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RUSSIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER



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NIAS Europe Studies will focus on capacity building amongst the young scholars, expert lectures by prominent academicians and diplomats, monthly discussions on Europe and a Monthly Dispatch – *Europe Monitor*.

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Europe Monitor is an academic initiative by NIAS Global Politics and the KAS India Office.

The Monthly is an integral part of NIAS Europe Studies. It includes focused commentaries on Europe, short notes and daily updates on contemporary Europe. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of any institutions or organisations.

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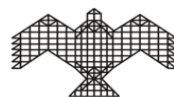
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National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) was conceived and founded in 1988 by the late Mr JRD Tata, who sought to create an institution to conduct advanced multidisciplinary research.

The objective is to nurture a broad base of scholars, managers and leaders who would respond to the complex challenges that face contemporary India and global society, with insight, sensitivity, confidence and dedication.



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Source: Government of Poland (Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej), World Economic Forum, Pavel Bednyakov, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP, Sputnik/Maksim Bogodvid, Reuters/DailySabah, Ali Unal/AP/The Financial Times

War in Ukraine section covers the everyday developments from Day 706 to Day 675 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.

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Source: Roni Rekoma/Bloomberg, europa.eu, Reinis Inkēns, Saeima, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Roberto Monaldo/LaPresse via AP, Human Rights Watch

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.

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COVER STORY

Expert Interview: Russia in the International Order

Padmashree Anandhan, Femy Francis, Rohini Reenum, Akriti Sharma, Akhil Ajith, Shamini Velayutham and Anu Maria Joseph

Russia would insist on retaining a portion of Donbas after war consultations.

In an interview to the NIAS Europe Studies team at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Ambassador DB Venkatesh Varma provided an overview of Russia as one of the old great powers of the world to its course of dramatic changes. According to Varma Russia today is more multinational, and multicultural compared to the Soviet period with strong minorities, Muslim minorities, Buddhist minorities, and Asiatic people from Siberia. He spoke about the complicated history of Russia in trying to be part of the European family and being subject to attacks by Napoleon, Nazi Germany and its civil war (intervened by 10 countries) between 1917 and 1924. Citing this Ambassador Varma stated how Russia compares the same to the present in Ukraine's case where it views the West as a problem creator in its periphery. Giving a gist about Ukraine, he highlighted how it is one of the most important ex-soviet republics, yet not entirely under Russia's sphere of influence and how its population had differing orientations by western Ukraine, considered pro-European and eastern Ukraine, seen as pro-Russian.

According to Ambassador Varma, the trigger to the conflict in eastern Europe was due to the sharp swing of Ukraine's foreign policy towards the EU and NATO where the population remained divided. The real trouble began when Viktor Yanukovich, former Ukraine's President (Considered pro-Russian) was ousted in 2014. Following an insurrection of a pro-west government, the failure of the Minsk agreement to maintain the Donbass area with constitutional autonomy sparked a war in February 2022. On the war in Ukraine, he said that it was not in favour of Russia in the first year but it turned so in the second year, with no longer being a war for territory but of attrition. According to him, as compared to Europe, the US and the NATO's military and

financial assistance to Ukraine the prolonged war was turning in favour of Russia. This was due to the population support of, Russia's President Putin and Russia's advantage in-material resources. He indicated the setting in of fatigue across Europe and the domestic divisions in US in continuing its aid to Ukraine in the long term whereas Russia's concerns over the impact of sanctions in the long term have diverted it towards the East. Denial from the European markets for its energy has pushed it to look at China and India and he said: "Now Russia is more self-contained in a civilizational sense." In terms of economy, despite strong sanctions, Russia has bounced back and continues its energy exports although the middle class is seen to be sceptical about the war. Finally, he ended his initial note concluding that Russia would insist on retaining a portion of Donbas after war consultations. Excerpts:

"Compared to Europe, the US and the NATO's military and financial assistance to Ukraine the prolonged war was turning in favour of Russia."

Padmashree Anandhan: If there is a peace process between Ukraine and Russia what would be the negotiating point?

Ambassador Varma: With regards to the peace process, there were some attempts in March and April of 2022 to get Russia and Ukraine together to see if there can be a compromise. Both on cessation of hostilities and also about the future of Ukraine. Turkey played a major role in that. There were several meetings in Belarus and Istanbul. There are reports that they were almost close to an agreement. Which is to say that Russia would withdraw to the February

2022 borders. There would be limits on future Ukrainian armed forces. Ukraine would accept neutrality which means a commitment not to join NATO in the future. Both Russia and Ukraine were agreeable to these terms. However, the Ukrainian side came under a lot of pressure from the US and the United Kingdom not to accept this peace deal and the peace deal fell through. Subsequently, Russia has made some military gains. Not as much as it would like. But Russia's position has changed subsequently. Because obviously, it is doing better than before on the battlefield. And occupies more territory than it occupied now at the beginning of the war.

Subsequently, Russia has also incorporated four provinces into the Russian Federation by a change in their constitution. Now therefore Russia has very clearly said that it is ready for peace talks. But not with the condition that Russia will return the territory. Because those territories that it has already incorporated into Russia are not for negotiation at the table. Now that will not happen because when Ukraine had a chance to accept those terms. Ukraine turned its back on that. Now Ukraine also has a law which says that there will be negotiations with Russia but not until President Putin is in power. So, the Ukrainian government is limited by its law not to negotiate with Russia.

“Now it is unlikely that a peace settlement will return to the status quo.”

However, I think the situation is changing. There is considerable pressure from the international community. There have been a number of peace plans. The Chinese provided one. The African Union provided one. There was also a peace plan from Indonesia. Prime Minister Modi said this is not an era of war. If there is any interest in India playing a role, we would do that. We have not offered any particular peace plan. But we have offered our services should it be required from us. Now it is unlikely that a peace settlement will return to the status quo. Because for a status quo to come about and on the negotiating table you need to

have a status quo that is an equal status quo between the two combatant powers on the battlefield. Which is not the case. It is now moving more and more in favour of Russia. So, depending on how far it goes. There is also less support for the war assistance to Ukraine from the European countries. And in the US Congress is unable to give a further tranche of support for Ukraine because of their internal divisions and difficulties.

Padmashree Anandhan: Two years into the war, can highlight a few measures taken by Russia against the sanctions imposed by the West? How will this turn out in the long term?

Ambassador Varma: Now in terms of the economic situation in Russia, Russia managed the sanctions pretty well through some tight monetary measures and social security measures for the vulnerable population. Inflation has risen but it is under control. Manufacturing has been boosted because a lot of money is going into the manufacturing sector which also includes the defence sector. Unemployment is low because the economy is now running at full speed to support the war effort. Because it might create a problem of inflation later. But presently inflation is being taken into account. Now whether economic instability will provoke political instability was the intention and the purpose of the sanctions. So in that particular respect sanctions have not succeeded in fulfilling the primary objective for which they were imposed. Now if they have not succeeded the only resulting aspect of the sanctions is their continuation which are aimed at restricting Russia's growth in the medium term. And of course, in the medium term, Russia's economy will be affected. But Russia is confident that it will be able to handle this by engaging with the rest of the world. And they are doing a large measure of de-dollarization.

Now the trade between Russia and China is almost entirely in non-dollar denominations. They are also stressing with India greater trade in national currencies. They are finding alternative routes for their energy resources. Oil, gas, LNG, coking coal and other commodities. And it has engaged with their Central Asian neighbours, with Turkey, with

the Trans Caucasus countries, with the Middle East, with India, with China, with South East Asia. It has stepped up its activities in Africa. So, Russia is trying to prove that it is not isolated. Isolation is more on the western side rather than the rest of the world. But this is a process that will continue to play out as we see the war progressing into the third year.

“Private armies have the advantage of deniability but have the disadvantage of the risk of going out of control.”

Padmashree Anandhan: What will be the state of the Wagner mercenary group post a failed rebellion?

Ambassador Varma: The mercenaries, the Wagner group. So, this notion of paramilitary groups which are notionally independent and run by private companies but reporting to the state is not a new phenomenon. The Russians have had it. The Americans also had it in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are a lot of such western supported groups in Africa fighting on various sides. But the Wagner group gained public attention and notoriety in a sense because of their excessive political ambition. Or trying to dictate their vision of how the war should be conducted and what should be taken forward in terms of decision-making in Moscow, particularly of the Russian Ministry of Defence. Now President Putin and the government authorities in Moscow allowed this to happen for about four to five months until there was almost open rebellion. And that open rebellion was in a sense closed down and stopped and finally crushed leading to the death of the leader of the Wagner group. And that problem has now been in a sense rectified by making it compulsory for all servicemen fighting in Ukraine to register themselves and sign a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence. But that has not eliminated the problem and the problem is not confined only to Russian paramilitaries in Ukraine.

There are a lot of Russian paramilitaries and other countries' paramilitaries and other

hotspots of the world. So, this is a phenomenon that will not go away. Private armies have the advantage of deniability but have the disadvantage of the risk of going out of control. And we saw that in good measure when the Wagner rebellion took place in the summer of last year.

Femy Francis: You talked about Russia's pivot to the east, what would the Eastern countries be getting back by collaborating with Russia? So, can these countries in the East afford to accept this pivot and will it even if it does not mean that it will make Superpowers very unhappy?

Ambassador Varma: Well, that's an interesting question and there is no single answer for all countries. A lot of countries are from Russia's point of view vitally important to pivot to the East to find new partners and new markets. It is clear that Russia has lost the European and American markets for the foreseeable future. So, in terms of markets China and India are very important. But for the countries concerned also are aware that Russia requires these markets and therefore is willing to provide certain discounts, especially in the supply of crude oil. And that we have seen is the reason why there has been a dramatic rise in India's oil imports from Russia almost to USD 50 billion and Russia is now the largest oil supplier to India. It is also a major oil and gas supplier to China. There are other commodities also that Russia is very important for commodities such as fertilizers, wheat, maize and cooking coal. In many of these aspects, India is also interested in enhancing its cooperation. Of course, this raises the problem concerning the application of US and EU sanctions.

“Russia has lost the European and American markets for the foreseeable future. So, in terms of markets China and India are very important.”

Sanctions are direct sanctions and secondary sanctions. Now these apply both in terms of sectors and these also apply in terms of the banking system. Presently there are no sanctions on Russian origin diamonds but

these might become stricter by the end of the year. Russian oil you can buy below USD 60 a barrel if you want to use western shipping and insurance companies. However some countries have been able to circumvent this by finding non-western shipping routes, shipping companies and non-western insurance. The third difficulty is the currency of payment. Of course, it is not possible today to do major currency transfers concerning dollars. It used to be the original currency in which crude was traded. So now there has been a variety of solutions to this partly using the Dirham through the UAE, the use of Yuan through China, use of national currencies sometimes in Indian rupees. So, this is a case-by-case thing. Sanctions are also not static. Sanctions are changing. They are expanding. And until now US has not imposed any secondary sanctions on any individual Indian company.

This may be more political than legal because if the US were to decide to impose sanctions, secondary sanctions on Indian companies it can do so. But essentially sanctions regime on the part of the US is entirely unilateral. They can decide what they want to do. Now the reason why the US has not imposed sanctions on India even though we are importing a lot of Russian oil is that some of the Russian oil is processed, refined and re-exported back into the international market, particularly for transfers to Europe. There are presently no sanctions on oil products that are refined from Russian origin crude. Only Russian origin crude is there. So firstly, it is an explicit gap. Secondly, there are some loopholes. Thirdly there are some grey areas. But all these three are shifting constantly. So, you cannot be sure whether if there will be no sanctions today, there will be no sanctions tomorrow.

“Russian economy has been affected but in the medium term we will see signs of the effects of long-term sanctions.”

Similarly, Russia is also watching this game very carefully. But largely as of now, and it is not a final judgment, the American effort to impose crippling sanctions on Russia has

“A number of Western companies in Russia, some have completely exited. Some have retained their stores and still staying on.”

largely failed. It has not stopped the war. It has not changed the Russian war calculus. It has not led to a collapse of the Russian economy. There are still international buyers going on for India for this trade. And it has brought Russia closer to China which is not the original intention of the US. And India which the Americans wanted to shift to the US side of the conflict has in a sense stayed in the middle. It is dealing with both Russia and with the US. So of course, it doesn't mean that it has had no impact on Russia. The Russian economy has been affected but in the medium term we will see signs of the effects of long-term sanctions. But everybody is hoping that at least European countries are hoping that once there is a peace settlement many of the companies will return to Russia. In fact, a number of Western companies in Russia, some have completely exited. Some have retained their stores and still staying on. Some have sold their franchises to their Russian partners. Some have just changed the name and continued to operate. So, it is not that American sanctions have worked, have not worked only on India. They have also not worked on their European partners. Because Europe is already unhappy with the fact that their energy prices have become three or four times more when Russian energy has not come into Europe. So, the Americans are a little reluctant to tighten the screws on Europeans because that will further affect the economy. So, this is a very dynamic process and it is worth your further study.

Rohini Reenum: Even before Russia annexed Crimea, it had warned the West that any further expansion of NATO and it will not be tolerable. Why do you think NATO kept pushing for an expansion without realising Russia's reaction? What do you think NATO's end game is?

Ambassador Varma: Yeah, that's a very good question and it is a lesson on the nature of international politics. The fundamental core of international politics is

countries will push you if you allow them to push you. Because that is the nature of the power differential. Big countries and stronger countries tend to push around weaker countries. That's a given. It happens every day. Countries recalibrate and recalculate if there is a counter-pushback. Now, how did NATO succeed in expanding against Russia? There are three, or four factors. Russia raised the issue of NATO expansion even when, at the time of the end of the Cold War. Even at the time of the reunification of Germany. At that time, NATO and the Americans gave a commitment which turned out to be hollow. So, James Baker who was the Secretary of State told Gorbachev who was the President of the Soviet Union that NATO would not expand one inch eastwards. Not one inch eastwards.

“But NATO expansion is not the answer and NATO expansion is a red line for him in 2007.”

Then the first wave of NATO expansion took place. When it took place, the Russians protested. President Clinton said, ‘no, no, it's nothing against Russia. You are our friends. We have domestic compulsions. We have a coalition. So, don't worry. In 1997, the Americans proposed a Russia-NATO council. Again, they cheated the Russians. They said, no, no, we are partners now. We created a Russia-NATO council. Don't worry.’ But nothing, we are friends now. It was 1997 that took place. They also created what is called the Russia-NATO Founding Act. It says that they are now partners and we will not create trouble for each other, equality, partnership. When President Putin came to power in 2000, he said, we will go by wanting to join NATO ourselves. Just two months ago, he said, it was a very naive statement on my part. We believe the... So, the two expansions had taken place already by that time. The third, fourth and fifth expansions took place. At every stage, the Russians said no. The Americans disregarded them. Why did they disregard them? Because you can disregard them. If countries can push you, they will push you. Right? So, in 2007, President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference. I mean, it is a very illuminating speech where he

explained why he wants a partnership with NATO.

