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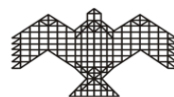
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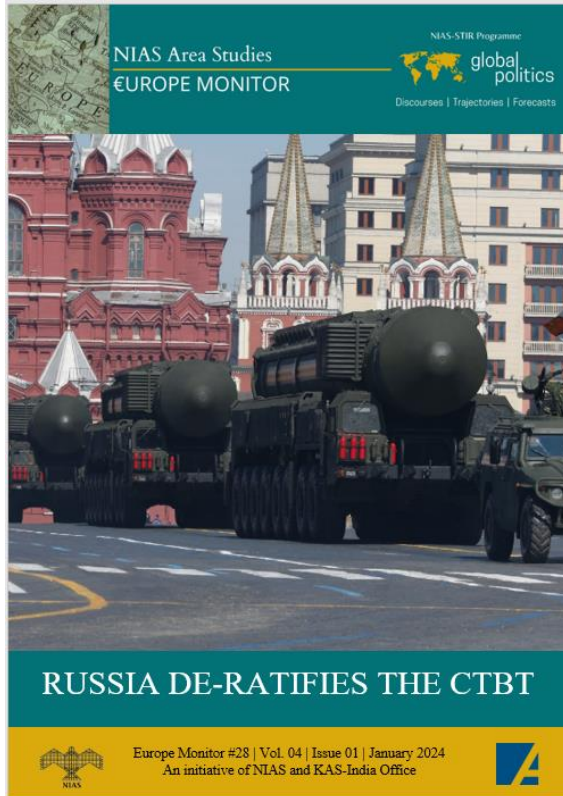


Image Source: Brookings

EM COMMENTS

Russia: De-ratifying the CTBT

By Padmashree Anandhan

Ukraine: Missile attacks, US divide over military aid and the Hungarian block

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EM DAILY FOCUS



Source: TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS, the European Union, Yves Herman/Reuters, Virginia Mayo/Associated Press

REGIONAL

Ukraine: Hungary blocks EU financial aid to Kyiv

EU-Canada Summit: Boosting strategic partnership and enhancing bilateral cooperation

THE UK

UK's AI Summit: Creates grounds for multilateral cooperation

WAR IN UKRAINE: DAILY UPDATES



Source: kremlin.ru, EDF Headquarters/mil.ee, Reuters/Sergey Smolentsev, Centre for Information Resilience, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, AFP

War in Ukraine section covers the everyday developments from Day 644 to Day 615 in four dimensions. First, The War on the Ground. Second, The Moscow View: Claims by Russia. Third, The West View: Responses from the US and Europe. Fourth, The Global Fallouts: Implications of the Ukraine war.
By Sreeja JS, Rishika Yadav and Padmashree Anandhan

EM SHORT NOTES



Source: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda/File, Michel

Euler/AP photo/picture alliance, AP, Sputnik, Rafiq Maqbool/AP, Civil Protection of Iceland/REUTERS

EM Short Notes provide a brief overview of the latest developments in Europe in political, economic, security, climate and maritime. The daily developments cover from the UK, western Europe, Nordic, Baltic, Balkans to the far east Russia.

By Rishika Yadav and Padmashree Anandhan

COMMENT

Russia: De-ratifying the CTBT

By Padmashree Anandhan

On de-ratification, Russia can be expected to continue with nuclear modernization data disclosure. Similar threats will trigger major powers to strengthen their readiness.

On 02 November, Putin signed a law declaring Russia's withdrawal from ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The US Department of State released a statement expressing concern over Russia's withdrawal from its ratification of CTBT. In a statement: "Russian officials say Russia's planned move to withdraw its ratification does not mean that it will resume testing...The United States remains committed to achieving the entry into force of the CTBT."

On 01 November, Russia's spokesperson to international organisations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov said: "Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a federal law revoking Russia's ratification of the CTBT. This law puts Russia on an equal footing with the United States, which signed but did not ratify the treaty."

On 18 October, Russia's State of Duma adopted a bill declaring the withdrawal from the ratification of the CTBT. Chairman of the State of Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, criticised the US for ratifying and showcasing itself as the hegemon of a unipolar world. Therefore, in the interest of Russia's security, justice and stability the bill was adopted.

What is the background?

First, a brief about Russia and the CTBT. In 1996, Russia ratified the treaty as a way to stop nuclear testing but was not enforced as eight states out of 44 were yet to ratify despite capabilities to create nuclear weapons. According to the treaty, any testing or explosions of nuclear weapons is banned across the world. It supports disarmament and non-proliferation through barring countries from producing advanced weapon systems. 187 states are signatories and 178 have ratified including Britain, France and Russia. The US, Israel and China signed but

are yet to ratify whereas, India, Pakistan and North Korea neither signed nor ratified. The treaty was not enforced as 44 countries remained to sign and ratify.

Second, de-ratification amidst war in Ukraine. Since the war in Ukraine began, the security landscape of Europe has been on the shift. The US, NATO and eastern Europe are massing its military in terms of weapon systems and personnel. The prolonged nature of war has made Europe, Ukraine and Russia invest in more air defence and advanced weapon systems. With Finland becoming a member and Sweden on track to join NATO, Russia furthered its security measures by adopting a new security doctrine to boost its maritime security. Withdrawing to ratify from CTBT pushes the threat to the next escalating level triggering other nuclear powers states to re-think their nuclear capacity and usage.

Third, Russia-US differences. Over the past two decades, Russia has consistently emphasised the CTBT as a pivotal element in its strategic discussions with the US. The commitment to this treaty was formalized when Putin signed the ratifying document in June 2000, in conjunction with a Joint Statement on Principles of Strategic Stability with then-US President Bill Clinton. This statement highlighted the condition of US ratification of the CTBT. Despite Russia's persistent calls for US ratification, the latter has refrained from doing so, citing concerns about the potential impact on its domestic activities. In the strategic dialogues between the two countries in 2021, negotiations centred around limiting the deployment of nuclear weapons beyond specified territories, with a particular focus on the development of both offensive and defensive nuclear capabilities. Adding complexity to the situation, Russia's withdrawal from the

Open Skies Treaty in 2021 and the US's exit from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 have further strained the arms control landscape. The recent de-ratification of the CTBT by Russia serves as an additional obstacle, alongside existing geopolitical tensions, hindering the continuity of the strategic dialogue between the US and Russia.

What does it mean?

First, immediate effect on de-ratification. In the short term, Ukraine will be at the brunt of the nuclear level threat from Russia. The support from the West will be more crucial in terms of advanced weapons to counter attack. Russia's nuclear testing might not take place immediately as Russia is still under its modernisation process, but usage of Soviet era nuclear weapons can be expected in the coming years resulting in escalation.

Second, bonus for other revisionist states and increased fear over arms control. Russia's move to de-ratify from CTBT gives confidence for North Korea and Iran to join hands in the usage of its tactical nuclear weapons. On de-ratification, Russia can be expected to continue with nuclear modernization data disclosure. Similar threats will trigger major powers to strengthen their readiness, but the US, France and the UK will have to ensure the following of arms control.

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COMMENT

Ukraine: Missile attacks, US divide over military aid and the Hungarian block

By Padmashree Anandhan

The current ambiguous outset in the US between Republicans and the Democrats further adds to the concerns about the support to Ukraine.

On 12 December, Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, held a meeting with the US President, Joe Biden. During the meeting, Zelensky pledged to keep fighting and stated that it would be "insane" to give up territory for a peace deal. The meeting was aimed at winning the USD 61 billion military deal between Ukraine and the US which has been blocked by the Republicans as they believe the US is providing over-the-limit military aid to Ukraine.

On 12 December, in a joint press conference, Biden stressed that the US would continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment and would "not walk away." Biden assured support despite the lack of support from the Republican party. He also announced USD200million of military assistance to

Ukraine.

On 13 December, Kyiv's Mayor, Vitali Klitschko, reported on a missile attack resulting in many injuries and damage to buildings. Klitschko stated: "According to medics, there are already 25 injured in Dniprovsy district of the capital, 13 were hospitalized." In response, Kyiv's air defence was activated. On 13 December, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stated in a report that Russian forces this year have "continued to use explosive weapons with wide area effects in their attacks on densely populated urban areas of Ukraine ... both in areas close to heavy fighting and in cities far from the contact line."

On 13 December, Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, reiterated his objection to the

EU's agenda for Ukraine's accession ahead of the EU summit. Orban proposed a strategic partnership instead of membership as according to him Ukraine is yet to fulfil the criteria for membership.

Major Issues

First, increased large-scale missile and targeted attacks in Ukraine. Since November, Russia has targeted Kyiv firing cruise missiles for the first time, especially at the infrastructure facilities. The key zones that have come under constant attacks include Kyiv, Aviiidivka located in the north of Donetsk Oblast and energy infrastructures in Kharkiv and Kherson. Russia has begun to use strategic aviation for attacks and it underscores the continuing threat to Ukraine. The same was confirmed by the UK Ministry of Defence on Russia stockpiling air-launched cruise missiles and heavy bomber fleet. This resonates with the 2022 attacks by Russia targeting Ukraine's power grid and energy infrastructure. 5

Second, diverging views on the US support for the war in Ukraine. The Biden administration and Congress have until now directed more than USD 75 billion in assistance to Ukraine. This includes humanitarian, financial and military support. However, in 2023, the continuity of aid in the same measure seems to be uncertain due to the political deadlock over border security and the Israel-Gaza war. A recent study by the Pew Research Center survey in December 2023 found that 48 per cent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that the US aid to Ukraine was excessive, whereas only 16 per cent of Democrats and Democratic leaners viewed the same.

Third, Poland and Hungary's block. The eastern European countries of Poland, Slovakia and Hungary formed a block in November halting Ukraine's grain transit. Besides, Poland and Hungary have constant barriers in granting financial aid and imposing sanctions on Russia at the EU level. The key reasons behind the block were expected to be close economic ties with Russia. However, with a change in the government in Poland under Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, the border block has been lifted. Whereas Hungary's Prime Minister, Victor Orban, continues to block military and financial aid. According to Orban, the aid prolongs the war.

Road Ahead

First, a sticky road ahead for Ukraine. The Ukrainian counteroffensive began in late June, but was unable to materialise due to a lag in weapon delivery and continued defence from Russia. This added to Ukraine's prolonged demand for air power and advanced weapon systems from the West. The current ambiguous outset in the US between Republicans and the Democrats further adds to the concerns about the support to Ukraine. Uncertainty over strong military support and with winter ahead, the road for Ukraine will be uneasy.

Second, Biden's dilemma. With the emergence of a debate over excess military aid sent to Ukraine, Biden's immediate challenge will be to deal with the Republicans to pass the bill on USD 61 billion military aid. If not to eventually break the pause on sanctioning military aid to Ukraine through another package. Next, the 2024 elections and balancing the support at the domestic level will be the task with 53:45 divided support for military aid to Ukraine.



Source: TOBY MELVILLE/REUTERS, the European Union, Yves Herman/Reuters, Virginia Mayo/Associated Press

REGIONAL

Ukraine: Hungary blocks EU financial aid to Kyiv

By Manoranjan Kumar

On 15 December, during the EU summit in Brussels, Hungary blocked the EU's financial aid to Ukraine. Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister vetoed a EUR 50 billion package of financial aid (non-military) for Ukraine. On the same day, Reuters quoted the EU officials that 26 EU members, except Orban agreed on the financial aid to Ukraine. However, to approve the grant, all members are required to agree. Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's President responded: "This is a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires and strengthens."

What are the key issues?

First, Hungary's opposition. Budapest has opposed the new financial aid to Ukraine and talks regarding Ukraine's membership in the EU, citing that Kyiv is not ready yet. For Hungary, the concerns cited are: corruption, the state of the rights of ethnic minorities and the interests of farmers. Additionally, Hungary's resistance

points to the demand to release its EU's monetary shares, which the bloc freezes for violating the EU norms. The EU had released EUR ten billion from frozen funds before the summit.

