Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, acting as the president of the EU Council, and Joseph Borrell, Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The EU-Thailand PCA is designed to strengthen and expand political dialogue and cooperation across a wide range of policy areas, including environmental protection, energy, climate change, transport, science and technology, trade, employment, human rights, and more. The agreement serves as a comprehensive framework for deepening bilateral, regional, and international collaboration between Thailand and the 27 EU member states.

Thailand’s Foreign Minister, Maris Sangiampongsa, highlighted that the PCA framework will lay the groundwork for future discussions, potentially leading to an expansion of cooperation in the areas mentioned, as well as others such as maritime governance, innovation, and counter-terrorism. The framework agreement also includes guidelines that both sides will follow to ensure effective implementation.

The PCA is expected to significantly benefit Thailand by enhancing trade and investment opportunities, particularly by accelerating negotiations for a Thailand-

EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The EU is currently Thailand's fourth-largest trade partner and sixth-largest investor, making this agreement strategically important for both sides. The pact aims to make Thai businesses more competitive, improve their access to EU research funding, and strengthen Thailand's role on the global stage.

Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is actively working on negotiating Schengen visa exemptions for Thai passport holders, further enhancing the benefits of this partnership. [Bangkok Post]

(msz)

EU to tighten hydrogen subsidy rules following China concerns

The European Commission is tightening rules to ensure EU funding for hydrogen projects benefits European companies, following concerns over cheap Chinese imports. On September 2, the EU's climate policy chief announced that new criteria are being developed to favor local firms in the upcoming round of green hydrogen project funding.

European electrolyser manufacturers have warned they cannot compete with cheaper Chinese products and are pushing for protections within the EU's Hydrogen Bank funding scheme. In response, the EU is considering criteria that would prioritize European supply chains, including cybersecurity and safety measures to prevent European data from being accessed by non-EU governments.

The new subsidy criteria, while not final, may require projects to be completed within Europe or limit reliance on non-EU countries.

The EU recently awarded €720 million to seven hydrogen projects, with some potentially using Chinese equipment, though the Commission has not confirmed this.

While the EU is not aiming to sever ties with China, it plans to act against what it sees as unfair competition, including imposing tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). [Reuters]

(alk)

EU, United States, UN experts express concern about Thailand's Move Forward Party's dissolution

On August 7, the United States and the European Union (EU) issued statements expressing serious concerns about the Thai Constitutional Court's dissolution of reformist opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) and its implications for Thai democracy. Washington criticized the ruling as detrimental to Thailand's democratic progress and a setback for the 14 million voters who supported the party in the 2023 elections. The EU echoed these concerns, describing the ruling as a setback for political pluralism and a threat to democratic principles. [Bangkok Post] [US State Department]

Using a similar language, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk expressed deep concern over the Constitutional Court decision to dissolve the MFP and ban its leaders from politics for 10 years. Türk criticized the ruling for undermining democratic processes and restricting political pluralism, stating it impacts fundamental freedoms and the right to participate in public life. He condemned the use of Thailand's royal defamation law, which the court cited in its decision, as contrary to international human rights standards and urged Thailand to foster a more inclusive democracy that upholds freedom of expression and association. [UN News]

Western democracies' echoing concern

In addition to the US and the EU, Australia emphasized that inclusivity, pluralism, and freedom of expression are essential democratic principles, which were compromised by the dissolution of the MFP. The Australian government urged Thailand to ensure that political participation reflects the will of the people.

Global Affairs Canada, the Canadian government's international relations department, condemned the dissolution, stating that it disenfranchises over 14 million voters and undermines political pluralism.

The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs labeled the ruling as a "severe setback to democracy" and stressed the importance of Thailand's commitment to pluralism, allowing democratic parties to operate freely.

The UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office described the decision as a setback for pluralism and freedom of speech, urging all parties to uphold democratic rights and representation. [Prachatai English 1]

Thailand downplays international outcry

On the other hand, Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin expressed his confidence that the MFP would find a way to overcome political turbulence and dismissed the speculations that the court's decision would weaken the opposition camp. [Bangkok Post]

Thai court dismayed by foreign diplomats

Earlier on August 2, ambassadors and senior diplomats from several embassies in Bangkok held a private meeting with Pita Limjaroenrat, the then Chief Advisor to the MFP leader, to discuss Thailand's "ongoing crisis of democracy." Although the meeting with foreign diplomats was not related to the charges against the MFP, the Thai Constitutional Court's ruling on August 7 included a pointed remark, indirectly addressing this interaction. The court stated that while diplomats from other countries have their own laws and regulations, any expression of opinion should adhere to "universal diplomatic etiquette." The ruling also emphasized that Thailand's democratic system with the King as Head of State must remain unchanged. [Prachatai English 2]

(msz)

EU election observers arrive in Sri Lanka ahead of September presidential election

A group of international election observers from the European Union (EU) and the Commonwealth have arrived in Sri Lanka to monitor the September 21 presidential election. Invited by Sri Lanka's Election Commission, the EU's Election Observation Mission has previously monitored elections in Sri Lanka six times, most recently during the 2019 presidential election

The EU mission includes a core team of a Deputy Chief Observer and nine experts already in Colombo, with 26 long-term observers set to monitor the campaign across the country. An additional 32 short-term observers will join during election week. [Daily Mirror]

(aa)

EU, India to host conference to discuss current and emerging threats in online radicalization

India and the European Union (EU) are set to co-host a regional conference on August 21-22 in New Delhi to address current and emerging threats in online radicalization. The conference will gather experts, policymakers, law enforcement officials, and academics from South Asia and Europe to discuss strategies to counter the exploitation of online spaces by extremist and terrorist actors. The event, part of ongoing counterterrorism collaborations between India and the EU, aims to enhance cooperation in areas like digital extremism, cybersecurity, and countering terrorism in the Indo-Pacific region.

The conference is linked to the EU-India Counterterrorism Dialogue and will explore strategies to combat terrorism and prevent violent extremism. Officials from India's Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Defence, and the Indian Army will join EU representatives from various agencies, including Europol and Frontex. [India Narrative]

(lm)

Europe will obtain rare earth metals from Belgian Solvay to become less dependent on China

Belgian chemicals company Solvay has announced plans to supply Europe with rare earth metals for permanent magnets used in electric vehicles (EVs) and wind turbines. This initiative, centered on their refurbished plant in La Rochelle, France, aims to decrease Europe's dependence on China.

Solvay confirmed that regular production at the La Rochelle facility is set to begin in early 2025, with a goal to meet 30 percent of Europe's demand for permanent magnets by 2030. The facility will be the only one in Europe capable of processing both light and heavy rare earth materials at an industrial scale. Solvay is in discussions with major European car manufacturers and turbine makers to garner support from the entire value chain. The company is also engaged in advanced talks with the French government for potential support, although details were not disclosed.

This initiative aligns with a new EU law that came into effect in May, which aims to bolster the bloc's self-sufficiency in critical materials currently dominated by Chinese supply. The law sets targets for the EU to mine 10 percent of its annual critical mineral needs, recycle 25 percent, and process 40 percent domestically by the end of the decade. Furthermore, it stipulates that no more than 65 percent of rare earth supplies should

come from a single country, given that China currently provides an estimated 95 percent of the EU's rare earth needs.

Europe imports approximately 16,000 tons of rare earth permanent magnets annually from China, accounting for about 98 percent of the EU's demand, according to a report by the European Raw Materials Alliance.

Compared to other countries, the EU has been slower in building supply chain resilience for raw materials. For instance, Japan financed the development of Lynas, now the largest Western producer of rare earths, following China's unofficial ban on rare earth exports to Japan a decade ago due to a geopolitical conflict. [Reuters] [Financial Times]

(jf)

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)

Indonesia-EU CEPA negotiations near conclusion

Negotiations for the Indonesia-EU Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU-CEPA) are almost complete, with 90 percent of the discussions finalized. Indonesian Minister of Trade Zulfikli Hasan stated that the agreement is expected to be concluded this month, before the newly elected government led by Prabowo Subianto comes into office in October.

Zulfikli also highlighted that the country has maintained a trade surplus for 51 consecutive months. He emphasized the importance of overcoming trade barriers through diplomatic agreements, which is a key reason for finalizing the IEU-CEPA after nine years of negotiations.

Once enacted, the IEU-CEPA is expected to eliminate import duties for Indonesian products entering European markets. This agreement is also anticipated to address differences between Jakarta and Brussels in the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). [Antara]

(ft)

Pope Francis commences 12-day tour through Asia-Pacific

Since September 2, Pope Francis has embarked on his longest and farthest papal trip, covering Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore, which will conclude on September 13. Originally planned for 2020 but delayed due to the pandemic, this visit

underscores the growing importance of Asia, one of the few regions where the Catholic Church continues to expand in terms of baptisms and religious vocations.

Indonesia & Papua New Guinea

During his visit to Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, Pope Francis participated in an interfaith meeting with the Grand Imam of Jakarta's Istiqlal Mosque, Nasaruddin Umar. They signed a joint declaration at the "Tunnel of Friendship" linking Jakarta's main mosque with its Catholic cathedral, calling for unity in addressing global challenges, including extremism and climate change. [EuroNews]

The Pope also met outgoing President Joko Widodo, reaffirming the importance of interfaith dialogue and condemning religious extremism. [Deutsche Welle 1]

On September 6, Pope Francis headed to Papua New Guinea for the second leg of his trip.

Timor-Leste

In East Timor, Pope Francis received an enthusiastic welcome, with an estimated 600,000 people—nearly half the country's population—attending an open-air mass. The event showcased the deep connection between Timor-Leste, one of the world's most Catholic nations, and the Catholic Church. The country gained independence from Indonesia in 2002 after a long and bloody struggle, and 97 percent of its population identifies as Catholic.

However, the Pope's visit was overshadowed by concerns over past sexual abuse scandals involving high-ranking clergy, particularly Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo. The Vatican admitted in 2022 that it had disciplined Belo in 2020 after accusations surfaced that he sexually abused boys in the 1980s and 1990s. [BBC] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle 2]

Singapore

The final stop on Pope Francis' four-nation tour is Singapore, from September 10 to 13. He will become only the second pope to visit Singapore, following Pope John Paul II's brief visit in 1986. The trip will focus on promoting interfaith dialogue, addressing global challenges like inclusiveness, artificial intelligence, and environmental care.

While in Singapore, Pope Francis will hold private meetings with Jesuits and attend an official welcome at Parliament House with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and President Tharman Shanmugaratnam. He is also scheduled to lead a public mass at the National Stadium, where 55,000 attendees, including many from neighboring countries, are expected. The Pope will also visit elderly residents and hold an interreligious meeting with youths at Catholic Junior College. [Associated Press]

(lm)

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)

Indonesian President-elect Prabowo visits Türkiye and Russia, among other stops

Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, Turkiye, to discuss bilateral cooperation and the potential expansion of partnerships, including in the defense sector. During their closed-door meeting on July 30, Prabowo highlighted Turkiye's importance as a strategic partner and emphasized Indonesia's commitment to strengthening their historical friendship. Erdogan congratulated Prabowo on his victory in the 2024 Presidential Election, with Prabowo set to be inaugurated as Indonesia's President on October 20, 2024.

Prior to this meeting, Prabowo had discussions with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Defense Minister Yaşar Güler. The meetings form part of Prabowo's series of foreign visits, which also included stops in Paris, France, and Belgrade, Serbia. Prabowo

expressed his appreciation for the warm reception from the Turkish Government. [Antara]

A day after, Prabowo Subianto, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow to discuss strengthening bilateral relations. Prabowo emphasized the importance of enhancing partnerships with Russia in areas such as energy and defense. He described Russia as a great friend and expressed his desire to maintain and deepen this relationship.

Putin noted the growing economic ties between Russia and Indonesia despite Western sanctions and other global challenges, highlighting the positive trend in their trade relations. Prabowo has been actively engaging in diplomatic efforts, having met with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in April to discuss increased cooperation on national security and other issues. Prabowo aims to strike a diplomatic balance and strengthen ties with various countries to maximize Indonesia's national interests. [NHK]

(si)

The Netherlands, South Korea, and Singapore discuss arms industry cooperation

On September 9, South Korean Minister of Defense Kim Young-Hyun held separate meetings on the sideline of the Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the Military Domain (REAIM) summit (see article above) with the Minister of Defense of the Netherlands, Ruben Brekelmans, and the Minister of Defense of Singapore, Ng Eng Hen, in to discuss possible arms industry cooperations.

During the meeting with Brekelmans, Kim expressed interests in launching defense projects involving South Korean companies, while Brekelmans pledged to expand cooperation in defense science and technology and agreed to continue director-level defense talks.

In the meeting with Ng, Kim thanked Ng for supporting South Korea’s approach to North Korea while Ng reaffirmed Singapore’s commitment to regional peace and other efforts related to the Korean Peninsula. [Yonhap News]

(ac)

Iranian Ambassador to Armenia confirms date of next “3+3” set

The next meeting of the 3+3 platform, aimed at regional cooperation, has been scheduled, according to Iranian Ambassador to Armenia Mehdi Sobhani. The exact date will be announced through diplomatic channels. Earlier reports suggest the meeting, involving foreign ministers, will take place in Turkiye.

Speaking to reporters, Sobhani added that Iran remains opposed to foreign control over the road connecting Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan through Syunik, asserting that such control should remain under Armenian sovereignty. He emphasized that Armenia's territorial integrity is a "red line" for Iran and dismissed any aspirations for a "corridor" involving Armenia as unattainable. [ARMENPRESS]

Initially proposed by Turkiye and Azerbaijan following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the platform includes Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkiye, and Iran, although Georgia has repeatedly declined to participate. [Azernews]

(dql)

Azerbaijan applies for BRICS membership

On August 21, the Azerbaijani’s foreign ministry announced that the country has formally applied to join BRICS to join the BRICS bloc, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

This move follows Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Azerbaijan (see article in this edition) aimed at strengthening regional ties and securing trade routes under pressure from sanctions imposed over the Ukraine conflict.

The BRICS alliance, which expanded in January to include Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, now considers Azerbaijan's application. Saudi Arabia is also considering joining the bloc. [AP News]

(dql)

Azerbaijan joins hands with Romania, Hungary, and Georgia in venture to install power line under Black Sea

Azerbaijan, Romania, Hungary, and Georgia have launched a joint venture to build an undersea power line across the Black Sea, which seeks to boost renewable energy supplies to the European Union.

The cable will connect Azerbaijan, known for its wind energy potential in the Caspian Sea, with Romania and Hungary via Georgia. Initially approved in 2022, the project gained urgency after Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted the EU's reliance on Russian energy.

At a meeting in Romania, energy ministers emphasized the project's strategic importance in enhancing energy security and reducing electricity costs. Romanian Energy Minister Sebastian Burduja noted the need for greater energy diversification, while Azerbaijan's Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov stressed the significance of green energy in addressing climate change.

Bulgaria is also considering joining the initiative, with further discussions set for a UN climate meeting later this year in Azerbaijan. [AP News]

(dql)

Turkey Applies to Join BRICS, Kremlin Official Says

Turkey has officially applied to join the BRICS group of emerging economies, a senior Russian official announced on Wednesday. This comes as Russia and China look to expand their influence in response to the West. The Kremlin official confirmed that Turkey's request for full membership in BRICS, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, will be reviewed, with Russia currently leading the group. (ABC News)

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has expressed Turkey's interest in joining BRICS several times before. A spokesperson for Erdogan's party recently echoed this, though stopped short of confirming the formal application earlier in the week. (ABC News)

(ab)

Austria to donate Mpox vaccines to African countries following EU health commissioner appeal

Austria announced on August 23 that it would donate mpox vaccines to African countries amid an outbreak of the virus. Austrian Health Minister Johannes Rauch confirmed the donation following a call for solidarity from the EU Health Commission.

Austria plans to provide 34,000 doses, potentially covering up to 170,000 vaccinations based on recommendations. The country will further coordinate with the EU Commission to finalize the number of doses and organizational details. [Anadolu Agency]

(ga)

Belgium leads charge in EU response to African mpox outbreak

Belgium is spearheading Europe's response to the mpox outbreak in Africa by facilitating the donation of 215,000 vaccine doses through the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. This effort comes as the mpox virus, now known as Mpox Clade 1b, spreads rapidly across ten African nations, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which has reported over 14,000 cases and 524 deaths this year. [Brussels Times] [vrt]

Belgium's outgoing Health Minister, Frank Vandenbroucke, emphasised the importance of acting swiftly to contain the virus, noting that the outbreak poses a potential risk to Europe if not addressed. This donation aligns with Belgium's broader commitment to global health solidarity, a priority during its EU presidency. [Brussels Times] [Brussels Times]

The World Health Organisation has declared the outbreak a "public health emergency of international concern," though it has clarified that mpox is not as contagious as Covid-19. Regardless, experts believe the risk of widespread transmission in Europe remains low. [WHO] [Brussels Times]

(dql)

NGO reports 'human rights disaster' at Uganda oil project owned by French, Chinese companies

A report by Climate Rights International (CRI) has criticized the Kingfisher oil project in Uganda, co-

owned by TotalEnergies and China's CNOOC, as a "human rights disaster." The USD 10 billion project, which includes oil drilling in the Lake Albert area and a 1,443-kilometer pipeline to Tanzania, has been associated with forced evictions, sexual violence, and environmental harm.

According to the report, local residents were forcibly evicted by Uganda's military, the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF), with little notice and inadequate compensation. Women reported instances of sexual violence and coercion by soldiers and company employees. The project has also negatively affected the local fishing economy, with boats being confiscated or destroyed. Additionally, environmental damage was reported, with contaminated water from drilling allegedly dumped into the lake or onto land.

Despite these claims, TotalEnergies asserts that displaced individuals have been fairly compensated and environmental protection measures are in place. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni views the project, which aims to produce oil by 2025, as a significant economic opportunity for the country. [France24]

(lm)

Norway launches new Africa strategy

Norway has launched a new strategy to deepen its engagement with African countries, the first major overhaul of the country's Norway's approach to the continent since 2007. [Government, Norway]

Focusing on strengthening political and economic ties, the strategy emphasizes equality, mutual understanding, and collaboration in multiple areas such as security, climate change, and green energy investments. [Royal Norwegian Embassy in Pretoria]

(dql)

Spain to donate half a million mpox vaccines to African countries

Spain will donate 500,000 doses of the mpox vaccine, or 20% of its stockpile, to fight an outbreak of the disease in Africa, according to a statement released by the Spanish Health Ministry.

"It makes no sense to stockpile vaccines where there is no problem, and now is the time to prove it," the

ministry said. Spain plans to donate 100,000 vials, which is equivalent to 500,000 doses. [Reuters]

The nations receiving the vaccines have not been specified yet.

Spain has also encouraged the rest of the European Union states to donate 20% of their stockpile of mpox vaccines. Germany and France have committed to send 100,000 mpox vaccine doses to countries in need. [The Local Spain]

Spain has only reported 268 cases of the old strain this year, far fewer than the 7,500 cases that were reported worldwide in the 2022 outbreak. Around 40,000 people have taken the vaccine so far. [Reuters]

(fs)

Pedro Sánchez makes official trip to West Africa

Spain's prime minister Pedro Sánchez has visited Mauritania, the Gambia and Senegal at the end of August, aiming to stem the recent migration surge and strengthen bilateral relations.