But NATO expansion is not the answer and NATO expansion is a red line for him in 2007. Whereas in 2008, there was the Russia-Georgia war which was provoked by the Georgians. Then you have 2014 which is the Maidan events in Kyiv where one government was overthrown and another put in place. NATO expansion into the Baltics, they tolerated. Russia could not do anything. They were too weak. Poland, they were not too concerned because there were still barriers between Poland and Russia. Romania, Czech Republic, Macedonia, you know, there is still some distance away from the Russian border. Ukraine joining NATO is on the Russian border. The flight time of a missile that is based in Ukraine, the flight time to Moscow is less than five minutes. So, NATO had finally come to the doorstep of Russia the NATO countries, the US pushed Russia like a spring down below when it could no longer push it further. And what happens to the spring once you put it down? It re-bounces back. That is what happened. The Russians tried to see if they could have a via mediation. They were not interested in territorial acquisition in Ukraine but they were interested in wanting to have a neutral Ukraine. And in December of 2022, while the war had not started, they submitted a proposal for a new security architecture in Europe that would ensure that... and as I said, even after the war started in March and April, they were ready for even that which is a future. Now, the Russians are convinced that Ukraine will join NATO, 100%. There is no way of stopping it. So, therefore, if Ukraine is going to join NATO, they might as well occupy some buffer land that will keep NATO forces away from the Russian border. So, if you see the Donbas area, it is now a new military buffer zone that they have created for themselves. It is an imperfect answer as far as the Russians are concerned but it is much better than the whole of Ukraine going in.

“They were not interested in territorial acquisition in Ukraine but they were interested in wanting to have a neutral Ukraine.”

Now, what does it tell you about international politics? International politics tells you that weakness will be exploited. If you are weak, countries will exploit you. There is no doubt about that. If you are naive, countries will exploit you. And the Russians were naive, you know, they were fooled three to four times. Third, having a problem on your neighbourhood is not a sign of your strength. If we have problems in our neighbourhood, in Nepal, Bhutan or Sri Lanka, you are not respected. Russia had problems in the neighbourhood. And if you have problems in the neighbourhood, countries will tend to exploit it. So, that is what happened. The Russians are trying to correct it over a three-decade-long era of weakness is now being, trying to be corrected through a process of war. And process of war is always not the best way of correcting a weakness. Many of them are handling it differently. So, there are different lessons to be learnt from different perspectives in the Russia-Ukraine war.

“As long as the Russia-China relationship is not a military alliance and is directed against other countries including the US or US partners, it will not be a direct problem for our relationship.”

Akriti Sharma: Can you give your comments on India and Russia and second how it would be with India looking toward western countries such as France and the US for defence cooperation?

Ambassador Varma: India-Russia relations have a long history. Largely because we have never had a very direct conflict with each other. The fact that we don't have a common border I think helps in such situations. But more than that I think there has also been a convergence, a strategic convergence of our interests which have been maintained and cultivated by successive leaders both in Russia and in India. And there is also a popular sentiment amongst the people about each other which I think has created a positive context in which the relations have progressed. Of course, relations cannot

remain stagnant forever. In each era, each time the relations have to be reinvented and restructured. I think the time has come for the restructuring to take place. But the restructuring elements will remain the same. We have a very strong defence relationship with Russia and it is for that reason that we made our defence purchases from Russia. Because Russia was the only country that was willing to give us advanced technology, very advanced systems at prices that we could afford. And on terms of conditions that were not very intrusive. And there was also technology transfer and aspects like that. And a basic element of trust. Russians have supplied very little arms to Pakistan over a period of time. So, that is a plus point for us. Now, going forward will the Russia-China relationship be a factor for India? As long as the Russia-China relationship is not a military alliance and is directed against other countries including the US or US partners, it will not be a direct problem for our relationship. Because Russia does want a multipolar world but also wants a multipolar Asia. It does not want China to dominate the Asian continent. So, in that sense, India is very important to them. Now, in terms of diversification of our arms imports, I think that is an ongoing process. I think it is a valid process.

There is merit in it. But I think the diversification should take place not in terms of political alignments of countries but in terms of specific weapons systems and the conditions for which they are being purchased. Whether they fit into our doctrine, whether there is a strong Make in India component, whether there is a technology transfer. And if the Americans give us good equipment, so be it. I think we will buy it from them. Or it comes from the French. Or if there is good equipment available from Russia, we will continue to take it from them. Presently, there are three big arms projects which are still ongoing. One is the S-400 supply. The second is the supply of the 1135.6 frigates. Four frigates of them. Two will be constructed in India. And the third is the joint manufacture of the AK-203 assault weapon which will be supplied to the Indian Armed Forces.

“We have a very strong defence relationship with Russia and it is for that reason that we made our defence purchases from Russia.”

There will be other future projects in the future. So, India's policy should have no exclusivity to any one part. We will pick and choose and that ability to pick and choose according to our interest is the essence of strategic autonomy. And I think our strategic autonomy... But Russia is also a high standard. If the Americans and the French also learn from India's experience with Russia and they give us equally good equipment and equally sophisticated equipment, I think we should take it from them. But no country should feel that they enjoy an exclusive market in India. And India's priorities are at the forefront. And I am confident that after this initial phase where Russia is committed to... the Russian defence industry is committed to Ukraine, they have... presently they have some difficulties. But in a couple of years, I think these difficulties will be sorted out. And we will return to normal relations ... However, the Indian market will not remain the same. Today we have a very strong make-in-India component, the Atma Nirbhar component. Many of our private defence industry players are active. India's defence needs are also of a higher quality. And I am sure Russians also feel it is in their continuing interest to support India as India's defence partner. And in the Russia-India relationship, the traditions, friendship are so strong. It will not be very difficult for us to reinvent the relationship. So, I think the key word is reinvention. It cannot be business as in the past. But the future should be addressed with the strengths of the past. But also addressed to the needs of the future.

“Russia has been thrown out in a sense practically from the European market. But Russia is waiting for the backlash to take place in the political economy of Europe.”

Akhil Ajith: How do you see the role of BRICS and its emergence, the expansion of BRICS as a key factor in the changing world order? Can you also comment on Russia's energy resources and its economic problems?

Ambassador Varma: About BRICS, Russia places a lot of importance on BRICS. Also because it is now presently holding the presidency of the BRICS and will be hosting the Kazan summit later this year. Of course, BRICS is an old institution but it has got a new relevance today for a couple of factors. First of course it allows Russia to break out of the isolation that the West is trying to impose on Russia and it has turned to the BRICS in a big way. This has coincided parallelly with a renewed interest in BRICS from many countries across the world. More than 20 countries have expressed interest, and more than 30 countries have expressed general interest because of the ethic of multi-polarity that is now widely prevalent in different regions of the world.

“The Russian priority in BRICS appears to be the BRICS payment mechanism.”

Many countries do wish to have an alternative international forum that deals with global issues which is apart from the regional forums or the United Nations, something in between. And that has led to a strong demand for the expansion of BRICS membership and six more countries were added at the last BRICS summit. Of course, it may in hindsight look like a mistake that it was done in haste because Argentina has now in a sense stepped back and will not be joining BRICS. So multi-polarity itself is now a dynamic process. There will be an ebb and flow of multi-polarity which will also be reflected in BRICS. The Russian priority in BRICS appears to be the BRICS payment mechanism. It is not a BRICS currency, it is not to be confused with a BRICS currency but a payment mechanism amongst the BRICS states which will also be available to the international community to de-emphasize the primacy and the monopoly of the dollar payment system. To what extent they can, this will involve also greater use of

national currencies. To what extent they succeed we will wait and see but this is the direction in which it is going.

“A lot of the defence equipment that is produced in India with Russian collaboration can be re-exported to African countries.”

Concerning energy resources, this again is a fluid and dynamic situation. Energy is not a freestanding issue. Its connection with climate change is not a freestanding issue. Finally, it has to be sustainable not only in terms of climate change but sustainable in terms of political economy. If it leads to recession, high inflation, unemployment and closing down of industries no energy formula will work in the long term. In fact there will be a backlash. Russia has been thrown out in a sense practically from the European market. But Russia is waiting for the backlash to take place in the political economy of Europe. And some signs of it we already see because of the right-wing governments that have come up and in the right-wing movements in different parts of the country which may want to rethink the energy choices of Europe to make it more sustainable and to restore economic growth. There is no substitute for cheap energy for restoring economic growth in Europe. Europe will find it very difficult to restore economic growth if the high cost of energy continues well into the future. And the ready available economic growth energy option that is available is again restoring the ties with Russia. And of the four North Stream pipelines one is still operational. One is still intact. It is not been broken up.

Anu Maria: On the Russia-Africa relations, has Russia found its alternative in Africa and Africa has found its alternative in Russia. And the problem is the west and west has the problem in there. As a scholar, should I look at Russia as a problem in Africa?

Ambassador Varma: So about Africa, Russia ignored Africa for the first two decades after the end of the Cold War. Even though it had a lot of sentimental support in Africa because Russia, the Soviet Union was a great

supporter of the National Liberation Movements. But I think in the last four years Russia has paid more attention to Africa because there is an interest among some of the African countries to get to Russia because they are disappointed with dealing with the Western powers and also disappointed with dealing with China. All these countries have gone through a cycle of experience with China and they feel that they are trying to see if there is someone alternative to China. So, it's wrong to think that Russia's motives for getting into Africa are only anti-Western. It is indirectly also undercuts, Chinese influence in the instruments of Russian influence in Africa are limited. Military aid, energy resources, nuclear energy in Africa and some bilateral trade. So Russia does not operate across the spectrum. They don't give much financial aid though they have written off a lot of old debt of the African countries. But they are focused on a few countries. Fewer countries than the US or the EU or China. And they are also focused on a few areas. But those areas are geopolitically very important. The Sahel is one such example. And it is also to create bilateral leverages but also multilateral leverages against the big powers. Like other big-power countries, Russia has also started the practice of hosting Russia-Africa summits. Like China, like the US, like the EU and India. Now the question is whether we can cooperate with Russia in specific fields. The answer is yes. A lot of African countries are interested in affordable defence equipment. A lot of the defence equipment that is produced in India with Russian collaboration can be re-exported to African countries. We can also cooperate in nuclear energy. We can also cooperate in nuclear medicine and agriculture. Will that involve conflict with other countries? Yes, but we can pick and choose which country which partner and which area. We should cooperate with Russia.

“It's wrong to think that Russia's motives for getting into Africa are only anti-Western. It is indirectly also undercuts, Chinese influence.”

Shamini Velayutham: Ever since the Russia-Ukraine war began, there seems

to be a weakening of support from Russia towards the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Do you think Russia will be able to gain space back post-war in the Southern Caucasus region?

Ambassador Varma: Let's start with the Caucasus and Russia's relations with Armenia and the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Now, Russia has had traditionally very strong relations with Armenia. And Russia has tried to play a mediating role between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Armenian position itself has undergone change in the last two years. Everybody agrees that Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan. And Armenia would have to cede control over Nagorno-Karabakh. The issue was in what conditions and for their people and under what humanitarian conditions it would take place. Russia also deployed a peacekeeping force in the region. It is the change in the Armenian position that it would no longer need Russia to mediate and it would seek the support of France and the US in settling the Azeri-Armenian conflict. It led to a situation where Russia said, okay if that is so, then good luck. Which led to Azerbaijan sending troops to occupy, retake and control Nagorno-Karabakh and its capital Stepanakert. This has been deeply unpopular within Armenia and Russia has not been a steadfast supporter of Armenia in its fight against Azerbaijan. From the Russian point of view, their priority is today the conflict in Ukraine. Russia thought that if it intervened more actively in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which in any case Armenia was losing interest in, it would get

overextended and in a sense to avoid that overextension and avoid a trap for its interest in the Trans Caucasus, it kept away.

“It is the change in the Armenian position that it would no longer need Russia to mediate and it would seek the support of France and the US in settling the Azeri-Armenian conflict.”

So tactically it might seem Russian weakness is apparent in the Trans Caucasus. That is partly true. But Russia is confident that in the long term, countries like Armenia cannot do without restoring good relations with Russia because of the economic connections, the social connections, the number of Armenians staying in Russia, number of Russians now staying in Armenia. Armenia is in a fairly hostile environment. It has troubles with Azerbaijan but it is also an area where Turkey has expanded its influence. Russia is also cooperating with Iran to maintain its links with Armenia because, in the transport corridors, there is a concern that these transport corridors might become a conduit for the western deployment of arms in Armenia.

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COMMENT

The War in Ukraine: Drones, missiles and counterattacks

By Padmashree Anandhan

Moscow's forces seem to have adapted their tactics compared to last winter 2022 by preceding their missiles with waves of drones with a mission to inundate Kyiv's air defence capabilities while depleting its ammunition reserves.

On 01 January, following the attack in Belgorod, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, issued a warning. Putin stated: “We are striking with high-precision weapons at the decision-making centres, at locations where military personnel and mercenaries gather.”

On 30 December 2023, Belgorod district located in southwestern Russia was subject to a repeated missile and drone strike from Ukraine injuring more than 100 and killing 24 civilians.

On 02 January, the Ukrainian Air Force reported on its struggle to counter Russia's drone attack (Tupolev Tu-95s bombers) in Kyiv. Apart from this, missile attacks were reported in Kharkiv resulting in damage to residential buildings and civilian infrastructure injuring many and killing four. On the same day, Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, citing the mass missile attack in Kyiv and Kharkiv demanded more air defence aid such as “Patriot, IRIS-T, and NASAMS.”

On 02 January, in response to the missile attacks in Kyiv and Kharkiv, Russia Today reported on how the targets were planned by the Russian Ministry of Defence. Russian armed forces claimed to have carried out a group strike using long-range precision weapons and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) on the military complex of Ukraine. According to the report from Russian officials, the attack was targeted at facilities in Kyiv and the suburbs that produced missiles and drones including the repair sites. Additionally, Russia claimed to hit missile depots, ammunition and aircraft weaponry.

On 05 January, the White House issued a statement citing the usage of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) of North Korea by Russia for the mass missile attack in Ukraine. The US National Security spokesperson John Kirby called the transfer of missiles a

“significant and concerning escalation.”

Major Issues

First, increasing mass missile attacks. Kyiv which has been subject to missile attacks since November 2023 is considered to be the resort when attacks escalate for Russia. Critical and energy infrastructures such as power plants and substations, district heating networks and telecommunications equipment have been the targets. Since January, the military depots, production sites and complexes have also come under intense attack. On the ground, with not much push or pull in the front line, Russia continues to advance north and south of Bakhmut except on the east bank of the Dniro River. Considering the frequency, the mass missile attacks and Russia's air power seem to be intact against Ukraine.