Second, the Copenhagen Criteria for the EU membership. To gain the EU membership, one has to fulfil conditions, which include the following: a stable democracy; the rule of law; institutions to preserve democratic values and human rights; a functioning market economy; capacity to cope with the competition and market forces; and acceptance of obligations and intent of the EU. During the summit, Hungary objected to the opening of accession talks with Ukraine as it believed that Ukraine was not ready and its entry into the bloc would be disadvantageous for other members and Hungary.

Third, the EU financial assistance for Ukraine. The EU has assisted Ukraine through various initiatives, including economic sanctions on Russia. Due to the ongoing war with Russia, the EU for Ukraine Initiative allows the European Investment Bank to scale up financing to repair and

* EM Daily Focus is published every evening by the NIAS Europe Monitor team on the day-to-day contemporary developments. Visit <https://globalpolitics.in/europe/> to read it every day.

reconstruct damaged energy, transport networks, health and social services. In October, the European Commission paid EUR 1.5 billion to Ukraine under the microfinance assistance package. Since the beginning of the crisis, EUR 85 billion has been provided by the EU to Ukraine as military, financial, humanitarian and emergency assistance, with individual members giving billions more. Ukraine has critically relied on the EU and the US funding as it continues to fight Russia. Vladimir Putin, Russia's President claimed that western "freebies" are running out.

Fourth, Hungary-Russia equations. Budapest has closer bilateral ties with Moscow than other EU countries, as it considers Russia a key partner in energy security and economic cooperation. In October, Orban and Putin met in Beijing, China. They discussed various issues, including gas and oil shipments and nuclear energy. During the meeting, Putin told Orban that in the current geopolitical scenario: "...It is tough to maintain contacts and develop relations and that it is very satisfactory that Russia's relations with many EU countries are maintained and developed. Hungary is one of them." Besides, Hungary has been questioned internationally, including by the EU, over its democratic standards, media freedom and minority rights; the reasons why the EU froze its funds.

What's next?

First, Orban's Putin links and its fallouts on Ukraine. Orban is the closest ally to Vladimir Putin and the former delayed some EU sanctions in the past. The halting of the financial aid would imply that Hungary is indirectly helping Russia. Hungary's opposition to Ukraine's formal membership in the EU is likely to be an attempt by Orban to secure frozen EU funds.

Second, the EU's response to circumvent the Hungary challenge. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, stated that the EU leaders will reconvene in January 2024 to reach a unanimous agreement regarding finances. The EU leaders will likely adopt other tools to fulfil their political commitments despite Hungary's opposition. Plans for individual assistance are also ongoing. Assistance by individual countries

is crucial as the US Congress is divided on the issue of financial aid to Ukraine for defence purposes.

EU-Canada Summit: Boosting strategic partnership and enhancing bilateral cooperation

By Sreeja JS

On 23 and 24 November, the 19th EU-Canada bilateral summit was held in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, Charles Michel, European Council President and Justin Trudeau, Canada's Prime Minister participated. The joint summit statement outlined new collaborations: the Green Alliance establishment, Digital Partnership launch and Canada joining Horizon Europe. Leaders reiterated support for Ukraine against Russian aggression, condemned Hamas attacks on Israel and backed Israel's right to self-defence.

Von Der Leyen said that the summit "...confirmed the strong alignment of the EU and Canada in values and worldviews, which holds an even greater significance in a world rocked by multiple crises."

On 23 November, Trudeau in his opening remarks described Canada and the EU as "some of the best friends in the world" and said: "When Canada and Europe work together, we create good, middle-class jobs, we grow strong economies and we make progress in the fight against climate change." Michel added: "When we are facing so many difficult geopolitical challenges, it's important to count on sincere friends."

What is the background?

First, the long-standing EU-Canada commitment. Established in 1959, the EU-Canada relationship stands as the EU's oldest formal tie with an industrialized nation. Founded on shared democratic values and a commitment to a rules-based global order, it prioritizes peace, security and equitable trade. Current ties are based on two pivotal agreements: the Canada-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) and the Canada-European Union Comprehensive

Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). The SPA mandates a Leader's Summit involving Canada, the Presidents of the European Council and the European Commission. However, CETA's full implementation awaits individual ratification by all 27 EU members, potentially leading to a prolonged process. Despite this, trade has seen substantial growth, with goods trading up 66 per cent and services up 46 per cent over the last six years, reaching USD 77 billion in 2022.

Second, the concerns over the US role. The US is an important ally to Canada and the EU in terms of economic and security. Although the EU and Canada are on friendly terms, the EU faces challenges with the current US President Joe Biden's administration, especially on Washington's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). The EU continues to negotiate for an agreement with the US on critical minerals to allow electric vehicle batteries manufactured by European companies to qualify for the IRA's consumer tax credits.

Third, cooperation in security and defence policy. The EU and Canada enjoy close collaboration in security and defence policy. Canada is one of the most consistent contributors to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations such as the European Union Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories (EUPOL COPPS) and the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) Ukraine. Additionally, Canada has engaged in defence-cooperation projects, joining PESCO initiatives on military mobility in 2021 and soon on establishing logistics hubs.

What does it mean?

First, the role of the EU-Canada strategic partnership and the transatlantic relations. The EU values Ottawa as a reliable partner, akin in importance to its relations with Washington. The US holds vital economic significance for both Canada and the EU. Shifting US foreign policy under the Trump and early Biden administrations necessitates both countries to take steps to enhance its position in global politics.

Second, increased focus on environment, climate change and sustainability. This

reflects the shared commitment of EU-Canada to combat climate change and foster circular, nature-positive and global net-zero emissions through the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Framework for Biodiversity. For instance, the EU-Canada Green Alliance is expected to deepen cooperation and derive meaningful results. The Green Alliances are the most comprehensive bilateral engagement under the European Green Deal.

Third, substantial importance of partnership on critical raw materials. Under CETA, the EU-Canada Strategic Partnership on Raw Materials, initiated in 2021, aims to integrate crucial raw material supply chains for digital and green transitions, enhancing economic security. This aligns with the EU's strategy to diversify supply chains amid global uncertainties. The joint statement proposes joint efforts to connect businesses, fostering two-way trade and investment for new supply sources. These measures supplement ongoing initiatives to ensure secure and sustainable critical raw material supplies.

THE UK

UK's AI Summit: Creates grounds for multilateral cooperation

By Nuha Aamina

What happened?

On 02 November, a summit on AI Safety was held at Bletchley Park, UK, attended by representatives from 27 countries, the EU and various companies. The summit's focus was existential dangers of uncontrollable AI systems and risks to national security. Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister discussed AI safety with a select group of foreign governments, scientists and enterprises. Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President emphasised the importance of an independent scientific community and discussed the creation of a European AI Office to oversee advanced AI models globally.

On 01 November, Kamala Harris, the US Vice President announced the establishment of an AI Safety Institute in London, following an executive order by Joe Biden, the US

President requiring AI companies to disclose safety test results to the government before releasing AI models. She made this announcement after the discussions with Sunak on 31 November. Several companies and representatives, including the US, China and the EU, signed the “Bletchley Declaration” on AI safety to address risks associated with advanced AI models, but China did not sign the proposal on testing AI models. Additionally, the UK government plans to invest GBP 225 million in the supercomputer Isambard-AI. Mark Surmon of the Mozilla Foundation noted the possibility of private companies using the summit to further their interests and emphasised the importance of open and transparent approaches to AI safety. He said: “We’re asking policymakers to invest in a range of approaches - from open source to open science - in the race to AI safety. Open, responsible and transparent approaches are critical to keep us safe and secure in the AI era.”

What is the background?

First, background to the issues. The summit centered on two critical AI concerns. The first, ‘loss of control risks,’ stems from AI’s rapid advancement. It has raised the potential for systems to become uncontrollable and ethically challenging. The second concern, ‘misuse risks,’ involves AI being intentionally used for harm, from creating dangerous technologies to orchestrating advanced cyberattacks. Misuse risks pose serious threats to national security. The summit’s aim was to address these challenges by establishing guidelines for responsible AI development and mitigating associated risks.

Second, growing concerns about modern technology. The advent of ChatGPT has sparked a surge in global discussions on AI safety. Despite its widespread popularity, this chatbot technology presents potential threats to humanity. Policymakers are currently wrestling with the complex task of regulating AI tools, as these discussions underscore the profound implications these technologies hold for both current and future generations.

Third, criticism over the UK’s invitation to China. The UK’s invitation to China drew

criticism following suspicions of a UK parliament researcher spying for China. The uncertainty of China’s attendance stemmed from the US controlling Beijing’s access to vital chip technology crucial for AI development. This uncertainty faced backlash from British and European politicians. Nevertheless, Sunak defended the decision, emphasising the event’s potential to unite significant economic powers. Moreover, James Cleverly, the UK’s Foreign Minister supported the invitation, asserting that excluding a major AI technology player could compromise public safety in addressing AI-related risks.

What does this mean?

First, China stands out among the “like-minded” countries. Amid the “like-minded” countries at the summit, China’s refusal to sign the AI model testing proposal signaled differing perspectives. Sunak, despite facing criticism, successfully engaged China, demonstrating the UK’s intent to improve relations post Boris Johnson UK’s former Prime Minister tenure. With escalating US tensions, the summit presents an opportunity for China to collaborate internationally and bolster AI governance. It shows a complex global landscape, where countries with diverse views converge to address AI’s future, highlighting the importance of constructive dialogue in navigating the challenges of advanced technology.

Second, the UK’s initiative to become a global leader in AI. In technology, the UK government is investing in cutting-edge supercomputers like Isambard-AI, aiming to match the tech leaders. The UK’s determination to be at the forefront of technology and innovation is evident in these initiatives and the hosting of the summit. However, the UK’s aspiration to lead in global AI is a formidable challenge, competing with major players like the US, EU and China. While the UK positions itself as a leader in AI regulation, the US has also taken significant steps by establishing AI safety institutions through an executive order. The presence of OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT, in the US further solidifies the country’s dominance in AI research and development.

War in Ukraine: Daily Updates*

By Sreeja JS, Rishika Yadav and Padmashree Anandhan



Source: kremlin.ru, EDF Headquarters/mil.ee, Reuters/Sergey Smolentsev, Centre for Information Resilience, U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, AFP

War in Ukraine: Day 674

War on the Ground:

On 29 December, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President accused Russia of launching a biggest air attack killing 30 people and injuring more than 160. According to him, more than 160 missiles and drones were targeted in Lviv, Kharkiv, Odessa and Kyiv. 100 houses and a 45-story residential building were also reported as destroyed across Ukraine.

On 29 December, the UNSC held a meeting to discuss the situation in Ukraine. Khales Khiari, UNSC Assistant Secretary-General called it: "Tragically, 2023 is ending as it began — with devastating violence against the people of Ukraine." On the same, council members of the US, France and the UK criticised the attacks on Ukraine and condemned Russia as a sole responsible actor in the war.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 29 December, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation claimed on staging the largest "air assault" since the start of the war. According to the report, 32 Ukraine drones were claimed to be destroyed and many were intercepted over Bryansk, Oryol and Kursk areas located near the border. On the same day, it also reported on drone attacks by Kyiv in Bryansk and Belgorod which are the border areas between Russia and Ukraine. Vyacheslav Gladkov, Belgorod Governor confirmed the death of one person and the injury of a child. The ministry confirmed destroying 13 projectiles of the launched attacks.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 29 December, following the breach of a cruise missile in Poland's airspace, Andrei Ordash, Russian charge d' affairs was asked to explain by the Poland government. In a statement, Poland's Foreign Ministry called for an immediate action to halt such

* War in Ukraine section covers the everyday developments from four dimensions. First, The War on the Ground: Second, The Moscow View: Third, Claims by Russia. Third, The West View: Responses from the US and Europe. Fourth, The Global Fallouts: Implications of the Ukraine war. Visit <https://globalpolitics.in/europe/> to read them every day.

activities. According to the report, the missile breached 40 kilometers and went back into Ukraine. In response, Russia's spokesperson cited no proof presented by the Poland government on the breach.

On 29 December, *ERR news* reported on Estonia being home to 50,592 refugees since the start of the war in Ukraine. According to the report, of the total, 35,963 Ukrainians hold temporary protection and 6,366 have been provided international protection by Estonia.