Pedro Sánchez announced the signature of three memorandums of understanding on circular migration, which will “lead to the development of programmes to select workers in the source countries for fixed term-jobs.” Once they finish their contract period, they will have to return to their country. [Moncloa]

Sánchez stressed that "circular migration programmes are a win-win for all parties involved. They procure the labour we need, we protect workers' rights, and we facilitate the return of these people to their countries of origin, with the benefits that this can also bring to the development of their communities.” [Moncloa]

Spain and Mauritania also agreed on renewing cooperation between security forces of both nations in order to combat people smuggling and human trafficking networks. [Euronews]

Mauritania, the Gambia and Senegal are three of the main places from which migrant boats depart. This year, the number of people migrating from West Africa to the Canary Islands has increased by 154%, with 21,620 people arriving in the first seven months. According to Spanish authorities, there could be up to 150,000 more African migrants planning the

dangerous journey over the next few months. [Reuters]

Last year, around 17,200 foreign laborers participated in Spain's circular migration program. Most of them were from Morocco and other Latin American nations. [AP News]

(fs)

Austria plans joint procurement of Leonardo M-346 jet trainers with Italy

Austria is exploring a joint procurement with Italy for Leonardo M-346 advanced jet trainers to replace its retired Saab 105 fleet. Austrian Defence Minister Klaudia Tanner confirmed on August 27 that she is evaluating an offer from Italy's Ministry of Defence, with plans expected to materialize soon.

The Austrian Air Force, which retired its Saab 105s in December 2020 after 50 years of service, has been relying on the Italy-based International Flight Training School (IFTS) for pilot training. Austria seeks approximately 12 M-346 trainers, and Leonardo's recent enhancements to the M-346 T Block 20 and M-346 F Block 20 variants aim to keep the aircraft technologically advanced. [European Security & Defence]

(ga)

Austrian citizen shot dead by police in Munich following terror attack

An 18-year-old Austrian citizen was shot dead by German police after a terror attack near the Israeli consulate in Munich on September 5. The suspect was armed with an older rifle and a bayonet and engaged in a shootout with police officers at Karolinenplatz, leading to the suspect's fatal injury.

Authorities have launched an investigation, suspecting the attack may be linked to religious extremism, and are examining whether the suspect had connections to terrorist groups. The shooting occurred on the anniversary of the 1972 Munich Olympics attack. [CNN]

(ga)

Armenian Prime Minister reports no current concerns about presence of Russian military base in the country

During an August 31 press conference, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan affirmed that he has no current concerns about the presence of Russia's 102nd military base in the country, located in Gyumri, 120 kilometres north of Yerevan. But also stated that Armenia no longer sees the need for that presence.

When asked about Armenia's potential withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Pashinyan clarified that, while his country has suspended its participation at all levels, there is no timeline for leaving the CSTO, considering this decision sufficient for the time being. [The Kyiv Independent]

He also noted that Armenian border guards have taken full responsibility for duties at Zvartnots airport, thanking Russia for its years of service. In July, Russia completed the withdrawal of its border guards from the airport, following a request by Armenia earlier this year amid growing tensions between the two nations. For decades, Russian border guards had been stationed at Zvartnots and along Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran, demonstrating the historically close military ties between the two nations. [Caucasus Watch]

(dql)

Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan hold phone talk with Russian President Putin

On August 23, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin and discussed efforts to normalize Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan during a phone call.

Putin reiterated his commitment to helping both nations develop a peace treaty, advance border delimitation, and reopen transport and logistics links. The conversation also touched on Putin's recent visit to Baku, emphasizing Russia's continued role in the peace process.

Both leaders highlighted positive trade and economic cooperation between Armenia and Russia and agreed to meet soon to further discuss bilateral issues. [AA]

Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been tense since 1991, when Armenian forces occupied

Karabakh and surrounding regions, territories recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan regained most of the area during the 2020 war, which concluded with a Russian-brokered peace deal. In September, Azerbaijan established full control over Karabakh after a brief military operation, leading to the surrender of separatist forces. [EiR No. 10, October/2023]

(dql)

Armenia, Georgia seek expansion of defence cooperation

On September 2 visiting Armenian defence Minister Suren Papikyan held official talks with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze to discuss opportunities to expand bilateral defence cooperation.

The discussion highlighted the need for long-term and stable regional peace and underscored the strategic partnership between Armenia and Georgia. Both sides agreed on the value of regular high-level contacts and explored expanding bilateral defence cooperation, including military education.

The defence ministers discussed additional aspects of Armenia-Georgia defence cooperation and regional security. [Ministry of Defense, Armenia] [Massis Post]

(dql)

Azerbaijan president announces peace treaty with Armenia is near

A peace agreement that could bring decades of conflict in the South Caucasus to an end is nearing completion, as on August 31, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced that nearly 80% of the peace treaty text between Azerbaijan and Armenia has been agreed upon. Speaking at an international forum in Cernobbio, Italy, Aliyev expressed optimism about the peace prospects in the South Caucasus and emphasized the ongoing discussions.

Aliyev also unveiled progress in border delimitation and demarcation, including an initial agreement on a 13-kilometer section of their over 1,000-kilometer border. He hopes these negotiations will lead to a significant peace treaty for both the South Caucasus and the broader international community. [AA]

His remarks came after the two countries signed an agreement on the joint activity of their border delimitation commissions on August 30. [Politico] [ARMENPRESS]

Relations between Baku and Yerevan have been strained since 1991, following the Armenian occupation of Karabakh and adjacent regions. The 2020 war and subsequent Russian-brokered peace agreement led to the liberation of much of this territory by Azerbaijan. Last September, Azerbaijan achieved full control over Karabakh after a military operation forced the surrender of separatist forces. [EiR No. 10, October/2023]

(dql)

Azerbaijan, Ukraine agree to strengthen cooperation in healthcare

Azerbaijan and Ukraine are strengthening their healthcare collaboration, with Ukrainian Health Minister Viktor Lyashko praising Azerbaijan's support, particularly in projects aiding war-affected children and providing humanitarian assistance. Despite the war, Ukraine's healthcare system continues to progress, Lyashko noted.

In a meeting with Azerbaijan's Ambassador to Ukraine, Seymur Mardaliyev, the two officials discussed enhancing cooperation, exchanging medical expertise, and fostering ties between medical institutions and universities. Mardaliyev reaffirmed Azerbaijan's continued humanitarian aid, which has been ongoing since the start of the conflict. Both sides committed to further cooperation. [Azernews] [Government Ukraine]

(dql)

Joint Azerbaijani, Turkish firefighting operations

Azerbaijan's BE-200CS amphibian aircraft, sent by the Ministry of Emergency Situations under President Ilham Aliyev's directive, is contnuing its firefighting efforts in Türkiye, particularly in the Izmir-Urla region. [Azertac]

On August 18, the ministry dispatched its “BE-200CS” amphibious aircraft from the Aviation Unit to Türkiye to aid in combating the severe forest fires ravaging the country. [Caspian News]

(dql)

Azerbaijan, Italy deepen relations during President Aliyev working visit

On September 5, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni attended a ceremony in Rome for the exchange of several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between Azerbaijan and Italian companies, focusing on biofuels, energy security, and reducing greenhouse gases. The ceremony was part of Aliyey's working visit to Italy on September 4-6.

During their talks, Aliyev and Meloni reaffirmed the strategic partnership between their countries and their commitment to deepening cooperation, particularly in energy, ahead of Azerbaijan's presidency of COP29 in November.

Meloni emphasized Italy's dedication to the stability and prosperity of the Caucasus region and its support for normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to achieve lasting peace. She also noted that cooperation with the European Union could open new opportunities for regional connectivity.

Additionally, the leaders held an in-depth discussion on key international issues and explored potential synergies within the framework of the Mattei Plan. [Italian Government] [President of the Republic of Azerbaijan]

A roundtable in Rome, co-organized by Azerbaijani and Italian economic bodies, brought together over 40 entrepreneurs to discuss cooperation in sectors such as energy, pharmaceuticals, construction, and chemicals. Azerbaijani Economy Minister Mikayil Jabbarov highlighted Italy as Azerbaijan's largest trading partner, while Italian officials emphasized the potential for expanding non-oil sector collaboration. Several MoUs were signed between Azerbaijani and Italian companies, aiming to boost joint production, research, and services. [Azertac]

On September 6, President Aliyev delivered a speech at the International Cernobbio Forum (see also article above), reaffirming the strategic partnership with Italy and Azerbaijan's key role in European energy security. He emphasized the importance of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, restored after the 2020 war, and the progress toward peace in the South Caucasus. Aliyev also discussed Azerbaijan's preparation for

hosting COP29, expressing hope for building bridges between the Global South and North. [Aze.Media]

(dql)

Azerbaijan angered over France's travel warning

Azerbaijan has condemned France's severe travel warning, which cited unfounded claims that French citizens have been detained in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry criticized France for attempting to damage bilateral relations with biased and baseless allegations.

He clarified that only two French citizens have been detained in Azerbaijan, one for suspected espionage and another for a separate offense in the Baku Metro. The ministry also pointed out the hypocrisy of France's stance, noting its own human rights violations, discriminatory practices, and restrictions on Azerbaijani journalists. It urged France to end its smear campaign against Azerbaijan. [News.Az]

In a note issued on September 4, the French foreign ministry warned that French citizens, including those with dual nationality, who reside in or transit through Azerbaijan may face risks such as arrest, arbitrary detention, and unfair judicial processes. The ministry emphasized that this risk is particularly relevant for individuals visiting Azerbaijan for tourism or business. The note also highlighted that there is no guarantee that fundamental rights will be upheld in the event of arrest or detention. [Turan]

The relations between Azerbaijan and France have been strained since Paris condemned Yerevan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September last year [EiR No. 10, October/2023] and the French Senate adopted a resolution calling on the French government to impose sanctions on Azerbaijan. [hetq] In May France accused Azerbaijan of supporting fatal riots in overseas territory New Caledonia. [Politico]

(dql)

Ukraine airspace violation and Belarus response

On August 10, Belarus called for Ukraine's charge d'affaires, calling for action in preventing future airspace violations after Ukrainian drones entered its

territory. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry warned Kyiv that a repeated incident could prompt Belarus to reassess the presence of Ukraine's diplomatic mission in Minsk. [Reuters]

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko stated that air defense forces destroyed several Ukrainian drones on Friday after they crossed into Belarus' Mogilev region, which borders Russia. Lukashenko noted that some drones were also downed near the Russian city of Yaroslavl. Belarusian state media, Belarus1, broadcast images purportedly showing debris from the downed drones. Lukashenko expressed bewilderment over Ukraine's actions and reiterated that Belarus would not allow such provocations to go unanswered. [Reuters]

In response, Belarus' Defense Minister Khrenin announced the deployment of additional troops, including special operations forces and missile units, to reinforce the Gomel and Mozyr regions along the border with Ukraine. He emphasized the deployment of Polonez and Iskander missile systems to counter potential threats. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry reiterated that continued airspace breaches could lead to a review of Ukraine's diplomatic status in Minsk. [Swiss Info][Reuters]

Andriy Kovalenko, from Ukraine's Centre for Countering Disinformation, suggested that Belarus' military buildup could be a strategic distraction to divert attention from Ukraine's primary military operations in the conflict.

Meanwhile, the Russian Defense Ministry reported intercepting six drones in the Yaroslavl region, reinforcing the narrative of increasing cross-border tensions in the region. [Swiss Info]

On August 15, Lukashenko in the crossfire of Ukraine and Russia, publicly asked for a de-escalation of war, and for the countries to start peace talks.

In his [Belta] interview, Lukashenko said the conflict is unwanted and does not benefit Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians alike. He clearly pointed to the West "It's them in the West, who need [the war]. I cannot reveal these facts, they are absolutely classified. But sometimes they speak openly — high-ranking people. Saying, let them beat each other — Ukrainians, Russians — let everyone die in this cauldron." [Politico] [Belarus President]

Lukashenko's soft resistance is related to the presence of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. By carefully balancing his stance, he aims to protect Belarus from

escalating conflict while also managing domestic discontent over his close ties with Russia.

This strategy helps him navigate the complexities of hosting Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil without provoking public outrage or increasing the risk of Belarus becoming a direct target in the conflict. [Euro News]

(hs)

Bulgaria upgrades defenses and maintains support for Ukraine

Bulgaria continues to support Ukraine in accordance with the decisions made by its National Assembly, according to Defense Minister Atanas Zapryanov.

Zapryanov made this announcement during a meeting of defense ministers from the Contact Group for defense assistance to Ukraine, led by the U.S., which took place at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. In this context, bilateral discussions were held between the Bulgarian and Ukrainian delegations, exploring joint solutions to enhance support for Ukraine. [Novinite]

Zapryanov also met with German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius to discuss key defense issues and potential avenues for expanding military cooperation.

During the meeting, the two ministers signed an agreement for the joint procurement of IRIS-T SLM air defense systems under the European Sky Shield initiative, aimed at strengthening defense collaboration and acquiring interoperable weapon systems. [Novinite]

Bulgaria's National Assembly had previously approved the acquisition of the IRIS-T missile systems on August 8. This purchase is aimed at enhancing the Bulgarian Air Force's air defense capabilities, ensuring both technological modernization and interoperability with allied air and missile defense systems. The project is vital for preserving Bulgaria’s air defense strength, protecting the country's sovereignty, and ensuring its territorial integrity.

(pt)

Croatia donates robotic mine clearance system to Ukraine

Croatia has donated a DOK-ING MV-4 robotic mine clearance system to Ukraine. The handover took place at the GLOBSEC international conference in Prague, where Croatian Defence Minister Ivan Anušić presented the equipment to Ukrainian representatives.

Croatia emphasized the extensive time and financial resources required for effective mine clearance in Ukraine. The donation follows a donor conference in Zagreb in 2023, which raised nearly USD 500 million for Ukraine. This new contribution aims to support Ukraine's recovery and assist in the safe return of displaced people. The European Union and the US have also recently provided additional mine clearance aid to Ukraine. [Ukrainska Pravda]

(ga)

Italian Ambassador visits several Croatian cities to discuss Italian community interests

Italian Ambassador to Croatia Paolo Trichilo visited Pula and Sissano on September 1 to address issues concerning the Italian community. Ambassador Trichilo met with the Mayor of Pula Filip Zoričić and attended an Andrea Bocelli concert at the Arena. The discussions focused on economic and cultural cooperation, bilingualism, and historical toponymy.

In Pula, Ambassador Trichilo inaugurated an exhibition on Italian brands at the local Community of Italians, which will continue its tour in Varaždin. While in Sissano, he met with Italian Community President Paolo Demarin and Mayor of Ližnjan Marko Ravnić, affirming the new Italian kindergarten project funded by the Croatian government, MAECI, and the Municipality. [Ansa 1]

Ambassador Trichilo met Croatian Defence Minister

Ambassador Trichilo further met with Croatian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Ivan Anušić on September 4 to discuss bilateral defence cooperation. This meeting, following Anušić's discussions with Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto at the GLOBSEC Forum in Prague, focused on the strong collaboration between the Croatian and Italian navies and air forces.

Both sides reviewed their joint contributions to NATO and EU peacekeeping missions and underscored their commitment to enhancing security and stability in the Balkans. The discussion reaffirmed their intent to further strengthen and adapt their defence

partnership in response to evolving geopolitical challenges. [Ansa 2]

Ambassador Trichilo visits Split, meets local leaders and Italian community

Ambassador Trichilo visited Split on September 10 to further strengthen ties between Italy and Croatia, particularly in Dalmatia. Ambassador Trichilo met with the Mayor of Split and the Vice President of the Split and Dalmatia Region to discuss ongoing cooperation, including INTERREG Italy-Croatia programmes.

The Italian delegation also visited the University of Split to explore its collaboration with the University of Naples and emphasized the importance of Italian language courses. The visit concluded with a tour of the Dolomites company's factory, which specializes in custom-made PVC windows and doors for the Italian market. Following the visit to Split, Trichilo traveled to Gospić to meet with the President of the Lika and Segna Region. [Ansa 3]

(ga)

Azerbaijan begins natural gas deliveries to Croatia

Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, has begun delivering natural gas to Croatia as of September 1. The delivery is part of a strategic collaboration between the governments of Azerbaijan and Croatia and involves the PPD and MET Group companies.

This initiative is expected to enhance energy security in Europe and demonstrates SOCAR's commitment to being a reliable energy partner. Azerbaijan has been supplying gas to Europe since December 2020 through the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and aims to increase its total gas exports to 25 billion cubic meters in 2024, with a significant portion going to Europe. [Xinhua]

(ga)

Azerbaijan begins natural gas deliveries to Croatia

Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, has begun delivering natural gas to Croatia as of September 1. The delivery is part of a strategic collaboration between the governments of Azerbaijan and Croatia and involves the PPD and MET Group companies.

This initiative is expected to enhance energy security in Europe and demonstrates SOCAR's commitment to being a reliable energy partner. Azerbaijan has been supplying gas to Europe since December 2020 through the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline and aims to increase its total gas exports to 25 billion cubic meters in 2024, with a significant portion going to Europe. [Xinhua]

(ga)

New Danish EUR 100 million military aid package for Ukraine announced

On August 19, Denmark's government announced a new EUR 104 million military aid package for Ukraine, focused on both short-term and long-term defense needs. The funds will be used to purchase military equipment from Ukraine's defense industry and international partners.

Danish Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen stated that this 20th aid package will provide Ukraine with essential military equipment to counter Russia's aggression. While specific details of the package are undisclosed for security reasons, Rasmussen confirmed that Denmark supports Ukraine's use of Danish-supplied equipment in its operations, including incursions into Russia's Kursk Oblast. He emphasized that such actions are part of Ukraine's legitimate self-defense strategy, consistent with the rules of war. [The Kyiv Independent]

(dql)

Denmark and Sweden to tighten controls at joint border

Denmark and Sweden have agreed on basing their police permanently in each other's countries to prevent children and young people from Sweden from traveling to Copenhagen to commit violent crimes on behalf of Danish gangs. This unprecedented cross-border cooperation follows a series of violent incidents in recent weeks, including shootings and the possession of weapons like hand grenades, involving suspects from Sweden.

Swedish police have reported that Danish gangs are recruiting children as young as 12 through social media to cross the border by car or public transport to commit crimes. Recently, a 16-year-old Swedish boy was arrested in connection with a shooting in

Copenhagen's Nørrebro neighborhood, and a 25-year-old Swedish man was found carrying two hand grenades in Tingbjerg, Copenhagen.

In response to the violence, Denmark has increased border checks on trains between Malmö and Copenhagen and introduced special policing zones in Copenhagen where random checks can be conducted. Copenhagen police attribute the violence to a conflict between two Danish criminal groups, with one based in Copenhagen and the other largely controlled from outside Denmark.

While gang-related shootings and bombings have long been an issue in Sweden, the recruitment of Swedish youths to commit crimes in Denmark is a recent development. Although Swedish and Danish police have collaborated before, this marks the first time officers will be permanently stationed in each other's countries to engage in preventive work. [The Guardian]

In a related development, the two countries also decided to summon tech companies to address the use of their platforms by gangs to recruit young people for violent crimes, according to the justice ministers of both countries.

Sweden has faced a long-standing problem with gang violence. It has the highest per-capita rate of gun violence in the European Union, with 55 fatal shootings last year, compared to just six in the other three Nordic countries combined. The problem is now spilling into other Nordic nations. Since April, Swedish gang members have been involved in 25 violent attacks in Denmark, often coordinated through messaging platforms like Telegram.