“The military is set to face a critical shortage, especially in air defence if the package remains blocked.”

Second, Russia's winter manoeuvrability. After the rocket attack launched in August 2023 in Kharkiv following Ukraine's attack on the Crimean bridge, the November attacks were considered the largest. Russia targeted Kyiv's administrative cities and energy infrastructure with 75 Shahed drones. The December 2023 attack by Russia on Ukraine with 120 missiles can be seen as the third wave. Moscow's forces seem to have adapted their tactics compared to last winter 2022 by preceding their missiles with waves of drones with a mission to inundate Kyiv's air defence capabilities while depleting its ammunition reserves.

Third, Ukraine's continuing to plead for air defence support. Kyiv welcomes this support, but it also recognises the dependency on the outcome of the current political deadlock in the US, which is stalled over the 2024 Presidential

elections. The military is set to face a critical shortage, especially in air defence if the package remains blocked. This leaves Ukraine with the challenge to continue to shield itself against such mass missile strikes.

Fourth, Ukraine's strategy and question of peace. Zelensky in his recent interview with the Economist denied the notion of Russia's win citing the losses incurred by Russia to be more. Confirming the failure of the mid-2023 counteroffensive, appraised the Ukraine forces' efforts in countering Russia in the Black Sea. Despite the lack of air defences, Ukraine has outperformed expectations by strategically utilising the resources while leaving the possibility of peace out of the discussion.

Road Ahead

First, a greyer 2024 ahead for Ukraine. Overall looking at the trend of Russia's wave of mass missiles in response to the attacks of Ukraine and consistently at Kyiv showcases its symbolic attitude to showcase its strength. The pledged weapons and air defence systems do show promise for Ukraine's battle against Russia but with the increase in the frequency of the mass missile attacks, it is downside for Ukraine, forced into a fight. Without Western countries promising long-term military support with the next level of weapon systems such as long-range Ukraine is left in the grey zone.

Second, a confident Russia. With the tactical use of weapons such as rockets, Shahed drones and a mass number of missiles since the 2023 winter, Russia has succeeded in showcasing its air power.

“The pledged weapons and air defence systems do show promise for Ukraine's battle against Russia but with the increase in the frequency of the mass missile attacks, it is downside for Ukraine, forced into a fight.”

Putin's symbolic year-end conference and the following statements to retaliate show the plan in place and the readiness of Russia to strike back. This also proves the vacillation of the sanctions and restrictions on other actors such as China, and Iran imposed to control Russia by the West.

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COMMENT

Farmers' protests highlight economic stress and a rising far-right in the EU

By Rosemary Kurian

Amid economic concerns, potential democratic backsliding, momentum for the far-right parties and waning popularity for centre-left governments in Europe, the farmers' protests could be a tipping point to achieve the above result.

The beginning of 2024 is marred with protests by farmers in several EU states. German farmers crowded the streets in all 16 federal states of Germany, expressing their disapproval of the government's decision to phase out subsidies for diesel used in farmyard vehicles. Berlin was brought to a standstill when farmers made a political statement by blocking the streets in front of the Bundestag. Germany joined a series of farmer protests across Europe, including Poland, Spain and France, over unfavourable subsidy cuts, budget hikes, EU green policies and ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

Similarly, farmers in Romania returned to the streets of Bucharest after failed negotiations over concerns of high tax rates and delayed compensation of loss suffered during droughts. The Russian blockade of the export of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea has opened Romania up as a transit hub for Ukraine, which has threatened local produce over displacement by Ukrainian companies. Polish farmers implemented blockades to force Donald Tusk's government to regulate the import of Ukrainian grains into the EU border, highlighting the need for greater EU regulation of grains from Ukraine to protect EU markets.

Why are the European governments under stress?

Germany's centre-left coalition government under Chancellor Olaf Scholz continues to experience an economic crunch after the pandemic, followed by its decision to support Ukraine, and a war-triggered energy crisis. Germany, often considered Europe's superpower, was on its way to become the only G7 country with a shrinking economy in

2023. Additionally, Germany is grappling with an emergency spending freeze after the Constitutional court prohibited the diversion of an unused Covid fund towards climate goals. Amid the budget crisis, the Green Party in the coalition denies compromising on the government's climate goals and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) insists on major budget cuts.

In the case of Romania, the concern remains securing a deal with the EU, much like most eastern European countries, to prevent the free trade of grain from Ukraine, which could address some demands for compensation by the farmers. Whereas in Poland, the newly appointed Prime Minister Donald Tusk, struggles to strike a balance between his promises of a pro-EU approach and support for protesting farmers. The previous government headed by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) was highly Eurosceptic, whereas Tusk vowed to better his relations with Brussels, but faces challenge from the PiS with a risk of overturning their policies. Therefore, while Tusk has decided to reject the EU proposition of avoiding tariffs for Ukrainian imports, his path remains one of strategic compromise. For the time being, a deal has been reached, granting compensation to Polish farmers through corn subsidies, and maintaining agricultural taxes at 2023 levels. The unregulated border with Ukraine remains a point of contention.

What role does the EU play?

Farmers across Europe, spanning from France and the Netherlands to Germany and Poland, are protesting to reinstate the status quo. While each protest is independent and rooted in domestic policy complexities, the larger questions of economic sustainability

and environment regulations place the EU policy at the centre of the crisis, especially its ambitious climate targets by 2030 that farmers refuse to implement. The EU's ambitious 'Farm to Fork' strategy urges halving the use of fertilisers and doubling organic production in farmlands. To the EU, the agricultural sector is the "problem child" in its green ambitions. Governments had urged the shutting up of certain farms due to nitrous oxide emission rates (the Netherlands) and allowed free import of produce from Ukraine post the war began, under common EU policy guidelines. However, the protests have urged independent governments to scale back on such policy decisions, even if it meant a conflict with the EU's vision.

"...a deal has been reached, granting compensation to Polish farmers through corn subsidies, and maintaining agricultural taxes at 2023 levels. The unregulated border with Ukraine remains a point of contention."

How are far-right parties utilising the protests?

When farmers' protests first began in the Netherlands, it created a new rural political party under the banner of the Farmer-Citizens' Movement that won in the local elections. In Germany, far-right parties like the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) are gaining support through slogans of "Germany first" in its Eurosceptic and populist approach. Many believe that the AfD aims at bringing down Scholz's government by using the momentum of the protests. Most farmers are conservative and in Germany, their support extends to the Christian Conservative parties in a bid against climate policies. Far right groups like AfD have used the protests opportunely, the most shocking being the ferry attack of Robert Habeck, the German Vice-Chancellor, and his family. He saw potential of the far-right "jeopardising the law and the rule of law". While the farmers have denied any interest towards fringe groups, the far-right continues to piggyback on their cause. The fear of most centre-left governments is to

prevent the spread of the far-right, a trend that has set foot across Europe.

What does it mean for EU Parliament elections?

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission's President, is a staunch proponent of the European Green Deal, the EU's green transition deal rejected by farmer unions due to demands of halving fossil fuels and doubling organic production. Ahead of the EU Parliament elections in June, von der Leyen aims to appease farmers through a "strategic dialogue" on 25 January, to heed to their grievances and cater to their needs. The farmers' protests have become a focal election agenda among parties across the EU, and an opportunistic far-right has forced governments to recentre their strategies, one that von der Leyen too, wishes to utilise. While the AfD backs the farmers in their election agenda in Germany, Macron's France is assessing candidates agreeable to the farmers' cause. For the sake of elections, he is projecting himself as a traditionalist, and balancing green plans with the farmers' cause. Aware of the threat that Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally poses under the circumstances, officials suggest Julien Denormandie, the former farmer-friendly agriculture minister who left politics to join the private sector.

A report by the European Council on Foreign Relations predicted a right-leaning European Parliament in 2024, based on a poll. In states like Austria, France and Poland, the far-right are predicted to lead, with a close second in Germany, Spain, Sweden and Portugal. This could significantly raise euroscepticism among EU countries and hamper all climate policies. Amid economic concerns, potential democratic backsliding, momentum for the far-right parties and waning popularity for centre-left governments in Europe, the farmers' protests could be a tipping point to achieve the above result.

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COMMENT

Decoding the UK-Rwanda migration bill post supreme court ruling

By Alka Bala

This emergency legislation upon which the migration scheme is positioned, strains the relationship between the judiciary and the Parliament, as it limits judicial scrutiny of decisions taken by the government.

The flagship Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill of Rishi Sunak, the UK Prime Minister's aims to curb illegal immigration and gained criticism from the Supreme Court, lawmakers and few within the Tories. Some of the bill's provisions were viewed to be violating the international refugee law, the safety of Rwanda to host refugees and concerns arose over the refolement principle and economic feasibility.

What are the changes made to the Rwanda bill after the court proceeding?

In April 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the UK and Rwanda calling for Migration and Economic Partnership to establish an asylum transfer scheme. According to it, asylum seekers arriving in the UK would be deported to Rwanda for the processing of their asylum applications and further would be settled there if the claims become successful. The UK Supreme Court raised its concerns on this scheme citing Rwanda's poor human rights record, inadequacies in the system of asylum processing and issues regarding a potential breach of the non-refoulment principle of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In response, a new UK-Rwanda treaty signed on 05 December replaced the non-binding MoU. Addressing Supreme Court's concerns, the treaty eliminates the potential refolement by stating that no relocated asylum seeker from Rwanda, can be sent to any country other than the UK. The treaty promises strengthened safeguards in the asylum process through expanding powers of the monitoring committee, the creation of a new appeals court and a 'first-instance' decision-making body.

The treaty was accompanied by a prospective legislation to expel safety concerns regarding Rwanda; through the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill. The bill designates Rwanda as a safe country and demands similar consideration of decision-makers while transporting asylum seekers to Rwanda. Within the UK court, the bill would prohibit the asylum seekers from challenging their removal to Rwanda citing "safety concerns" and refolement. In attempts to address the Supreme Court's concerns, the bill goes too far by excluding the Refugee Convention and the UK's international legal obligations. Criticisms persist over the bill as it might still face legal challenges from the European Court of Human Rights, highlighting the roadblocks to smooth implementation of the scheme. Most importantly, this emergency legislation upon which the migration scheme is positioned, strains the relationship between the judiciary and the Parliament, as it limits judicial scrutiny of decisions taken by the government.

Is this policy financially feasible?

An impact assessment by the Home Office estimated an increased cost of GBP 63,000 in relocating an individual to Rwanda. The Home Office aims to eliminate the cost to the taxpayer, which would require the government to deter 37 per cent of illegal migrants arriving in the UK. Although labelled as an "imperfect tool" by Craig Mackinlay, an MP from the Conservative Party, this policy could lead to savings in the future due to its deterrent effects. Along with the costs saved on resettlement, the government would additionally save on the provision of social housing, benefits and healthcare to asylum seekers. Quoted as a

“spend to save” scheme by Mackinlay, the actual costs could exceed the estimates since the effectiveness of it is yet to be tested.

“...killing the bill would have resulted in the Conservative Party facing the upcoming elections with a deeply divided front lacking actionable plans to curb illegal migration.”

According to the Labour Party, a total of GBP 400 million would be sent to Rwanda, out of which the UK government has paid GBP 290 million and expects to pay GBP 50 million more in 2024-2025. In the scenario of migrants not being sent to Rwanda, President Paul Kagame’s statement on refunding the UK’s money comes as an assurance against the financial failure of the policy. However, the ambiguity remains as Rwanda did not mention the refundable amount or the time and later specified that it was not obligated to do so.

Does the debate in the Parliament reflect the deeper division among Tory MPs?

A Conservative rebellion was evident in the debates leading up to the third reading stage at the House of Commons where rebel Tories backed amendments to tighten the legislation, leaving no loopholes that would allow violation of provisions of international refugee law. James Cleverly, UK Home Secretary’s efforts to gather support from lawmakers in favour of the bill, stated the government’s pledge to crack down on the smuggling gangs that aid illegal migration

and to revamp the current lagging asylum procedures. Calls for support have been met with criticisms of the increased expenditure of the bill, as they cite alternative uses for the proposed GBP 400 million, increasing cross-border police units and their security powers. The practical functionality of the bill is questioned, as despite paying an exorbitant amount to Rwanda, not even a single asylum seeker has been moved to the country due to legal challenges. Among the infighting, Sunak’s lead was undermined as two senior Conservative party deputy chairs Lee Anderson and Brendan Clarke-Smith resigned after leading a group of 60 Tories to vote in favour of the proposed amendments. Other rightwing rebels including Robert Jenrick, former immigration minister, and Suella Braverman former Home Secretary, along with nine other Tory MPs voted against the bill whereas 36 Tories abstained. The bill passed in the House of Commons with a majority of 44 votes. Despite statements on Sunak’s failure to gather consensus among the Tories, ultimately the bill voting required the Tories to come together, as killing the bill would have resulted in the Conservative Party facing the upcoming elections with a deeply divided front lacking actionable plans to curb illegal migration.

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COMMENT

Norway: Parliament approves controversial deep-sea mining

By Alka Bala

Norway's proposal believes deep-sea mining would allow a faster transition to a low-carbon economy, however, such an activity would be performed at the cost of losing the earth's oldest carbon reservoirs.

Norwegian Parliament's approval for deep sea mining sparks a greater debate over its environmental risks and the need for diversification of supply sources of essential minerals necessary for green transition. Scientific knowledge gaps highlight the environmental costs of such an activity while also questioning its feasibility. Heralded as a responsible ocean nation, Norway's support for the controversial practice raises concerns over its future strategies for ocean resource management.

In January 2024, the Norway Parliament voted in favour, with cross-party support to open up the Norwegian waters and its seabed for commercial deep-sea mining. Through its proposal, Norway will be adopting the controversial practice, despite avid opposition from environmental groups, scientists and fishery organisations over the "irreversible damage" to the marine ecosystem and its biodiversity. The issue of deep-sea mining faced a larger conflict of interest in the EU, whereas the global community awaits guidelines from the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to navigate the exploration and exploitation of one of the essential global commons, the ocean system.

Why deep-sea mining now?

The proposal for exploration of deep-sea comes as the seabed covered with nodules (potato-sized rocks) and crusts contain critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, manganese, scandium and zinc. These minerals are considered crucial for the development of renewable energy technology, such as the making of electric batteries and turbines. Accelerating the speed of the green transition, would also position Norway as a major energy producer, and ensure the supply and

security of minerals within Europe. It would solve the difficulties faced in the procurement of rare minerals, due to their unequal concentration in different parts of the world. The Government has highlighted a step-by-step approach for the implementation of deep-sea mining, where licences would be given to companies for commercial purposes only after parliamentary approval.