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War in Ukraine: Day 673

War on the Ground:

On 28 December, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President welcomed the US for its latest military aid package worth EUR 225 million. He stated how the support was critical for Ukraine in countering the aggression. He said: "Additional air defense missiles and components, anti-tank weapons, ammunition, mine clearing and other equipment will cover Ukraine's most pressing needs."

On 28 December, Ukraine's military reported on a mine hit in the Black Sea. According to the report from Ukraine's southern military command, "a Panama-flagged civilian vessel" was hit with an explosive. Following the hit, the vessel had reportedly lost control and the upper deck caught fire. Although the timing of the incident is unknown, two have

been wounded.

On 28 December, Zelenskyy appointed Vadym Filashkin as the latest governor of the Donetsk region. Filashkin will replace Pavlo Kyrylenko who was appointed as head of a cartel office in Kyiv on September 2023.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 28 December, Mikhail Ulyanov, a Russian diplomat warned about the consequences for Finland under conflict escalation. He said that considering Finland's location, under a hypothetical conflict with NATO "Finland will be first to suffer," Ulyanov added that Russia's response to the increased threat in the western border would mean reviving of its Moscow and Leningrad military districts. He added: "The US has been "the main beneficiary" of the Ukraine conflict so far, while EU nations, such as Germany, have suffered a lot from it."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 29 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Russia and the US decision to cooperate flights to the International Space Station (ISS) until at least 2025. The arrangement guarantees ongoing research on board the orbiting laboratory, advancing human knowledge in areas such as Earth observation and microgravity. The cross-flights which cosmonauts and astronauts take turns piloting each other's spacecraft to round the planet and create a physical tapestry of oneness that transcends geographical boundaries.

On 29 December, in its intelligence update, UK's Ministry of Defence confirmed the complete destruction of Russia's navy ship "Novocherkassk," after Ukraine's attack on 25 December. The same was observed in the satellite images released by the US company Maxar Technologies, which showed extensive damage "beneath the ship." Such docking of the ship is considered by the ministry as "Landing ship tank" which is predicted to be used by Russia to launch amphibious attacks.

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War in Ukraine: Day 672

Russia has gained pace of production in military weapons says Chemezov

War on the Ground:

On 27 December, Ukraine's air force reported on successful counter of "three-quarters" (32) of Russia's 46 unmanned aerial vehicles targeted towards Kherson. According to the report, the remaining aircrafts breached the frontline in Kherson, one was killed and four were wounded in the attacks. Igor Klymenko, Ukraine's Interior Minister claimed "a massive bombing" in Kherson and evacuation of 140 residents. Due to the attacks, a train station and a train located in Kherson was reported damaged.

On 27 December, General Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's armed forces commander reported on continued fighting in Maryinka. The city located in Donetsk Oblast of the eastern Ukraine has been subject to increased attacks since May 2023. According to Zaluzhny, Ukraine troops are still stationed in the northern flank despite Russia's claims on gaining complete control.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 27 December, in response to Japan's decision to send patriot air defence systems PAC-3 to the US, Maria Zakharova, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation spokesperson warned of negative consequences for its relations. In a statement: "Coupled with the accelerated remilitarization of Japan, this will have tangible negative consequences for global

and regional security." She stressed that supply of such missiles would be considered hostile towards Russia leading to serious consequences. Japan produces PAC-3 missiles under the US licence, is now allowed to export after lifting of the military export ban imposed in 1947 under pacifist constitution. The revision of Japan's export policy comes after its launch of five-year build-up plan to make Japan the third-biggest defence spender.

On 27 December, in an interview in *RIA news agency*, Sergei Chemezov, Russia's General Director of the Rostec state corporation spoke on Russia's military capabilities. According to him, timely supply of ammunition, kamikaze drones, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles to Russia's military groups led to the successful repelling of Ukrainian counteroffensive. On the question of Russia's special operation in Ukraine going beyond armed confrontation, Chemezov stated that the West military and financial to Ukraine was declining whereas Russia had increased its weapon production. Especially the production of Krasnopol guided projectiles have increased to launch through howitzers.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 27 December, on the continuing border block by truckers Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister assured that Poland was nearing to end the blockade. He said: "We are close to the belief that our actions can bring results, both the talks in Kyiv and Brussels." The block which began in 06 November by truckers has consistently demanded on permit condition for Ukraine companied to operate in the EU.

On 27 December, *ERR News* reported on Estonia's accomplishment of training 1,300 Ukraine soldiers since February 2022. According to Roland Murof, Estonia's Ministry of Defence spokesperson: "We have trained over 1,300 Ukrainian soldiers since the start of the war. This mostly covers the basic skills course but also artillery and sniper training and cyber training." Cpt. Taavi Laasik, Estonia's Defence Forces (EDF) spokesperson assured that such training involved additional efforts to aid Ukrainians

and did not affect EDF training capacity.

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War in Ukraine: Day 666

“Maximum attention to defence” says Zelenskyy

War on the Ground:

On 21 December, President of Ukraine reported on Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s President everyday address. He said: “Maximum attention to defense. Maximum efforts for the sake of the state. Maximum energy for Ukraine to be able to achieve its goals..” he discussed on the continuity of financial support with EU officials for next four years and highlighted efforts to ensure stability and resilience across state systems. Pointing the maritime security concerns in the Black Sea and advancing peace discussions, Zelenskyy invited a UN representative to the next Peace Formula meeting. He also reported on the Main Intelligence Directorate statement on the slowdown in the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation efforts.

On 21 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Vitali Klitschko, Kyiv’s Mayor statement on drone strike in Kyiv. According to the him, fallen debris from Russia’s drone strike ignited a Solomianskyi District building. Additional debris fell in Darnytskyi and Holiivskyi districts. Active air defence in the area was prompted by the officials.

On 21 December, Ukrainian air force reported downing 34 out of 35 Shahed-type drones launched by Russia. The drones reportedly originated from Russia’s

occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai and Kursk Oblast, directed toward areas across Ukraine. The air force engaged tactical aviation and anti-aircraft units in repelling the assault and shot down across 12 oblasts, including Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 21 December, *RT* reported on Vladimir Putin, Russia’s President criticism of the West. During the Presidential Council meeting, Putin highlighted Russia’s robust ties with non-western countries and urged leaders from the West to advocate for cooperation instead of anticipating a downfall. Putin highlighted how Russia’s economic pivot toward non-sanctioning countries like China and India helped withstand western pressure. He also reported on Russia’s diversification in trade and reduced dependence on western financial systems.

On 21 December, *RT* reported on Valery Gerasimov, Russia’s Chief of General Staff highlighted the US’s role in destabilizing global security, citing actions undermining arms control agreements. He criticised NATO expansion, stating it fosters confrontation and escalates tensions in Europe. Gerasimov underscored Russia’s military response, on the creation of new military districts and augmenting troop targets. Putin’s recent directive on increase the defence budget raises Russia’s standing on army target to 1.32 million troops.

On 21 December, *RT* reported on Vladimir Saldo, Kherson Region Governor confirmation on destroying a US-made ATACMS missile. According to the report, the missile was directed towards the Crimean Bridge by Ukrainian forces. Saldo stated that the missile interception over the Sea of Azov.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 21 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Viktor Orban, Hungary’s Prime Minister statement. Orban stated that Hungary disagreed with granting Ukraine EUR 50 billion from the EU budget over five years. Despite Orban’s absence during the

unanimous decision to start Ukraine's accession talks, he opposed revamping the EU budget for Kyiv and other tasks. The impasse could lead to resolving aid outside the budget. Orban highlighted Hungary's stance, preferring funding to be granted outside the budget.

On 21 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Germany's pledge to support Ukraine energy grid. According to the report, Germany pledged EUR 88.5 million to fortify the vulnerable Ukraine's energy system, a prime target for Russia's attacks. Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, channelled EUR 54.3 million through the state-owned bank Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW).

On 21 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission's President, confirmation on disbursement of the final EUR 1.5 billion financial aid. This aid will be part of 2023's EUR 18 billion macro-financial aid to Ukraine. The aid will help Ukraine in recovery, reform and rebuilding.

On 21 December, *Reuters* reported on Russia allocated over USD 12 billion in state aid to sustain its aviation sector. The move comes post-western sanctions due to the Ukraine conflict which stalled key parts and services supplies. Airbus and Boeing ceased support in March 2022, prompting Russia's self-reliance push. Putin aims to manufacture 1,000 domestic aircraft by 2030 as currently, only 133 super jets operate domestically. The industry planned to maintain aircraft manufacturing, focusing on sales and enhancing production. These investments are aimed to sustain the aviation industry amid sanctions' repercussions. Challenges persist in reclaiming western markets due to safety record complexities.

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War in Ukraine: Day 664

Putin discusses Russia's goals and challenges in the defence minister board meeting

War on the Ground:

On 19 December, Ukraine's Boryspil International Airport confirmed a "technical flight" departure of an empty Boeing 777-300, complying with martial law safety rules. The plane, previously part of Russia's Azur Air fleet and later under Ukraine's Skyline Express, departed for Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées in France. The airliner, capable of seating 531 passengers, is known for its unique layout. This marked the fourth aircraft departing since the airport's closure due to Russia's invasion.

On 19 December, *Ukrinform* reported on Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President year-end remarks. He added that he is waiting for the specifics on offensive and defensive operations from military command. Zelenskyy emphasised joint responsibility with the General Staff for battlefield outcomes, expressing concerns and uncertainties regarding ongoing actions and their outcomes.

On 19 December, Oleksandr Kubrakov, Ukraine's Minister for Development of Communities, Territories and Infrastructure, informed about the export of over 10 million

tonnes of cargo. It was exported through the Ukraine's Black Sea corridor. According to the report, agricultural exports rose from 278,000 to nearly five million tonnes, despite ongoing attacks on port infrastructure the temporary routes facilitated the transit of civilian vessels at Chornomorsk, Odesa and Pivdennyi ports.

On 19 December, Oleksandr Syrsky, Ukraine's ground forces head, cited the challenges faced by Ukrainian forces amidst Russia's attempt to seize Kupiansk. The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation claimed repelling eight of Ukraine's attacks in Kupiansk with artillery support. According to the Institute for the Study of War highlighted Ukraine's ammo rationing due to shortages, potentially delaying future counter-offensives.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 19 December, in a defence minister's board meeting conducted by Sergey Shoigu, the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President discussed the results of the military operation in Ukraine, Russia's goals and its challenges. According to the report in *RT*, Shoigu claimed that close to 400,000 troops of Ukraine had been killed and 14,000 tanks along with armoured vehicles had been lost. Putin said: "The West is not abandoning its strategy of containing Russia and its aggressive goals in Ukraine. Well, we are not going to give up our goals for the special military operation either." On Russia's strategic initiative, he added that the commander took "active defence" when needed and improved their positions. However, on the challenges, Putin highlighted the difficulty faced by Russia's military and it required higher production and supply of munitions and drones. He also noted on restructuring of the communication systems, modern reconnaissance and increased capabilities of satellite constellation.

On 19 December, the *TASS* reported on Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary for Russian president's confirmation of Russia's plans to circumvent the EU sanctions on diamonds. He assured that measures were in

place to protect Russia's interests. Peskov downplayed concerns over freezing defence enterprises' assets, stating there were minimal assets for the EU to freeze. He highlighted the EU sanctions on Russia's Society Znanie as noteworthy in the 12th package, emphasising the perceived depletion in areas for imposing sanctions.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 19 December, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) confirmed it would maintain substantial investment in Ukraine. It informed that it will secure a rare capital increase of EUR four billion. The extra funding is aimed at bolstering Ukraine's economy during and post-war, with an annual investment of EUR 1.5 billion throughout the conflict and a potential increase to EUR three billion for reconstruction. Since Russia's 2022 invasion, the EBRD has invested over EUR three billion in Ukraine.

On 19 December, *Notes from Poland* reported on 14 foreign nationals involved in Russia's spy network in Poland received prison sentences ranging from one to six years, by a district court in Lublin. The group monitored transports to Ukraine and planned a train derailment. Arrests since March totaled 16 individuals, mostly Ukrainians, two Belarus's students and a Russia's ice hockey player. Targets included airports, train stations and border crossings. Two withdrew guilty pleas. Tasks included arson and distributing anti-Ukrainian leaflets.