Swedish Minister of Justice Gunnar Strommer emphasized the need to hold these platforms accountable, questioning whether they are doing enough to prevent such activities. Danish Minister of Justice Peter Hummelgaard highlighted the widespread use of encrypted services and social media, including Telegram and TikTok, for criminal purposes, suggesting that if legally possible, he would support geo-blocking and shutting down certain platforms. [Reuters 1]

In an earlier move, Stockholm announced enhanced police cooperation among Nordic countries that includes the establishment of a hub in Stockholm to prevent the spread of gang crime to Norway, Finland, and Denmark. [Reuters 2]

(dql)

Denmark finalizes combat vehicle deal with Swedish BAE Systems Hägglunds

Denmark's Army has finalized a DKK 9.975 billion (USD 1.5 billion, EUR 1.3 billion) deal with Swedish BAE Systems Hägglunds to acquire 115 CV90 MkIIIC combat vehicles. The contract will see deliveries between 2026 and 2029, with local Danish contractors collaborating with BAE Systems' Swedish facility.

Denmark has used CV90 vehicles since 2005, including deployments in Afghanistan. In March 2024, BAE Systems signed a 15-year, USD 400 million (EUR 361 million) framework agreement with the Danish Defence Acquisition and Logistics Organization (DALO) for the repair and maintenance of Denmark's existing CV90 fleet.

Additionally, DALO has contracted for a Mid-Life Upgrade (MLU) of the CV90 fleet, which will include new D-series turrets for improved balance and weapon integration, rubber tracks to reduce weight, noise, and vibrations, and enhancements such as an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) and Defence Aid Suite (DAS) sensor system.

The upgrades, scheduled for delivery between 2026 and 2029, will be executed in close collaboration with Danish industry partners. [Defense and Security Monitor 1]

Meanwhile, Skyranger 30, the latest short range air defense turret system of German company Rheinmetall, was showcased for the first time mounted on the Danish Piranha V 8x8 armored vehicle during an exhibition by the Danish Defense Acquisition and Logistics Organization (DALO) 2024. [Defense and Security Monitor 2]

(dql)

Estonia to halt translating laws into Russian

Estonian Minister of Justice and Digital Affairs has a will stop translating laws into Russian as part of a cost-saving measure, according to Minister Liisa Pakosta. This decision will save approximately €12,900 annually without impacting the Estonian legal system, as only Estonian versions published in the Riigi Teataja hold legal authority.

Since 2014, around 200 laws have been translated into Russian, and while these translations will remain

available, they will no longer be updated. [ERR]

(dql)

Finland seeks to ban Russians from purchasing property in the country

On September 3, the Finnish Defense Ministry announced that is has introduced legislation aimed at banning Russian nationals and companies from acquiring real estate in Finland, citing security concerns over Russian influence: “The threat of intelligence and influence targeting Finland’s critical infrastructure has increased both in the physical and cyber environment as a result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and Finland’s membership in NATO.”

The proposed law seeks to prevent property acquisitions by citizens or entities from countries that threaten Finland’s national security or violate another country’s sovereignty. Russian citizens with Finnish or EU/EEA permanent residency are exempt. [Jurist] [Ministry of Defense, Finland]

Defense Minister Antti Häkkänen confirmed in an interview that the legislation targets Russian influence, with foreign ownership seen as a potential risk for interference in Finland’s domestic affairs. [Yle]

(dql)

Finland, Norway enter CO2 transport, storage partnership

On September 6, Finland and Norway reached a preliminary agreement to cooperate on carbon capture and storage (CCS). In a virtual meeting, Finland’s Environment Minister Kai Mykkänen and Norway’s Petroleum Minister Terje Aasland discussed plans to capture carbon emissions from Finnish forest and bioenergy industries and transport them to Norway for permanent storage under the seabed.

Norway offers the nearest viable location for Finland, whose soil is unsuitable for long-term storage. Norway has capacity to store large amounts of CO2, which could benefit European emissions reduction efforts.

However, the project's timeline, budget, and overall benefits remain uncertain. Some experts point to CCS as costly, energy-intensive, and prone to potential CO2 leakage. Finland’s environment ministry indicated that

a memorandum of understanding will be signed after necessary procedures, including parliamentary approval. [Yle]

Meanwhile, Finland faces criticism over its climate policies. A group of environmental organizations recently sued the Finnish government for insufficient climate action, and a June report confirmed that the country is not on track to meet its climate targets under current measures (see article in this edition).

(dql)

Finnish citizen arrested in Turkey

The Finnish foreign ministry has confirmed the arrest of a female Finnish citizen in Istanbul, believed to be the leader of the Kurdish PKK branch in Finland.

The arrested woman, reportedly a Kurdish activist from Iran and known within Finland's Kurdish community, has been under Turkish surveillance for some time. She allegedly acted as a liaison between PKK leaders and members and participated in anti-Turkish protests in Finland. [Yle]

(dql)

In state visit to Belgrade, French President Macron concludes fighter jet sale with Serbia

During a two-day state visit to Serbia by the French president, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic revealed that a long-anticipated sale of Rafale fighter planes to Belgrade had been concluded. The €2.7 Billion deal will see the transfer of 12 Dassault Rafales to Serbia by 2029. This purchase makes Serbia the 8th international Rafale costumer and follows the 2021 purchase of 12 rafales by neighbouring Croatia.[The Independent] [Le Monde]

Both nations previously relied on fleets of Russian produced Mikoyan fighter jets, however, with Russian influence waning worldwide in the wake of western sanctions Russia's need to replace its own aircraft losses during the Ukraine war many have turned to more reliable arms suppliers. Indeed, earlier this year the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published a report illustrating how between 2019 and 2023 French arms exports surpassed those of Russia for the first time. [SIPRI]

Beyond arms sales, the state visit also served to highlight increasing relations between France and Serbia with trade between the two nations tripling over the last 12 years. French firms have secured key contracts to renovate Belgrade's international airport and build the city's first metro system. [France24]

Furthermore, it has also not gone unnoticed that this state visit is the second (after Olaf Scholz) to have taken place since Serbia has restarted its lithium mining operation in the Jadar Valley in July. This project, whilst unpopular domestically, is believed to have strong EU support as lithium is a mineral crucial to the green energy transition and a key component in electric vehicle batteries. [BBC]

Many have expressed hope that this visit marks a rapprochement between western nations and Serbia. Building metaphorical bridges to Serbia, an EU candidate nation with deep historical ties to Russia would be a significant achievement for the French president. France has long been seen in international circles as a nation more willing to engage to eastern Europe as demonstrated by Macron's repeated phone calls with Vladimir Putin at the start of the Ukraine war. From the Serbian perspective it has been proposed that Vucic "believes that by purchasing these Rafales, which are an extremely expensive product of the French military and industry, he will buy President Macron's favour and political protection" [France24] hinting at French support in favour of Serbian accession to the EU. Earlier this year France signed a separate arms deal with Armenia a current CSTO member which has shown increasing unease at its membership within the Russian-led alliance. [Politico]

(axc)

French court rejects appeal in Agent Orange lawsuit by French-Vietnamese ex-journalist

On August 22, the Paris Court of Appeals rejected an appeal by French-Vietnamese former journalist Tran To Nga, who sought to sue Monsanto and other agrochemical companies for their role in producing Agent Orange, a chemical used by the US military during the Vietnam War. Nga, who has suffered severe health issues linked to Agent Orange, accused 14 companies of causing harm by supplying the chemical. The court upheld the companies' legal immunity, citing that they acted on behalf of a sovereign government. Nga plans to take her case to France's highest appeals court for a final ruling.

Agent Orange, deployed by US forces from 1962 to 1971, is blamed for widespread environmental and health damage in Vietnam, including severe birth defects affecting 150,000 children. Despite the impact, only military veterans from the US, Australia, and Korea have won compensation for exposure to the toxic chemical. Nga, who has Type 2 diabetes, an insulin allergy, and has battled tuberculosis and cancer, continues her fight for justice, linking these conditions to her exposure to Agent Orange during the war. [France24] [JURIST]

(lm)

Russia complains to Germany over Nord Stream pipeline blast investigation

Russia has lodged a formal complaint with Germany over its investigation into the 2022 explosions that severely damaged the Nord Stream gas pipelines, RIA news agency reported on Monday. The complaint comes after a prime suspect in the probe, a Ukrainian diving instructor, managed to evade arrest in Poland due to a reported oversight by German authorities. [Reuters]

Moscow has expressed concerns that the German investigation might conclude without identifying those responsible for the sabotage. The head of the European department at Russia's foreign ministry, stated that Russia has raised the issue of Germany and other affected countries fulfilling their obligations under U.N. anti-terrorism conventions. [The Guardian]

Germany's foreign ministry has dismissed Russia's complaint, asserting that they are in contact with Russian authorities while the investigation continues. Meanwhile, Russia continues to allege that the United States and Britain orchestrated the attack, a claim both nations have denied.

The Nord Stream pipelines, vital for transporting Russian gas to Europe, were ruptured by underwater blasts in September 2022, leading to ongoing geopolitical tensions. [Reuters]

(nm)

Britain and Germany propose new treaty to reset post-Brexit relations

Prime Minister Keir Starmer and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have announced plans for a new treaty between the UK and Germany, aimed at strengthening relations between the two countries and resetting ties with Europe in the post-Brexit era. The leaders met in Berlin, where they discussed the proposed agreement, which is expected to be signed later this year.

The treaty is intended to foster closer collaboration between the UK and Germany across various sectors, including science, technology, business, and culture. Starmer described the treaty as a "once in a generation" opportunity to enhance the partnership between the two nations, with the potential to boost economic growth and create jobs in both countries. "Germany is already the UK's second-largest trading partner, and this agreement will deepen those ties," Starmer said. [BBC}

Migration emerged as a key issue during the discussions. Chancellor Scholz hinted at a possible new migration deal with the UK, emphasizing the need to rebuild connections between the two nations following Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. "The contact between our societies has declined massively," Scholz noted, "We want to change that because if you know each other well, you want to support each other better."

However, the details of the proposed treaty remain vague, with critics noting that the arrangement appears "scant on detail." Despite this, the leaders expressed optimism about the potential for the agreement to reset relations and strengthen Europe's position in global alliances such as NATO.

As the UK seeks to redefine its role in Europe post-Brexit, the proposed treaty with Germany marks a significant step in renewing and deepening its ties with the continent. [The guardian] [GB news]

(nm)

Lithuania building new German military base, amid rising security concerns

Lithuania and Germany marked the beginning of construction on a new military base in Rudninkai, Lithuania, during a ceremony on Monday. The base, set to house up to 4,000 German troops, is expected to be completed by late 2027. The deployment marks the first permanent stationing of German forces abroad since World War II, driven by security concerns following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The Lithuanian Prime Minister highlighted the importance of the base, located just 20 kilometers from Belarus, a close ally of Russia. "If we are not secure, there is no security for them," she said, referring to Germany.

The project is one of Lithuania's largest, with an estimated cost of 1 billion euros. Lithuanian Defense Chief emphasized its dual role as reassurance for the population and deterrence against potential Russian aggression.

Germany's Defense Minister likened the deployment to the Allied forces' presence in West Germany during the Cold War. However, delays in awarding construction contracts have raised concerns about meeting the project's timeline. Lithuania has also increased its defense spending to 3% of GDP to support the base and other military upgrades, reflecting the country's heightened focus on security amid regional tensions.

(nm)

Iran shuts down last German language institute in Tehran amid diplomatic tensions

Iranian authorities on Tuesday closed the last language institute certified by the German Embassy in Tehran, reportedly in retaliation for Germany's closure of Islamic centers linked to Iran. The Institute for Teaching German Language, established in 1995, was shut down following orders from judicial authorities, who claimed the centers were "illegal" and involved in "extensive financial violations." [AP news]

The closure comes after Germany shuttered the Islamic Center Hamburg and five related organizations in July, accusing them of promoting Iranian theocratic ideology and supporting Hezbollah. Germany's Foreign Ministry condemned the closure, urging Iran to allow teaching to resume immediately. [Deutsche Welle]

(nm)

Germany denies plans to adopt UK's Rwanda deportation scheme, says ambassador

Germany has denied any plans to adopt a Rwanda-style deportation scheme for asylum seekers, as

suggested by some reports. Germany's ambassador to the UK, Miguel Berger, took to X (formerly Twitter) to clarify that the Germany has no intention of implementing a system like the one promoted by the previous Tory government in the UK.

“The discussion is about processing asylum applications in third countries under international humanitarian law and with support of the United Nations,” Berger stated, distancing Germany from the UK's approach of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda. [The Independent]

The Rwanda plan, initiated under Rishi Sunak’s government, was aimed at deterring asylum seekers from crossing the English Channel in small boats by deporting them to Rwanda with no prospect of return to the UK, even if their asylum claims were valid. The controversial plan was scrapped when Keir Starmer’s Labour government came to power, with Starmer emphasizing it was ineffective and costly.

Despite this, some Tory MPs have argued that Germany's discussions about using asylum facilities in Rwanda, originally intended for the UK, indicate Labour was wrong to abandon the policy. However, Germany’s ruling coalition is facing its own challenges regarding immigration, especially with far-right parties gaining ground in recent elections. [The Standard]

(nm)

Hungary opens first state-funded bilingual Hungarian-Ukrainian school

Hungary has registered its first state-funded bilingual Hungarian-Ukrainian primary and secondary school in Budapest to address the needs of Ukrainian refugees in Hungary. The Hungarian government will fully finance the school.

Prime Minister Orbán emphasized the importance of helping Ukrainians feel at home in Hungary, particularly given the large number of Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba praised the school as a step toward preserving Ukrainian identity abroad. The school will also help children adapt to their new environment without losing cultural roots. [Euromaidan Press] [Hungary Today]

(ga)

Irish PM and Ukrainian President meet in Kyiv showing strengthening relations between the two

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris in Kyiv, marking a significant step in Ireland's support for Ukraine. The two leaders signed a memorandum of understanding focused on joint efforts in demining and cybersecurity, enhancing Ukraine's resilience. Zelensky thanked Ireland for welcoming over 100,000 Ukrainian refugees and emphasized the importance of Ireland's role in Ukraine's reconstruction. Harris reiterated Ireland's support for Ukraine's EU membership and announced an additional €36 million in aid. He also visited bomb-damaged areas in Kyiv, praising Ukraine's resilience. [BBC]

Ireland is set to sign a new bilateral political agreement with Ukraine, reaffirming its solidarity with the country amid Russia's ongoing invasion. Tánaiste Micheál Martin informed the Cabinet that the agreement supports Ukraine's right to self-defense under the UN Charter, while aligning with Ireland's policy of military neutrality. The agreement will include non-lethal assistance and focus on political, humanitarian, and reconstruction support. Ireland has already provided €90 million in humanitarian aid and €250 million in non-lethal military support. The deal will last for ten years, echoing similar agreements made by other EU and G7 nations. [Irish Independent]

(nm)

Austria, Italy explore joint M-346 purchase

Austria is exploring a joint procurement with Italy to acquire Leonardo M-346 trainer aircraft to replace its retired Saab 105 jets. Austrian Defense Minister Klaudia Tanner initiated a legal review and instructed the military to start discussions with Italy, responding to a proposal from the Italian Defense Ministry. Austria aims to quickly advance this partnership.

The move follows Austria's recent joint procurement with the Netherlands for Embraer C-390 transport aircraft and a previous collaboration with Italy to buy Leonardo AW169M helicopters. Unlike the Saab 105, which was solely a trainer, Austria wants the new aircraft to also provide air surveillance and defense capabilities. Austria plans to acquire about a dozen jets and is considering options including the Leonardo M-346FA, Boeing T-7, and the Czech-made L-39N. The

procurement process is reportedly in its final stage. [Aviation Week]

(lm)

Italy, China oppose antagonism and decoupling to collaborate on global issues

China and Italy have expressed a desire to strengthen multilateral coordination, oppose division and confrontation, and work together to address global challenges, according to a Chinese Foreign Ministry.

The statement came after Meloni concluded her five-day visit to China, which lasted from July 27 to 31. The visit was her first visit to China since taking office in October 2022 and coincided with the 20th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. It follows Italy's withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) last year (see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2).

During Meloni's visit to Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee Zhao Leji met with the Italian leader.

Discussions included global issues such as the war in Ukraine, Middle East tensions, Indo-Pacific security, artificial intelligence, climate change, and UN Security Council reform. Xi expressed interest in Italian investments in China and pledged to import more high-quality Italian products.

The two nations signed a three-year action plan to implement past agreements and experiment with new forms of cooperation in trade and investment, industrial manufacturing, technological innovation, green energy, artificial intelligence, and other fields.

The action plan reflects Meloni's efforts to reset relations with China following the withdrawal from the BRI initiative and to attract Chinese investment in auto manufacturing and other sectors. [Global Times] [AP] [AiR No. 31, July/2024, 5).

(jf/dql)

Kosovo closes and reopens border crossings with Serbia following protests

On September 6, Kosovo closed two of its four border crossings with Serbia after protesters on the Serbian side blocked roads and turned away travelers with Kosovo documents. The closures at the Brnjak and Merdare crossings, in the Serb-majority northern region, came in response to actions on September 6 by "masked extremist groups" in Serbia, according to Kosovo's Interior Minister Xhelal Svecla. He criticized the Serbian authorities for allowing the blockades.

The Serbian protesters, opposing the closure of parallel institutions for ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo (see article in this edition), have demanded the withdrawal of Kosovo police from the north and called for NATO-led peacekeepers (KFOR) to take control of the area.

The protests began after Kosovo police shut down five offices linked to the Serbian government on August 30. Kosovo's Foreign Minister, Donika Gervalla-Schwarz, accused Serbia of trying to provoke instability in Kosovo, a country whose independence from Serbia in 2008 Belgrade has never recognized. [AA]

On September 7, the two border crossings reopened, after the protests came to an end, marking a temporary easing of tensions, though the political and security situation is widely seen as remaining fragile. [bne]

Tensions have escalated this year after Kosovo mandated the euro as its sole currency, effectively banning the use of the Serbian dinar in its territory. [Al Jazeera]

(dql)

Lithuanian defence minister reaffirms support for Ukraine at meeting with President Zelensky

On August 13, Lithuanian Defence Minister Laurynas Kasčiūnas met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during his visit to Ukraine. The discussion focused on enhancing defense cooperation and addressing Ukraine's immediate military needs amid ongoing Russian aggression.

Kasčiūnas reaffirmed that Lithuania continues to stand firmly with Ukraine as a committed ally and a dependable partner in its pursuit of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The country is dedicated to providing all possible assistance to Ukraine, especially in terms of military support.

Zelensky expressed appreciation for Lithuania's steadfast political support and substantial contributions to Ukraine's defense. He emphasized the significance of the Security Cooperation Agreement signed by both countries' leaders in Brussels on June 24.

The meeting covered Ukraine's key defense requirements and additional support from Lithuania, including air defense systems, drones, and other critical equipment. Lithuania is set to deliver a new military aid package in August, featuring short-range air defense systems, armored vehicles, and anti-drone technology.

The talks also addressed collaborative efforts to advance Ukraine's defense-industrial complex. Notably, five Lithuanian drone manufacturers have tested their combat UAVs in Ukraine, with deliveries anticipated in September. [Ministry of Defense, Lithuania] [Euromaidan Press]

(dql)

Lithuania fortifies Kaliningrad border

Lithuania has reinforced part of its border with Russia's Kaliningrad region by installing mines and concrete barriers known as "dragon's teeth." This fortification, located at the Panemunė bridge, aims to strengthen Lithuania's defenses against potential Russian sabotage or military incursions. The measures are part of a broader state defense program.

The Lithuanian defense ministry allocated up to EUR 3 million for these fortifications this year, with additional funding from the Lithuanian Defense Fund starting in 2025. Plans are also in place to install backup barriers on national roads and bridge approaches.

Additionally, Lithuania is reinforcing its border with Belarus, with Defense Minister Laurynas Kasčiūnas announcing the construction of 27 border defense sites, featuring various barriers like dragon's teeth and anti-tank hedgehogs to block vehicle movement.

Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have jointly urged the European Union to build a defense line along its 700 km border with Russia and Belarus, with an estimated cost of EUR 2.5 billion. [Militarnyi] [Ministry of Defense, Lithuania]

(dql)

Belarusian politician in Vilnius defects to Minsk

Belarusian opposition politician, Olga Tishkevich, who was living in Vilnius, appeared on a Belarusian regime-controlled TV program, where she made accusations against other Belarussian political refugees in Lithuania, alleging plans to attack Minsk with drones and infiltrate Belarus with "sabotage groups." [Lithuanian National Radio and Television]

In the same interview she also alleged some paramilitary Belarusian units were controlled by Lithuanian intelligence.

This appearance follows her history as an active member of the opposition, having fled to Lithuania after the 2020 Belarusian protests. Tishkevich had been expelled from her political party, the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Narodnaya Hramada," earlier this year. She was removed from the ballot in May after Belarusian cyber activists leaked data showing she reported an activist to the KGB in 2018.

Despite these accusations, she denied any collaboration. Her sudden reappearance in Belarus raises suspicions that she may have been coerced or influenced by the regime, highlighting ongoing efforts by the Belarusian KGB to infiltrate and destabilize the opposition in exile.

(bw)

Moldova, Germany likely to cooperate on migration

Moldova and Germany are on the verge of signing a migration agreement, as announced by President Maia Sandu and German Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz during a joint news conference.

Sandu indicated that the agreement is in its final stages of preparation, with details being worked out by relevant institutions. She highlighted the significant Moldovan community in Germany and expressed a desire for the Diaspora to eventually return to Moldova. Scholz affirmed that there are no major obstacles to the agreement, which is expected to benefit citizens of both nations. [Moldpres]

The statements were made during Scholz's visit to Moldova on August 21. The talks focused on bilateral

relations and security policy issues, specifically, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and Germany's support of Moldova's accession to the European Union.

Scholz is the first German leader to arrive in Moldova on a bilateral working visit in the last 12 years. [Radio Free Europe]

(dql)

Moldova, Ukraine agree on deepening environmental cooperation

Moldova and Ukraine are set to enhance their cooperation on environmental protection. Moldovan Environment Minister Sergiu Lazarencu and Ukrainian Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Ruslan Strilets met in Kiev on August 15 to discuss initiatives aimed at improving environmental protection, managing water resources, and addressing transboundary pollution.

The two ministers signed an agreement under the Espoo Convention, committing both countries to take measures to prevent, reduce, and minimize transboundary environmental impacts.

The war in Ukraine has caused severe environmental damage, including forest fires, water pollution, and ecosystem destruction, with damages estimated at over USD 6 billion. Approximately 5,500 cases related to environmental crimes have been opened. [Moldpres]

The Espoo Convention is the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, a United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) convention, named of the Finnish city Espoo where it was signed in 1991.

(dql)

Moldova President, Czech Ambassador meeting

On August 9, Moldovan President Maia Sandu met Czech Ambassador Stanislav Kázecký to express her gratitude for his contribution to strengthening relations between Moldova and the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic's support for Moldova's European aspirations, and its involvement in key projects that are

improving the quality of life for Moldovan citizens, was pointed out by the President.

The two nations pledged to continue their partnership in areas such as agriculture, energy, technology and environmental protection. The Czech Republic was thanked for helping Moldova to become more resilient in the face of regional challenges, particularly in the context of the Russia - Ukraine conflict. Through this meeting, Moldova is reinforcing its commitment to strengthening ties with EU member states as part of its broader effort to gain EU membership. [Moldopres]

(hs)

Dutch support for Ukraine 'undiminished' after Nord Stream reports

The Dutch government remains committed to supporting Ukraine despite reports linking Ukrainian authorities to the 2022 sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipeline. Prime Minister Dick Schoof and key ministers emphasised on August 16 that they will await the results of the German investigation before speculating on Ukraine's involvement. Schoof stated that Dutch support for Ukraine is vital for European security and will remain “undiminished” regardless of the Nord Stream allegations. [NOS] [NL Times]

The issue has sparked concern among some Dutch politicians, particularly from coalition parties Farmer-Citizen Movement and the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV). They argue that if Ukraine is proven to be behind the sabotage, there should be consequences for Dutch military support. However, PVV leader Geert Wilders called for further investigation before taking any action, highlighting the need for clarity on who ordered the attack. [NL Times]

(gvc)

Netherlands to supply Ukraine with 51 drone-detection radars

The Netherlands will provide Ukraine with 51 mobile radars to enhance its air defence against Russian drone attacks, as announced by the Dutch Defense Ministry on August 21. These radars, supplied by Dutch manufacturer Robin Radar Systems, can detect small drones and distinguishing them from birds. [Kyiv Independent] [MSN]

The radars are expected to be delivered by late 2024. This move is part of the Netherlands' ongoing support for Ukraine, which includes previous commitments like the delivery of F-16 fighter jets. [Kyiv Independent] [MSN]

(gvc)

Dutch medical sector warns against dependence on Russian nuclear medicine

Dutch doctors and pharmaceutical companies are increasingly concerned about Europe's reliance on Russia for key materials used in cancer treatments. Radioactive substances like Lutetium-177, vital for treating metastatic prostate cancer, are almost exclusively produced using enriched Ytterbium—a process largely controlled by Russia's nuclear sector. This dependency raises fears, especially as the geopolitical situation with Russia remains tense. [NOS]

Lutetium-177 is expected to become even more crucial as its use expands to treat thousands of patients. Terbium-161, another radioactive substance, may offer even better outcomes but is also tied to Russian production. With concerns about potential sanctions or supply disruptions, the Dutch medical community is pushing for reduced reliance on Russian materials. [NOS]

To address this, the American isotope manufacturer Shine, with support from the Dutch government, is developing facilities in Veendam to produce these materials locally. The goal is to begin production by 2028, which would significantly reduce Europe's dependence on Russia for critical cancer treatment supplies. [NOS]

(gvc)

Norway allocates USD 53 million to Ukraine's air defense

Om September 3, the Norwegian government that Norway will provide an additional NOK 570 million Norwegian kroner (around USD 53.4 million) to the International Fund for Ukraine (IFU) to help purchase drones and air defense systems.

This is part of a donation made to together with the UK, the Netherlands, and Lithuania and aimed to protect Ukrainian civilians and critical infrastructure

from Russian attacks, particularly in light of Russia's escalated missile and drone strikes since October 2022.

Norway has previously contributed to Ukraine's defense by funding air defense systems, demining equipment, artillery ammunition, vehicles, and other military supplies. Additionally, Norwegian arms company Nammo will grant Ukraine a license to produce 155mm artillery shells. [The Defense Post]

The IFU, led by the UK Ministry of Defense, supports Ukraine through a coalition of countries, including Australia, Denmark, Iceland, Lithuania, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden. [Government, Norway] [Euromaidan Press]

Polish prime minister rejects German allegations of involvement in Nord Stream pipeline explosion

On August 17, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk responded to reports rekindling questions about who was responsible for the 2022 Nord Stream pipeline explosions, which severed Germany's key energy supply and exacerbated the European energy crisis. Germany was Russia's partner in the pipeline project of which Poland said that is has long harmed its own security interests.

Following a denial from one of his deputies that Warsaw was involved, Tusk remarked that those behind the pipeline project should "apologize and remain silent."

Tusk's comments followed accusations from The Wall Street Journal, which suggested Ukrainian authorities were responsible for the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipeline explosions. The Prime Minister's response seemed particularly directed at August Hanning, former head of Germany's BND, who claimed in Die Welt that the sabotage likely had Poland's support. Hanning recommended that Germany seek compensation from Ukraine and Poland but did not provide supporting evidence.

Polish Deputy Prime Minister Krzysztof Gawkowski vehemently rejected Hanning's allegations, describing them as "inspired by Moscow" and intended to destabilize NATO countries. [Euronews]

(nl)

Romania donate Patriot missile system donation to Ukraine

On September 3, the Romanian parliament approved a draft law to donate a Patriot missile-defense system to Ukraine. The measure passed with 245 votes in favor, 29 against, and one abstention.

The Defense Ministry views this donation as a way to enhance regional support for Kyiv and strengthen Romania's relationship with the United States. Romania, a NATO and EU member with a 649-kilometer border with Ukraine, has experienced occasional Russian drone fragment intrusions since the invasion began. [Radio Free Europe]

On September 5, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis signed a decree regarding the transfer of the defense system to Ukraine, marking the final approval of the donation. [The Kyiv Independent]

Russia accuses Moldova of hosting over F-16 fighter jets

On August 13, the Russian foreign ministry summoned Moldova's charge d'affaires, Alexandru Chetraru, over media reports suggesting Chisinau may host F-16 fighter jets sent by the West to Ukraine. The ministry expressed "serious concern" and highlighted Moldova's increasing militarization, including joint exercises with NATO forces, which it claimed contradict Moldova's constitutionally declared neutrality and obligations under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Russia also warned that these actions could harm the settlement of Moldova's Transnistria conflict and undermine its own security, given the significant Russian population in Moldova. Moscow urged Moldova to strictly maintain its neutral status and avoid involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, as it could escalate tensions and negatively impact the situation around Transnistria.

In response, the Moldovan foreign ministry denied hosting military equipment for Ukraine and reiterated its commitment to neutrality, pointing out that Russia is the only country illegally maintaining troops in Moldova without its consent. Tensions between Russia and Moldova have worsened since the election of pro-Western President Maia Sandu in 2020, with Sandu accusing Moscow of attempting to destabilize her government, claims Russia denies. [AA]

(hs)

Russian President Vladimir Putin visits Azerbaijan

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Azerbaijan has highlighted Moscow's efforts to maintain influence in the Caucasus amid evolving regional dynamics.

On August 19, Putin met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to discuss the Russia-Azerbaijan strategic partnership, with a focus on bilateral relations and ongoing regional issues. A key topic was the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan following Azerbaijan's 2023 military operation to regain control of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia, traditionally an ally of Russia, has been distancing itself and improving ties with Western nations, creating tensions with Moscow. Azerbaijan, a significant energy supplier to Europe, balances its close ties with Russia and its economic links to the West. [RFERL]

(hs)

At least 10 migrants drown as boat overturns on a river between Serbia and Bosnia

At least ten people drowned after a boat carrying migrants overturned while crossing the Drina River from Serbia to Bosnia on August 22 in the morning, officials from both countries reported. Bad weather forced authorities to halt rescue efforts, which are set to resume in the next day.

According to Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dacic, the boat was carrying 25 people when it overturned. Eighteen migrants, including three children, successfully crossed into Bosnia. The group comprised 16 Syrians and two Egyptians, including 10 minors.

Migrants traveling the Balkan route often use Serbia as a transit point, arriving from Bulgaria or North Macedonia before attempting to cross into Bosnia, Hungary, or Croatia in their pursuit of reaching Western Europe. Many rely on people smugglers to navigate these dangerous crossings, fleeing conflicts and poverty in their home countries. [PBS News]

(ga)

Serbia and Azerbaijan sign tourism cooperation agreement

Serbia and Azerbaijan signed a Memorandum of Understanding to enhance tourism cooperation on August 28. The deal was formalized in Belgrade by the Azerbaijan Tourism Bureau and Serbia's Tourism Minister Husein Memic and aims to boost bilateral tourism efforts and share knowledge on tourism education.

During the meeting, Azerbaijan highlighted its upcoming role in the 29th session of the UN COP29 and invited Minister Memic to participate in a high-level meeting on climate action in tourism. Discussions also included the cultural ties between the two nations and their impact on tourism. [News.Az]

(ga)

Serbia signs EUR 2.7 billion fighter jet deal with France

Serbia signed a EUR 2.7 billion contract with France for 12 Rafale fighter jets during French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to Belgrade on August 29. The deal includes nine single-seat and three two-seat jets to be delivered by 2029 and aims to modernize Serbia's air force and replace outdated Soviet-era aircraft.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić emphasized the strategic importance of the agreement, while President Macron affirmed it as a step toward a stronger, more sovereign Europe. The visit also involved discussions on deepening economic and strategic ties between France and Serbia, which has historically maintained close relations with Russia and China. [France 24]

(ga)

Kosovo raids Serbia-linked municipal offices

Kosovo authorities conducted raids on five municipal offices in northern areas populated by ethnic Serbs on August 31. This operation is part of a broader effort to

dismantle parallel administrative and social service structures supported by the Serbian government.

Kosovo's Ministry of Local Administration stated that these institutions were illegal and violated Kosovo's laws. The raids also uncovered forged documents. This action follows previous raids on Serbian post offices in Kosovo, which have historically facilitated financial transactions between Kosovo Serbs and Serbia.

The actions mark rising tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, exacerbated by Kosovo's recent ban on the Serbian dinar and ongoing disputes over currency and governance. The situation remains tense, particularly in Mitrovica, a city divided by ethnic lines and patrolled by NATO's KFOR peacekeeping force. [Ansa]

(ga)

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister visits Russia

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on September 4 in Vladivostok during an economic forum. Putin further extended an invitation to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic for the upcoming BRICS summit in Kazan.

Vulin reaffirmed Serbia's stance of remaining outside NATO and not imposing sanctions on Russia. Despite the recent arms deal with France, Vulin assured that Serbia’s relations with Russia would remain unaffected. Vulin was previously sanctioned by the US over alleged corruption and was appointed deputy prime minister in May 2024. [The Moscow Times 1]

Serbian President declines Putin’s invitation due to prior commitments

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has declined Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation to the BRICS summit, scheduled for October 22 to 24 in Kazan, Russia. President Vučić cited prior commitments with important foreign guests as the reason for his absence.

The European Union has cautioned Serbia that maintaining strong ties with Russia could hinder its EU accession aspirations, following Vulin’s meeting with Putin. Serbia, while condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has refrained from imposing sanctions on Moscow and remains heavily dependent on Russian gas. [The Moscow Times 2]

(ga)

Fugitive Italian crime leader arrested in Slovenia

Italian crime leader Francesco Caruso was arrested on August 20 in Koper, Slovenia, following a coordinated effort by Italian and Slovenian authorities, with support from European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust).

Caruso had been evading a 21-year prison sentence for crimes including drug trafficking, extortion, as well as kidnapping, and was located through extensive surveillance and phone tapping. The European Investigation Order (EIO) facilitated the operation, allowing precise tracking and leading to Caruso's arrest.

Sentenced in February 2024, Caruso led a Calabrian organized crime group involved in various criminal activities, including mafia-related offenses. [Eurojust]

(ga)

Former ETA leader Txeroki transferred from France to a Spanish prison

A former military leader of the now-defunct Basque separatist organization ETA called Miguel de Garikoitz Aspiazu Rubin, known as Txeroki, has been moved from a French prison to complete the remainder of his sentence in Spain.

He has been transferred from the Lannemezan prison in the French Pyrenees to a jail close to San Sebastián in the northern Basque region of Spain, association representing family members of people imprisoned for ETA activity Etxerat said. [Efe]

People serving sentences in another member state of the European Union may ask to have their sentences served in their home nation under EU law.

Garikoitz Aspiazu was given a 20-year prison sentence by a French court in 2013 after being detained in 2008 next to the border with Spain and linked to the abduction of a Spanish couple and their child in the area the year before, as well as being found guilty of making more than 500kg of explosives. [Reuters]

After his arrest, he was tried in a court in Madrid and sentenced to 377 years in prison for 20 attempted assassinations, one of them being the former deputy mayor of Portugalete (Bizkaia), Esther Cabezudo, in February 2002. [Reuters] [Efe]

ETA started its bloody campaign for the independence of traditional Basque territories in northern Spain and southwest France in the 1960s. The group declared its dissolution in 2018, bringing an end to a 50-year campaign that claimed over 850 lives in Spain.

(fs)

Spain rejects Hungary's rail bid due to potential ties to Russia

The Spanish government decided to veto the Hungarian consortium Ganz-Mávag Europe's attempt to purchase Spanish train manufacturer Talgo due to national security concerns, including possible ties to Russia, as announced by official Spanish government sources. [Spanish Economy Ministry]

Ganz-Mavag had put out a bid in March for Talgo, the company that makes Spain's AVE high-speed trains, offering 619 million euros. The offer represented a 17% premium over Talgo's value at the time. [Reuters]

Reasons behind the veto are alleged links between Ganz-Mávag and Moscow, as well as the potential for Talgo technology to enable the movement of Russian troops in Ukraine and other regions. Spanish government said the bid would have entailed "insurmountable risks for national security and public order." [Politico]

“The bid complied with all legal requirements and there are no well-founded reasons for the Spanish government's opposition", Ganz-Mávag said in an official statement. It also added that they might resubmit the bid in the future depending on the circumstances. [Reuters]

The European Commission endorsed the veto, as "the prerogative of such decisions lies with member states," a Commission spokesperson said. "In line with EU treaties, member states can restrict single market freedoms, such as the freedom of establishment and the freedom of movement of capital on public security grounds.” [Euronews]

The government veto has led to a crisis for the company. Talgo's shares fell by 10% soon after the

veto was declared. [Politico]

(fs)

Sweden to allocate financial aid for heating and energy in Ukraine

The Swedish government has approved an additional SEK 500 million (EUR 43.9 million) to support Ukraine's heating and energy needs. This funding, one of Sweden's largest contributions to Ukraine's energy supply, will enable the installation of two gas turbines for electricity production, with protective measures in place to minimize the impact of Russian attacks.

The Swedish Agency for International Development and Cooperation, along with Ukraine and international financial institutions, will oversee the project, which is expected to be operational by 2025. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden] [Euromaidan Press]

(dql)

Sweden deepens defence cooperation with Czech Republic

Swedish Defence Minister Pål Jonson met with Czech Defence Minister Jana Černochová during the GLOBSEC Forum in Prague, held in Prague from August 31 to September 1. On the sidelines of the event, they signed a Joint Declaration on Enhancing Defence Cooperation.

The declaration aims to strengthen collaboration between Sweden and the Czech Republic in areas such as extending the use of the JAS 39 Gripen aircraft beyond 2027, supporting joint training and operations of the Swedish-made CV90 infantry fighting vehicle, and assisting Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. [Ministry of Defense, Sweden]

The ministers' discussion covered the Czech Republic's acquisition of 246 CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, with Jonson welcoming the decision. Czech industries will participate in the production of these vehicles for the Czech Armed Forces and may contribute to their production for other European countries, a key point emphasized by Černochová.

Jonson and Černochová also addressed the continuation of the JAS-39 Gripen aircraft lease for the Czech Air Force until it acquires 5th generation F-35

aircraft. The current lease ends in 2027, and while Sweden has offered to extend it, the Czech Ministry of Defence is not fully satisfied with the terms. [Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces, Czech Republic]

(dql)

Sweden, Moldova sign letter of intent on defence cooperation

On August 20, Swedish Defence Minister Pål Jonson and Civil Defence Minister Carl-Oskar Bohlin signed a Letter of Intent to strengthen defence cooperation with Moldova.

The Letter of Intent focuses on enhancing defence cooperation, addressing hybrid threats and disinformation, implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and increasing technology and knowledge exchanges between the two countries. [Ministry of Defence, Sweden]

(dql)

Switzerland: Inmates escape from jail near German border

Two inmates, an Algerian and a Tunisian, escaped from Bässlergut prison in Basel, near the German border, Swiss authorities reported on August 31. The details of how they managed to escape remain unclear. The 37-year-old Algerian was jailed for serious crimes, including intentional homicide, grievous bodily harm, and robbery. The 22-year-old Tunisian was imprisoned for property damage, trespassing, and illegally entering Switzerland. Swiss authorities have launched an international search to apprehend the fugitives. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Swiss investigate four people linked to Russian oligarch

Swiss authorities are investigating four individuals linked to Russian oligarch Suleyman Kerimov as part of an inquiry into potential violations of sanctions and money laundering. The State Secretariat for Economic

Affairs (SECO) has temporarily frozen EUR 1.3 billion (CHF 1.25 billion) related to the case.