Why are international environmental organisations concerned?

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), sea-bed mining could lead to large amounts of sound, vibration and light pollution endangering marine fauna while also disturbing the habitat of organisms dependent on the nodules. In the report published by the Environment Justice Foundation, such high environmental risks highlight the need to use alternative approaches to deep-sea mining. It proposed that demand for minerals could be reduced by 58 per cent between 2022 and 2050 through improved recycling, circular economy and new technologies. Other environmentalists urge to focus on reducing the environmental damage caused by current mining operations on land, instead of starting a new industry.

What is Europe's response and take on deep-sea mining?

On 07 February, the European Parliament passed a resolution raising concerns about Norway's proposed deep-sea mining. The area to be explored by Norway falls under the Svalbard Fisheries Protection Zone, and allows 22 EU countries and 23 other states to equally pursue fisheries-related activities. Concerns were raised about the detrimental impacts of deep-sea mining on fisheries, fish

stocks and access to fishing groups. It called for Norway to follow a precautionary principle and supported an international moratorium on deep-sea mining until scientific concerns regarding its impact on marine ecosystems are mitigated. Norway and the EU are part of the European Economic Area, and Norway would require European markets for the minerals extracted from such processes and also to ensure that the mining industry becomes commercially feasible. Although the European Parliament's resolution lacks legal binding, it acts as an indicator of the European disapproval of the proposed practice.

The global and regional response to Norway's decision has been marked with criticism, as 24 countries globally and 7 EU countries have demanded a temporary ban on sea-bed mining. France strongly opposed deep-sea mining voting for a ban in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The UK had shown its support for a temporary moratorium until enough scientific evidence was made available. Other EU countries that have expressed their support for a temporary ban are Spain, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Finland and Portugal.

“Norway’s promises for ecosystem-based ocean management contradict its plans for deep sea mining as its proposed mining areas could contain vulnerable marine ecosystems.”

In November 2023 190 EU lawyers addressed an open letter to the Norwegian Parliament, citing the research by 700 scientists, urging them to withdraw their proposal due to knowledge gaps. The European Commission also fears the negative environmental impacts of such an activity. A resolution adopted in 2022 in the European Parliament on the blue economy has also urged international support for a moratorium on deep-sea mining.

Sceptics of Norway's behaviour question its reputation as a responsible ocean nation and highlight the hypocrisy in its environmental policies as it disregards potential

environmental risks. Within the EU, there exists a rift on the issue of deep-sea mining, where the pro-climate Members of the European Parliament have challenged this “irresponsible” decision that overlooks environmental risks. The political right, already saturated with the EU's climate-conscious policies and targets, highlights the hypocrisy of the EU's dependency on non-democratic countries for its supply of minerals and considers Norway's proposal as a step towards diversifying its mineral supply sources. They reiterate the need for diversification of sources of supply by highlighting the EU's adoption of the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) in March 2023, which also focused on the use of sustainable practices for resource exploitation. Governance lapses and concerns about the violation of human rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo were highlighted as it contributes to a major portion of the bloc's mineral energy needs.

What lies ahead for Norway?

The approval allows for the exploration of Norwegian waters, opening up 281,200 square kilometres around the Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard. As of now only three start-ups with links to “sea-services” companies, including Loke Minerals which aims to harvest manganese ore if its license gets approved, whereas another company Green Minerals hopes to extract copper ore and is positive to start test-mining from 2028. Deep sea mining companies post-approval of the license will explore Mohns Ridge, a wedge of Arctic seabed. Activists and scientists find mining companies collecting data on environmental concerns as problematic, as they fear such data might be biased and mask the environmental risks. However, the industry argues that the necessary resources for extensive mapping and exploration are in the hands of private companies. The feasibility of a new mining industry is also debated as these minerals might prove difficult to extract. Norway's proposal believes deep-sea mining would allow a faster transition to a low-carbon economy, however, such an activity would be performed at the cost of losing the earth's oldest carbon reservoirs.

In response to the European Parliament's resolution, Maria Varteressian, the State Secretary at Norway's Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted Norway's commitment towards a "knowledge-based approach" and assured that exploitation activities would begin only after receiving more information. She reiterated the shared interest between Norway and the European Union on principles of sustainable ocean management, and how these principles would underline Norway's future actions.

What does the international law say?

Marked as 'the Ocean Decade,' 2021-2030 is observed as the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development where the UN General Assembly aims for countries to focus on developing and driving scientific knowledge in ocean science. This would enable nations to obtain a better understanding of the ocean system while restoring the decline of the ocean system. Norway through its approval for deep-sea exploration in its national waters and mining has set an uncertain precedent for discussions regarding the exploration and exploitation of minerals in international waters, as the International Seabed Authority (ISA) is yet to finalise the rules and regulations on the same. In the October-November 2023 session held by the ISA council, it framed its discussions around four working groups that dealt with the protection and preservation of the marine environment, Inspection Compliance and Enforcement (ICE), financial model and terms, and institutional matters. ISA would be further expanding and finalising these regulations, through voting and formal adoption would take place in 2025.

Norway gained access to the continental shelf around its EEZ in 2009, however, this access is only limited to the seabed and not its surface waters. Mining activities can impact fisheries operating at the surface level, which may be UK fishing areas or EU fishing areas, raising transboundary

concerns. The Svalbard Treaty ratified by 48 countries, acknowledges Norway's sovereignty but also recognizes that exploitation of resources on Svalbard's continental shelf would be subject to the principle of equality, meaning Norway would not be able to claim sole ownership of these resources. If Norway's proposal for deep sea mining is brought into action, without mitigating the environmental risks, it would be a contradiction to its ocean commitments made at the OSPAR Convention on the protection of the marine environment in the North-East Atlantic and the Ocean Panel, where it has promised 100 per cent sustainable ocean management by 2025.

"Although the European Parliament's resolution lacks legal binding, it acts as an indicator of the European disapproval of the proposed practice."

Norway currently holds the chairmanship of the Arctic Council and highlighted sustainable resource management regarding Oceans as one of its four key priorities. However, Norway's promises for ecosystem-based ocean management contradict its plans for deep sea mining as its proposed mining areas could contain vulnerable marine ecosystems. Other nations of the Arctic Council, such as Canada and Finland had earlier voiced a temporary moratorium as a precautionary pause against sea-bed mining. Additionally, in 2023, companies from Arctic Council nations, Danish company Maersk and US weapons manufacturing company Lockheed had divested in deep-sea mining citing environmental risks. Arctic Council's International Conference on Ecosystem Approach to Management (EA) set to take place in Norway in 2024, would be crucial in determining rules and practices regarding management of ocean resources.

EM Daily Focus*



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FRANCE

Farmer protests continue despite government measures

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 30 January, following continued protests across France, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal reiterated the announced measures, including opening of an aid scheme for livestock, doubling support to those farmers in the Brittany region, and a schedule for payment under the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) by 15 March. Attal stated: "...there must be a French agricultural exception." He affirmed, "...the commitment of the president of the Republic to a new tax cut of EUR two billion."

On 29 January, farmers once again blocked eight points of major highways following two weeks of protest across France using tractors. In response, France's Minister of Interior, Gérald Darmanin, asked the police

forces to show restraint and warned farmers not to block key spots including Paris's Charles de Gaulle, Orly airports and the

Rungis international wholesale food market in the south. Close to 15,000 police and gendarmes were deployed to prevent the spreading of the protests in Paris.

Key issues

First, the problem of the EU's CAP plan. France's Common Agricultural Policies (CAP) in 2021 was approved in July 2023 by the European Commission. As per the plan, fair income and competitiveness were promised through payments per hectare and allocation of EUR 3.5 billion additionally to small and mid-sized farms. With the droughts in place, delay in the reform and financial package with unpaid subsidies has become one of the key causes of high costs for agricultural products leading to the protests, and the subsequent stalling of progress towards resilient agricultural practise. The emergency measures announced by Attal on simplifying technical procedures, ending fuel taxes on farm vehicles, and assurance to not sign the European free-trade deal became ineffective.

Second, criticism against environmental regulation. Farmers have long been

* 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.

criticised for not being environment-friendly. According to the report in France 24 published in February 2023, the food industry contributed to 25 per cent of the greenhouse emissions. The emissions recorded were mainly from the use of fossil fuels for transportation, the use of machines in agriculture and food processing industries, and nitrogen fertilisers. Since then, France has insisted on opting for a transition towards sustainable agricultural practices to reduce the carbon footprint. France has taken a few steps, including reducing herd sizes in 2021, as part of its National Low-Carbon Strategy for agriculture and to make agriculture practise more climate resilient. However, farmers face a larger burden without enough subsidies.

Third, protest against the unfair foreign competition. Besides environmental regulation, French farmers compete against farmers from Belgium, Poland and Brazil. According to a report by France 24, "France imported more than one chicken out of two consumed in 2022 from abroad." The farmers highlighted that the products produced across the world, that were made in France, continue to dominate due to cheaper rates and strict standards of less pesticide, sequestering carbon, allotting more land for solar panels and four per cent of arable land to conserve biodiversity. Additionally, the French farmers claimed that they are produced with no compensation for the high cost incurred.

What's ahead?

First, pressure on the government to act on the delay. The protests which started on 18 January have been prolonged for two weeks, inflicting pressure on the government. This has pushed Macron's administration to restart the pledged reforms and bring back the tax cuts and subsidies, fearing potential food shortages and a supply block. Another reason behind the government's rapid response and negotiation with the farmer unions to control protests is the European Parliament elections, where Macron's party is facing challenges from the far-right National Rally.

Second, the agricultural crisis triggered by

the war. Similar to other European countries such as Germany, Belgium, Poland and the Netherlands, France also faces challenges in allotting funds to the agricultural sector. The key trigger to the protests in France was the economic crunch caused by the war in Ukraine. Since the war began, the French government has prioritised ensuring energy supply, strengthening defence within, and providing aid to Ukraine, thus leaving out the agricultural sector. This has led to increased costs of production and strict regulations, making it difficult for farmers to operate, considering that they did not receive any profits or compensations.

Macron pledges for a stronger and fairer France in a press conference: Three takeaways

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 16 January, in a press conference held after five years Emmanuel Macron, France's President laid out his upcoming presidential agenda focus on "law and order, migration, and education." The overall pledges made during his speech aimed for a "stronger France," starting with reforms on economic bill and tax cut to middle class. As per the report in Euronews the speech was observed as an effort to showcase his leadership against the rising far-right, National Rally challenge in the European elections. It was also a sign to dissipate the domestic anger which brewed due to laws over pension and immigration.

Three takeaways

First, increased pressure within France and the parliament. Swaying into the second term of Presidential elections with less margin of difference, the slow rise of National Rally party adds pressure on La République en Marche with European elections scheduled in June. Macron, who is well known for addresses and speeches in social media and especially outside France faces a complex situation in the parliament. Without majority in the parliament, fulfilling the agenda or passing of the policies such as the pension reform has been possible only by using special constitutional powers. The domestic protests over the pension reform, and the farmers protests has made a compelling domestic scenario for Macron.

Second, an inward-looking agenda. The majority of the announced reforms focused on education, “civic rearmament” and addressing radicalism. Macron announced an experiment across 100 institutions with an aim to mandate school uniforms by 2026 across, learning of France’s national anthem and insisted on having drama courses at the primary school level. Apart from the education, as part of the civic education, the number of hours of screen time was also part of Macron’s reforms aimed to shape future of the societies. At the international, support to Ukraine remained a key argument, better control over France’s borders, increasing of police deployment to address uncivilised behaviour and countering drugs and radical Islam was given the spotlight. On the ongoing war in Middle-East, Macron showcased the government’s decision to not join the joint strike with the UK and the US in the Red Sea. Thereby indicating the larger motive of France to “avoid escalation.”

Third, domestic economic measures under focus. European economies reeling under pressure from the pandemic and fallouts of the war in Ukraine, protests have sparked across Poland, Romania and Germany calling for tax cuts. The latest set of reforms set out by Macron assures two billion tax cuts for the middle-class population in 2025. He also announced a revamp to the existing maternity and paternity leaves which will ensure 67 per cent of salaries to both with an aim to control the declining birth rate. Employment rate was also included part of the reform when France aims to reduce unemployment rate to five per cent or below through tighter rules of withdrawing benefits to those who decline twice when offered by the bureau.

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GERMANY

Approves citizenship bill easing naturalisation process and dual citizenship

By Rosemary Kurian

On 19 January, the German Parliament Bundestag approved a legislation easing the naturalisation process for non-Germans and allowing dual citizenship for non-EU citizens. The bill was approved by the centre-left leaning coalition government consisting of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens. A total of 639 votes were cast in the Bundestag, with 382 in favour of the bill, 234 in opposition and 23 abstentions. Legal immigrants living in Germany would be eligible to gain German citizenship after five years of residence instead of the earlier eight, and under special circumstances of service to the German state, naturalisation will be granted in three years. Nancy Faeser, Germany's Interior Minister, noted that it was an effort in moulding the current stringent immigration law in a way “that does justice to our diverse society.” It would bring citizenship laws in Germany on par with its other western European peers like Sweden and France, with a much higher naturalisation rate. The passed legislation must be approved by the Council of States and signed by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's President to become a law.

What does the new bill entail and why?

Faeser described the legislation as an effort to lure in more skilled labour into Germany due to dire shortages. According to a report by the German Economic Institute, due to shortage of skilled workers, about 630,000 vacant jobs were unfilled in 2022. The new legislation will grant the children born to individuals living in Germany for more than five years automatic citizenship and allow immigrants above the age of 67 to take an oral test instead of a written one to test their proficiency of the German language. However, those individuals who have a history of committing racism, antisemitism and other such offences will be denied such privileges, so will those completely

dependent on the support of the German state. The ban on dual citizenship has been lifted, which, so far, only enables select cases to use the provision. EU citizens, Swiss nationals, citizens of states that do not allow the renunciation of citizenship, refugees with the threat of persecution in their home country, children of parents with two citizenships— one of which is German, and Israelis, are the only cases where dual citizenship would be granted.

Why are conservative and far-right parties against it?

Deutsche Welle noted that the centre-right leaning Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has opposed the coalition government's effort at changing German immigration laws, implying the German citizenship to be treated carefully. Others in opposition have noted that the lowering of standards for naturalisation will make integration into German society difficult. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) claim that such laws would reduce incentives for non-Germans to integrate into mainstream society. Right-wing parties believe that such a law would devalue the German passport. Germany has around three million people of Turkish heritage, which is one of the major sect of immigrants. Out of this, almost half of those still hold a Turkish passport. Alexander Throm, a conservative legislator, warned the coalition government that if their intention was gaining new votes, most Turks in Germany vote for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which would bring a foreign conflict into German society.