On 19 December, *The Telegraph* reported on the UKs plan for a ten-year security deal with Ukraine. The UK emphasised on naval aid, intelligence sharing and post-war security commitments against potential Russia's threats. The pact has sought to include weapon deliveries and sanctions if attacks resume. UK's naval aid is aimed at reinforcing Kyiv's maritime capabilities, building upon prior support involving mine-hunting ships. Whereas the EU offers Ukraine a EUR 20 billion long-term security package, emphasising weapon support, defence industry collaboration and intelligence sharing.

On 19 December, the UK's Ministry of Defence in its intelligence update reported on Russia's recent attack on air base near Kyiv using a killjoy hypersonic missile. Ukraine's air force claimed to have downed one of three missiles fired. According to the report, it would be the first attack since August raising concerns over a winter-long missile assault in Ukraine.

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War in Ukraine: Day 663

EU imposes 12th round of sanctions on Russia

War on the Ground:

On 17 December, *Ukrinform* reported on Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President interview. He outlined efforts to use frozen Russia's assets for Ukraine. He focused on

the crucial decisions surrounding frozen Russia's assets and their potential benefits for Ukraine. He emphasised on ongoing negotiations with the US, on the G7's role in directing assets from Russia and its support to Ukraine.

On 17 December, Ukraine's Main Directorate of Intelligence verified the incursion of Freedom of Russia Legion fighters into Belgorod region's Terebreno village. According to the *Kyiv Post*, the breach sparked clashes, leading to a shooting battle showcasing the border security challenge. The skirmish, affecting Terebreno residents near Ukraine's border, initiated with no evacuations but residents taking shelter.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 17 December, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported intense clashes across Ukraine. According to the report, in Kupyansk, forces repelled ten attacks, causing Ukrainian forces to lose equipment and over 60 servicemen. A Slovakia-made artillery system was destroyed near Krasny Liman. In the battles in Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia, 30 to 190 troops experienced loss along with significant military hardware damage. Additionally, the *TASS* reported on Russia's claims on strikes in Kherson that hit a US-made howitzer and resulted in personnel losses. Air defence intercepted multiple drones and rockets.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 18 December, the EU imposed the 12th round of sanctions package targeting Russia's imports and exports. Measures include Russia's diamonds, bolstering the oil price cap enforcement and tracing assets of listed individuals. Over 140 new entities faced asset freezes, including those involved in defence, IT and disinformation around Ukraine's occupied territories. The sanctions aimed to weaken Russia's military and to incorporate stricter export controls on advanced tech, metal goods and enterprise software. Energy measures involved import bans on liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and vigilance on oil sales.

On 18 December, the Centre for Information Resilience, an independent, non-profit social enterprise of the UK highlighted extensive destruction in Avdiivka. According to the report, severe damage was observed in educational institutions, medical facilities, churches and supermarkets due to targeted strikes. Residential areas faced relentless shelling, with 25 of 26 apartment towers hit, obstructing Ukraine's army observation points. The city, pivotal since Russia's invasion in 2014, witnessed 154 casualties, with around 1200 residents enduring the ongoing conflict. Despite Russian forces gaining some territory, Ukraine's troops retain control over the main urban centre and chemical factory to the northwest, as well as a crucial supply road in Avdiivka amid ongoing fierce battles.

On 18 December, the truckers from Poland restarted the border blockade with Ukraine's farmers, challenging the transit of Ukraine's trucks. The protest at Dorohusk-Jagodzin resumed despite a court order and ongoing blockades since November. Protest leaders have demanded the scrapping of the EU-Ukraine trade pact of 2022, alleging economic damage and violating transport rules by Ukraine's hauliers. The blockade at the busiest crossing, Dorohusk-Jagodzin, led to an 80 kilometres truck queue. The standoff persisted despite talks between Tusk and Zelenskyy. Arkadiusz Klimczak, Poland's new Infrastructure Minister has sought to plan multi-level actions. On 20 December, ministers from both countries planned to meet for crisis talks amid concerns over cheap Ukraine goods flooding Poland's markets.

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War in Ukraine: Day 660

War on the Ground:

On 15 December, Ukraine's councillor of Keretsky village was found in video footage detonating a grenade. According to the report in *Deutsche Welle*, 26 people were injured and six seriously wounded as per statements from the police. The motive of the councillor remains ambiguous and the source of acquiring the grenades also seemed difficult to obtain amidst war.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 15 December, following Hungary's block of the EU's financial aid, Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary for Russian president praised the move. He said: "Hungary, in contrast to many European countries, firmly defends its interests, which impresses us." On Ukraine's membership to the EU, Peskov stated that the addition of new members to the EU can lead to more destability.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 15 December, following the EU summit, Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister announced the block on the EU's aid to Ukraine worth EUR 50 billion. Orban said: "Summary of the nightshift: veto for the extra money to Ukraine." The EU leaders in the summit aimed to break through

Hungary's block but Orban refused to agree to funding to Ukrainian government for the next four years as per the EU budget plan. In response, Charles Michel, President of European Council assured to bring back the discussion on Ukraine aid "early next year" after the failure to attain unanimity on the budget plan.

On 15 December, the UK's Ministry of Defence in its latest intelligence report observed intense fighting in Marinka. A town located in the eastern area of Donetsk oblast and south-eastern Ukraine holds the largest ethnic population of Russians. In a statement: "Russia has likely further reduced the small pockets of Ukrainian-controlled territory remaining within the town boundary." According to the ministry, Russia's operational objectives is expected to acquire control of 0015 and N15 highways to advance towards Kurakhove town.

On 15 December, truckers from Slovakia announced to removal of the blockade at the border crossing with Ukraine. According to a spokesperson from the truck drivers' union, the protest was ended following the request from the police. The block which began three days before by the truckers had demanded the EU to reimpose restrictions on Ukraine's drivers on entry. Whereas the EU waived the permit after the war. Similarly, the block has been suspended over the Poland-Ukraine border and is expected to restart after the court's decision. The key concern behind the truckers is "unfair competition" triggered by Ukraine.

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War in Ukraine: Day 659

War on the Ground:

On 14 December, *Kyiv Post* reported on the largest drone attack in Odesa injuring 11 people including three children. According to the report from Ukraine's air force, three waves of drone attacks were observed in the southern region with 41 intercepted out of 42. The debris from the drones damaged warehouses, vehicles and port infrastructure.

On 14 December, Germany's local police reported on Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President visit to Germany. According to a police spokesperson, Zelenskyy has an appointment in the Rhine-Main area which is known as Germany's financial capital and was observed to have visited the area close to the US airbase at Erbenheim, the headquarters of the US troops in Europe.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 14 December, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President held the first year-end since the war in Ukraine. During the conference, Putin said: "There will be peace when we achieve our goals. They are not changing." On the battlefield strength and mobilisation, close to 617,000 troops are estimated to be on the ground and 486,000 soldiers have signed contracts till now. Apart from this, thousands of convicts were reportedly recruited into the mercenary group. On reporting the ground situation and Russian forces' position, Putin stated that the forces have strengthened their stance at all fronts, meanwhile attempting to secure a stance in the east back on the Dnipro River in the Kherson region.

On 14 December, Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary for Russian president expressed Russia's observation on the decline in US military support for Ukraine. He said: "The Kyiv regime promised them that if you give us \$100 billion, we will have a victory on the battlefield." He highlighted the recent announcement of USD 200 million in aid by the US while substantial funding was available.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 14 December, ahead of the EU summit, the European Commission unblocked EUR 10 billion in funds for Hungary. The move was seen as a bribe to make Hungary remove the veto for Ukraine's EU membership and financial aid, which amounts to EUR 50 billion. Charles Michel, the European Council President disclosed the EU's agreement to open talks on Ukraine's EU membership decision. In response, Zelenskyy said: "This is a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe."

On 14 December, ahead of the high-level EU summit in Brussels, Olaf Scholz German Chancellor and Emmanuel Macron, France's President held a meeting with Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President and Charles Michel, the EU Council chief. The meeting involved a discussion on Ukraine and initiating talks on its accession to the EU. On the same, Mark Rutte, Netherlands' Prime Minister issued a statement expressing confidence in the EU in reaching a consensus over enlargement and long-term financial aid to Ukraine. Scholz stated that the occurrence of the EU summit is an "important sign" for Ukraine and Russia. He added: "One thing is important, however: that we succeed in making the financial facility for Ukraine possible and thus create the basis for Ukraine to continue its resistance against Russian aggression."

On 14 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the German government's delivery of the Patriot air defence system to Ukraine along with missiles to improve its air defence capacity. The delivery also included "nine Bandvagn tracked multi-purpose vehicles, 7,390 155-caliber artillery shells, three more mobile remote-controlled mine-clearing devices and eight tankers."

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War in Ukraine: Day 702

Massive missile strike reported in Kyiv

War on the Ground:

On 13 December, Vitali Klitschko, Kyiv's Mayor reported on a missile attack resulting in many injuries and damage to buildings. According to him: "According to medics, there are already 25 injured in Dniprovsky district of the capital, 13 were hospitalized." In response, Kyiv's air defence was activated. Following the attack, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President reported on injury of 53 people due to debris and criticised Russia for firing missiles at night. He said: "There will be a response. Certainly."

On 13 December, Ukraine's cyber defence agency claimed that the earlier cyberattack on Ukraine's mobile network operator offline was traced to Russia's military intelligence. It is considered the biggest cyberattack since the war and Ukraine accused Russia for use of cyberspace as one of the zones of the war.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 13 December, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported on the advance of Russian forces in the south of the Donetsk area. In a statement, it said that its combined military unit T-72B3 tank crews have supported firepower to attack the units in the Urozhainoye and Novodonetskoye areas between Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk. It confirmed destroying Ukraine's armoured combat vehicle and manpower enabling it to forward.

On 13 December, Russia claimed to attack Ukraine's army control center using its upgraded Ka-52M helicopters in Donetsk. In a statement, it said: "Crews of Ka-52M helicopters of the assault group delivered a

strike with free-flight aircraft rockets on the enemy strongholds." The Ka-52M the next version of the Ka-52 Alligator attack helicopter has helped in increasing the striking range for Russia.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 December, in a joint press conference, Joe Biden, the US President stressed that the US would continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment and would "not walk away." Zelenskyy pledged to keep fighting and said that it would be "insane" to give up territory for a peace deal. Following this, Biden imposed sanctions on over 250 individuals and organisations related to the war. The latest sanctions include those involved in the procurement of Chinese-manufactured weapons and technologies to Russia. It also includes individuals and companies from Turkey, UAE and China for shipping equipment, aircraft parts and X-ray systems.

On 13 December, the Denmark government promised to support Ukraine with new military aid worth EUR one billion. Mette Fredriksen, Denmark's Prime Minister announced the package in the Nordic Summit and is expected to be presented on 14 December in the parliament for approval. Once adopted, ammunition, tanks, drones and equipment will be sent to Ukraine.

On 12 December, the US intelligence released a report disclosing the number of casualties for Russia in the war in Ukraine. According to the report, 315,000 Russian troops have been killed or wounded since February 2022. This includes 13,000 since October. Till now Russia has lost some 2,200 tanks out of 3,500 and 87 per cent of military personnel since the war began.

On 13 December, Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister reiterated his objection to the EU's agenda for Ukraine's accession ahead of the EU summit. Orban proposed for a strategic partnership instead of membership as according to him Ukraine is yet to fulfill the criteria for membership, especially in areas of corruption. The EU which has blocked the funds to Hungary over rule of law concerns is expected to be

released in the coming days.

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War in Ukraine: Day 657

War on the Ground:

On 12 December, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President held a meeting with Joe Biden, the US President. During the meeting, Biden assured support despite a lack of support from the Republican party. Apart from this Biden announced USD 200 million of military assistance to Ukraine.

On 12 December, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) granted Ukraine access to a portion of a loan of USD 900 million. The move comes after the IMF executive board released the fund after a second review. This

loan arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility aims to boost Ukraine's economic and financial stability and also to direct it towards the EU accession. In total, Ukraine will receive USD 15.6 billion. According to Kristalina Georgieva, IMF Chief: "The authorities also continue to demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to tackling vital governance and corruption issues."