SECO's broader efforts to enforce sanctions on Russia have resulted in CHF 7.1 billion (EUR 7.56 billion) in frozen assets, along with luxury items such as cars, art, and properties. The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) opened criminal proceedings in November 2023, following SECO's request based on extensive preliminary research. The investigation is connected to the Ukraine conflict and violations of Swiss embargo laws. [SWI]

(lm)

Switzerland to extend S status for Ukrainians until March 2026

The Swiss government has extended the S protection status for Ukrainian refugees until March 4, 2026, due to the ongoing instability in Ukraine. This status, first activated on March 12, 2022, following the war's outbreak, provides clarity for the affected individuals, as well as for cantons, municipalities, and employers. By August 2024, around 66,000 Ukrainians had been granted this status. Additionally, support measures focused on integration, particularly in language acquisition, training, and job market access, will also be maintained to aid their continued integration. [SWI]

(lm)

West provides Ukraine with new round of support

On August 6, EU governments approved the first regular payment of EUR 4.2 billion to Ukraine, part of the EUR 50 billion allocated for financial support from 2024 to 2027. This payment, which consists of both grants and loans, is contingent on Ukraine meeting specific conditions, including reforms in public financial management, governance, business environment, energy, and de-mining. The EUR 50 billion fund was agreed upon by EU governments in March. To date, Ukraine has received EUR 6 billion in bridge financing and EUR 1.9 billion in pre-financing from this fund. [Reuters]

In addition, the United States announced a new USD 125 million military aid package for Ukraine, following a call between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Joe Biden. The aid

includes air defense munitions, ammunition, and anti-armor missiles, and is part of ongoing support for Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the U.S. has provided tens of billions in military assistance. [DW] [Aljazeera]

(hs/ycl)

UK and Irish leaders meet in Dublin to reset relations after Brexit tensions

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer met with Irish premier Simon Harris in Dublin in an effort to repair relations between the UK and Ireland, which had been strained by Brexit. This visit marked the first time in five years that a British leader visited Ireland and followed Starmer's Labour Party victory in July.

The meeting was seen as an important step in rebuilding economic and security ties between the two countries. Relations had deteriorated after the UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016, particularly due to complications surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol. The agreement, aimed at preventing a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, had sparked political tensions in Northern Ireland.

During the visit, both leaders expressed their desire to establish a "new path" for British-Irish relations. While Starmer reaffirmed that the UK would not seek to rejoin the EU, he emphasized his intention to renegotiate aspects of the post-Brexit trade agreement to promote growth. The two leaders also discussed the broader significance of strengthening ties with the EU and standing together on global issues, including the war in Ukraine.

To end the day, Starmer and Harris attended a business roundtable to discuss trade relations and later a soccer match between Ireland and England, symbolizing the renewed spirit of cooperation. [The Independent]

(nm)

UK Prime Minister Starmer visits Dublin to flesh out 'reset' with Ireland, EU

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer visited Dublin on September 7, for the first official visit by a British prime minister to Ireland in five years, aiming to improve

relations with both Ireland and the European Union. The visit followed Starmer's election victory and is part of his broader diplomatic efforts to reset ties strained by Brexit. Starmer met with Irish Prime Minister Simon Harris at Farmleigh House, where they discussed moving relations "from friction back to friendship," marking what they described as a "fundamental shift" in their bilateral relationship now that the Brexit debates are behind them.

The two leaders emphasized their desire for closer cooperation between the UK, Ireland, and EU member states, without revisiting the core terms of Britain's departure from the EU. Brexit had caused significant strain, particularly over trading rules governing Northern Ireland, which shares a land border with Ireland, an EU member. These rules were a major sticking point in post-Brexit negotiations and caused friction between the two nations.

During their talks, Starmer and Harris explored what a practical "reset" in relations would look like, focusing on areas of diplomatic and trade cooperation. They also met with business representatives from major companies such as Primark, Dawn Meats, and dairy giant Ornua to discuss economic ties.

In addition to formal talks, Starmer and Harris attended a soccer match between Ireland and England, a symbolic event given the history between the two nations. A previous match in 1995 had been abandoned due to riots, reflecting tensions in the years before the Good Friday Agreement, which largely ended the conflict in Northern Ireland. [Reuters]

(lm)

Finland, Qatar seek energy cooperation, discuss Gaza during Emir Al Thani's visit

On September 5, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo hosted Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar at his official residence in Helsinki, following a morning meeting with several Finnish cabinet ministers.

Discussions centered on strengthening bilateral cooperation in investment, energy, and education, as well as addressing the situation in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. Qatar has been actively involved in ceasefire negotiations with Egypt and the US. The Emir met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in July and Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky in June, while maintaining close ties with both the US and China. [Yle]

The two leaders also witnessed the signing of three memoranda of understanding (MOUs). The first focused on peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution; the second established a Joint Ministerial Committee for Economic, Commercial, and Technical Cooperation; and the third aims at cooperation in vocational and technical education. In addition, a letter of intent was signed between the Qatar Chamber and the Helsinki Chamber of Commerce. [Gulf Times 1]

In separate meeting between Al Thani und Finnish President Alexander Stubb on September 4, both sides discussed cooperation in multiple areas including mediation, investment promotion, education and the green transition. [Gulf Times 2] [President of the Republic of Finland]

(dql)

Hungary foreign minister visits Bahrain, discuss economic cooperation and peace

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó meets Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani in Manama to discuss on deepening cooperation in industry, economy, education, youth empowerment, as well as promoting global peace.

Szijjártó and Al Zayani agreed on the need for dialogue over military action to resolve conflicts, and emphasized efforts to combat terrorism and enhance regional stability.

Economic agreements were reaffirmed, including significant investments by Hungary's Festipay in Bahrain's payment systems and ongoing negotiations for Hungarian multinational oil and gas company, MOL Group, environmentally friendly oil extraction and potential rubber bitumen plant.

Szijjártó also advocated for closer EU-Gulf Cooperation, including renewed free trade talks and visa agreements, with hopes for increased support at the upcoming EU-GCC summit. [Hungary Today]

The visit concludes with signing an agreement to offer Bahraini students scholarships through Hungary's "Stipendium Hungaricum" program, which aims to support Bahrain's educational and developmental goals by providing access to quality education at leading Hungarian universities. [Bahrain News Agency]

(ga)

Iran summons Austrian envoy after controversial Hezbollah support post

The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Austrian Ambassador to Tehran on August 28 in response to Austria's Foreign Ministry summoning Iran's ambassador the previous day to discuss the concern.

The diplomatic tension arose after Iranian Ambassador to Vienna Abbas Bagherpour posted a message endorsing Hezbollah's recent airstrike on Israel, which included the group's flag and the statement "Hezbollah will win".

Austria condemned the post, citing its strong stance against Hezbollah, which is designated as a terrorist organization by Austria and several other EU countries. Bagherpour removed the post following backlash from Austrian political figures. [Tehran Times]

(ga)

Israeli ambassador will not return to Ireland unless bilateral relations improve, says embassy of Israel

Israel's ambassador to Ireland, Dana Erlich, will not return to her post in Dublin unless relations between the two countries significantly improve, according to Israel's embassy in Ireland. Erlich was recalled in May 2024 following the Irish government's decision to formally recognize the state of Palestine, a move that Israel strongly opposed.

The recall of Erlich came as part of a diplomatic protest Ireland's stance, which Israel's foreign minister, Israel Katz, labelled as a "reward for terrorism" in reference to Hamas's attacks that killed over 1,100 Israelis in October 2023. Relations between the two nations have been strained since, with Israel expressing concerns about rising anti-Israel sentiment in Ireland, which it claims has morphed into anti-Semitism.

A spokesperson for the Israeli embassy said that Erlich's return would depend on Ireland adopting a more cooperative and friendly approach. The embassy also highlighted concerns regarding the Irish government's criticism of Israel's military actions and

the ongoing Gaza conflict, which has claimed over 40,000 lives, primarily civilians.

Ireland has maintained a critical stance on Israel's actions in Palestine, pushing for a review of the EU-Israel trade deal based on human rights conditions and supporting a case at the International Court of Justice to investigate allegations of genocide by Israel. Despite these tensions, Ireland has rejected calls to expel the Israeli ambassador, stressing the importance of maintaining diplomatic channels. [The Irish Times]

(nm)

Netherlands express support for Israel amid rising tensions with Iran

On August 5, Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof expressed support for Israel on X as tensions with Iran escalated following the assassinations of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders. Schoof reaffirmed the Netherlands' commitment to Israel's security and called for de-escalation, a ceasefire in Gaza, and increased humanitarian aid.

Later, Foreign Minister Caspar Veldkamp also urged Iran to exercise "maximum restraint" and conveyed the Netherlands' serious concern about the growing tensions. [NL Times]

(gvc)

Israel rescinds accreditation of Norwegian diplomats

On August 8, Israel revoked the accreditation of eight Norwegian diplomats working with the Palestinian Authority, citing Norway's recognition of a Palestinian state in May [EiR No. 6, June/2024] and what it views as anti-Israel policies.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz criticized that Oslo's stance on the Palestinian issue was one-sided, leading to its exclusion from involvement with the Palestinian Authority. In response, Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide criticized the move as an "extreme act" that undermines efforts to assist the Palestinian population and warned of consequences for Norway's relationship with Israel.

The Palestinian Authority also condemned the decision, calling it a violation of international law and

warning of significant repercussions. The European Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, also expressed strong disapproval, emphasizing solidarity with Norway and concerns over the impact on Middle East peace efforts. [EEAS]

Norway, a key player in the Oslo Accords, continues to lead international donor efforts for Palestinians and had recently recognized a Palestinian state, a move Israel condemned, linking it to bolstering militant groups like Hamas amid ongoing conflict in Gaza. [Reuters]

(dql)

Norwegian wealth fund to divest companies involved in Israel's Gaza war and occupied territories

Norway's USD 1.7 trillion sovereign wealth fund may divest from companies which violate recently expanded ethical guidelines regarding involvement in Israel's operations in the occupied Palestinian territories. The Council on Ethics, which oversees the fund's compliance, sent a letter to the finance ministry in August, outlining its stricter interpretation of unethical corporate behavior. This change, not previously reported, could lead to the exclusion of more companies, although the council expects the number to be small.

The council has already identified one company for potential disinvestment and suggested that more could follow. The fund, a leader in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investing, holds stakes in 8,800 companies, representing 1.5% of global listed shares. The council is currently reviewing companies like RTX Corp, General Electric, and General Dynamics, which NGOs claim supply weapons used by Israel in Gaza. These companies have not yet responded to inquiries.

As of June 30, the fund held investments worth NOK 16 billion crowns (USD 1.41 billion) in Israel, spread across 77 companies. The council's focus is on weapons producers in countries outside the Arms Trade Treaty, particularly U.S. firms.

The fund's ethical guidelines are influenced by a recent International Court of Justice opinion, which addressed Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, settlement policies, and use of natural resources, all deemed in conflict with international law. This updated

interpretation could affect companies with indirect involvement in these activities.

Previously, the fund divested from nine companies operating in the West Bank for building infrastructure and providing surveillance systems. The final decision on exclusions rests with the central bank, which often follows the council's recommendations. [Reuters]

(dql)

Norway's Prime Minister meets Amir of Qatar

(dql) On September 4, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre met with visiting Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani for bilateral talks.

With Qatar playing a key role in the negotiations on a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, Støre highlighted Qatar's role as an "increasingly important actor in peace and reconciliation efforts" in the Middle East.

In addition to the situation in Gaza, Støre and Al Thani discussed expanding cooperation between the two countries, with a focus on technology development and green transition. The discussion also included issues and challenges related to workers' rights. [Government, Norway]

Al Thani emphasized his country's desire to enhance its relationship with Norway to better align with the mutual goals of both nations and expressed optimism about elevating the bilateral relationship. [The Peninsula]

(dql)

Russian, UAE discuss BRICS cooperation

On August 14, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister and special presidential representative for the Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, met with United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ambassador Mohammed Ahmed Al Jaber to discuss cooperation within BRICS.

The talks centered on strengthening the traditionally friendly bilateral relations, with an emphasis on political dialogue and expanding cooperation in trade, investment, culture, and humanitarian areas. The meeting was held at the request of the UAE ambassador. [TASS]

The UAE joined BRICS in January, along with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Ethiopia.

(hs/ycl)

Russian president reaffirms support for Palestine

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed concern over the high number of Palestinian civilian casualties in Gaza during a meeting on August 13 with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Moscow. Putin reaffirmed Russia's support for a two-state solution, emphasizing that despite Russia's own military conflicts, it remains attentive to the humanitarian crisis in Palestine. Abbas called Russia one of the "dearest friends" of the Palestinian people.

The meeting took place amid growing tensions in the Middle East, as Israel braces for possible retaliatory strikes from Iran and Hezbollah. Russia, maintaining relations with both Palestinian factions and Israel, has faced Israeli criticism for hosting Hamas delegations and highlighting the civilian toll in Gaza, where nearly 40,000 people have been killed and most of the population displaced by Israel's military campaign. [Euronews] [Al Jazeera]

(hs)

Slovakia to purchase six air defense systems from Israe:

On August 28, the Slovakian government approved the purchase of six mobile air defense systems from Israel for EUR 554.3 million to enhance airspace protection. Additionally, the government agreed to buy over 1,300 heavy terrain vehicles in a joint acquisition with the Czech Republic, replacing aging trucks at a cost of EUR 708.3 million.

Defense Minister Robert Kalinak emphasized that these measures are part of NATO's efforts to strengthen the military alliance's eastern flank, with a particular focus on enhancing defense capabilities, especially air defense. [US News]

(nl)

Sweden and Qatar sign cooperation agreements

On September 2-3, Qatari Amir Hamad Al Thani visited Sweden to hold official talks with Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom.

The meeting between Al Thani and Kristersson focused on strengthening bilateral relations. The discussions covered areas such as investment, economy, energy, and international cooperation, with particular attention to regional developments, including the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories. Both leaders expressed their commitment to enhancing cooperation between their countries. [Gulf Times]

Similarly, Al Thani Billstrom discussed ways to develop cooperation relations, along with discussed regional and international developments, especially the developments in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories. [Qatar News Agency]

During the visit, several memoranda of understanding (MoUs) were signed to strengthen cooperation between the two countries, marking 50 years of bilateral relations. These agreements include MoUs on political consultations, peace and reconciliation, humanitarian and development cooperation, land transport and logistics services, social development, and a letter of intent for military cooperation. [The Peninsula]

(dql)

Switzerland reopens embassy in Baghdad after 33 years

Switzerland has reopened its embassy in Baghdad after a 33-year closure, which was originally due to the Gulf War in 1991. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs announced the reopening as part of efforts to strengthen bilateral relations with Iraq, particularly in economic, security, and migration matters. This move is aligned with Switzerland's 2021-2024 Middle East and North Africa strategy.

Since 2012, Swiss relations with Iraq had been managed through the Swiss embassy in Jordan, but the new diplomatic post in Baghdad reflects Switzerland's recognition of Iraq's regional importance. [Al Mayadeen English]

(lm)

Turkey hosts Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas for talks with President Erdogan

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara, where the two leaders discussed the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reaffirmed Türkiye's support for the Palestinian cause. (Presidency of Republic of Türkiye)

During the visit, Erdoğan assured Abbas that Turkey would continue to advocate for Palestine on the international stage, urging the global community to intensify pressure on Israel. The Turkish president condemned Israel's actions in Gaza, criticizing the silence of some Western countries and their continued support for Israel. (Duvar English)

In a statement released by his office, Erdoğan emphasized Turkey's commitment to the Palestinian struggle and outlined recent measures taken against Israel. Türkiye has denounced the ongoing war in Gaza and suspended all trade with Israel. Additionally, Ankara has submitted a formal request to join South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice, which accuses Israel of genocide. (Sabah)

Abbas was also scheduled to deliver a speech in the Turkish Parliament during his visit, underscoring the significance of the diplomatic ties between the two nations. The visit highlights Turkey's role as a key supporter of Palestine amid escalating tensions in the region. (Duvar English)

(ab)

United Kingdom suspends some arms exports to Israel over risk of breaking international law

The U.K. government, under Prime Minister Keir Starmer, announced it is suspending certain arms exports to Israel due to concerns that they might be used to violate international humanitarian law in the ongoing conflict in Gaza. The decision affects around 30 of 350 export licenses, covering parts for military planes, helicopters, drones, and targeting equipment. Foreign Secretary David Lammy emphasized that this is not an arms embargo, nor a judgment on Israel's actions, but rather a precautionary step.

The move comes amid growing pressure on Israel's allies, including the U.K., to halt arms sales due to the high casualty toll in Gaza, with over 40,000 Palestinians killed in the nearly 11-month-long conflict. The U.K. has sold GPD 42 million (USD 53 million) worth of arms to Israel in 2022, a relatively small figure compared to larger suppliers like the U.S. and Germany, but the suspension carries symbolic weight. [TIME]

This is not the first time the UK has restricted arms sales to Israel following mass civilian casualties. Similar measures were taken by previous governments, including those led by Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron. The latest decision comes under Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Labour government, which has taken a more critical stance on Israel than its Conservative predecessors. The government has reinstated funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) and has stated that it will no longer challenge the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrants for Israeli leaders.

The suspended licenses include components for military aircraft, helicopters, and drones, but crucially, parts for F-35 fighter jets—known for their role in Israeli airstrikes—are excluded from the suspension. The government justifies this exclusion by citing the potential global impact on the F-35 program, which involves companies from multiple Western nations, including the UK.

Against this backdrop, human rights groups and campaigners have criticized the UK's decision, arguing that it does not go far enough. Amnesty International labeled the move as "filled with loopholes," pointing out that by continuing to supply F-35 components, the UK is failing to adequately address its responsibility in arms control. [Al Jazeera]

(lm)

US CIA Director visits Bosnia to address concerns over Republika Srpska's rhetoric

US CIA Director William Burns visited Sarajevo to address the "worrying secessionist rhetoric and actions" coming from the leadership of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serb entity, Republika Srpska. Burns, who arrived in Sarajevo following a diplomatic mission to Israel aimed at negotiating a cease-fire in Gaza, held discussions with members of Bosnia's presidency, intelligence officials, and the foreign minister. The meetings focused on shared concerns, particularly the

territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina. (Radio Free Europe)

The visit comes amid rising concerns among Bosnia's Western allies about Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik's pro-Russian stance and his close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Dodik's actions and statements have raised alarms over potential threats to Bosnia's stability and unity. (Radio Free Europe)

(ab)

Croatia to purchase advanced rocket systems from the United States

The US State Department has approved a USD 390 million Foreign Military Sale (FMS) to Croatia for M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and related equipment, according to the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) on August 30.

This proposed deal is now pending final approval from the US Congress and includes eight HIMARS units, 48 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) pods, and various support items such as training, software, and technical assistance.

The acquisition aims to enhance Croatia's defence capabilities and interoperability with NATO forces. Croatia, joining a list of European nations that have ordered HIMARS, will likely receive the systems in 2027 due to high demand. [European Security & Defence]

(ga)

U.S. Defense Department greenlights ammunition sale to Denmark

The U.S. State Department has approved Denmark's request to purchase M982A1 Excalibur tactical projectiles and related support, valued at approximately USD 121 million (EUR 109 million).