What is the government response?

Olaf Scholz, Germany's Chancellor welcomed all those foreigners who have spent years in Germany and abided by its law as potential citizens of the country. During a time when most European states are closing down their borders to immigrants, with France tightening its rules on citizenship, Germany is taking the opposite route to provide a haven for skilled workers, much like the US and Canada, as Faeser stated. Germany's naturalisation bill passed just after another law made easier deportation of foreigners possible. The government, amid pressure from the far-right, is balancing its priorities

on immigration through stringent laws for illegal immigrants and attractive ones for foreigners who could fill up the vacant jobs. Those with no cause to remain in Germany can now be easily deported, with police given access to enter rooms of potential deportees. According to Faeser, this balance of laws is an attempt by the government to ensure that "immigration is accepted by society and integration works."

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REGIONAL

Italy-Africa Summit: Exhibits the need to diversify and curb migration

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 28 January, the Italy-Africa summit began in Rome under the Mattei Plan. The summit aimed to present the African country's vision for the development of Africa. 25 African leaders along with representatives from the European Union (EU) took part to discuss strategic partnerships, causes of irregular migration, and counter-smuggling gangs. It was also aimed at making Italy an energy hub to facilitate supplies from Africa and help Europe.

Speaking on migration, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, called for a united stand in cracking down on people smugglers. She said: "The best way to do this is to join forces and crack down on the criminals, and in parallel, build alternatives to the deadly smuggling routes." In a press conference, Italy's Prime Minister, Georgia Meloni, stated: "Everything that

happens in Africa concerns us, from migration to security and supply chains. For us, the proper development of the African continent is fundamental.”

On 29 January, Meloni sought to diversify Italy’s energy supplies and to fulfil the goal of making Italy the energy hub in the southern Mediterranean. In her Africa Plan, she planned energy investments, where Italy would collect energy from Africa via pipelines and distribute it throughout Europe. This included an initial pledge of EUR 5.5 billion including guarantees. The President of the African Development Bank Group, Akinwumi A Adesina, said: “The Mattei Plan fits into the priorities of the Bank.” He added: “Africa has the fastest growing middle class in the world, offering an immense market, with consumer and business spending projected to reach US\$7 trillion by 2030.”

What is the background?

First, objective beyond the Mattei plan. The plan was named after the founder of Italy’s oil and gas company Eni, Enrico Mattei. Following his emphasis on “supply diversification” to comply with the energy needs of Italy and the “dual-flag” approach in oil-producing countries in Africa, the latest strategy aimed to promote interdependencies between Europe and Africa. Although the plan presented Africa as a place for business opportunities and investment, Italy’s vested interest lies in increasing private sector participation in energy, agriculture, water, and research and development.

Second, addressing the challenge of migration. Despite pledges to end migrant boats entering Italy from North Africa, under Meloni’s government, the count has increased by 50,000 in 2023. Till now, attempts to reduce the illegal migration have failed. This has instigated Italy to promote a developmental plan in Africa to create opportunities to demotivate young people from migrating.

Third, Meloni’s pivot for Italy. For Italy’s small and medium-sized companies, it is a big step to invest in remote and conflict-prone zones like the Sahel, North Africa, and Horn of Africa. The former prime minister of Italy, Matteo Renzi, who approached sub-Saharan African markets between 2014 to 2016, faced the challenge of stimulating cooperation and investment. However, Meloni has not faced this issue, and has long urged for those migrating from Africa “to be helped at home.” For her, it is a priority that in exchange for helping African economies to prosper, the flow of migrants would be stemmed. This election pledge has failed so far.

What does this mean?

First, Italy’s diversification strategy. Curbing irregular migration stays key to Meloni’s Africa strategy, and emphasis remains on achieving energy security to meet economic and industrial ambition. Although establishing energy cooperation and attending to the migration problem is on the cards, this cannot be circuited around the EU. Africa’s participation in the EU summit has increased to eight in the past two decades and given the resource shortage, Italy should consider maintaining cordial relations with the EU through a commitment to strike cooperation in Africa.

Second, benefit to geopolitical capacities. The Mattei plan could be connected to related European plans like the Global Gateway. Italy would benefit from the EU’s financial and geopolitical capacities, while the Global Gateway could benefit from the Mattei plan’s bottom-up replica, boosting Italian industry’s fortes in the energy and infrastructure sectors, to the use of Europe’s economic and geopolitical interests. The Italian government should take this opportunity to re-imagine its international posture via strategic interdependencies with various partners in Africa.

War in Ukraine: Daily Updates*

By Padmashree Anandhan



Source: Government of Poland (Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej), World Economic Forum, Pavel Bednyakov, Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP, Sputnik/Maksim Bogodvid, Reuters/DailySabah, Ali Unal/AP/The Financial Times

War in Ukraine: Day 706

IMF predicts increase in Russia's economic growth for 2024

War on the Ground:

On 30 January, Ukraine's air force reported shooting down 15 Shahed drones out of 35 launched by Russia. According to the report, Russia had launched missiles in the direction of "Primorsko-Akhtarsk in Russia's Krasnodar Krai, the Russian city of Kursk, and Cape Chauda in occupied Crimea." The attacks mainly targeted the frontline, energy infrastructure, civilian and military facilities.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 30 January, the TASS reported on data collected from the Russian military transport plan. According to the report, the aircraft was shot down "intentionally." It carried 65 Ukrainian servicemen, six crew members, and three Russian soldiers who died in the

crash. As the investigation continued, sources from the Russian security services confirmed to the TASS that the plan was subject to "external influence."

On 30 January, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister criticised the west for attempting to ask other countries to transfer Russia made weapons to Ukraine. Citing Ukraine's increased demands for more military weapons, he stated how the West is trying to convince to send Russian supplied weapons to Ukraine to other countries.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 30 January, the EU member countries agreed unanimously on a plan to allocate billions of Euros from the profits resulting from the freezing of the assets of Russia's central bank. This move comes as a first steps towards Ukraine's reconstruction ahead of the planned summit on 01

* 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.

February. Out of the EUR 260 billion foreign reserves of Russia gathered in 2022, EUR 191 billion remains in Belgium's Euroclear security depository. These reserves have now turned billions as they mature and reinvested. As per the agreement signed, the profits raised by the Euroclear will not be paid out until the EU proceeds to setup a "Financial contribution to the [EU] budget that shall be raised on these net profits to support Ukraine."

On 30 January, *Politico* reported on Emmanuel Macron's statement during his visit to Sweden urging European countries to offer support to Ukraine regardless of the US decision. Similar to Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor, Macron said that Europe "should not delegate security," but must act decisive to defend Ukraine. In the upcoming European Council summit on 01 February, the EU intends to declare an aid package worth EUR 50 billion for Ukraine and Macron is expected to sign a deal on air defence cooperation with Sweden.



Image source: Maxim Shemetov/Reuters/FT

The Global Fallouts: Implications of the war

On 30 January, the *Financial Times* reported on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) prediction on Russia's economy for 2024. According to the IMF, the economy is expected to expand faster than 2023 and forecasts an increase to 2.6 per cent in 2024, which is double the earlier prediction in October 2023. According to Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, the IMF's chief economist said: "It is definitely the case that the Russian economy has been doing better than we were expecting and many others were expecting." The reason behind the performance was "strong stimulus" given by the government combined with "firm

commodity prices," but in the long run, the growth of the Russian economy is expected to be lower than pre-war period.

On 30 January, the *Financial Times* reported on increased Brazilian imports of Russian diesel in 2023. According to the report, the purchase of fuel oil rose by 400 per cent to USD 8.6 billion and a 6000 per cent increase in diesel with a USD 4.5 billion boost to the Russian economy. This makes Brazil the largest buyer superseding Turkey in purchasing diesel. When questioned, Brazil's development, industry and foreign trade ministry stated that the increased imports were due to "decisions made by private agents and follow the logic of supply and demand."

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War in Ukraine: Day 705

Victor Orban approves to fund Ukraine from the EU Budget

War on the Ground:

On 29 January, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President asked Germany to lead the initiative to consolidate the EU member states in providing support to Ukraine. Highlighting the concerns over the US and growing resistance in the US congress he

stressed Germany's economy and its economic relations with other countries as a link to bring them together. Zelenskyy also reported on the decline in his income. Since the war began, he has disclosed his income to vouch for transparency following the corruption scandal in his government. Till now his family has an income of UAH 10.8 in 2021 and UAH 3.7 in 2022.

On 29 January, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) reported on the embezzlement of USD 40 million from the defence ministry official linked to a Ukrainian arms firm, Lviv Arsenal. This amount was allotted to purchase 100,000 mortar shells and according to SBU, five have been charged and one detained on the offence and are expected to face up to 12 years of prison if found guilty.

On 29 January, Ukrainian forces stressed their aim to expand its hold into the eastern bank of the Dnipro River which is currently occupied by Russia. After November 2022, Ukrainian forces have not made substantial progress in southern Kherson and the forces report that Russia continues to push forward.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 29 January, Russian air defences claimed to counter a drone attack targeted on the Slavneft-YANOS oil refinery located in Yaroslavl, northeast of Moscow. According to Mikhail Yevrayev, Governor of Yaroslavl, no fire or casualties were recorded. The attack was observed as a continuity to the series of drone attacks on Russia's energy infrastructure which have paused fuel production. Some of the previous attacks include "Rosneft's Tuapse oil refinery in southern Russia on the Black Sea and a Baltic fuel export terminal and processing complex at the port of Ust-Luga."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 29 January, Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister indicated his willingness to support Ukraine from the EU budget. Orban had initially blocked the revision of the EU budget which comprised aid to Ukraine which led to the planning of an emergency

summit on 01 February. Ahead of the summit, Hungary's shifted stance would mean using the EU budget to aid Ukraine. The proposed budget comes to EUR 50 billion.

On 29 January, Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State issued a warning over Ukraine losing control of what it had gained in the last two years due to a loss in funding. The statement comes as Joe Biden, the US President struggles to get approval from the US Congress. He said: "Without it, simply put, everything that Ukrainians achieved, and that we've helped them achieve, will be in jeopardy."

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War in Ukraine: Days 703 & 704

The US plans to position its nuclear weapons in the UK for the first time in 15 years

War on the Ground:

On 28 January, Ukraine's military reported on a new set of missile and drone attacks by Russia across Ukraine. According to the report, attacks were observed in Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kremenchuk, and in frontline towns Myrnohrad and Novohrodiivka. The reported attacks had targeted the infrastructure, and industrial sites.

On 28 January, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) revealed the corruption in the defence sector worth USD 40 million. According to the authorities, in a deal signed for a purchase of 100,000 mortar shells and paid in advance, there were arms supplied. The investigation exposed officers from the Ministry of Defence and those who managed the arms supplies in Lviv's arsenal to have

stolen close to 1.5 billion shells. In a statement, the SBU said: "According to the investigation, former and current high-ranking officials of the Ministry of Defense and heads of affiliated companies are involved in the embezzlement." Following the investigation, legal proceedings have been launched against five individuals who are suspected to be involved.

On 27 January, Ukraine's coordination headquarters for the treatment of prisoners of war issued statement on receiving bodies from Russia after the plane crash. According to the report, 77 soldiers' bodies were returned but it "appeared unrelated" to the incident.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 28 January, the TASS reported on Russian troop's claim of attacking Ukraine's ammunition and fuel depots in the Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia areas. Russia's defence ministry issued a statement on the same on destroying using missiles, artillery and drones.

On 27 January, RT reported on the International Energy Agency's (IEA) report on Russia's gas production. The report estimates an increase of four per cent in 2024. It also predicted the domestic gas consumption of Russia to increase by two per cent. At the global level, gas production was reportedly around three per cent as the supply is expected to stay tight. Whereas the global gas demand level is expected to grow as prices are reduced. The IEA has warned about the volatility of gas prices mainly due to the war in Ukraine and the Middle East.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 28 January, Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor reiterated the need to support Ukraine with financial and military aid. Following US President Joe Biden's difficulty in sanctioning a new package to Ukraine due to blockade in Congress, Scholz called for a joint talk in Europe on how the aid can be increased and expanded. The German government which has already set a benchmark of EUR seven billion as aid to Ukraine in its budget aims to provide more

with help from other European member states.

On 28 January, the BBC reported on Avon, a cosmetics company's continuing operations in Moscow. According to the report, the company had announced stopping its businesses after the war in Ukraine and suspended exporting beauty products from Russia. The BBC found that the company was still recruiting new sales agents and produces in its plant in Moscow. Earlier, the Brazilian firm Natura & Co. started holding only local operations to help sales agents who depend on its business. The company stated that it supported women through local activities as it is critical for their livelihood. Criticising this, Steven Tian who is part of Yale University said that there was no excuse for continuing to fund Russia when there was enough time given for companies to exit Russia.

On 27 January, *The Guardian* reported on the US plan to position its nuclear weapons in the UK for the first time in 15 years. According to the report, three warheads as strong as Hiroshima bombs are in talks to be positioned at the Royal Air Force (RAF) Lakenheath in Suffolk. Earlier, the US placed its nuclear missiles in the same site and removed them in 2008 after the threat from Russia was reduced. The decision to place again has come as a precaution of a war between NATO and Russia.

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War in Ukraine: Days 702

Russia's President stated that the investigation report of the plane crash

War on the Ground:

In the meeting held by the United Nations Security Council, Russia and Ukraine clashed over claims on the crash of the Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft. Dmitry Polyanskiy, Russia's Deputy Ambassador said: "All of the information that we have today show that we are dealing with a premeditated, thought through crime." He also added that Ukraine's leadership was aware of the route and the information on soldier transit. On the same Khrystyna Hayovyshyn, Ukraine's Deputy Ambassador counterclaimed: "Ukraine was not informed about the number of vehicles, roads and means of transportation of the captives. This alone may constitute intentional actions by Russia to endanger the lives and safety of the prisoners."

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 26 January, Russia's defence ministry claimed to give an initial warning to Ukraine on transiting prisoners of war, 15 minutes before. Andrei Kartoplov, Member of the State Duma said: "The Ukrainian side was officially warned, and 15 minutes before the plane entered the zone they were given complete information." Whereas Ukraine's military intelligence denied receiving such a request.

On 26 January, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President stated that the investigation report of the plane crash would be released in two to three days. Putin said: "The main intelligence department of the Ukrainian army knew that we were taking 65 servicemen there. They did it by mistake or thoughtlessly, but they did it." Russia's state investigative committee reported on collecting body parts for genetic testing and based on distinct tattoos identities were being confirmed.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 26 January, on Sweden's ratification, Jens

Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General issued a statement that Hungary's parliament was expected to ratify by the end of February. Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's Prime Minister stated that there was no negotiation with Hungary on the topic of joining NATO.