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 12 December, the TASS reported on Russian air forces destroying of aerial target near Bessonovka village in the Belgorod border area. The report was confirmed by the governor of the Belgorod region and no casualties or damage was reported. The destroyed air-defence system was known as Tochka-U tactical ballistic missile and an additional 24 rounds of artillery shelling was also observed in the area. The Tochka-U is similar to the SS-21 Scarab of NATO which was built in the 1970's by the USSR.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 December, the US government announced a new set of sanctions on more than 250 individuals and organisations in Russia, China, Turkey and the UAE. This is targeted at Russian entities and those that have evaded sanctions. Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of the State said: "We will continue to use the tools at our disposal to promote accountability for Russia's crimes in Ukraine and those who finance and support Russia's war machine." According to the US Treasury, the sanctions were imposed on four entities and nine individuals from China, Russia, Hong Kong and Pakistan for facilitating in stocking of China-manufactured weapons and technology to Russia. The sanctions were also imposed on Turkey, UAE and China for transferring technology, equipment and microelectronic components.

On 12 December, Finland's government announced the opening of two crossings, Vaalimaa and Niirala on the border shared with Russia. Petteri Orpo, Finland's Prime Minister said: "The government has today decided to keep the eastern border closed except for two border crossing points." He

added that the two border points were opened to observe change and be closed if the influx trend continued. According to the report, 900 asylum seekers from Kenya, Morocco, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen entered Finland in November which was less than one in a day as per previous records.

On 12 December, a German government spokesperson reported on the recent effort of the EU in pursuing Hungary to agree to the EU's aid facility plan for Ukraine. The aid which is worth USD 50 billion has been threatened on vetoing the plan by Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister. According to the report in *Deutsche Welle*, the EU's aim remains to focus on supporting Ukraine and its facility is to show united support and a "clear signal" to Russia.

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War in Ukraine: Day 656

War on the Ground:

On 11 December, Ukraine's military reported on a new offensive by Russian forces in Avdiivka. According to the report, this was seen to strengthen its hold in eastern Donbas. Avdiivka located in the northwest of Donetsk is a key site for Ukraine with a coking plant. Oleksandr Stupen, Ukraine's military spokesperson stated that the front line in eastern Ukraine had not moved despite intense fighting and till now 610 artillery shelling had taken place in the past 24 hours.

On 11 December, Ukraine confirmed the re-opening of the border between Ukraine and Poland. The border crossing considered the largest crossing point opened back after a month's blockade by Poland's truck protestors. Blockade which began in November at four border crossings demanding entry permits to the EU, the local authorities cancelled the permit to protest based on the effect of demonstrations on

Poland's companies. Oleksandr Kubrakov, Ukraine's Infrastructure Minister confirmed the re-opening of Yahodyn-Dorogusk checkpoint.

On 11 December, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President began his visit to the US by meeting with Lloyd Austin, US Defence Secretary and Charles Brown, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General. The meeting focused on "global security challenges, development in frontline and US-Ukraine defence cooperation. In a speech, Zelenskyy warned that failure to support Ukraine may lead to the fulfilling of the wishes of Russia and requested continued support from the US military. He added: "America's commitments must be honored. America's security must be defended. And America's word must be kept."

On 11 December, Ukraine's air force reported destroying eight of Russia's eight missiles which were targeted towards Kyiv. According to the report, the debris of the shutdown missiles had injured four people and damaged a residential building.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 11 December, Russia's election commission announced that the presidential elections would take place in the annexed region of Ukraine, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Earlier, Ukraine said that the elections would be viewed as null and warned observers about travelling or attempting to monitor voting.

On 11 December, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President visited Sevmash shipyard in Severodvinsk to purview the commissioning of new nuclear submarines. Severodvinsk located in Russia's north-western Archangelsk region is home to latest build Alexander III and Krasnoyarsk nuclear submarines. During the visit, Putin raised navy flag of Emperor Alexander III 7th Borei-class atomic-powered submarine. According to the report, the three submarines under construction include land-based nuclear missiles and nuclear-armed strategic bombers.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 11 December, the UK government announced to transfer of two Royal Navy minehunter ships to the Ukrainian Navy following its move to form a maritime defence coalition with Norway. This is aimed to boost Ukraine's sea operations and to enable its ability to counter the threat from Russia's sea mines and restore the export routes in the Black Sea for Ukraine. According to Grant Shapps, UK's British Defence Minister: "This capability boost marks the beginning of a new dedicated effort by the UK, Norway and our allies to strengthen Ukraine's maritime capabilities over the long term."

On 11 December, Slovak truckers announced to restart partial blockade in the freight road crossing with Ukraine. The key demand has been on imposing restrictions on access to Ukraine's trucking firms to the EU. According to one of the trucking associations UNAS, the blockade will be set on the Vysne Nemecke/Uzhhorod crossing.

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War in Ukraine: Days 654 & 655 War on the Ground:

On 10 December, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President reported on the situation in Avdiivka. According to him, the Ukrainian forces are "holding ground" on the frontline and appreciate the unity in the defence. Vitaliy Barabash, Avdiivka's mayor claimed to repel all attacks launched by Russia and expressed the continuing tense situation and large offensive in the town for the third consecutive day. On 09 December, Ukraine's parliament approved four bills to initiate the EU accession talks. This includes national minority rights, discussing Hungary's demand which opposed Ukraine's bid to the EU. The same was confirmed by Zelenskyy on signing the bills into law.

On 09 December, Ukraine reported on Russia's cruise missile attack towards Kyiv and claimed destroying 14 out of 19 missiles resulting in the injury of six and death of one person. On the same day, Ukraine's military spokesperson reported countering 32 attacks in Avdiivka town. According to the spokesperson, Russian forces were observed to be concentrating on the defence line across the town to push forward to cut down Ukraine's supply lines.

On 09 December, one of the charity organisations called the Kolo Foundation which helps Ukraine in supplying military and ammunition reported on the never-ending border blockade with Polish truck drivers. The block which began on 06 November has continued for three weeks expanding to 19 miles has resulted in a delay in the delivery of tech components to make drones and communication equipment to Ukraine. According to the report, the 200 pickup trucks that were scheduled to transfer ammunition and help in evacuation are reportedly stopped.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 10 December, during the ceremony to award gold star medals, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President addressed the Russian troops on the frontlines as the future of the country and highlighted how their combat activities are key deciding factors.

On 09 December, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation reported on

countering five attacks in the Donetsk area launched by Ukraine's troops in the past 24 hours. According to the report in the TASS, more than 200 have been expected to be killed and wounded. In the attack, the 22nd, 93rd mechanised and 79th air assault brigades have been reportedly targeted.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 10 December, Romania reported on the discovery of an impact crater which is observed to have been debris from a drone explosion. The crater was located three kilometers from the west of Plauru across the Danube River from Ukraine's port of Izmail. According to Romania's defence ministry, the place from where the drone was launched is unknown but raised concerns over the after-impact of Russia's attacks on Ukraine's port infrastructure. On 10 December, defence ministries of the Czech Republic and Denmark vowed to provide 50 infantry fighting vehicles, 2500 pistols, 7000 rifles, 500 light machine guns and 500 sniper rifles. Troels Lund Poulsen, Denmark's Defence Minister called the package a "substantial donation" for Ukraine. It also includes anti-tank weapons and modernized armaments which are expected to be delivered in the future.

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EM Short Notes*

By Rishika Yadav and Padmashree Anandhan



Source: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda/File, Michel Euler/AP photo/picture alliance, AP, Sputnik, Rafiq Maqbool/AP, Civil Protection of Iceland/REUTERS

BULGARIA

Lawsuits challenge COVID-19 handling of the government

On 30 December, *Euractiv* reported on Three lawsuits that criticise Bulgaria's pandemic response specifically, the poorly executed vaccination rollout and dubious school closures have put the country in the sights of legal action. The government is accused of neglecting vaccination public education, closing schools unnecessarily and failing to prioritise disadvantaged populations in the accusations which are being led by the Helsinki Committee and the Bulgarian Open Society Office. They contend that Bulgaria has the second-highest COVID-19 fatality rate in the world which is a tragic result of these purported failings. The lawsuits highlight a case of improper vaccination administration for children and call for prompt action to safeguard vulnerable lives and end prejudice. They also aim to bring attention to the disorganised vaccination process. ("Bulgaria is facing lawsuits because of the

pandemic." *Euractiv*, 30 December 2023)

Diversifies gas supply pipeline with Serbia

On 10 December, Serbia opened a pipeline to Bulgaria, reducing reliance on Russia's gas. The link has offered access to Azerbaijan's gas, aiming to bolster energy security. Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President, Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's President and Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's President, attended the opening ceremony. The pipeline has sought to connect Novi Iskar in Bulgaria to Nis in Serbia, providing access to Azerbaijan's gas and Greece's LNG terminal. A recent deal with Azerbaijan secured 400 million cubic metres annually from 2024. The EU supported the project financially. Previously reliant on Russia's gas, Serbia's move marked a shift amid the EU efforts to reduce dependency on Russia's energy sources. ("Serbia opens pipeline to Bulgaria to diversify gas supplies," *Deutsche Welle*, 10 December 2023)

* EM Short Notes are notes published along with Daily Focus on Europe, every evening by the NIAS Europe Monitor team. The short notes provide a brief overview of the latest developments in Europe and provides the sources from which they are compiled. Visit <https://globalpolitics.in/europe/> to read them every day.

CZECH REPUBLIC**Deadly shooting at Prague University**

On 21 December, a gunman, now confirmed dead by the police, killed 14 and wounded 24 at Prague's Charles University Faculty of Arts. Petr Fiala, Prime Minister, cancelled plans, returning to Prague amid ongoing police operations. Vit Rakusen, Interior Minister, dismissed links to terrorism. European leaders, including Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs and von der Leyen, offered condolences. The White House condemned the "senseless" violence. Police discovered several weapons at the university and confirmed the gunman's alleged patricide. The incident, rare for the Czech Republic, prompted closures in the Old Town area. ("[Czech Republic: Fatal shooting at Prague university](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2023)

ESTONIA**Human rights study reveals concerns on free speech shift**

On 11 December, *ERR News* reported that a study by Estonia's Institute of Human Rights (EIHR) indicated a shift in human rights concerns over a decade. Initially, social equality dominated worries, but now, freedom of speech tops the list for 25 per cent of respondents, tripling in a decade. Karmen Turk, a lawyer, emphasised the changing communication landscape, attributing anxiety to international business control over online discourse. Aet Kukk, executive manager of EIHR, highlighted responsibility in speech and referenced ongoing hate speech legislation, where half supported regulation but half feared a threat to free speech. The study reflected a middle-ground sentiment on regulating hate speech while preserving free expression. (Kadri Põlendik, "[Study: Freedom of speech perceived as biggest human rights concern in Estonia](#)," *ERR News*, 11 December 2023)

FRANCE**Macron demands immediate ceasefire in Gaza conflict**

On 29 December, *Le Monde* reported that During a recent conference conversation, French President Macron pushed Israeli

Prime Minister Netanyahu for a "lasting ceasefire" to improve the severe humanitarian situation in Gaza. Macron highlighted the need for both sides to put an end to violence and emphasised steps to stop new settlements and safeguard Palestinians in the West Bank. He expressed profound sadness about the deaths of civilians and the rising tensions. Netanyahu also praised France for its cooperation in maintaining sea traffic security and providing security along the Lebanese border. As the fighting continues to devastate both sides, hopes for a long-lasting truce are still tenuous. ("[Macron asks Netanyahu for 'lasting ceasefire' in Gaza](#)," *Le Monde*, 29 December 2023)

Eiffel Tower to remain closed due to worker strike

On 28 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the closure of the Eiffel Tower in Paris due to a strike over worker contracts. Marking the 100th anniversary of Gustave Eiffel's (French architect) death, the employees of the tower staged a strike leaving numerous tourists at a closed entrance. Negotiations regarding the contract between the staff and the city have hit a roadblock leading to a symbolic protest. The tower remains inaccessible leaving pre-Christmas tourism and the upcoming 2024 Olympics in question. ("[France: Eiffel Tower staff goes on strike](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 December 2023)