On August 20, the Defense Department's Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced that American multinational aerospace and defense conglomerate RTX will be the primary contractor for the sale, which includes 339 Excalibur projectiles. The deal also covers the acquisition of Portable Electronic Fire Control Systems, Improved Platform Integration Kits, and various support equipment, along with

training, technical assistance, and repair services. [Defense Security Cooperation Agency, USA]

Denmark seeks to enhance its defensive capabilities, particularly the precision strike ability of its brigades, to counter current and future threats. [UK Defence Journal]

(dql)

U.S. alarmed by ruling party's threat to ban opposition in Georgia

The U.S. State Department has expressed deep concern over the ruling Georgian Dream party in Georgia for its increasingly anti-democratic actions and rhetoric.

These concerns were heightened by the party's recent threats to ban the opposition following elections (see article in this edition). The U.S. urged the Georgian government to uphold human rights, stop persecuting critics, and return to a democratic path aligned with Euro-Atlantic integration. It that the government's actions clash with the democratic values essential for EU and NATO membership and contradict the aspirations of the Georgian people. [Civil Georgia]

(zh)

Serbia and Dominica strengthen ties with new cooperation agreement

Dominica and Serbia signed a Protocol of Cooperation to enhance their partnership across various sectors on August 26. The agreement was formalized by Dominica's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Vince Henderson and Serbia's Foreign Minister Marko Djuric to provide Serbia with technical and material support in education, health, agriculture, and digitalization.

Key provisions include enabling Dominican students, especially in medicine, to study at Serbian institutions, improving Dominica's access to medical supplies and specialist support, and boosting agricultural development through enhanced processing capabilities and modern technologies.

Future collaborations include supporting Serbia's Tourism Fair preparations, facilitating a new Air Serbia flight to Florida, and working towards visa-free access

for Serbian citizens. Dominica will also participate in Expo 2027 in Belgrade. [Dominica News Online]

(ga)

Hungarian State Secretary talks on improving US Relations

Levente Magyar, the Parliamentary State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, met with the Deputy National Security Advisor in Washington to discuss the future of Hungarian-American relations.

Magyar framed the talks as a review of issues that the two countries might not necessarily agree on, but still value having progressive dialogue as opposed to not talking at all. He stated, “We do not have to agree on everything, and there are many important issues on which we do not think alike, we do not have the same vision of the way forward, but we are allies”. [Hungary Today]

The Hungarian state secretary highlighted the diverging issue of the war in Ukraine, mentioning that both sides want peace in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Mr. Magyar noted that the primary focus of the meeting and key difference was their differing perspectives on the approach to achieving peace in Ukraine. While the United States views military support for Ukraine and war financing as the solution, Hungary's priority is to maintain distance from the conflict, he pointed out.

“We believe that the best way to keep this situation as far away from our country as possible is to have a ceasefire and subsequent peace talks as soon as possible,” explained Magyar. [Hungary Today]

During the meeting, relations with China were also addressed, revealing varying perspectives where the United States views China as a global competitor, whereas Hungary perceives economic benefits in Chinese investment and cooperation.

When summarizing the talks in Washington, State Secretary Magyar emphasized that the goal should be to ensure that Hungary and the United States “at least do not diverge more than they have so far.”

(pt)

Russia bans 92 Americans

On August 28, Russia's foreign ministry announced a ban on entry to 92 U.S. citizens, including journalists, lawyers, and leaders of key military-industrial firms, citing Washington's "Russophobic" stance. This move marks a further deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations, which are at their lowest since the Cold War due to the Ukraine conflict.

The banned individuals include 14 employees from the Wall Street Journal, five senior journalists from the New York Times, and four from the Washington Post. The Wall Street Journal condemned the bans as an attack on press freedom. Russia's foreign ministry accused these journalists and media outlets of spreading false information about the Russian military and criticized the Biden administration for its sanctions on Russian officials and entities.

The ministry also denounced U.S. actions as interference in Russia's internal affairs and warned of consequences for perceived hostile actions.

The list also includes several U.S. defense industry employees, state prosecutors, and university professors. Russia views the conflict in Ukraine as part of a broader struggle with the West, which it claims is aiming to undermine Russia. [Reuters]

(hs)

Russia summons US envoy over American media coverage in Kursk

On August 20, Russia's foreign ministry summoned senior U.S. Embassy official Stephanie Holmes to protest what it described as "provocative actions" by American journalists reporting from Ukrainian-controlled areas of the Kursk region. The ministry accused the reporters of illegal entry to the and propaganda production to cover up alleged crimes by the Kyiv regime.

The protest follows reports of US news channel CNN from the Russian-Ukrainian border and the Kursk town of Sudzha.

In addition, Russia expressed concerns about the presence of U.S. mercenaries in the region, accusing American private military companies of supporting Ukraine during a recent incursion. Though no specific companies were named, Russian state media

previously reported that the Forward Observations Group had posted photos from Kursk on Instagram.

This move follows a similar protest made to Italy's ambassador after RAI, Italy's state broadcaster, aired the first foreign media report from the conflict-ridden region, prompting a criminal investigation by Russian authorities. [The Moscow Times]

(hs)

Swiss prosecutor seeks 14-year sentence for ex-Guatemalan police chief Sperisen in murder case

Swiss prosecutor Yves Bertossa has demanded a 14-year prison sentence for Erwin Sperisen, the former head of Guatemala's National Civil Police, during his fourth trial in Geneva. Sperisen, a dual Swiss-Guatemalan national, is accused of being involved in the extrajudicial execution of seven prisoners in 2006. These executions took place during an operation to regain control of Pavon prison in Guatemala, where a hit squad, allegedly comprised of Sperisen's men, carried out the killings.

Bertossa argues that Sperisen was fully aware of the death squad's actions, highlighting that the team consisted of his own personnel, including his lieutenant and two personal advisors. The prosecutor maintains that Sperisen, as the police chief, had agreed to the execution plan, thus making him complicit in the murders.

Throughout the legal proceedings, Sperisen has maintained his innocence, claiming he was wrongfully imprisoned for 11 years. He is also seeking CHF 8 million (EUR 8.53 million) in compensation for his time spent in custody. This trial marks a continuation of a lengthy legal battle, with previous convictions and appeals, as Sperisen continues to contest the charges against him. [SWI]

(lm)

Foreign minister of Azerbaijan and Iran hold phone talk

On August 25, Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov held a phone conversation with newly

appointed Iranian Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araghchi.

The discussion focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation in areas such as economy, trade, transport, and communications. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Azerbaijan] [News.Az]

The phone call came after a joint military drill in West Azarbaijan province in northwest Iran in June and after the resumption of operations at Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran following over a year of negotiations aimed at easing tensions between the two countries. These moves are indicative of efforts to ease tension between Baku and Tehran. [Tehran Times] [AP News]

Relations between Azerbaijan and Iran had deteriorated significantly after a gunman attacked the Azerbaijani embassy in January 2023, killing its security chief. While Iran claimed the attack was personal, Azerbaijan labeled it a "terrorist attack" and accused Iran of supporting hardline Islamists, a claim Tehran denied. Diplomatic expulsions followed, heightening tensions further.

The strained ties were also fueled by Azerbaijan's close relationship with Israel, which Iran views as its primary regional adversary. Additionally, the long-standing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, along with concerns over Azerbaijan's territorial ambitions, have further complicated relations. [The New Arab]

(dql)

Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan strengthen diplomatic relations

On August 23, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a treaty on allied relations in Tashkent following the inaugural Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan High Intergovernmental Council meeting, attended by both leaders and their ministers.

The discussions focused on strengthening strategic partnerships and expanding cooperation through roadmaps on industrial, infrastructural, and interregional development.

Mirziyoyev hailed the visit as a "historic milestone" in the friendship between the nations, while Aliyev emphasized the significance of the treaty, calling it the highest international agreement between the two countries. In addition to the treaty, 13 other

agreements were signed to enhance cooperation in economic, educational, and cultural sectors. [AA]

(dql)

Belarus, China seek to deepen cooperation

On August 23, China and Belarus have committed to enhancing cooperation across multiple sectors, including trade, security, energy, and finance, according to a joint statement issued following a meeting between Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko in Minsk.

The statement said the aim is to bolster bilateral industrial supply chains and improve trade facilitation to lower costs. Belarus is also looking to expand its collaboration with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, which includes major Chinese cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai.

Belarus was an early participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative, and relations between the two countries have remained robust over the past 32 years, despite global challenges, Premier Li said during his visit.

China is Belarus's second-largest trading partner and its top partner in Asia, with bilateral trade exceeding 7.52 billion Euros in the past year, according to China Daily. Premier Li's visit to Belarus followed the conclusion of his first official visit to Russia.[Reuters]

(hs)

Belarus detains Japanese national on suspicion of espionage

On September 4, Belarus detained a Japanese man in his 50s on suspicion of spying, according to local media, with authorities accusing him of monitoring military sites and border areas.

The man, identified by Belarusian reports as Masatoshi Nakanishi, is said to have gathered intelligence on Belarus' social and political conditions, including the border with Ukraine, and was reportedly photographing and filming military facilities. Belarusian media also noted that Nakanishi previously taught Japanese in the southeastern city of Gomel, where his

wife is originally from, and had organised a cultural exhibition there. [Reuters]

Japan's embassy in Belarus confirmed that Nakanishi has been held since July 9 for reportedly breaching local laws. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi stated that Japan is providing consular assistance and has confirmed that Nakanishi is in good health. The government, he said, is doing everything it can to support him. [Japan Times]

Japan as other countries has imposed sanctions on Belarus due to its support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. [Reuters]

(dql)

Czech foreign minister visits South Korea

Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský's visited South Korea on September 8-10. His working visit focused on strengthening diplomatic and trade ties.

South Korea, one of Czechia's top 20 trading partners, hosted bilateral meetings where Lipavský discussed strategic communication and cooperation opportunities, particularly regarding South Korean company KHNP's participation in building two new units at the Dukovany nuclear power plant.

Lipavský also met with his Korean counterpart, Tchejol Choe, to explore further collaboration in nuclear energy, industry, and science. South Korea is Czechia's third-largest trading partner outside Europe and its fourth-largest foreign investor. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic]

(dql)

Czech Republic to broaden chip cooperation with Taiwan

The Czech Republic and Taiwan are set to finalize an agreement within September to establish the "Czech-Taiwanese Advanced Chip Design Research Center," aimed at enhancing semiconductor capabilities in Czechia.

Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announced that nearly all aspects of the project have been agreed upon, and a supervisory committee will oversee its

progress. The center's opening ceremony will be held in the Czech Republic once the deal is signed.

The project, part of a five-year agreement, aims to leverage Taiwan's semiconductor technology to build Czechia's industry capacity, while also linking Taiwanese companies to European supply chains, boosting Taiwan's business prospects in Europe.

Specific financial contributions and technological details from Taiwan remained undisclosed. [Focus Taiwan]

(dql)

Lithuanian public institutions to ban Chinese electronics for national security

From 2025, Lithuanian institutions are implementing new national security rules that ban the use of Chinese-made phones, drones, and other technology. These measures aim to reduce potential espionage risks associated with "untrustworthy countries". The main target of this is Chinese equipment and electronics which already are used widely throughout the country. [Lithuania National Redio and Television]

Lithuania will continue to purchase drones for Ukraine and for its in small portions to its military from China as part of an exception clause only for the military. However, there is also research and efforts to develop alternatives by the armed forces to move away from Chinese goods. The deadline for this April 2025. Domestic drone manufacturers though will be forced to replace all components sourced from countries that government's view pose a threat to national security.

Computers and CCTV cameras which are widely used within Lithuania and the government institutions are being phased out and replaced for the upcoming definite ban in 2025. [RBC-UKRAINE]

(bw)

Netherlands tries Pakistanis for incitement to kill far-right politician Geert Wilders

Two Pakistani men are being tried in absentia in the Netherlands for inciting the murder of far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders. The trial, held in a high-

security court near Amsterdam, is centered on accusations that religious leader Muhammed Ashraf Jalali and political party leader Saad Hussain Rizvi urged their followers to kill Wilders. The calls for violence followed Wilders' plan to organize a contest for cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, which provoked widespread outrage.

Dutch prosecutors have requested a 14-year prison sentence for the two men. Jalali allegedly promised followers they would be "rewarded in the afterlife" for killing Wilders, while Rizvi is also suspected of inciting violence. Neither defendant appeared in court, and Dutch authorities have sought legal assistance from Pakistan, though no treaty exists between the two countries.

Wilders, who has faced numerous death threats over the years, canceled the controversial contest following protests in Pakistan. He testified in court, calling for a strong response against incitement to murder, stating, "For the past 20 years, I have been robbed of my freedom because of what I think, say, write and do." [Al Jazeera]

(lm)

China's growing interest in Norway's Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard

The Norwegian Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard is gaining increased international attention as more countries invest in polar science and seek Arctic research bases. Recently, China, Turkey, and Russia have sent delegations to Svalbard to explore joint Arctic research opportunities. China's interest in expanding its presence is evident, with a delegation visiting the Russian science center in Barentsburg, the second-largest settlement in Svalbard, to discuss closer cooperation. [High North News]

China already operates the Yellow River Station in Ny-Ålesund and has shown interest in establishing a laser station in Adventdalen, a valley on the island Spitsbergen in Svalbard. Additionally, China sent a record three icebreakers to the Arctic this summer, underscoring its growing involvement in the region. [South China Morning Post]

Turkey is also expanding its Arctic research ambitions, with plans for a base in Svalbard. Last month, the Turkish Arctic Scientific Expedition visited Pyramiden, a former mining town that could host an international Arctic research station in partnership with Russia's

state-owned mining company Trust Arktikugol and BRICS nations. [High North News]

These developments come amid concerns from Norway, a NATO member, about Russia's Arctic expansionism, which may have military implications. In response, Norway published a new Svalbard white paper in May [Government, Norway, in Norwegian], proposing the creation of a Svalbard Research Office to coordinate foreign research activities and limit the development of new scientific centers in the region. [The Maritime Executive]

(dql)

Poland and India upgrade diplomatic ties

Poland and India elevated their diplomatic ties to a strategic partnership, as announced by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Warsaw on August 22. Modi’s visit marks India’s first prime ministerial visit to Poland in 45 years.

The two leaders, reaffirmed their commitment to peace in Ukraine and discussed areas of cooperation, including defense, agriculture, and trade.

They also unveiled a five-year 'Action Plan' (2024-2028) to significantly enhance bilateral cooperation. The plan focuses on expanding political dialogue and security ties, including regular consultations and defense industry collaboration. It also addresses trade and investment opportunities in high-tech, agriculture, and energy, amongst other sectors. This partnership builds on a history of friendly relations and growing economic engagement.

Tusk highlighted the significance of the partnership, emphasizing the absence of conflicts between the two nations despite their different histories and traditions. He also stressed the importance of respecting territorial integrity and the rule of law, especially in the context of the Ukraine conflict.

In addition, he emphasized Poland’s readiness to contribute to India’s military modernization and noted that India has a significant amount of Soviet-era equipment, like T-72 tanks, which Poland could repair or refit. [Notes from Poland] [The Straits Times] [Onmanorama]

(cr)

Russian President Vladimir Putin holds phone meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

On August 27, President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to explored ways to further strengthen the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership between their countries. The phone call came on the heels of Modi visit to Ukraine days before (see article in this edition).

Modi updated Putin on his recent visit to Kyiv and reaffirmed his commitment to resolving the Ukraine crisis through political and diplomatic means. In response, Putin expressed dissatisfaction with the policies of the Kyiv authorities and the West, while outlining Russia's stance on the conflict.

The leaders also reviewed the progress of trade agreements made during Modi's official visit to Russia in July 2024, expressing satisfaction with their implementation.

The discussion also emphasized the collaborative efforts between the two nations within BRICS. Modi confirmed his participation in the Kazan Summit scheduled for October, which will occur under Russia's BRICS chairmanship. [Kremlin Telegram] [Reuters]

(ycl/hs)

Russia, Mongolia strengthen strategic cooperation during President Putin's official visit

(to) Russian President Vladimir Putin concluded a two-day official visit to Mongolia last week. The visit, which took place on September 2-3 commemorated the 85th anniversary of the Battle of Khalkhiin Gol, an important event in the shared history of Mongolia and Russia. The Battles of Khalkhin Gol, fought in 1939 along the Mongolia-Manchuria border, were a series of clashes between the Soviet Union and Japan, resulting in a Japanese defeat before the start of World War II.

The official program began with President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa of Mongolia and Vladimir Putin of Russia paying tribute to Marshal Georgy Zhukov at a wreath-laying ceremony held at the Monument to Marshal Zhukov in Ulaanbaatar. This ceremony, attended by

senior veterans, included a military parade celebrating the victory at Khalkhiin Gol. [Mongolian News Agency 1]

During the visit, both presidents held official talks and signed several key documents, expanding cooperation in critical sectors such as energy, transportation, and environmental protection. Notable agreements included the expansion of Ulaanbaatar's Third Thermal Power Station and the supply of aviation fuel to the new Ulaanbaatar International Airport. [Mongolian News Agency 2]

Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai also held a meeting Putin during which they discussed deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two nations. They highlighted the importance of trade agreements, including plans for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Mongolia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), an economic alliance of five post-Soviet states situated in Eurasia including, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan. This would enhance Mongolia's export potential, mainly concerning meat, leather, wool, cashmere, carpets, and cement, to Russia and the EAEU market. [Mongolian News Agency 3]

Putin's visit culminated in a press briefing on September 3, where the leaders reaffirmed their mutual commitment to strengthening economic and political ties. This visit was particularly symbolic as it coincided with other major anniversaries, including the 75th anniversary of Ulaanbaatar Railway and the centennial of diplomatic relations between Mongolia and Russia. [Mongolian News Agency 4]

On August 30, days before Putin's visit to Mongolia, Ukraine has urged Mongolia to recognize Putin as a war criminal, based on an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant for his involvement in the illegal transfer of Ukrainian children, and called on Mongolian authorities to arrest and transfer him to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Mongolia has ratified the Rome Statute, committing the country to the obligation of making arrests. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Of Ukraine] Bovenkant formulierOnderkant formulier

The ICC has issued an arrest warrant for Putin for war crimes, specifically the unlawful deportation and transfer of children from occupied areas of Ukraine to Russia. [International Criminal Court]

President Putin was however not arrested during his visit to Mongolia. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy criticized Mongolia for not arresting Russian

President Vladimir Putin during his official visit. Zelenskyy expressed disappointment, stating that Mongolia prioritizes respect for Putin over international law, undermining efforts to hold him accountable for his actions. Ukraine's foreign ministry warned that Mongolia would face "consequences" for its decision. [The New Voice of Ukraine] [Sarajevo Times]

Mongolia justified its decision not to arrest Putin by stating that it "has always adhered to a policy of neutrality". [Asia-Plus]

Mongolia finds itself in a difficult position. Landlocked country between China and Russia, it has traditionally navigated its relations with these powerful neighbors through a delicate balance, while also pursuing a "Third Neighbor" policy to engage with countries outside its immediate sphere.