On 26 January, Reuters reported that Russia's latest Zircon hypersonic missile would require more testing before it comes into practise. The missile is a sea-based with range of 900 kilometres with multiple speeds of sound making it challenging to counter. Russia had earlier claimed testing the missile in the Atlantic Ocean.

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War in Ukraine: Days 701

The Council of Europe's (COE) parliamentary assembly (pace) adopted a resolution

War on the Ground:

On 25 January, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President called for an international investigation into the crash of Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft. He accused Russia as "playing with the lives of Ukrainian prisoners." Following the crash, Zelenskyy asked Dmytro Kuleba Ukraine's Foreign Minister to give necessary information on the incident to its allies.

On 25 January, Ukraine's air force reported shooting down 11 out of 14 drones launched by Russia over Odesa and Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine. According to the report, two were reported to be injured in an attack

on Black Sea city and damage was observed in residential and civilian infrastructures.

On 25 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on one of Ukraine's security service unit's claims of carrying out a drone attack on Russia's oil refinery. According to the report, the refinery located in the southern Russian town of Tuapse came under attack. This refinery acts as the primary oil processing unit and its vacuum and atmospheric columns were observed to have been damaged.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 25 January, Russia's state media news agency RIA confirmed the crashing of the black boxes of the transport aircraft that crashed in Belgorod. It accused Ukraine of shooting down the plane which carried prisoners for swap.

On 25 January, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister issued a statement on Turkey, stating its assurance to not allow the US access Black Sea. In a press conference, on the question of Turkey crossing the rule of the Montreux Convention, Lavrov responded by saying, that the US warships would not gain access from Turkey. The convention acts as a regulator of maritime traffic between the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits connecting the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea. Lavrov stressed that the US efforts to pursue Turkey into negotiating the maritime route will not be allowed. The Convention mandated warships "to comply with a number of regulations in times of peace, while in wartime belligerents are not allowed to sail them through the straits."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 25 January, Turkey's government ratified the bill which was earlier approved by the parliament on Sweden's accession into NATO. This leaves Hungary which remains the last member of NATO to approve. Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's Prime Minister said: "With this, a key milestone has been reached in Sweden's path towards NATO membership."



Image Source: Thix photo

On 25 January, the Council of Europe's (COE) parliamentary assembly (pace) adopted a resolution unanimously on the destiny of the Ukrainian children who were deported by Russia forcibly. In the resolution, the COE called all the national parliamentarians to adopt resolutions recognising such crimes as genocide. It also urged the international community to collaborate with Ukraine to bring back or trace the lost children.

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War in Ukraine: Days 700

Russia claims 65 POWs dead after Ilyushin Il-76 crash

War on the Ground:

On 24 January, following the plane crash in Belgorod, Ukraine's military intelligence claimed on seeing no evidence of reliable passenger information. In a statement: "Currently, we do not have reliable and comprehensive information about who exactly was on board the plane and how many." It also stated that there was no information given ahead to Ukraine to

ensure the safety of the airspace during the mentioned time of the crash.

On 24 January, the UN Security Council agreed to convene a meeting on 25 January to discuss the crash of the Russian military plane. This comes after Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister called for an emergency meeting. Ukraine's government is yet to confirm the incident.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 24 January, Russia's defence ministry reported on a crash of a military transport plane that carried 65 Ukrainian prisoners in the Belgorod region. According to the report in the TASS, the plane (Ilyushin Il-76) included six Russian crew members and also three escorts. The same was confirmed by Belgorod's governor. Following the downing of the plane, the ministry accused Ukraine and reported 65 Ukrainian prisoners on board to be dead.

On 24 January, Russia's State of Duma, the lower house of the Parliament passed with 395 votes in favour the first stage of a bill granting permission for the state to seize the property of those found guilty of "discrediting" or spreading "false information" on the Russian army.

The West View Responses from the US and Europe

On 24 January, Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor issued a statement to European member states urging for military weapons to Ukraine. He called the pledges made so far for Ukraine for 2024 were "not big enough." He added: "...it would not be good news if Germany, should the US drop off as a supporter, were to become the biggest supporter of Ukraine at the end." A recent report by the Kiel think tank in Germany, estimates the German military aid to be worth half the amount sent by the US with no other country in line to reach that margin.

On 24 January, Boris Pistorius, German Defence Minister pledged to provide six Sea King Mk41 multipurpose helicopters to Ukraine. He said: "The Sea King is a proven and robust helicopter that will help the Ukrainians in many areas: from

reconnaissance over the Black Sea to transporting soldiers." The helicopters are presently used over the North Sea and Baltic Sea for sea rescues will be replaced with NH-90 Sea Lion naval transport helicopters. According to the report, adding to the recent pledge, the total amount of military aid given to Ukraine by Germany amounts to EUR six billion.

On 24 January, Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister announced his decision to fasten the vote process in the parliament to approve Sweden's accession into the NATO. The move follows Turkey's approval and on the same Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General said: "I look forward to the ratification as soon as parliament reconvenes." The upcoming parliament session in Hungary is expected to be held on 27 February.

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War in Ukraine: Day 699

Turkey's parliament approves Sweden's accession to the NATO

War on the Ground:

On 23 January, Vitali Klitschko Kyiv Mayor reported on explosions resulting in the injury of more than 12 and the death of six. According to the report, airstrikes were observed to have struck Kyiv and Kharkiv. Ukraine's military claimed to counter 21 out of 41 missiles launched by Russia.

The Moscow View:**Claims by Russia**

On 23 January, Russia's defence ministry claimed to launch strikes on Kyiv and Kharkiv in retaliation to Ukraine's attack on one of the markets in Donetsk. According to the statement issued by Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary for Russian president Vladimir Putin, the strikes were a series of "high-precision missiles" targeting Ukraine's military facilities involved in producing rockets and munitions. Highlighting the event, he criticised Ukraine for killing dozen through shelling in Donetsk.

On 23 January, *RT* reported on the expected financial losses that could be faced by the US and its allied due to the freezing of Russian assets. According to the report, USD 288 billion of foreign direct investments (FDI) had been frozen till now by the west which is expected to go under the confiscation plan. Under such a scenario, *RT* reported that billions of amount invested by the EU, the US and its allies which amounts to USD 223.3 billion would be at risk of being lost.

The West View:**Responses from the US and Europe**

On 23 January, NATO announced signing of USD 1.2 billion contract with companies from Germany's Junghans Microtec and France Nexter Munitions for producing more than 200,000 of 155-millimetre shells to support NATO members and Ukraine. This category of shells can be used in the Caesar and Panzerhaubitze 2000 artillery systems and the first round of delivery is expected to be made by 2026. Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's Secretary General said: "We do all of this to ensure that we have the forces in place to remove any room for miscalculation or misunderstanding in Moscow about our readiness to protect every inch of NATO territory, and as long as we do that, there will be no attack against the NATO territory." Since the war in Ukraine began, NATO's artillery stocks have decreased due its support to Ukraine which has led to the contract.

On 23 January, Turkey's parliament voted in favour of Sweden's accession into NATO. Finland and Sweden which applied May 2022 for NATO membership faced a

roadblock from Turkey over categorising Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as "Terrorist." Finland which made progress in getting the greenlight from Turkey, Sweden faced a long haul due to Turkey claiming its support to the group. Apart from this demands over arms sales from both and the US were also under negotiation, with the F-16 approved by the US and further pressure from the NATO, Turkey ratified its decision. This leaves Hungary to be the only NATO member to approve Sweden's entry into NATO.

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War in Ukraine: Days 692

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President reiterated the west support for Ukraine

War on the Ground:

On 16 January, the Ukraine government asked residents in the north-east Kharkiv to evacuate due to increased Russian attacks. According to Oleg Sinogubov, Kharkiv regional governor the evacuation took place also in the Kindrashivska and Kurylivska communities of the Kupiansk district.

On 16 January, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President in the World Economic Forum conference highlighted the fears of escalation and losing against Russia. Pointing to the financial pledges by the EU, he called it a "positive signal" and expressed hope for the same from the US.

On 16 January, Ukraine's parliament passed a law to create an electronic registry for mobilisation purposes. Yaroslav Zhelezniak,

a member of parliament said: “The bill passed on 16 January does not address the larger issue of mobilization but aims to improve the digitalization of Ukraine’s army.” The passed bill aims to create a digital registry for recruitment and have all information ready for monitoring the mobilisation.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 16 January, in a service award ceremony, Vladimir Putin, Russia’s President issued a statement calling the Ukrainian counteroffensive launched in June 2023 to be a failure. He stressed strongly that it would be “impossible’ for Russia to withdraw or lose control of the captured areas in Ukraine till now. On Ukraine’s proposed peace plan, he called it a “formidable formula.”

On 16 January, Vadim Kstenin, Mayor of Voronezh, announced an emergency over a Ukrainian drone attack in Voronezh, a city in southern Russia 250 kilometres far from the Ukraine border. According to the report, the city holds an airbase for Sukhoi Su-34s fighter-bomber planes and 15 blasts were observed. The attack damaged the windows and forced evacuation measures. On the same day Russia’s defence ministry claimed to have shot down five drones and intercepted three more over Voronezh.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 16 January, during the Davos conference, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President reiterated the west support to Ukraine. She stressed ensuring the continuity of the support to succeed in the war, especially in financial aid and sustained weapons aid. She said: “Ukraine can prevail in this war but we must continue to empower their resistance... They need a sustained supply of weapons to defend Ukraine and regain its rightful territory. They need capabilities to deter future attacks by Russia.” On the same day, Robert Habeck, Germany’s Economic Minister conveyed Germany’s stance in providing “investment guarantees” to Ukraine for reconstruction. According to Germany’s economic ministry, guarantees from 14

companies have been received till now worth EUR 280 million.



Image source: Inquam Photos/Cornel Putan via REUTERS

On 16 January, Dariusz Klimczak, Poland’s Infrastructure Minister stated that the blockade by Polish truckers ended on 01 March. The move comes following the agreement between the truckers and the government who have agreed to end the border block at three points, Korczowa, Hrebenne, and Dorohusk. Tomasz Borkowski of the Committee to Protect Transporters and Transport Employers stressed the conditions agreed and the time given for the government to work on their demands. As per the agreement, the Polish government will monitor solutions drafted together by Poland and Ukraine to ease the spat over EU-registered drivers in Ukraine and some Commission funds to help Polish haulage companies. The deal also mandates more checks on the Ukrainian trucks that operate out of the EU-Ukraine agreement.

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War in Ukraine: Days 691

Romanian farmers and truckers recommence the blockade

War on the Ground:

On 15 January, Ukraine's air force claimed to shoot down Russia's two military command aircraft over the Sea of Azov. According to the claim, it was a successful mission downing a Russian A-50 spy plane and II-22 command aircraft. No confirmation was given by Russia on the attack.

On 15 January, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a statement on its humanitarian aid goal. According to the organisations, it requires USD 4.2 billion more to give humanitarian aid to Ukrainians and expects to reach 8.5 million Ukrainians present within and 2.3 million present in eastern Europe. It is estimated 40 per cent of the Ukraine population requires humanitarian assistance.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 15 January, *RT* reported on Russia's defence ministry claim on countering Ukraine's attack in the Kursk area. According to the report, three Soviet-era ballistic missiles were shot down in the border area using Russia's air defence systems which were aimed at unknown facilities. The weapons are estimated to have a range of 120 kilometres with the ability to carry 500 kilograms of the warhead. Roman Starovoyt, Kursk Governor confirmed the strikes and the destruction of the same in the Fatezh district which is 40 kilometres from Kursk city.

On 15 January, *Al Jazeera* reported on Russia's decision to sentence more than 200 Ukrainian prisoners under the charge of "murder and mistreating of prisoners." According to Alexander Bastrykin, Russia's investigative Committee head, the sentence was given for committing such acts on civilians and prisoners of war. Russia also claimed to continue such aggressive measures including "high level officials."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 15 January, following Poland's farmers' protest against Ukraine's grain trucks, Romania's farmers and truckers staged protests again. On failure of the negotiations with the government, the protestors demanded against "high taxes and delayed compensation payments." This slowly expanded into blocking the northeastern border with Ukraine. Subsidies and compensations already in place, Romanian farmers have demanded faster payment due to the impact of drought and disruption from Ukraine's grain import. Whereas, the truckers have raised concerns over increased insurance and taxes. After Russia's blockade in the Black Sea, Romania has turned into a central hub for Ukraine's grains through Constanta port, but this has resulted in provoking anger among the farmers and truckers over competition from Ukrainian companies.

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War in Ukraine: Days 689 & 690

Russia claims striking Ukraine's military facilities using hypersonic missiles

War on the Ground:

On 14 January, at the Davos conference held by Switzerland to discuss Ukraine's path toward peace, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President is expected to present the peace plan. The 10-point plan which was first presented in 2022, will again be discussed by national security advisors of 81 countries including international organisations. Russia has so far rejected the plan, but the plan insists on "restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, withdrawal of Russian troops, the protection of food and energy supplies, nuclear safety, and the

release of all prisoners,”

On 14 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Oleg Gumenyuk a former mayor of Vladivostok, Russia joining Russian forces in the war. He was earlier sentenced to 12 years of prison under corruption charges and was observed to have joined the volunteer group to fight in the front lines. According to the report, Russia had promised to set volunteered prisoners free if survived the war.

On 13 January, *The Guardian* reported on Ukraine's air defence counter against Russia's missile. According to the report, five areas in Ukraine were targeted by Russia using Kinzhal missiles considered the hardest conventional missile. No details were reported on the casualty, damage, and number of missiles countered.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia



Image source: Sputnik/Aleksey Kudenko

On 13 January, Russia's defence ministry claimed to launch a major air strike on Ukraine's military industry facilities. According to the claim, long-range high-precision weapons including Kinzhal hypersonic and drones were used in the attack. It claimed to attack the Ukrainian facilities which produced 155mm, 152mm, and 125mm shells used in tanks and artillery. The ministry claimed successful of the strike but no exact number of targets was disclosed.

On 13 January, *RT* reported on Russia's continued progress in maintaining its foreign currency reserves. According to the report, as of 05 January, the reserve stood at USD 598.5 billion and Russia's international reserves were observed to be "highly liquid foreign assets." These include, "foreign

currencies, special drawing rights with the IMF and monetary gold." Russia claims that half of its reserve is frozen by the western central banks and continues to warn against the move.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 14 January, the UK Ministry of Defence reported on the war's impact on healthcare of the Russians. In its latest intelligence report, the ministry referred to the Russian media on the shortage of medical products, antibiotics, and challenges in accessing hospital services. In the update: "The government is also being forced to reduce the civilian health estate nationwide due to a lack of clinical staff and financial pressures."