Paris Olympics: Security plans for the opening ceremony

On 21 December, Emmanuel Macron, President, assured readiness for potential changes in the 2024 Olympic opening due to security concerns. The ceremony, initially set along the Seine River, might relocate, considering past terror incidents. Macron outlined backup plans in case of crises, emphasising preparedness for any scenario. The unique opening, a departure from traditional stadium settings, is aimed at engaging thousands along Paris' riverbanks. Despite heightened security after recent attacks, organisers affirmed their commitment to the Seine-centric event. ("[Macron says Paris ready to deal with Olympic terror threat](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21

December 2023)

Emmanuel Macron defends controversial immigration bill

On 20 December, in response to the immigration bill, Macron defended, calling it imperfect yet reflective of public desire. The parliament vote on 19 December marked a compromise between Macron's centrists and conservatives, leading to the bill's passage in the National Assembly. Critics claimed it mirrors far-right demands for "national preference," strengthening deportation and social welfare restrictions for foreigners. Aurelien Rousseau, Health Minister, resigned in opposition. The bill, labelled a betrayal of France's values, gained 349-186 votes. Gerald Darmanin, Interior Minister, backed the bill, citing tougher actions against foreign offenders and provisions for migrant workers. The bill awaits final enactment after the Constitutional Council review. (Sylvie Corbet and Elaine Ganley, "[France's Macron defends divisive immigration bill and denies it marks tilt by government to right](#)," *Associated Press*, 21 December 2023)

The National Assembly passes stricter migration controls

On 19 December, legislation enforcing tighter migration controls passed in the National Assembly despite opposition. The bill by Emmanuel Macron, France's President garnered support from conservatives after far-right backing, easing the need for their votes. Gerald Darmanin, France's Interior Minister, expressed relief as the majority vote ensured independence from far-right support. The bill, aimed at influencing upcoming elections, faced amendments, toughening rules and extending residency requirements. It weakened residency options, delayed benefits access, introduced quotas and made France's citizenship harder for immigrants' children. ("[France passes controversial immigration bill](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 December 2023; Ido Vock, "[French MPs pass controversial immigration reform](#)," *BBC*, 20 December 2023)

Macron criticised for religious gesture in Elysee Palace

On 09 December, the *BBC* reported that Emmanuel Macron, France's President, faced backlash for participating in a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony inside the Elysee Palace. It violated the country's secular principles. The event, attended by Haim Korsia, Chief Rabbi, marked the start of Hanukkah and Macron's receipt of an anti-Semitism award. The move drew criticism from various political factions, considering it a breach of secularism. Macron defended the gesture, asserting it was in the "spirit of the Republic and of concord." Critics view it as part of Macron's inconsistent stance on the Gaza conflict, attempting to balance relations with Israel and Arab countries within France's diverse population. (Hugh Schofield, "[France's Emmanuel Macron buffeted from all sides in row over secularism](#)," *BBC*, 09 December 2023)

GEORGIA

President rallies for EU membership ahead of crucial decision

On 09 December, Salome Zourabichvili, Georgia's President, joined the Tbilisi march as the EU prepared to decide on Georgia's candidacy status. Hundreds gathered, drumming and waving flags along Rustaveli Avenue. Rally organisers stressed unity in Georgia's path to the EU. Zourabichvili hailed the event as a manifestation of the people's desire for Europe. The EU's impending decision on 15 December follows Georgia's application post-Russia's 2022 Ukraine invasion. The EU membership could fortify Georgia's defence, especially after the 2008 conflict with Russia. Despite popular support, the ruling party's remarks align with the stance of Vladimir Putin, Russia's President, though they claim commitment to the EU and NATO aspirations. ("[Georgia rallies for EU membership ahead of key decision](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 09 December 2023)

GERMANY

Hottest year recorded as global temperatures soar

On 29 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported

on Germany's living in record heat and 2023 looks to be the warmest year on record following a pattern of extreme heat around the globe. As flooding recedes leaving damage across the country temperatures by year's conclusion soar over 2022's record high. Alarm bells are ringing with this scorching echo of the worldwide 1.46 degrees Celsius rise beyond pre-industrial levels reminding us of the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43 per cent by 2030 as per the Paris Agreement. ("[Germany: 2023 set to be warmest year on record.](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 29 December 2023)

German patients' treatment uncertain due to doctor strikes

On 29 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported that following an increase in COVID-19 and flu cases, hundreds of doctors in Germany are going on a three-day strike due to frustration with their poor pay and excessive paperwork putting the country's healthcare system at risk of collapsing. By drawing attention to unsustainable conditions this "lesser evil" protest which was strongly criticised by patients and the Health Minister aims to safeguard long-term patient care. Physicians criticise spending restrictions that reduce income and hinder high-quality care and they are advocating for the repeal of a 1992 law that they believe to be the main offender. Despite conceding the constraints of bureaucracy the Health Ministry is adamant about calling off the strike in favour of negotiations in the coming year. Despite disagreements, everyone agrees that urgent attention is necessary to maintain the high quality of treatment provided by Germany's well-liked healthcare system, which has a vast network of specialists and is easy to access. ("[German doctors go on strike as virus season hits.](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 29 December 2023)

Defence minister signs deal to deploy troops in Lithuania by 2027

On 18 December, Boris Pistorius, Defence Minister, signed a deal with Arvydas Anušauskas, Lithuania's Defence Minister for the deployment, aimed at leading NATO's eastern defence amid the Ukraine

conflict. The deal involves a move to station 4,800 troops 100 kilometers from Russia's border. Pistorius said: "The speed of the project clearly shows that Germany understood the new security reality." Despite challenges, like awaiting tank replacements, the brigade is slated for deployment in Lithuania. According to Roderich Kiesewetter, a politician from the Christian Democrats, Germany's plan to deploy elements in 2024 and complete the brigade by 2027 seems to be uncertain due to inflation impacting financial reserves. Lithuania is expected to invest 0.3 per cent of its GDP in infrastructure. Pistorius emphasised sustainability beyond 2027, highlighting the need for long-term capabilities. The deployment aligns with Germany's commitment to protect NATO allies and fortify its military readiness in the face of potential threats from Russia. (Caleb Larson, "[Germany puts its troops in the line of fire if Putin attacks NATO.](#)" *POLITICO*, 18 December 2023)

HUNGARY

Battery manufacturing to become the second highest in the world

On 29 December, *Hungary Today* reported that Hungary is rapidly becoming a battery powerhouse thanks to investments from the east, moving it up from fourth to second place in the world manufacturing rankings. Driven by Hungary's open doors, giants such as China's CATL, the world's leading battery manufacturer, are establishing themselves alongside five others. Hungary's quick ascent is largely due to this eastern alliance, even though China continues to rule the battery hill. The largest project ever in Hungary, CATL's EUR 7.9 billion mega-project, is facing local opposition due to environmental concerns. Environmental organisations like Greenpeace and WWF think and they advocate for ethical battery manufacture as the key to opening up a sustainable future. Hungary has to walk a tightrope between progress and the environment as it advances towards battery leadership. ("[Hungary on the Way to Become the Second Largest Producer of Electric Batteries.](#)" *Hungary Today*, 29 December 2023)

Danube River under impact over Budapest flood levels surge

On 29 December, *Hungary Today* reported on flood warnings blazing over 1,200 km, Hungary is braced for the effects of decades of greatest Danube River levels. The epicentre management Budapest is forecasting a record-breaking 680 centimetre peak which would submerge lower quays and force car relocations. Rising concerns are echoed by the Raba River near Győr and receding waters of the Tisza face the threat of tidal surges. While they rush to rescue and evacuate firefighters sandbag homes and advise the public to remain vigilant. In the days ahead Hungary's fortitude will be put to the test as the Danube's strength crests and floodwaters create a brand-new, unpredictable environment. Pray for quickly receding seas and remain alert and informed. ("[Floods: Danube River Peaks, Budapest Braces for Highest Water Levels](#)," *Hungary Today*, 29 December 2023)

ICELAND

Volcano erupts in Reykjanes Peninsula

On 19 December, a volcanic eruption took place in the Reykjanes peninsula following weeks of seismic activity. The Icelandic Meteorological Office confirmed the event after being preceded by a minor earthquake. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Iceland's Prime Minister, expressed concern about the significant impact of the eruption. Vidir Reynisson, head of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, highlighted the swift magma flow, deeming it substantial for the region. He cautioned against visiting the area, stressing its danger. Gudni Thorlacius Jóhannesson, Iceland's President, prioritized safeguarding lives and infrastructure. Reykjavík's international airport remains operational, advising travelers to monitor flight statuses. ("[Icelandic volcano erupts after weeks of buildup](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2023)

IRELAND

Commits to European Wind Charter for energy targets

On 19 December, Ireland, represented by

Eamon Ryan, Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, joined the European Wind Charter. The move aimed to enhance conditions for wind energy goals, both onshore and offshore. This pact has sought to cover energy plans, auctions, regulations and equipment, aligned with the EU wind power action plan. Ireland pledged to achieve nine gigawatts onshore by 2030, supporting Ireland's climate action plan. Ireland also backed targets for 2030 and beyond, emphasising offshore wind and aligning with the North Seas Energy Cooperation's long-term plans. Ryan highlighted wind energy's pivotal role in decarbonization efforts and emphasised the need for community engagement to ensure inclusive benefits from wind energy. ("[Ireland signs European Wind Charter and makes pledge to deliver on wind energy targets](#)," *gov.ie*, 19 December 2023)

Minister for Agriculture spotlights methane mitigation efforts at COP28

On 10 December, Charlie McConalogue T.D., Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, highlighted methane reduction strategies at COP28's US Chamber of Commerce event in Dubai. Addressing Ireland's emission targets, he stressed the need to curtail methane and nitrous oxide from agriculture. His panel participation featured Ireland's advancements in genetically selecting low methane-emitting cattle, constituting 73 per cent of the country's agricultural emissions. McConalogue showcased Ireland's robust investment in climate research, notably in feed additives to reduce methane. He underscored collaborations with New Zealand and global initiatives like "AIM for Climate." Ireland's sustainable food systems were also showcased as a global model, emphasising science and innovation for future food security and environmental preservation. ("[Minister McConalogue focuses on Methane Mitigation at COP 28](#)," *gov.ie*, 10 December 2023)

ITALY

Government speeds up recovery with EUR 16.5 billion EU funds

On 30 December, *ANSA English* reported on the fourth iteration of the National

Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) released by the European Commission. It provided a significant impetus for Italy's post-pandemic recovery. This substantial EUR 16.5 billion award was obtained following Italy's successful completion of 28 major benchmarks indicating advancement in critical domains such as public procurement social inclusion, public administration modernization and justice reform. This will be deployed to support investments in the space sector, green hydrogen technologies, transportation infrastructure, research, education and social policies, as well as to drive improvements in digitization, namely cloud migration for local public administrations. With this large payment, Italy has already secured approximately EUR 102 billion in NRRP resources, demonstrating its commitment to and advancement towards the plan's goals. Working together with the European Commission, Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister has reaffirmed her government's commitment to the prompt and comprehensive implementation of the amended NRRP. ("Fourth NRRP installment paid today' - premier's office." *ANSA English*, 30 December 2023)

Pakistani parents gets life sentence for "honour killing" of their child

On 20 December, *BBC* reported on Italy's court life sentence to a couple in Pakistan for murdering, Saman Abbas, their 18-year-old daughter, who refused an arranged marriage. Abbas was found dead at a northern Italy farmhouse 18 months after her disappearance in November 2022. Shabbar Abbas, her father, extradited from Pakistan, maintained innocence, stating he never considered harming her. Nazia Shaheen, her mother, convicted in absence, is believed to be hiding in Pakistan. The case spotlighted "honour killings," rooted in tribal customs. Abbas's relationship triggered fury, leading to her murder. (Kelly Ng, "Italian court jails parents for life over 'honour killing' of Pakistani teen." *BBC*, 20 December 2023)

LATVIA

Riga rolls out 35 Solaris electric buses

On 28 December, *ENG.LSM.lv* reported on

the release of 35 new electric buses in Riga. Known as "Solaris" vehicles are currently undergoing testing to replace the noisy diesel buses. With the support of the EU Cohesion Fund the city, the initiative aims towards a greener future reducing both CO2 emissions and noise pollution. Additional benefits for the passengers include comfortable journeys, smartphone charging ports and a reduced environmental impact. ("Electric buses ready to hit the streets of Riga." *ENG.LSM.lv*, 28 December 2023)