Russia's strategic outreach, coming at a time of significant economic difficulty – including sanctions and the loss of European markets – underscores the importance of Mongolia as a potential alternative route for trade. With Western sanctions impacting Russia's oil and gas revenues, Mongolia's role as a transit hub is crucial for Russia's efforts to mitigate these losses. [Atlantic Council] [The Conversation] [Euro News] [BBC]

(to/hs)

Slovenian president visits Mongolia

Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar began a three-day state visit to Ulan Bator on August 20, marking the first visit by a Slovenian head of state. Accompanied by a business delegation, Pirc Musar met with Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh and discussed strengthening cooperation in various fields, including business, tourism, research, climate change mitigation, sustainable development, and women's empowerment. [The Slovenia Times]

The visits concluded with the signing of several cooperation agreements to enhance bilateral relations. The documents include a joint declaration and memorandums of understanding covering tourism, forestry, trade, and industry. [Xinhua]

(ga)

Switzerland convicts two oil executives in 1MDB graft scandal

Switzerland's Federal Criminal Court has convicted two oil executives, Tarek Obaid, a Swiss-Saudi national, and Patrick Mahony, a Swiss-British national, for their roles in embezzling more than USD 1.8 billion from Malaysia's 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad) fund. Obaid received a seven-year prison sentence, while Mahony was sentenced to six years. Both were ordered to repay most of the misappropriated funds, with slight deductions for interest payments already returned.

The 1MDB fund was originally established by the Malaysian government as a major development initiative. However, the fund became the center of a large-scale corruption scandal, with allegations surfacing around 2015. Prosecutors in Switzerland revealed that Obaid and Mahony, executives of PetroSaudi, convinced 1MDB that their company had backing from the Saudi Arabian government, which was false. This deception allowed them to secure the joint venture with 1MDB, subsequently defrauding the fund. Obaid reportedly enriched himself with over USD 805 million, while Mahony gained at least USD 37 million.

The court noted that Obaid's larger profit from the fraudulent scheme contributed to his longer prison sentence. During the trial, both men denied any wrongdoing, with Obaid's lawyer announcing an immediate appeal against the verdict. The appeal claims the court ignored key factual and legal arguments presented in the defense.

The 1MDB scandal, involving prominent figures such as former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak and fugitive financier Jho Low, saw an estimated USD 4.5 billion siphoned off from the fund. The funds were laundered through Swiss bank accounts, with the proceeds used to purchase luxury real estate in Switzerland and London, as well as jewelry and other assets. Obaid and Mahony also used the money to grow PetroSaudi, from which they were handsomely paid.

The verdict has been welcomed by 1MDB's current management, which continues efforts to recover the stolen assets. The 1MDB scandal has implicated several high-profile individuals, including Najib Razak, whose 12-year prison sentence for his role in the corruption case was halved earlier in 2024. Other entities, such as Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, were also drawn into the scandal, which has had

widespread international repercussions. [Deutsche Welle]

(lm)

Turkey and Turkmenistan discuss strengthening economic ties in Ankara

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan met with his Turkmen counterpart Rashid Meredov in Ankara to explore ways to enhance bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sector. The discussions focused on expanding cooperation through new agreements and boosting trade between the two countries. (TRT World)

The ministers exchanged views on increasing the bilateral trade volume target to $5 billion, reflecting both nations' commitment to deepening economic ties. The talks also included an evaluation of cooperation opportunities in transmitting Turkmen natural gas to Turkey and European markets, a move that could significantly enhance energy security and economic collaboration in the region. (TRT World)

Beyond economic matters, Fidan and Meredov addressed key international issues, including the ongoing situation in Gaza and developments in Ukraine. These discussions underscore the broader geopolitical considerations influencing the relationship between Turkey and Turkmenistan. The meeting is part of Turkey's broader strategy to strengthen its connections with Central Asian nations, highlighting the importance of regional cooperation in an increasingly complex global landscape. (TRT World)

(ab)

Turkey and Indonesia sign defence industry agreements

Türkiye and Indonesia have signed a series of defence industry agreements, strengthening their bilateral cooperation in military technology. The deals were signed in Jakarta under the leadership of Türkiye's Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB). (TRT World)

Under the agreements, Türkiye will provide Indonesia with a range of defence systems, including remote-controlled stabilized weapon systems, advanced radar technologies, fire control systems, and data link capabilities. Additionally, air defence missile systems,

cruise missiles, and smart munitions will be supplied to Indonesia. (Daily Sabah News)

Further agreements were made to transfer technology related to unmanned surface vehicles, tank modernization, and missile system maintenance, highlighting the growing defence cooperation between the two countries. (TRT World)

(ab)

Turkey provides aid to flood-Affected Bangladesh

Türkiye has started delivering humanitarian aid to Bangladesh in response to severe flooding that has affected more than 5 million people. 16,750 aid packages are being sent to the hardest-hit areas where road access has been disrupted. The operation is being coordinated by Türkiye's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) to ensure that essential supplies reach those in need. (TRT World)

(lm)

Turkish and Egyptian presidents hold landmark meeting in Ankara

In a significant step toward mending long-strained relations, the Egyptian president visited Ankara for the first time in 12 years to meet with the Turkish president. This historic meeting marks a major diplomatic breakthrough between the two regional powers. (Anadolu Ajansı)

The visit follows the Turkish president's trip to Egypt earlier this year, signaling both nations' intent to rebuild ties after a decade of tension, which began following political upheaval in Egypt in 2013. Diplomatic relations have gradually improved since 2020, culminating in the reappointment of ambassadors and efforts to enhance economic and military cooperation. (Anadolu Ajansı)

During the meeting, the two leaders focused on boosting bilateral ties, particularly in the economic and strategic sectors. Discussions also touched on significant regional and global issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both leaders reiterated their support for a two-state solution and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East

Jerusalem as its capital, based on 1967 borders. (Duvar English)

Following the formal welcome ceremony, the leaders co-chaired the first session of the Turkey-Egypt High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council, an initiative aimed at institutionalizing their renewed partnership. In a joint declaration, the two countries condemned Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the release of hostages, and unrestricted humanitarian aid to the region. (Duvar English)

The declaration also emphasized their commitment to strengthening the Palestinian National Authority and expressed readiness to enhance cooperation on addressing the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Both nations condemned Israel's settlement activities in the West Bank and called for stronger international action to support Palestinian statehood. (Anadolu Ajansı)

In addition to political cooperation, Turkey has announced plans to provide military support to Egypt, including the supply of armed drones, while both countries aim to increase their trade volume from $10 billion to $15 billion in the near future. This landmark meeting between the two leaders is seen as a crucial step in stabilizing their relations and strengthening cooperation across multiple fronts. (TRT World)

(ab)

Indian Prime Minister Modi visits Ukraine

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kyiv on August 23, marking the first visit by an Indian prime minister to Ukraine since its independence. The meeting, closely watched by Russia, came weeks after Modi's visit to Moscow, where he met President Vladimir Putin, a move that drew criticism from Kyiv.

Modi's visit, significant for its symbolism and timing before Ukraine's Independence Day, highlighted India's delicate position balancing relations with both Russia and the West. During his discussions, Modi reiterated India's commitment to peace, emphasizing that the ongoing conflict must be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy. He offered India's assistance in peace efforts without taking sides, affirming New Delhi's strong ties with Russia while expressing solidarity with Ukraine and pledging humanitarian aid.

In addition to peace efforts, Modi and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky discussed expanding

bilateral cooperation in areas such as agriculture, medicine, and culture.

Modi's visit raises questions about India's potential role in advancing peace negotiations, given the continued lack of direct talks between Kyiv and Moscow. While Modi's close relationship with Putin could help facilitate dialogue, analysts suggest that India's influence alone may not significantly impact the course of the war.

Zelensky has urged India to reconsider its neutral stance, suggesting that halting Russian oil imports could pressure Putin more effectively. Zelensky also mentioned ongoing negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Switzerland to host a second peace summit, and expressed interest in India hosting the event. [Reuters] [The Straits Time]

(lm/cr/ycl)

Denmark unveils "Africa Strategy"

On August 26, Denmark unveiled its new "Africa Strategy" that seeks to enhance stronger ties with the continent.

Launched by Foreign Minister Løkke Rasmussen and Minister for Development Cooperation and Global Climate Policy Dan Jørgensen the new strategy includes opening new embassies in Senegal, Tunisia, and Rwanda, while closing those in and severing ties with Burkina Faso and Mali due to the instability caused by military coups. Denmark also plans to bolster its diplomatic presence in Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. [News Central] [Reuters]

Denmark seeks to position itself as a preferred partner through enhanced investment, trade, and educational exchanges with African countries. The strategy leverages Denmark's 60-year history of development cooperation with Africa and emphasizes strengthening the Investment Fund for Developing Countries (IFU) and the Export and Investment Fund of Denmark (EIFD) to support Danish businesses and economic growth in Africa. Additionally, Denmark will increase its support for climate adaptation, particularly in water resource management, providing over DKK 1 billion (EUR 134 million) for new bilateral initiatives.

Singling out China and Russia, Rasmussen highlighted the importance of Africa's alignment with Europe in the face of increasing influence of the two countries. Dan Jørgensen, for his part, noted that African partners are

eager for stronger ties with Denmark, particularly in green sectors like water technology. Denmark's expertise in this area is in high demand, and the government plans to expand its efforts in water-related partnerships and trade. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark]

(dql)

Algeria opens embassy in Slovenia

Algeria inaugurated its embassy in Ljubljana on August 30 following the expansion of a natural gas supply agreement established in November 2022 and increased in May 2024 to cover about 50% of Slovenia's annual gas needs. The opening ceremony was attended by Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon and Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf.

Both officials emphasized the growing cooperation in energy, artificial intelligence, and pharmaceuticals, as well as affirming their joint efforts on global issues such as the UN Security Council's work on Palestine and the situation in Ukraine.

Slovenia emphasized the countries' shared commitment to cultural heritage and regional stability, while Algeria expressed support for Slovenia's upcoming presidency of the UN Security Council and a collaborative approach to resolving global conflicts, including the Western Sahara dispute. [The Slovenia Times]

(ga)

Australia and Slovenia sign tax treaty to boost trade and investment

Australia and Slovenia have signed their first tax treaty on September 9, aimed to foster cross-border trade and investment by lowering withholding tax rates on dividends, interest, and royalties. This is expected to lower costs for Australian investors in Slovenia and improve access to Slovenian capital and technology. [SeeNews]

Key provisions include a reduction in withholding tax rates, with dividends reduced to 10%, and in certain cases, as low as 5%. Interest withholding rates will be set at 10%, with exemptions for government and pension-related investments. The treaty also maintains Australia’s taxing rights over natural resources and

ensures pension payments are taxed only in the recipient's country of residence.

The treaty aligns with OECD and G20 recommendations to reduce profit shifting, prevent tax evasion, and enhance transparency in international taxation, fostering a fairer and more efficient tax environment for cross-border trade and investment. The agreement also establishes mechanisms for resolving tax disputes, including the option of arbitration if necessary. [Department of Treasury Australia]

(ga)

Italy, China oppose antagonism and decoupling to collaborate on global issues

Italy and China have expressed a desire to strengthen multilateral coordination, oppose division and confrontation, and work together to address global challenges, according to a Chinese Foreign Ministry.

The statement came after Meloni concluded her five-day visit to China, which lasted from July 27 to 31. The visit was her first visit to China since taking office in October 2022 and coincided with the 20th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. It follows Italy's withdrawal from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) last year (see AiR No. 50, December/2023, 2).

During Meloni's visit to Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee Zhao Leji met with the Italian leader.

Discussions included global issues such as the war in Ukraine, Middle East tensions, Indo-Pacific security, artificial intelligence, climate change, and UN Security Council reform. Xi expressed interest in Italian investments in China and pledged to import more high-quality Italian products.

The two nations signed a three-year action plan to implement past agreements and experiment with new forms of cooperation in trade and investment, industrial manufacturing, technological innovation, green energy, artificial intelligence, and other fields.

The action plan reflects Meloni's efforts to reset relations with China following the withdrawal from the BRI initiative and to attract Chinese investment in auto

manufacturing and other sectors. [Global Times] [AP] [AiR No. 31, July/2024, 5].

(jf)

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)

Laos, UK 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)

Pakistan, Turkish navies hold expert-level talks to discuss joint operations

On August 3, the Pakistan and Turkish navies held expert-level talks at Pakistan's Naval Headquarters in Karachi to discuss joint operations and professional cooperation. Discussions focused on joint operations, training, and technical cooperation. Additionally, the navies conducted coordinated patrols and naval drills in the North Arabian Sea to enhance interoperability.

The talks were part of the sixth staff-level expert discussions, attended by Vice Admiral Ibrahim Ozdem, Chief of Staff of the Turkish Naval Forces, who praised the Pakistan Navy's role in regional maritime security. Vice Admiral Ovais Ahmed Bilgrami received the Turkish official.

The meeting highlighted the strong and evolving relationship between the two naval forces, particularly in defense production and military exercises. Turkiye is building advanced corvette ships for Pakistan, which are used for coastal defense, patrol, and escort missions. The two navies regularly engage in joint military exercises, share expertise, and collaborate on operational levels. [Arab News]

(lm)

Philippines, Germany commit to defense deal by year's end

The Philippines and Germany 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, 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)

China and Russia discuss on "peaceful" collaboration in outer space

China and Russia recently held talks in Moscow focused on the "peaceful use of outer space," agreeing to enhance cooperation in this sector. The meeting on August 8 addressed issues such as "international legal regulation" and ensuring the long-term sustainability and safety of space activities, as well as the agenda of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, according to the Russian foreign ministry.

The discussions resulted in an agreement to strengthen coordination both bilaterally and on specialized multilateral platforms. Ma Xinmin, director general of the Chinese foreign ministry's department of treaty and law, represented China and discussed "issues of common interest relating to the peaceful use of outer space." This marked the first ministerial-level consultation of its kind between the two nations.

At a prior meeting in February, China and Russia emphasized the importance of continued cooperation and joint efforts to prevent an arms race and the weaponization of outer space, according to Moscow.

In addition to space collaboration, the two countries are also pursuing closer cooperation in emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence, critical materials, and biosecurity, which could shape future geopolitical dynamics.

Since the deterioration of ties with the West following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow has increasingly turned to China, which has ambitious plans for its space program. Their cooperation includes a commission on satellite navigation and a 2016 deal on space technology intellectual property. [South China Morning Post]

(jf)

China and Russia revive barter trade to bypass US sanctions

China and Russia are reintroducing barter trade agreements as a response to increasing difficulties in international payments caused by US sanctions. These sanctions have targeted Russian banks, prompting major Chinese and Turkish banks to sever ties with Russia, making traditional financial transactions challenging.

The barter trade, common during Russia's "virtual economy" period in the 1990s, is being reconsidered as a method to circumvent these financial restrictions. This system allows for the exchange of goods without involving cash transactions, thus avoiding the complications posed by U.S.-controlled SWIFT sanctions and currency risks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping discussed the reintroduction of barter agreements during a summit in May 2024, with the first such transaction expected as early as this autumn [See AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3]. [Reuters]

This move also coincides with Russia's increasing reliance on China as its largest trade partner, with mutual trade rising to USD 136 billion in the first half of 2024.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, such as the lack of a direct payment mechanism between Russia and China's banking systems and difficulties in maintaining liquidity in the Chinese yuan, now crucial for Russia's economy. [Business Insider] [intellinews]

(rl)

North Korea and Russia agree to cooperate on health

North Korea and Russia have reportedly signed an agreement to collaborate on healthcare, medical education, and scientific research.

The deal focuses on areas such as child health and combating infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and hepatitis. It also includes provisions for training medical professionals and supplying medicines and medical equipment.

The agreement highlights concerns about health risks faced by North Korean children, as evidenced by South Korea’s Ministry of Unification's 2023 report, which revealed that less than 50 percent of North Koreans are vaccinated.

Analysts view this cooperation as the latest sign of strengthening ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. [Radio Free Asia]

(ac)

Pakistan, Turkiye vow to strengthen ties and expand trade

Pakistan and Turkiye have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening their bilateral ties and expanding trade during a meeting between Turkish Trade Minister Omer Bolat and Pakistan's Finance Minister, Senator Muhammad Aurangzeb, on August 8. The ministers emphasized the long-standing brotherly relationship between the two nations and discussed ways to further enhance economic and trade ties.

Aurangzeb praised the historical significance between Pakistan and Turkiye and provided an update on

Pakistan's improving financial fundamentals which includes stable currency, foreign exchange reserves exceeding USD 9 billion and declining inflation rates. He also mentioned recent reforms in taxation, the energy sector, and state-owned enterprises, as well as efforts by the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) to attract foreign direct investment.

Minister Bolat highlighted the shared commitment of Prime Minster Shehbaz Sharif and President Erdogan to strengthen bilateral ties. He also expressed Turkiye's commitment to deepening ties, particularly in trade and investment, and identified sectors such as services, health, education, medicine, and fashion as key areas for potential investment. He also suggested increasing flight connectivity between the two countries to boost economic exchange. [APP News]

(ht)

China emerges as largest buyer of Russia's fuel oil

China and Saudi Arabia have become the largest buyers of Russia's fuel oil, according to London Stock Exchange Group (LSEG) data.

In July, Russia's seaborne exports of fuel oil and vacuum gasoil (VGO) increased by 7 percent from June, reaching approximately 4.05 million metric tons, as Russian refineries completed seasonal maintenance.

During the same period, direct shipments of fuel oil and VGO from Russia to China rose by 18% month-on-month to 0.7 million tons, which China imports for refining feedstock.

This increase follows the EU's full embargo on Russian oil products, which took effect in February 2023, shifting Russia's fuel oil and VGO exports mainly to Asian countries. [Reuters]

(alk)

China, Russia vow to promote peace and security amid Ukraine incursion

During an August 16 meeting in Beijing between Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu and his Russian counterpart Sergey Ryabkov, Russia vowed to promote "global peace and security." This comes as Ukraine continues its offensive against Russia,

including a recent incursion into Russia's Kursk Oblast on August 6.

In response to the escalating conflict, China has shown increased interest in intervening in the Ukraine war, especially by engaging more with Kyiv. Recently, China has held meetings with representatives from Ukraine (see AiR No. 31, July/2024, 5) and the Vatican (see article in this edition) to discuss a peaceful resolution and provide humanitarian aid.

China is also focused on strengthening its ties with Russia. In early July, President Xi Jinping met with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, where Xi called for stronger China-Russia relations (see AiR No. 28, July/2024, 2). Meanwhile, Chinese Vice-Premier He Lifeng is visiting Moscow this week from August 19 to 20 for talks with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Chernyshenko.

However, China's commitment to resolving the conflict with Western nations has been questioned after it chose not to attend a peace conference in Switzerland in June, where both Russia and Ukraine were present. [South China Morning Post]

(alk)

Turkish defense minister visits Malaysia

On August 20 Malaysian Defense Minister Dato Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin met with his visiting Turkish counterpart Yasar Guler to discuss ways to deepen defense cooperation. Their discussion focused on interoperability and readiness of the countries armed forces in all domains, including land, sea, and air as well as AI and intelligence sharing. The two ministers also discussed training for Malaysia's armed forces in Turkish military assets and equipment. [Bernama 1]

The meeting came after Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim received a courtesy call from Guler who was accompanied by İbrahim Kalin, head of Turkish intelligence. Their talks covered bilateral cooperation and the war in Gaza. [Bernama 2]

(dql)

Turkey, Maldives, sign MoU to enhance water and sewerage systems

The Maldivian government has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Turkey to advance the water and sewerage infrastructure in Maldives. The agreement, signed by Environment Minister Thoriq Ibrahim and Turkey's Deputy Director General of Istanbul's Water and Sewerage Administration, aims to facilitate technical cooperation and development in these sectors. [the edition]

(sa)

High-ranking North Korean official visits arms expo in Russia

Kim Jong Sik, a key figure in North Korea's ballistic missile program, was reportedly spotted at a Russian arms exhibition, according to video footage released by Russia's defense ministry. Kim, the first vice department director of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, was seen in military uniform attending the event.