On 14 January, following the Davos conference, Ignazio Cassis, a Swiss Federal Councillor called China's role to be crucial in ending the war in Ukraine. He said: "We must find ways to work with China on this." Although China did not attend the meeting in Davos, Cassis stressed the participation of the BRICS alliance to create a "collective movement" to influence China and Russia's role. On the same, Andriy Yermak, the Ukrainian president's chief of staff called the meeting as "good sign" indicating the growing support for the proposed peace plan of Zelenskyy. Yermak said: "Countries from the Global South are increasingly getting involved in our work. It shows understanding that this European conflict is, in fact, a challenge for all humanity."

On 14 January, in a meeting between Germany and France's Foreign ministers, Annalena Baerbock and Stephane Sejourne long-term support for Ukraine and assertion of Franco-German relations was discussed. Sejourne highlighted the presence of a full agreement to support Ukraine and the importance of the relations in the current times. He also acknowledged the differences that existed in the relations of both countries but added he ensured the ties were stronger to discuss and find solutions.

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War in Ukraine: Days 688

UK and Ukraine sign security agreement

War on the Ground:



Image source: Ukrainian Presidential Press Office

On 12 January, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s President and Rishi Sunak, UK’s Prime Minister signed a security accord. The deal provides USD three billion of military aid and will be one of the first concrete agreements signed following the UK’s pledges. Sunak said: “It’s important that Russia sees that we are not moving away, that we will be with Ukraine, not just today, not just tomorrow, but for the long term.” Compared to the US, the UK assistance is considered small but with the block in the US Congress, the security cooperation will be a strong step towards a 100-year partnership between the UK and Ukraine. As per the agreement, in the occurrence of a Russian attack, the UK will discuss with Ukraine in 24 hours to decide on measures to counter.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 12 January, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s former President responded to the UK-

Ukraine security agreement. He warned the UK on the deployment of its troops in Ukraine as “declaration of war.” The deal which was signed following the G7 summit discussion in 2023, has come under the criticism of Russia’s open engagement.

On 12 January, *RT* reported on the surge in Ukrainians deemed ineligible for new recruitment. The cases were observed to be on the rise due to Ukrainians paying medical workers to avoid being recruited. According to the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP), the surge in potential Ukrainians rejected ranged from three (2021) to eight (2022) and at present stands at 27 per cent in 2023.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 January, the government of the UK announced a new package for Ukraine aligning with Rishi Sunak’s visit to Kyiv. The new package will include additional military support of GBP 200 million to Ukraine from 2025. According to the UK Ministry of Defence, it has pledged to work with international partners to support Ukraine with a mass number of drones. It also assured “intelligence sharing, cybersecurity, medical, military training, and defence cooperation.” The package aims to boost Ukraine’s manoeuvrability in surveillance and improve drone stock.

On 12 January, the US announced a new set of sanctions on Russian entities and the individuals involved in procuring and testing North Korea’s ballistic missiles. The move comes following the usage of North Korea’s short-range ballistic missiles by Russia in targeting Kyiv. On the same Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of the State said: “...transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia supports Russia’s war of aggression, increases the suffering of the Ukrainian people, and undermines the global nonproliferation regime.”

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War in Ukraine: Days 686

Lithuania announces EUR 200 million aid to Ukraine

War on the Ground:

On 10 January, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s President as part of his tour to Baltic, visited Lithuania. The visit is focused on seeking support to counter Russia. Following the meeting, the Government of Lithuania announced EUR 200 million aid to Ukraine. During his address, Zelenskyy called on strengthening Ukraine’s air defence, drones, and refurbishing its ammunition. Gitanas Nausėda issued a statement: “In January, we will again send ammunition, generators, and detonation systems to Ukraine. And in February M577 APCs. We will train Ukrainian soldiers and strengthen cooperation in the military industry.” On the same, Alar Karis, Estonia’s President said: “Democratic countries have done a lot to help Ukraine, but we need to do more together so that Ukraine wins and the aggressor loses.”

On 10 January, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine reported damage to 872 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine since 24 February 2022. Out of the damaged sites, 120 came under national importance and 682 were of local importance. Maximum damage was found in Kharkiv, Odesa, Donetsk, and Kherson. The damaged infrastructure includes creative hubs, libraries, institutions of art education, and museums and theaters.

On 10 January, the UN reported on 10,200 civilian deaths since the war began. According to the report, 125 casualties were recorded since December 2023 due to intense airstrikes by Russia. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated 6.3 million Ukrainians to have left and settled in Europe.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 10 January, in a meeting held with residents of the Chukotka area, Vladimir Putin made remarks on Russia’s growing resilience towards “foreign pressure.” Highlighting Russia’s growth despite sanctions stated it as “self-sufficient.” He stressed how the European economies are more dependent on Russia than it is dependent on them.

On 10 January, RT reported on Russia’s claim of initiating the mass production of the “gliding aerial bomb PKB-500U Drel.” The move comes after the trial held in the combat environment of Ukraine was successful. The bombs are known to be cheap and use fins instead of expensive engines like the missiles. They can be deployed using high-flying warplanes at a short range. It is also observed to be equipped with a guidance system for accuracy.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 10 January, NATO issued a statement to continue its support to Ukraine in the form of military, economic, and humanitarian forms. The move comes following the meeting between Ukraine authorities and NATO allies which outlined to provide “billions of euros of further capabilities” for Ukraine. Jens Stoltenberg, NATO’s Secretary General said: “As Moscow intensifies its strikes on Ukrainian cities and civilians, NATO allies are boosting Ukraine’s air defenses.”

On 10 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the transfer of a group of children from eastern Ukraine into Belarus for “emergency survival training.” The reported 35 children will be hosted in eastern Belarus city, Mogilev under the Ministry of Emergency Situations. On the same, Ukraine and Belarus opposition parties accused the Belarus government of engaging in illegal transfer of children from Ukraine. Yale University also released a study confirming more than 2,400 children aged between 6 to 17 transferred to Belarus.

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War in Ukraine: Days 685

UK reports on the possible impact on Russia's air defence following Ukraine's strikes in Crimea

War on the Ground:

On 09 January, Danylo Hetmantsev, a senior Ukrainian lawmaker reported on Russia's attacks on countering Ukraine's budget payment systems. According to Hetmantsev, the attack was observed as an attempt to destroy Ukraine's payment system. This comes after Ukraine's Security services warned earlier over Russia's plan to cyberattack on its telecom providers.

On 09 January, Ukraine's energy operator, Ukrenergo reported on a shutdown of power following a severe winter. Due to the loss of power, more than 1,000 Ukraine's towns and villages were forced to use less amount of power due weakened grid. The usage of electricity increased as the temperatures reduced by minus fifteen Celsius. In a statement by Ukrenergo "As of this morning due to bad weather — strong winds, ice — power was cut off in 1,025 settlements."

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 09 January, Sergey Shoigu, Russia's Defence Minister reported on the losses

incurred by Ukraine in 2023. According to the report, 215,000 troops and 28000 units of military hardware were lost and the casualties had exceeded by 383,000 including injured and wounded. Pointing this, Shoigu disclosed Russia's focus which is expected to be on improving its nuclear capabilities and producing "state-of-the-art weapons" for combat readiness.

On 09 January, *RT* reported on Andrey Klychkov, governor of Oryol statement on the situation in Oryol. As per the report, two Ukrainian drones crashed into Russia's oil facilities in Oryol. The attack was observed to be 350 kilometres south of Moscow with a target on its "fuel and energy complex facility." The same was confirmed by Russia's defence ministry on the interception of two drones over the Oryol area and four drones over the Kursk area.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

09 January, in a news conference, Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor criticised the EU was its failure to deliver adequate weapons to Ukraine. He said: "As significant as the German contribution is, it will not be enough to ensure Ukraine's security in the long run." Scholz called on the EU and its allies to unite and boost their efforts to support Ukraine.



Image source: REUTERS/Peter Nicholls

On 09 January, in its intelligence update, the UK Ministry of Defence reported on the possible impact on Russia's air defence following Ukraine's strikes on Russia in Crimea. In a statement: "These attacks likely degraded the awareness and coverage of Russian air defences over the Crimean region." The ministry also confirmed the missile attacks by Russia in Kryvyi Rih and

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War in Ukraine: Days 682 & 683 **Polish farmers withdraw blockade at Ukraine border after agreement**

War on the Ground:

On 06 January, Ukraine's air force reported on destroying Russia's command center at the Saki airfield in Crimea. On the same, Russia's defence ministry claimed shooting down four of Ukraine's missiles, but there is no clear evidence of the exact number of missiles launched.

On 06 January, Vadym Filashkin, Pokrovsk Governor reported on a Russian missile strike killing 11, including five children in Pokrovsk, a city in eastern Donetsk. On 07 January, Ukraine's air force reported on drones attacks across Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Odesa, Kirovohrad, Vinnytsia, and Cherkasy areas. According to the report, 21 out of 28 drones were destroyed by Ukraine and no casualties were observed.

The Moscow View: **Claims by Russia**

On 07 January, Russia's forces claimed striking two warplanes of Ukraine. The same was confirmed by Russia's defence ministry, identified as Su-25 was observed to fly close to an air support plane near Dnepropetrovsk. The Russian military also claimed intercepting 14 missiles launched from the US made HIMARS and anti-ship Neptune rockets.

On 07 January, RT reported on Russia's latest implementation of its law on providing residence permits to "skilled foreign workers," but only for a limited period. The permit allows the individual to work in Russia for two years, and by default grants the family members a permit to live in Russia. The amendment was adopted in the Russian State of Duma after the sign of Vladimir Putin, Russia's President.

The West View: **Responses from the US and Europe**

On 06 January, Denmark's defence ministry announced the delay in delivering the F-16 jets to Ukraine. Earlier Denmark had pledged to send 19 US-made fighter jets to Ukraine, but, the US approval not being met led to the delay. In a statement, the ministry said: "Based on the current timetable, the donation should take place in the second quarter of 2024," it said in a statement."

On 06 January, after a continued blockade by Polish farmers, the block was withdrawn after the signing of the agreement between the government and farmers. The agreement confirms the acceptance of the government to provide subsidies (EUR 230 million) to produce corn, reduce agricultural tax and preferential liquidity loans. According to one of the protestors: "We have signed an agreement with the government and we are waiting for its implementation. The blockade has been suspended until our demands are met."

The Global Fallouts: **Implications of the war**

On 07 January, Yoko Kamikawa, Japan's Foreign Minister during her visit to Ukraine held a meeting with Dmytro Kuleba, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine. She reiterated Japan's support for Ukraine and highlighted its policy to stand united for Ukraine. The meeting also confirmed Japan's decision to organised a conference to help boost Ukraine's economic reconstruction in Tokyo. In a statement, Japan's Foreign Ministry said: "The handover ceremony of large-scale power-related equipment for winterisation assistance.'

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War in Ukraine: Day 681

Russia reports on three dozen of Ukraine drones to have targeted Crimea

War on the Ground:

On 05 January, Ukraine’s air force reported on drone strikes in southern Ukraine. According to the report, it claimed destroying 28 out of 31 drones launched across Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, Kirovohrad and Khmelnytskyi areas. It observed the drones to be Iran-made Shahed drones which are designed to “fly into a target and detonate.”

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia



Image source: Sputnik / Viktor Lyashchenko

On 05 January, *RT* reported on three dozen Ukraine drones to have targeted Crimea. The same was confirmed by Russia’s defence ministry on the missile attacks in Sevastopol by Ukraine using 10 projectiles. Russia’s military claimed destroying 36 Ukrainian

unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) over Crimean air space. *RT* also reported on a simultaneous Ukraine strike in Belgorod resulting in the interception of 10 rockets while one hit a parking lot of a residential area injuring two civilians.

On 05 January, *RT* reported on Russia’s continuing position as a major supplier of oil and gas to Turkey in 2023. The data was released by Turkey’s Energy Market Regulatory Authority, which reported a 54.14 per cent share of Russian gas and 49.93 per cent of Russian oil to Turkey. The continued share of Russian energy into Turkey was due to an earlier decision of Russia to postpone the settlement of gas bills of USD four billion till 2024. This has helped Turkey to meet its economic problem and continue its imports from Russia.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 05 January, following the US claim on Russia’s usage of North Korean missiles to target Ukraine. The UK condemned Russia on the same and called the move “...symptomatic of [Russia’s] isolation on the world stage and a sign of its desperation.”

On 05 January, the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) General Staff issued a statement on Russian troop movement in Ukraine. He indicated Russia’s success in taking control of small areas of land to maintain the initiative, especially in the Kupyansk-Kremlinna line and Bakhmut. He added: “The main thrust is likely to be on the encirclement of Avdiivka and so it can be expected that additional resources will be deployed there in the near future.” Observing the southern side of Ukraine, he confirmed Ukraine’s success in gaining back control of settlements near Velyka Novosilka and stated that there was no breakthrough by Russia despite minor gains.

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War in Ukraine: Day 680

Russia's new decree inviting foreign fighters

War on the Ground:

On 04 January, Dmytro Lubinets, Ukraine's Human Rights Commissioner reported on the prisoner swap between Ukraine and Russia. According to Lubinets, the exchange aimed to transfer all the detained personnel to their home. During the exchange, 230 Ukrainian men and women were returned by Russia whereas 248 Russian prisoners were returned by Ukraine. In total 2,800 Ukrainians have been released so far by Russia while 4,000 remain held.

On 04 January, the Office of the President of Ukraine announced the schedule of peace plan talks by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President in Switzerland by 14 January, with no invite to Russia. On the same day, Ukraine's military reported on launching two strikes on Russia's command post in Crimea's Sevastopol city. Russia confirmed the same claiming to have struck down ten guided missiles.

On 04 January, Ukraine's police announced arresting of two men in Moldova under the suspicion of helping in the escape of men who were to be recruited to fight against Russians. The move comes as debate over new recruitment sparked to boost Ukraine's army. According to Ukraine police officers: "Two members of a criminal group were detained in Moldova, one of them while transporting four Ukrainians." The arrested men were detained for transiting the men from Odesa along the border of Transnistria and across checkpoints and sent into Moldova. To be transited, the Ukrainians paid USD 4500 and USD 5000 to the smugglers.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 04 January, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President signed a decree approving to allow foreign fighters to apply for citizenship. This means any foreigner signing the military contract for a minimum year can apply for

Russian nationality for them and their spouse. Those under regular armed forces and from other "military formations" will also be eligible to apply and to gain the citizenship they are mandated to live for five continuous years.