44 new species discovered in wildlife observations

On 28 December, *ENG.LSM.lv* reported on Latvia's natural environment observations of recording more than 281,000 diverse fauna and flora of Latvia. The figures include a total of 44 unknown species such as slime fungi and rare plants. While birds continue to dominate the list of most spotted creatures butterflies, mushrooms also add to the list. This surge in records was due to the "availability of technology" easing the reporting by the individuals faster and motivating them to be part of the data collection process. ("Latvia recorded many wildlife observations in 2023." *ENG.LSM.lv*, 28 December 2023)

Government mandates biowaste separation

On 12 December, *ENG.LSM.lv* reported that starting in 2024, Latvia sought to introduce a directive for segregating biodegradable waste, primarily food waste, necessitating waste managers. The move has taken place to arrange collection and processing. A new biowaste processing facility at the "Daibe" landfill site in the Cēsis district was established to handle this. ZAAO, a waste management company, adopted Germany's technology for organic waste recycling, aiming for higher efficiency. Though operational in test mode, the plant is generating gas for energy production and technical compost. Encouraged by a successful pilot project involving apartment residents in Cēsis, the company anticipated citizen cooperation in the upcoming mandatory biowaste separation from 01 January 2024. This initiative followed Latvia's PET bottle deposit system

implemented in 2022. (Gunta Matisone, "[New treatment site ready for new rules on bio-waste](#)," *ENG.LSM.Iv*, 12 December 2023)

POLAND

Government reform to liquidate of all public media faces block from PiS

On 28 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the latest announcement by Bartłomiej Sienkiewicz, Poland's Cultural Minister on government's decision to liquidate all public media. According to the government, the liquidation ensures the protection of jobs, prevents layoff and allows restructuring. Sienkiewicz added on revoking lengthy liquidation processes if needed. Whereas the Law and Justice party (PiS) criticised the move calling destruction of Poland's media. In response, Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister defended saying it was crucial for preserving a free press citing legal justification. ("[Poland puts state media into liquidation amid political row](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 December 2023)

New government dismisses public media leaders

On 21 December, *Euronews* reported that a recent coalition government (led by the Law and Justice party) ousted public media leadership, affecting TV, radio and news agencies. Programming ceased abruptly, with TVP stations like TVP Info halting operations. The move aimed to break the former administration's alleged political media control, leaving employees uncertain about their future. (Magdalena Chodownik, "[New Polish government sacks governing bodies of public media](#)," *Euronews*, 21 December 2023)

Donald Tusk elected as prime minister after success in forming a coalition

On 11 December, the recent parliamentary elections saw Donald Tusk, leader of the centrist party, Civic Platform, elected as prime minister. It was followed by a coalition victory involving left-wing to moderately conservative parties. Tusk's ascent followed the rejection of Mateusz Morawiecki's acting Prime Minister by the parliament. It took place despite Morawiecki's nomination after the Law and Justice Party (PiS) lost its majority and

Tusk's appointment became possible as the largest opposition coalition allied. Tusk, focusing on pro-EU policies, is aimed to repair strained ties with the EU, seeking to unlock frozen EU funds amidst ongoing disputes over Poland's rule of law. ("[Polish parliament elects Donald Tusk as prime minister](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 December 2023)

RUSSIA

Foreign Ministry demands for immediate ceasefire in Gaza

On 30 December, *Sputnik* reported that Russia's Foreign Ministry has been vocally supporting a quick truce in the Gaza conflict in recent days, condemning terrorism and collective punishment and highlighting how urgent it is to put an end to the ongoing carnage. In addition to this diplomatic posture, the Russian Defence Ministry demonstrated the remarkable powers of the Kh-101 cruise missile which was created by the Raduga Design Bureau and has a 5,500-kilometer range and large payloads. Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia brought attention to Ukraine's resource shortages amid the conflict before the UN Security Council saying that his nation does not have the resources to advance or sustain the status quo on the contact line. Nebenzia called on the Security Council to take action against Ukraine for placing anti-air defence systems in residential areas, which is regarded as a violation of international humanitarian law. ("[Russia Calls for an Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza](#)," *Sputnik*, 30 December 2023)

SERBIA

Ruling party wins amid allegations of rigging

On 19 December, *Euronews* reported that the Progressive Party, led by Aleksandar Vucic, President, secured the parliamentary vote. However, the Belgrade local election faced allegations of theft, prompting demands for a re-vote. Protests surged as opposition members claimed irregularities and fraud, insisting on challenging the city election results. Vucic, defending the election's fairness, urged calm. International observers noted procedural flaws despite the smooth conduct,

mentioning overcrowding and voting irregularities. Vucic's tenure, spanning a decade, faced criticism for limiting democratic freedoms, allowing corruption and clashes with opposition accusing the EU of overlooking democratic deficits for regional stability. The ruling party clinched a substantial parliamentary majority, pending final counts. ("[Serbian opposition leaders and protesters rally in Belgrade claiming election was rigged](#)," *Euronews*, 19 December 2023)

SWITZERLAND

Signs pioneering financial services pact with the UK

On 21 December, Jeremy Hunt, UK's Chancellor of the Exchequer hailed the unprecedented financial services agreement as a signal of openness for deals that bolster competition. This mutual recognition deal permitted UK financial firms, spanning banking and asset management sectors, to operate in Switzerland, respecting UK regulatory standards. The reciprocal applies to Switzerland entities in the UK. Hunt emphasised the agreement's basis on the "deference principle," bypassing the need for UK-Swiss regulatory alignment. Notably, the UK insurance firms sought to gain exclusive access to Switzerland, exempt from certain incoming regulations. The accord is aimed to instill certainty, facilitating planning and investment for both countries' firms and potentially setting a blueprint for future mutual recognition agreements. ("[UK signs first of its kind financial services agreement with Switzerland](#)," *GOV.UK*, 21 December 2023; Stefan Boscia, "[UK and Switzerland strike 'first of its kind' financial services deal](#)," *POLITICO*, 21 December 2023)

SWEDEN

Initiative to use drones to deliver defibrillators for cardiac arrest cases

On 30 December, *Euractiv* reported on the skies over Sweden becoming battlefields against cardiac arrest as a life-saving transformation takes place. According to a groundbreaking study in 67 per cent of cases, drones fitted with defibrillators reach patients up to three times faster than ambulances. Though obstacles like weather

and limitations still exist these self-sufficient life savers provide vital equipment to patients within 15 metres. Researchers envision countless applications such as applying wound bandages for mishaps or administering adrenaline for allergies. This pioneering the European initiative sets the stage for broader adoption and might save countless lives throughout the continent where 350,000 cardiac arrests occur outside of hospitals every year. Researchers are planning to link the defibrillator system with volunteer networks. Sweden's drone fleet takes off, providing hope and a glimpse into a future when emergency response reaches new heights. ("Sweden uses drones to fight cardiac arrest," *Euractiv*, 30 December 2023)

Court upholds conviction of Iran's nationals for 1988 executions

On 19 December, the Svea Court of Appeals affirmed Hamid Nouri's life sentence for "grave breaches of international humanitarian law and murder." The move is for his role in the 1988 mass execution of 5,000 political dissidents in Iran. Robert Green, a Judge, supported the prosecutor's strong case. Nouri remained the sole defendant in the killings, maintaining his innocence despite consistent claims. The trial, under universal jurisdiction, marked hope for justice beyond borders, though it infuriates Tehran. ("[Sweden upholds life sentence in Iran prison executions case](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2023)

Delegation meets objectives at World Radiocommunication Conference

On 18 December, the Federal Council reported that the World Radiocommunication Conference 2023 (WRC) in Dubai finalised crucial decisions on future radio spectrum usage. The conference concluded on 15 December. Across four weeks of intense negotiations, agreements were secured concerning mobile communications, satellites, aviation and scientific applications. The delegation effectively fulfilled the Federal Council's outlined objectives. ("[World Radiocommunication Conference 2023:](#)

[Swiss delegation achieved its goals,"](#) *The Federal Council*, 18 December 2023)

THE UK

Tony Chung activist from Hong Kong seeks asylum

On 30 December, the *BBC* reported on Tony Chung, a well-known pro-democracy activist bravely fled Hong Kong to seek refuge in the UK out of fear of ongoing surveillance and harassment from the government. After being found guilty of encouraging secession Chung was released from prison in June and entered what he calls "an even bigger and more dangerous prison." Chung felt stuck in a situation, forced to report on fellow activists faced with regular police meetings and even offered money to become an informant. He decided to leave his native country and seek refuge overseas all the while appearing to be on a sanctioned trip to Japan. Chung is now in the UK and intends to recover and go back to school and keep fighting for a more independent Hong Kong. ("[Tony Chung: Student activist flees Hong Kong to seek asylum in UK,](#)" *BBC*, 30 December 2023)

Recycling: Plans for electrical goods to be included in UK collections

On 28 December, the *BBC* reported on the UK government's proposal to introduce kerbside collections for small electrical goods such as toasters and hair dryers from 2026. The main objective of this initiative is to improve recycling efforts and reduce the amount of waste that ends up in landfills. Under this plan retailers would be responsible for collecting larger electrical items, like fridges when delivering replacements for customers. By implementing these measures, the government aims to prevent the unnecessary disposal of millions of electrical items each year and make it easier for households to recycle unwanted electronics. The Environmental Services Association has expressed its support for these proposals highlighting that they would simplify the recycling process and provide greater convenience for individuals to recycle their waste electronics at home. (Thomas Mackintosh, "[Recycling electrical goods could be done at kerbside and drop-](#)

[off points in shops,](#)" *BBC*, 28 December 2023)

Strikes by junior doctors affect appointments

On 28 December, the *BBC* reported on the impact on the National Health Service (NHS) due to a six-day strike by junior doctors starting 03 January. This marks the longest strike in the history of the organisation cancelling close to 88,000 appointments, including crucial hospital check-ups and surgeries. There is also a possibility of disruption in emergency services as senior doctors are being called upon to fill the gaps. This recent action was a direct consequence of unsuccessful negotiations between the British Medical Association British Medical Association (BMA) and the government leaving numerous junior doctors disappointed due to years of below-inflation pay increases. The demand for junior doctors is a rise of 35 per cent. The impact of this strike is estimated to cost more than GBP two billion to the NHS. (Nick Triggle, "[Junior doctors' strike: Thousands of NHS appointments hit by walkout,](#)" *BBC*, 28 December 2023)

Rural homeless crisis explodes

On 28 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported on increasing pressure in rural England due to a 40 per cent rise in homelessness over the past five years surpassing major cities like London. In towns like Boston, the plight of rough sleepers resonates with rates exceeding those of the capital on a per capita basis. This was fuelled by soaring housing prices, stagnant wages and a dwindling supply of affordable options, which demanded immediate action. The UK requires a significant boost in housing availability, a redefined concept of "affordable" aligning with local circumstances and a steadfast commitment to ensuring every individual regardless of being in bustling metropolises or tranquil villages, has a secure roof. ("[Homelessness climbs sharply in rural England,](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 28 December 2023)

Eurotunnel strike resolves

On 21 December, union workers unexpectedly halted Eurotunnel traffic between France and the UK due to a wage

dispute. The staff of Getlink, the company that operates the Eurotunnel connecting both countries, initiated the walkout, disrupting Eurostar, car and freight services. The blockade affected routes to London, Amsterdam and Brussels. Workers protested a EUR 1,000 year-end bonus, demanding triple the amount. The strike, ending in the evening after fruitful negotiations, caused travel chaos ahead of Christmas. Services resumed at night with passenger travel set on 22 December. Clement Beaune, Transport Minister, criticised the strike, urging an immediate resolution. ("[Eurotunnel strike halting traffic between France, UK ends](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2023)