Kim Jong Sik, who accompanied North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during the December 2023 launch of the Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), is banned from visiting UN member nations under a UN Security Council resolution. Despite this, Russia appears to have granted him entry, possibly in violation of the ban.

This development occurs amid increasing military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, highlighted by a recent treaty signed in June for mutual military assistance (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4).

South Korea's Yonhap News Agency suggests that Kim may be engaging in discussions with Russian officials regarding ICBM and arms development, raising concerns about the deepening military ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. [NHK]

(dql)

United Kingdom looks to boost defence ties with Singapore with ships deployed in region

The United Kingdom is looking to strengthen defense ties with Singapore by enhancing interactions between the Royal Navy and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). As part of this effort, British offshore patrol

vessels HMS Spey and HMS Tamar, deployed in the Indo-Pacific since 2021, are engaging with RSN personnel to explore joint training and potential bilateral exercises. The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and British military have not conducted bilateral drills since the early 2000s but regularly collaborate in multilateral exercises under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), which also includes Australia, Malaysia, and New Zealand.

The HMS Spey is currently supported by the British Defence Singapore Support Unit (BDSSU) in Sembawang, which serves as a logistics hub and is part of Britain's permanent commitment to the FPDA. This unit provides berthing for FPDA vessels and logistics support for visiting warships, such as HMS Argus, which recently arrived in Singapore following joint exercises with U.S. and Australian forces in Australia.

Britain's defense commitment to the region continues to grow, with plans for a British aircraft carrier strike group to visit Singapore in 2025, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of Singapore's independence and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations. [The Straits Times]

(lm)

British Prime Minister calls for closer China-UK ties

In their first-ever conversation, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer told Chinese President Xi Jinping that he seeks closer economic ties between the UK and China while maintaining the freedom to discuss disagreements openly.

During the 45-minute call, Xi urged the UK to view China objectively and rationally, highlighting both countries' roles as permanent members of the UN Security Council and their potential to promote global peace.

Starmer initiated the call, aiming to establish a long-term, "grown-up" relationship with China despite existing challenges. The leaders discussed cooperation in areas like trade, the economy, and education, agreeing to work closely on global security and climate change.

Downing Street stressed that the conversation did not shy away from sensitive issues, including Hong Kong, Russia's war in Ukraine, and human rights. Tensions between the UK and China have grown in recent years,

particularly over China's actions in Hong Kong, its treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and its neutral stance on the Ukraine conflict.

However, China remains a major trading partner for the UK. Starmer, Britain's first Labour prime minister in 14 years, seeks a pragmatic, respectful, and long-term approach to the relationship. China also sees the UK as an important partner in peace efforts in Ukraine and Gaza and as an important interlocutor with the US, especially given the uncertainty surrounding the upcoming US presidential election, in which Donald Trump has promised higher tariffs on trading partners if he returns to power, in which China seeks Britain's support as a nation that believed in free trade.

Beijing is also keen to strengthen ties with European countries and mend relations with US allies in response to Washington's export controls on technology and military alliances in the Asia-Pacific such as AUKUS. [Financial Times]

(alk)

Russian President Putin and Chinese Premier Li Qiang praise strengthened ties

Russian President Vladimir Putin lauded the strengthening trade relationship between Russia and China during a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Moscow on August 21. Putin emphasized that Russia-China collaboration on large-scale economic and humanitarian projects would continue for years, according to a Kremlin statement. Li's visit, focused on practical economic cooperation, comes as the two nations seek to bolster their partnership amid rising tensions with the West.

Li Qiang, China's second-highest-ranking official after President Xi Jinping, travelled to Moscow for an annual meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, where both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to deepening bilateral cooperation. According to Chinese state media, Li praised the efforts of both Putin and Xi for injecting "strong momentum" into relations between the two countries.

During his meeting with Mishustin, Li stressed that China and Russia were prepared to enhance "all-round practical cooperation," underscoring that their relationship was not intended to target any third party. The two countries also agreed to expand economic and trade cooperation and expressed their opposition to external efforts to hinder their "economic

development, technological progress, and international development," a statement that implicitly referred to the United States and its allies. Both officials shared the view that "certain countries" were obstructing the collective rise of emerging markets and developing nations.

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia has increasingly relied on China's market, goods, and investment, following a wave of international sanctions from the West. Both Moscow and Beijing view their partnership as a counterbalance to Western efforts they believe are aimed at stifling their development. [CNN]

(jf)

China, Russia plan shipping routes through Arctic cooperation

China and Russia have taken further steps toward expanding their cooperation in Arctic shipping routes, part of a broader effort to counter Western pressure through strengthened economic ties. On August 21, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a joint communique in Moscow, agreeing to develop shipping routes in the Arctic, a move previously discussed during a May summit between their presidents in Beijing.

This agreement is part of a larger commitment to deepen cooperation in traditional sectors like oil and gas, while also exploring emerging areas such as science, technology, and the digital economy. The communique emphasized that the strengthening of China-Russia relations is a strategic decision based on shared interests and will not be influenced by shifts in the international landscape.

As Russia faces Western sanctions, it is increasingly turning to China to help develop an Arctic Sea route that could reduce shipping times to Asia by nearly half, allowing Moscow to bolster trade with its Asian partners. This comes as Beijing continues to maintain close trade ties with Russia during the ongoing war in Ukraine, despite several Chinese companies facing sanctions from the US and Europe for allegedly supplying dual-use goods that have supported Russia's defense sector. Both countries criticized "unilateral" sanctions and pledged to increase the use of their own currencies in trade, which already accounts for 95 percent of transactions between them. They also expressed their desire to push for reform of the

Bretton Woods system, aiming to diminish the dominance of the US dollar in global trade.

Amid sanctions targeting Russian gas exports to Europe, Moscow has sought to expedite the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 natural gas pipeline, which would link Russia to China through Mongolia. However, disagreements over pricing and Mongolia's recent removal of the project from its 2028 development plan have caused delays.

While the communique did not mention the pipeline directly, it reaffirmed the commitment of both nations to advancing key projects under the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor. Additionally, the two sides agreed to continue discussions on allowing Chinese cargo ships access to the lower Tumen River, which would give Beijing a route to the Sea of Japan (East Sea). Both Russia and North Korea have been hesitant to open this waterway, fearing increased Chinese influence in the region.

Although relations between Moscow and Pyongyang have strengthened—reportedly with North Korean support for Russia's war in Ukraine—Beijing remains cautious about being drawn into a trilateral axis with Russia and North Korea. China continues to engage with Western countries, which perceive such alliances as potential geopolitical threats. [South China Morning Post]

(jf)

Belarus and China deepen strategic partnership during Premier Li Qiang's visit

On August 22, Chinese Premier Li Qiang met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk during an official visit. The visit marked the continuation of 32 years of relations between the two nations. During the meeting, both leaders expressed their commitment to advancing their strategic partnership and development strategies. Premier Li emphasized China's commitment to deepen political trust and enhancing cooperation in various sectors, including trade, agriculture, and technology. He furthermore emphasized the success of the China-Belarus Industrial Park, a key project under the Belt and Road Initiative.

The China-Belarus Industrial Park is a special economic zone in Belarus designed for high-tech industrial and business activities and founded under the intergovernmental agreement between China and

Belarus. It offers important tax benefits and strategic access to international markets and infrastructure. [China Daily]

Belarus furthermore plans to enhance cooperation with the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, a major Chinese economic region that includes cities like Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai, according to a statement from China's foreign ministry. [Reuters]

Li's visit to Belarus is part of a four-day trip. The meeting with Russia's President Vladimir Putin on August 21, 2024, emphasized economic and practical cooperation as the Kremlin relies more and more on Beijing for economic support among the ongoing war in Ukraine. In Li's meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, the two officials furthermore stated that "certain countries" are hindering the "collective rise of emerging markets and developing countries," referring to their mutual perspective on the United States and its allies. The discussions with Russia and Belarus are part of China's broader effort to build a multipolar world order and strengthen coordination on international platforms, particularly as both nations face increasing pressure from the West. [CNN]

Premier Li Qiang's visit to Belarus highlights the strengthening of China-Belarus relations. This visit occurs as Belarus relies more and more on Russia for political and financial support, especially since it served as a launchpad for Russia's actions in Ukraine. Additionally, Belarus's recent accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) marks its alignment with China's broader strategic goals, reinforcing its partnership with Beijing among a shifting global landscape. [VOA]

Belarus's inclusion as the first exclusively European member furthermore positions the SCO as a counterbalance to Western-led organizations, while also offering Belarus an alternative to its strained relations with Europe due to sanctions related to its support for Russia. [MERICS]

(to)

Indonesia, Türkiye sign defense industry agreements

Turkish defense firms Aselsan and Roketsan have signed strategic defense agreements with Indonesia on August 26, following a meeting between Turkish

representatives and Indonesian President-elect and Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto.

Under these agreements, Indonesia will obtain advanced systems from Aselsan, including the SARP remote-controlled weapon system, the CENK radar, the Fire Control System, and a Data Link. Roketsan will deliver the SUNGUR air defense missile system, the CAKIR cruise missile, and the MAM-L smart micro munition.

In addition, the two countries signed memorandums of understanding for unmanned surface vehicles, tank modernization, and missile system maintenance.

The Turkish defense and aerospace industry has grown substantially, with export revenues increasing from USD 248 million in 2002 to a record USD 5.55 billion last year. The industry's turnover surged from just over USD 1 billion in 2022 to USD 12.2 billion in 2023. The number of projects, meanwhile, increased from 62 to over 1,000. [Hürriyet Daily News]

(dql)

Japan sees arrival of Italian navy's flagship

The Italian navy's flagship, ITS Cavour, arrived in Japan on August 22 as part of its regional deployment. Prior to Japan, the vessel visited Australia and is scheduled to continue to the Philippines. The vessel is expected to conduct joint exercises next week with the Japanese maritime self-defense force and the US, German and French navies.

This visit marks a series of incremental steps taken by Rome and Tokyo to reinforce their strategic partnership in areas such as economic security, science, industry, diplomacy, and defense.

Highlighting the significance of these efforts, Italian Ambassador Gianluigi Benedetti reaffirmed Rome’s strategic interest in ensuring "full freedom of navigation and maritime security" in the region. He emphasized its importance to maintaining trade flows and energy supplies, particularly in response to China's increased regional assertiveness. [Japan Times]

(sw)

Germany, Pakistan strengthen economic ties on trade and investment

On August 23, Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif met with a group that was headed by Svenja Schulze, German Minister of Economic Cooperation and Development. The aim of the meeting was to strengthen commercial and economic ties between both countries and emphasize environmental protection as well as Climate Change. Sharif expressed gratitude over Germany's donation of USD 102.9 million to the flood victims. Both leaders ensured prioritizing environmental security and budget for programs has been increased by 400 percent. Pakistan also received USD 26.9 million for renewable energy and Sharif underlined her commitment to expand women participation in the country's progress.

CM Maryam Nawaz also underscored the scholarships and training offered to women by the Quaid e Azam Business Park's Vocational Training Center. This will foster the protection of economic, social, and safety rights of workers across all industries. German Minister commended the efforts and applauded women engagement in parliament and other government agencies. [The Express Tribune]

(ht)

United Kingdom and Nepal sign USD 48.5 million grant support agreements

Nepal and the United Kingdom have signed two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for approximately NPR 6.5 billion (USD 48.5 million) in grant support.

The first MoU focuses on the Resilience, Adaptation, and Inclusion in Nepal (RAIN) program, with funding of NPR 6.5 billion (USD 48.5 million), aimed at strengthening disaster risk management and climate change adaptation in Karnali, Lumbini, and Madhesh provinces.

The second MoU concerns the Samartha program, with funding of NPR 6.58 billion (USD 49.1 million), designed to enhance provincial and local governments' capacities to deliver quality social services, particularly in education and health, in Lumbini and Madhesh provinces. [The Kathmandu Post]

(iz)

India clears procurement of 240 Russian jet engines for IAF's Su-30MKI fighter jets

India's The Cabinet Committee on Security has approved the procurement of 240 AL-31FP aero-engines for the Indian Air Force's Su-30MKI fighter jets, to be supplied by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) at a cost of over INR 26 billion (approximately USD 312 million). The engines, which will include over 54 percent indigenous content, will be manufactured at HAL's Koraput division. Deliveries are scheduled to begin in a year and will be completed over eight years.

This procurement is crucial for sustaining the IAF's fleet of Su-30MKIs, which form a significant part of India's fighter strength. The IAF currently operates 259 Su-30MKIs, with a long-term upgrade plan for 84 jets to be executed by HAL, incorporating 78 percent indigenous content.

Russia, as the original equipment manufacturer, will assist in upgrading certain systems, while most enhancements, including radar and avionics, will be indigenous, featuring the DRDO's Uttam AESA radar. The Su-30MKI fleet is expected to remain operational beyond 2055. [The Hindu]

(lm)

Japan and Italy deepen defense ties ahead of G7 Summit

Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto met in Tokyo on August 27, where they reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening defense cooperation between the two nations. This meeting comes ahead of the first-ever G7 Defense Ministers meeting, set to be hosted by Italy in October. [Nippon]

The ministers highlighted the recent advancements in Japan-Italy defense relations, particularly through joint initiatives like the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), the exchange of aircraft, the increase in joint exercises, and the start of formal negotiations on the Agreement on the Japan-Italy Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This agreement aiming to facilitate logistical cooperation between the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Italian Armed Forces. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

As defense exchanges between Japan and Italy have intensified, the Italian aircraft carrier *Cavour* made its

inaugural visit to Japan, docking at the Yokosuka naval base (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). Japanese military officials were invited aboard to observe the operations of F-35B fighter jets on naval vessels. As Japan prepares to receive the first of its 42 F-35Bs, which will operate from its two Izumo-class carriers, Italy's *Cavour* —already equipped with these advanced fighters.

The Italian Defense Minister emphasized that the *Cavour*'s visit to the Pacific was not intended as a message to China or North Korea. Instead, it was part of a broader effort to strengthen ties with partners, ensuring freedom of navigation and maritime security to safeguard trade and secure supply chains in the region. [Defense News]

(sw)

Norway and South Korea and to launch security defense dialogue

On September 2, South Korea Minister of Defense Shin Won-Sik met with Norway Ministry of Defense Bjorn Arild Gram in Seoul to reach the consensus of launching a security defense dialogue channel.

During the meeting, Shin shared concerns over the growing alliance of North Korea and Russia and stressed the growing security connectivity between Asia and Europe. He reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to bolster their bilateral defense cooperation based on share values.

Gram, during his visit to South Korea, visited the Demilitarized Zone, and inspected the border that separates two Koreas. Gram reaffirmed Norway would commit in defense exercises with the United Nations Command in 2025.

Norway has signed arms trade agreements with South Korea in 2017 and 2022 respectively, purchasing 28 K-9 self-propelled howitzers and 14 K-10 ammunition resupply vehicles from Hanwha Aerospace. [Yonhap News] [Forsvrets Forum in Norwegian]

The Foreign Ministry noted that this visit marks the first time the Swedish delegation has traveled to Taiwan, aiming to better understand Taiwan's democratic development and strengthen economic and trade relations. [Radio Taiwan International] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

China's announcement follows Japan's recent claim that a Chinese spy plane violated its airspace near the

East China Sea (see AiR No. 36, September/2024, 1). In July, China and Russia held a joint military exercise in the waters and airspace near Zhanjiang, China. Analysts view these exercises as a response to increased US military activity in the region. [Anadolu Ajansi]

(ac)

Spanish prime minister discusses Ukraine, Gaza and trade during meeting with Xi Jinping

On September 9, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, focusing on the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and the importance of "close, deep, and balanced relations" between Spain and China. It was the second time Sánchez visited China in less than two years. Sánchez emphasized

(to)

China and Norway strengthen cooperation on green energy and sustainable development

On September 9, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre in Beijing to discuss deepening bilateral cooperation, especially in the fields of green energy and environmental protection.

Xi emphasized China's willingness to work closely together with Norway on renewable energy, electric vehicles, agricultural products, and shipping, further promoting sustainable development and the global green transition. He highlighted the potential for expanding collaboration in areas such as energy transition and climate action. Støre reaffirmed Norway's commitment to advancing sustainable development policies and furthermore praised China's key role in the global green transition.

Both leaders also discussed global issues, including the Ukraine crisis, with Xi calling for favorable conditions to achieve a political resolution through dialogue.

The discussions took place amid growing international efforts to combat climate change, with both countries expressing their dedication to shared environmental

goals. The visit and talks were part of broader diplomatic efforts to strengthen China-Norway relations, with plans for biannual green energy transition meetings. [Reuters]

(to)

Polish foreign minister reaffirms bilateral ties with Philippines

Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski visited the Philippines on September 4 and met with Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique A. Manalo. The discussions covered a range of cooperative areas including trade, investments, agriculture, and technology, as well as maritime and environmental issues. [Department of Foreign Affairs Philippines]

Discussions further covered global security issues such as the Ukraine war and the South China Sea, with both sides expressed concerns about the growing alliance between China and Russia. Both countries set to expand their defence cooperation and explore maritime security partnerships, including information sharing between the Philippine and Polish coast guards. Manalo also encouraged Polish investment in sectors like automotive, energy, and IT. [Philippines News Agency 1] [Philippine Star]

Sikorski also met with Department of National Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. Their discussion focused on strengthening bilateral defense relations, including potential cooperation on emerging technologies, cyber security, and defense against disinformation. This meeting builds on recent enhancements in the Philippines-Poland defense partnership, marked by the delivery of S-701 Black Hawk helicopters to the Philippine Air Force. [Philippine News Agency 2]

(ga)

Germany and South Korea and hold joint naval drills in the Yellow Sea

On September 6, South Korea and Germany conducted joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, with a German warship stopping in Incheon to resupply. The drills, involving South Korea's ROKS Incheon frigate and Germany's Baden-Wurttemberg frigate, centered on maritime maneuvers and the exchange of navigation data.

The German vessel has been operating in waters near the Korean Peninsula as part of efforts to monitor U.N. sanctions on North Korea. [Yonhap News]

(ac)

Team:

Alexandre Cayrouse (axc), Ally Koh (alk), Anna Chong (ac), Atakan Budakçı (ab), Atif Aslam (aa), Aye Moe Pwint Phyu, Brighton Wankeaw (bw), Chloe Joyce Wong Rong (cr), Diego Moreno Fernández (df), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felix Serna Calvo (fc), Gavin Charoenkwan (gvc), Geo Dzakwan Arshali (ga), Hamail Tahir (ht), Helene Skaff (hs), Henning Glaser, Ji Fang (jf), Lawrence Brenner (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Muhammad Syammakh Daffa Alghazali (ma), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Nabilah Mohammad (nm), Nina-Luca Linder (nl), Pavel Tantchev (pt), Riya de los Reyes (rr), Shekinah Annuncia (sa), Simon Welfonder (sw), Thomas van Oeveren (to), Thurein Lynn (tl), Venus Phuangkom, Yuchen (Jade) Lin (ycl), Zhaneta Hovsepyan (zh)

We would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please send any feedback you have regarding this newsletter to: contact@cpg-online.de

Also, don't forget to Like CPG on Facebook, and browse our *website* for other updates and news!

German-Southeast Asian Center of Excellence for Public Policy and Good Governance - CPG
Room 207, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University, 2 Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200, Thailand

www.cpg-online.de
www.facebook.com/cpgtu

Preferences | Unsubscribe