HMS Diamond joins task force safeguarding Red Sea shipping

On 19 December, Royal Navy's HMS Diamond, a third ship of the Type-45 joined Operation Prosperity Guardian, an international coalition safeguarding merchant ships in the Red Sea. The move came in response to escalating Houthi attacks. Three US destroyers and a French warship are part of the task force, focusing on ensuring free navigation and countering threats to global trade and life. The increased Houthi assaults, including ballistic missiles, disrupted major trade routes, affecting companies like Maersk and BP. Defence Ministers globally discussed the operation's launch, emphasising its impact on global trade. Grant Shapps, Defence Secretary, emphasised the need for an international solution to counter these threats to the global economy and security. He said: "These illegal attacks are an unacceptable threat to the global economy, undermining regional security and are threatening to drive up fuel prices." ("[HMS Diamond joins new international task force to protect shipping in the Red Sea](#)," *GOV.UK*, 19 December 2023; Joshua Posaner, Laura kayali, Tommaso Lecca and Caleb Larson, "[European vessels to police Red Sea as part of US task force](#)," *POLITICO*, 19 December 2023)

Adobe abandons USD 20 billion Figma takeover over regulatory hurdles

On 18 December, Adobe withdrew its

planned USD 20 billion acquisition of design software rival Figma. According to Dylan Field: "Despite thousands of hours spent with regulators around the world detailing differences between our businesses, our products and the markets we serve, we no longer see a path toward regulatory approval of the deal." The UK's Competition and Markets Authority demanded a sale of one of Figma's units that would undermine the deal's core purpose. The European Commission warned about eradicating current and future competition between the companies, potentially impacting consumer prices and choices. Margrethe Vestager, the EU Competition Chief, stressed the need to safeguard future competition in digital markets. Despite falling below typical revenue thresholds, the deal underwent scrutiny under the Article 22 procedure, highlighting its potential issues. Adobe is set to pay Figma a USD one billion termination fee due to the scrapped agreement. (Giovanna Faggionato, "[Adobe abandons Figma takeover after Brussels, UK opposition](#)," *POLITICO*, 18 December 2023)

TURKEY

Airstrikes hit Kurdish militant targets in Iraq

On 20 December, Turkey's warplanes conducted fresh airstrikes in northern Iraq against suspected PKK locations. 14 targets in the Gara, Hakourk and Qandil regions were hit, destroying caves, shelters and warehouses allegedly used by militants. Ankara is aimed to combat the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) presence in Iraq, an issue addressed in high-level security talks between Turkey and Iraq officials in Ankara. The PKK, Baghdad and Kurdish authorities in Iraq have not responded. The PKK, labelled a terrorist group by the US and the EU, has long been a concern for Turkey. The conflict, ongoing since 1984, has claimed many lives. ("[Turkey says its warplanes have hit suspected Kurdish militant targets in northern Iraq](#)," *Associated Press*, 21 December 2023)

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Budapest visit strengthens ties with Hungary

On 19 December, a visit by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President, to Budapest marked the

100th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Hungary. Erdogan emphasised enhancing defence and energy collaborations, aiming to boost annual bilateral trade from USD four billion to USD six billion. Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister expressed Hungary's eagerness for mutual success with Turkey in the 21st century. The visit formalized an "advanced strategic partnership." ("[Erdogan and Orban pledge closer ties in Budapest meeting](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 December 2023)

Super Lig football suspended after referee attack

On 11 December, Turkey's Football Federation (TFF) halted the Super Lig after Faruk Koca, Ankaragucu's president, punched Halil Umut Meler, the referee, post-match. Koca's attack, triggered by Rizespor's late equalizer, left Meler with a black eye. Fans stormed the field, further assaulting the referee, although the assailants were unidentified. The TFF condemned the "inhumane attack" and vowed severe punishment for those involved. The league's indefinite suspension was announced by the Board of Directors. Ali Yerlikaya, Interior Minister, issued a detention order for Koca, while Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President, denounced the violence, asserting sports should embrace peace, not hostility. ("[Turkey suspends top-flight football after referee attack](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 December 2023)

REGIONAL

Schengen expansion welcomes Romania and Bulgaria

On 29 December, *Politico* reported that Romania and Bulgaria will be able to enter the Schengen area, which is a big step towards further the EU unity and unrestricted mobility. The agreement to permit air and sea travel from these countries beginning in March 2024 is reason for pride, even though land borders are still up for discussion. Over 400 million people of the 26 European countries that make up the Schengen zone can travel without a passport. Marcel Ciolacu, the prime minister of Romania, expressed hope that land border talks will be fruitful in

2024, opening the door for total integration. Even while land boundaries are still a problem, this agreement is a step in the right direction toward complete integration and opens the door to a more prosperous and connected future for everybody. ("[Romania, Bulgaria set to partially enter Schengen zone in March](#)," *Politico*, 29 December 2023)

Euro 7 deal entails stricter rules on-road vehicle emissions

On 18 December, the agreement reached by the European Parliament and Council on Euro 7 rules to curtail emissions from road transport vehicles: cars, vans, buses, trucks and trailers. The agreement is aimed at promoting cleaner mobility while keeping vehicle prices affordable. The new regulation enhanced exhaust emission limits for buses and trucks in labs and real driving conditions. It introduced stringent brake particle emission caps and mandated improved battery durability for electric and hybrid vehicles. It also proposed an Environmental Vehicle Passport for emission data at registration. Alexandr Vondra, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group reporter emphasised balancing environmental goals and manufacturers' interests. Approval is pending before enforcement in 30-48 months, targeting cleaner and more durable vehicles. ("[Euro 7: Deal on new EU rules to reduce road transport emissions](#)," *European Parliament*, 18 December 2023)

EU agrees on dependable AI regulation with the Artificial Intelligence Act

On 09 December, Members of the European Parliament finalised a landmark deal with the European Council, achieving a consensus on the Artificial Intelligence Act. This legislation is aimed at ensuring AI in Europe complies with fundamental rights, bolsters innovation and protects democracy. The Act has sought to ban harmful AI applications like social scoring and manipulative systems, implementing strict rules for high-risk AI. Safeguards for law enforcement use of biometric identification systems were also agreed upon. Businesses failing to comply may face fines of up to seven per cent of their global

turnover. Co-rapporteurs highlighted the Act's significance in upholding rights while supporting innovation, with the next steps involving formal adoption by Parliament and Council. (["Artificial Intelligence Act: deal on comprehensive rules for trustworthy AI," European Parliament](#), 09 December 2023; ["AI: EU agrees landmark deal on regulation of artificial intelligence," BBC](#), 09 November 2023)

Global poll shows a decline in democracy perception

On 11 December, *Politico* reported that a cross-country poll, spanning seven western countries, noted a decline in democratic satisfaction over the past five years. Majority opinion across the US, France and the UK reflected concerns about worsening democracy, echoed in Croatia, Italy, Poland and Sweden. Dissatisfaction prevailed, with many perceiving the system as biased toward the affluent and urging "radical change." The EU sentiment varied: while support existed, dissatisfaction lingered regarding the EU-level democracy, lacking perceived influence over decisions. The survey highlighted challenges for the EU leaders ahead of the European Parliament elections, emphasising the need to align public sentiment with the EU institutional processes for the forthcoming polls. (Nicholas Vinocur, ["Western democracies face crisis of confidence ahead of big votes, poll shows," POLITICO](#), 11 December 2023)

INTERNATIONAL

75th anniversary of BRI offers opportunities to improve Hungary-China relations

On 30 December, *Hungary Today* reported on two significant events the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Hungary and China. Hungary's EU Presidency is predicted to have a significant impact in 2024. It is even possible that in 2024 Chinese President Xi Jinping would pay a visit to Hungary. Since the Belt and Road project was announced in 2013 Hungary's relations with China have grown stronger and in 2015 Hungary joined the Chinese project. Hungarian government policy has placed an increasing amount of emphasis on the country's relationship with

China. For example, the government declared significant Chinese investments this year and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his delegation travelled to China in October. (["Significant Year to Come in Hungarian-Chinese Relations," Hungary Today](#), 30 December 2023)

Venezuela Condemns UK Warship Deployment Near Guyana

On 30 December, *Politico* reported on the UK dispatch of the cruiser HMS Trent to Guyana, despite the long-simmering border conflict between Venezuela and Guyana. Nicolás Maduro declared it was a "hostile provocation" and launched military drills in Venezuela in retaliation. The flames were fueled by the oil-rich Essequibo, which Venezuela claims but Guyana controls. The recent vote called by Maduro to garner support from the populace for the region further fueled the flames. The action taken by the UK is a possible deterrent against Venezuelan aggression as well as a show of support for Guyana. The international world is closely monitoring the situation and is pushing for negotiation and a peaceful resolution through the International Court of Justice, which Venezuela now rejects. De-escalation depends on the future actions and rhetoric from both sides. (["Venezuela's Maduro blasts 'provocation' as UK sends warship to Guyana," Politico](#), 30 December 2023)

A look at EU Southeast Asia relations in 2024

On 30 December, *Deutsche Welle* reported that a significant shift in the EU Southeast Asian relationship is anticipated in 2024 characterised by important elections simmering trade tensions and readjusting alliances. Economic relations are clouded by new EU restrictions on palm oil which may put strain on relationships with significant Southeast Asian exporters like Indonesia and Malaysia. The region's Muslim-majority countries are adamantly opposed to what they see as the EU hypocrisy over the Israel-Gaza conflict. As China's close ally Laos assumes the ASEAN chairmanship worries over Beijing's sway on regional agendas intensify. As ethnic armed factions hold tentative discussions

with the junta speculation about possible realignments within the country is rife. This is contributing to the ongoing uncertainty in Myanmar. The February EU-ASEAN Ministerial Summit presents a critical chance to fortify cooperation and advance multilateralism in the face of growing international uncertainty. The EU and Southeast Asia will shape the future of their long-standing partnership as 2024 progresses by managing these changing tides and striking a balance between conflicting interests. ([“What's in store for EU-Southeast Asia ties in 2024?”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2023)

Putin welcomes Jaishankar and affirms a strong India-Russia connection

On 29 December, *Sputnik* reported that India and Russia's friendship endures in the face of world unrest. Putin gave Jaishankar assurances of continuous development, citing booming commerce and high-tech cooperation outside of the coal and oil industries. He praised Modi's nonviolent efforts in Ukraine and cordially invited him to visit in 2024. In return, Jaishankar expressed gratitude for reaching the fifty dollars billion trade milestone and hinted at much bigger possibilities. At their meeting, agreements were reached to solidify the expansion of the Kudankulam nuclear project, which is another important milestone in this long-lasting collaboration. India and Russia's relationship is unwavering because of their mutual respect and aspirations for a better future, even in the face of global upheaval. ([“India-Russia Ties Making Steady Headway Despite Turbulences in World: Putin to Jaishankar,”](#) *Sputnik*, 29 December 2023)

EU launches security and defence initiative in Gulf of Guinea

On 11 December, the EU Council approved a two-year EU security and defence initiative supporting West Africa's Gulf of Guinea

countries. It has endorsed civilian and military operation plans. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, highlighted the initiative's aim to tackle Sahel's security spillover, providing tailored support to Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. It focused on bolstering these countries' security forces to combat terrorism in northern regions while enhancing the rule of law, governance and civil-military trust. This initiative, developed in coordination with the four countries, combined military-civilian expertise, complementing the EU assistance to Benin and Ghana's armed forces. Previous Council decisions established the initiative in Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo. ([“Gulf of Guinea: Council launches an EU Security and Defence Initiative,”](#) *European Council*, 11 December 2023)

Climate summit draft falls short of fossil fuel phaseout

On 11 December, expectations of ending fossil fuels waned as the COP 28's draft proposed reducing rather than eliminating them. Demands for phasing out coal, oil and gas went unmet, leading to discontent among environmental groups, the US, the EU and vulnerable island countries. Disagreements arose over language—some opposed the “phaseout” or “phase-down” of specific energy sources. Negotiations extended into the summit's final hours amidst widespread disappointment. Despite pledges for renewable energy and efficiency measures, the draft lacked a decisive stance on fossil fuels. Discontent was palpable, with former Al Gore, US Vice President, calling COP 28 on the brink of failure. (Karl Mathiesen, [“Greens erupt as fossil fuel ‘phaseout’ is dropped from proposed climate deal,”](#) *POLITICO*, 11 December 2023)

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