On 04 January, *RT* reported on a continuing missile strike in Belgorod for the seventh day. Vyacheslav Gladkov, Russia's regional governor reported on warning sirens raised due to an air defence trigger. He confirmed on damage to more than 30 cars and buildings due to the attack and confirmed on shooting down 10 rockets.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 04 January, the White House issued a statement citing the usage of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) of North Korea by Russia for the mass missile attack in Ukraine. The US National Security spokesperson John Kirby called the transfer of missiles a "significant and concerning escalation." Apart from this it also disclosed Russia's plan to buy short-range ballistic missiles from Iran indicating the expansion of defence partnership.

On 04 January, *The Guardian* reported on the repeat of the blockade by Polish farmers at the border crossing with Ukraine. According to the report, the protest was resumed to prevent tax increases and gain subsidies from the government. Following the successful meeting on 24 December 2023, between the farmers and Czeslaw Siekierski, Poland's Agricultural Minister, now they demand a formal agreement to withdraw the protests.

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War in Ukraine: Day 678

Kyiv and Kharkiv witness mass missile attacks.

War on the Ground:

On 02 January, Ukraine’s air force reported on its struggle to counter Russia’s drone attack (Tupolev Tu-95s bombers) in Kyiv. The explosion of the drones led to debris which resulted in the fire of a residential building in Desnianskyi, which is the administrative area of Kyiv. In response to the attack, air alerts were issued in Chernigiv, Cherkasy, Mykolayiv, and Kherson. Vitali Klitschko, Kyiv’s Mayor reported on loud explosions. There was an immediate report on casualties. Apart from Kharkiv, missile attacks were reported in Kharkiv resulting in damage to residential buildings, civilian infrastructure, and injury of many and the death of four.

On 02 January, in an interview with *The Economist*, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s President denied the notion of Russia winning the war citing the heavy losses incurred by Russia. Although there was no evidence to substantiate this, experts from the west claimed on exceeded Russia’s losses compared to the gains made in Ukraine. Zelenskyy also stated the failure of the mid-2023 counteroffensive in meeting the agenda but appraised the efforts taken to counter Russia in the Black Sea. On the same day, during his everyday address, Zelenskyy citing the mass missile attack in Kyiv and Kharkiv demanded more air defence aid such as “Patriot, IRIS-T, and NASAMS.”

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 02 January, in response to the missile attacks in Kyiv and Kharkiv *RT* reported on how the targets were planned by Russia’s defence ministry. Russia’s armed forces claimed to carry out group strikes using long-range precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) on the

military complex of Ukraine. According to the report from Russia’s officials, the attack was targeted at facilities in Kyiv and the suburbs that produced missiles and drones, including the repair sites. Apart from that, Russia claimed to hit missile depots, ammunition, and aircraft weaponry.

On 02 January, Russia’s defence ministry reported on intercepting nine missiles in the Belgorod region. Issuing air raid alerts, the ministry reported on taking down two Tochka-U tactical ballistic missiles and seven rockets launched from “Olkha” long-range artillery launchers.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 02 January, Poland’s army released a statement on sending four F-16 fighter jets to its eastern border to shield itself from Russia’s attack targeting Ukraine. In a statement: “In order to ensure the safety of Polish airspace, two pairs of F-16 fighters and an allied air tanker were put into action.” The move comes after a Russian missile entered its airspace earlier.

On 02 January, the government of Turkey announced the block on allowing the passing of two minehunter ships through the Bosphorus, and Dardanelles straits. The move comes after the UK Royal Navy announced to donate the ships to support Ukraine’s maritime defence. It was seen positively by neither NATO nor Turkey as they consider it as a violation of the “international agreement on wartime passage of the straits.” According to Turkey’s Presidency: “Our pertinent allies have been duly apprised that the mine-hunting ships donated to Ukraine by the United Kingdom will not be allowed to pass through the Turkish Straits to the Black Sea as long as the war continues.” The block is also due to the 1936 Montreux Convention which was brought back after February 2022 which disapproves the passing of ships from belligerent parties through straits.

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War in Ukraine: Day 677

Putin warns on targeting Ukraine's military sites

War on the Ground:

On 01 January, the Defence Ministry of Ukraine reported on creating a two-step "procurement system" as per the NATO standards called "ProZorro" for the purchase of food and clothing for Ukraine's armed forces. Rustem Umerov, Ukraine's Defence Minister said that the system was formed to avoid conflict of interest which had earlier resulted in corruption. Through this system, in the first step, the deputy defence minister will issue a policy detailing the needs and secondly, the state operators will carry out the procurement while the deputy maintains control.

On 01 January, *Ukrinform* reported on an update released by Ukraine's General Staff of the Armed Forces (UAF). In the update, UAF reported on 56 combat engagements to have taken place on the front line and claimed countering 13 strikes by Russia by the air force. The attacks were observed to have concentrated in the Kupiansk, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Zaporizhzhia in the last 24 hours.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 01 January, *RT* reported on Vladimir Putin's statement following the attack in Belgorod by Ukraine. He called the attack a target on the civilians and warned on not retaliating but to focus on Ukraine's military sites. He added: "We are striking with high-precision weapons at the decision-making centers, at locations where military personnel and mercenaries gather." Belgorod located in southwestern Russia has

been subject to repeated missile and drone strikes by Ukraine as per the report and the recent attack on 30 December 2023, resulted in the injury of 100 and the death of 24 civilians.

On 01 January, *RT* reported on Putin's visit to Vishnevsky military hospital in Moscow. During his visit, he made remarks on the Russian economy. He stated that the GDP had increased by 3.5 per cent in 2023, indicating the steadiness of the economy and confirming the recovery from losses. He added: "We have never seen anything like that before: while we used to make money from oil and gas [exports], 2023... What we're witnessing are structural shifts in our economy, and they are very important."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 01 January, the Norwegian government issued a statement declaring permission to engage in the "direct sale of weapons and defence-related products" to Ukraine. Norway's defence industry will be the authority and the policy change will be implemented from 01 January 2024. In a statement, Bjørn Arild Gram (Sp), Norway's Minister of Defence said: "This change means that we are safeguarding fundamental defense and security policy interests for Norway together with our allies." The measure will enter force in four segments, starting from donations from own stocks, through international cooperation, fund mechanisms, direct procurement from the industry, and through training the Ukrainians. According to the statement, the change in policy means, that Norwegian companies can now apply to the foreign ministry for an export license to sell defense-related products directly to Ukraine.

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War in Ukraine: Day 675 & 676

Air strikes continue in Kharkiv following the attacks in Belgorod

War on the Ground:

On 31 December 2023, the *BBC* reported on continuing airstrikes in Kharkiv by Russia. According to the report, the strike was seen as retaliation to Ukraine's strikes in Belgorod, which killed 24. The attack resulted in damage to civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv and Kherson, Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia. According to Ukraine's forces 21 of 49 Russia's drones, engaged around Kyiv were destroyed.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 31 December 2023, in a year-end speech, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President emphasised collective achievements, national interests, values, and the homeland's security. Putin expressed optimism, uniting the diverse people of Russia toward national development and prosperity.

On 30 December 2023, *The Moscow Times* reported on Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN criticism against Ukraine on the attacks in Belgorod. Nebenzya accused Ukraine of the attack in Belgorod, which killed 21 due to cluster munitions. Nebenzya, at a UNSC meeting, reported on civilian targets hit by Kyiv, whereas Ukraine reported 39 deaths due to Russia's missile strikes in Kharkiv. The Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation warned of consequences and vowed retaliation.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 30 December 2023, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland initiated a search in Lublin Voivodeship for possible remnants of a suspected Russia's rocket. On 29 December, a Russian missile was reported to have breached Poland's airspace. The operation aimed to confirm the absence

of any debris within Poland's territory. Following radar confirmations of the object leaving Poland's territory, ended by 1900 GMT.

On 31 December 2023, the UK's Ministry of Defence reported on Russia's *Vozdushno-desantnye voyska (VDV)* airborne forces defence in sustaining heavy casualties. In a widespread offensive, the forces were reported to have suffered personnel losses. The ministry reported a rise in Russia's casualties, projecting over half a million losses by 2024. Citing the US Intel, 315,000 Russia casualties have been recorded since the invasion.

The Global Fallout: Implications of the War

On 31 December 2023, Xi Jinping, China's President, emphasised the vital importance of enhancing China-Russia ties, during New Year's greetings to Putin. He stated that it serves both countries' fundamental interests and meets global expectations. Xi expressed readiness to sustain contact with Putin to advance mutual trust and expand collaboration between the countries.

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EM Short Notes*

By Meenakshi R, Alka Bala, Rosemary Kurian and Padmashree Anandhan



Source: Roni Rekoma/Bloomberg, europa.eu, Reinis Inkēns, Saeima, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Roberto Monaldo/LaPresse via AP, Human Rights Watch

AUSTRIA

Authorities release warrant for suspect in Cologne Cathedral attack

On 08 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Austria's recent arrest warrant of a suspect assumed to be involved in the attack in Germany. The individual, a 30-year-old Tajik, is believed to be connected to IS-Khorasan and is suspected of planning an attack on Cologne Cathedral during Christmas. Currently held under a European arrest warrant for additional interrogation, both Cologne Cathedral and Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral are under increased security protection. The authorities maintain a cautious approach and continue to investigate to find a broader network. ("Cologne Cathedral attack: Austria issues warrant for suspect." *Deutsche Welle*, 08 January 2024)

BELARUS

Tinder is to leave the Belarusian market on 15 February

On 17 January, according to *Politico*, Tinder, the dating app company, reported its

intentions to exit Belarus possibly over its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, Match Group, Tinder's parent company has not disclosed the exact reason for its pullback from the country. Previously in July 2023, it exited the Russian Market stating its commitment to human rights, however, there were reports in November 2022 where Tinder was used to identify critics of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. The app users will be able to match and chat with other users until February 15, according to the company press release. (Sejla Ahmatovic, "Tinder swipes left on Belarus after Valentine's Day." *Politico*, 17 January 2024)

BELGIUM

New tax regime to affect expats

On 22 January, *Politico* reported on the decision by the Belgian Parliament to scrap the special expatriate tax regime, which allowed tax benefits to expatriates working in Belgium since 1983. The new scheme would grant such benefits only to those earning over EUR 75,000 gross income per

* 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.

year, which could only apply to perhaps 10 per cent of expatriates. The new regime was an effort to close a loophole in the tax system that was meant to allow tax benefits to temporary workers from abroad. Expats will now go through the same tax regime as Belgian residents, which has the potential to reduce the attractiveness of the Belgian employment market to foreigners who might now prefer France and the Netherlands. The high taxes on expats would, however, benefit Belgian companies as the previous necessity to hire consultants to calculate differential tax benefits would no longer be needed. (Ketrin Johecová, "Expats in Belgium face life under new tax regime", *Politico*, 22 January 2024)

Brussels to join European mission in the Red Sea

On 19 January, *Politico* reported Belgium's decision to send a warship, the frigate Louise-Marie, equipped with 16 anti-missile Sea Sparrow missiles to the European Mission in the Red Sea. After much reluctance from the left-wing parties in Hadja Labib, Belgium's Foreign Affairs Minister announced the country's participation in the mission countering attacks by Houthi rebels and would focus on achieving a ceasefire in Gaza while ensuring access for humanitarian aid convoys in the region. (Jeremy Van Der Haegen, "Belgium sends warship to Red Sea", *Politico*, 19 January 2024)

De Croo under pressure to balance equation with China

On 10 January, *Politico* reported on Alexander De Croo, Belgium's Prime Minister's challenges ahead of his visit to China. This trip is considered significant due to strained trade relations, escalating tensions over Taiwan's presidential election. The EU currently grapples with a substantial trade deficit and De Croo's requires a delicate balancing act. While it seeks economic opportunities, it also aims for greater "reciprocity" and endeavours to reduce its reliance on China in sensitive sectors such as green technology. Belgium has come under scrutiny for potential Chinese influence in its political affairs, further intensifying the pressure on De

Croo. His emphasis on green energy investment during the trip underscores the EU's careful approach of seeking cooperation while safeguarding its strategic interests. (Camille Gijs, "Belgian PM faces high-wire act in China as EU, Taiwan fears intrude", *Politico*, 10 January 2024)

Belgium Avoids EU Blunder as Government Renews Central Bank Chief's Term

On 10 January, *Politico* reported on an intense political deadlock that poses a risk to Belgium's EU Council presidency. The government announced its decision to extend Pierre Wunsch's tenure as the governor of the National Bank of Belgium. This timely resolution guarantees Wunsch's involvement in the crucial European Central Bank (ECB) meeting scheduled for 25 January. The previous delay stemmed from disputes regarding other government appointments, raised concerns about the independence of the central bank and necessitated Wunsch to temporarily assume a leadership role. Now officially appointed for a second five-year term, the governor will continue to be an advocate for stricter monetary policies within the ECB council. ("Belgian government breaks deadlock over renewal of central bank governor mandate", *Politico*, 10 January 2024)

Government sets out agenda for the EU Council Presidency

On 01 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Belgium's assumption of EU Council presidency and the challenges ahead to carry out its agenda. Belgium which is taking over the presidency after Spain in 2024 has more than 100 legislative projects, an asylum reform, and regulation of EU's AI to finalise before April. The next European Parliamentary elections are scheduled in June and pending legislative projects will be carried forward but under a new Commission. As the time remains limited, Hadja Lahbib, Belgium's Foreign Minister says: "we are better in finding solutions than creating problems." As far as Belgium's agenda is concerned, it aims to bring laws to induce "green restructuring of the economy," and to increase "Europe's global competitiveness." Apart from this handling

the Hungarian block over aid to Ukraine and discussion over EU's internal mechanism and strategizing its foreign policy are also on the list. (Bernd Riegert, "[Belgium's bold EU Council agenda](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 01 January 2023)

CROATIA

First Digital Village Project commenced to combat rural depopulation

On 03 January, *Total Croatia* reported on Croatia's problem over the rural exodus crisis as 195 ghost villages and numerous others struggle. To help them survive the "First Croatian Digital Village Project," led by Poslovni Dnevnik aims to equip farmers with the necessary technology and networking skills, educating them on digital tools. This will enhance agriculture more smartly and sustainably. The project takes advantage of Croatia's extensive investment opportunities in digitization utilising artificial intelligence, robotics, and advanced internet technologies to transform production methods, improve efficiency, and address concerns regarding food security. The success of this endeavour relies on the collaboration between policymakers, industry leaders, and technology providers, ensuring inclusivity and bridging the digital gap. By embracing this digital transformation, Croatian agriculture has the potential to not only revive its rural communities but also thrive in the modern world, benefiting farmers, consumers, and the environment alike. ("[First Croatian Digital Village Project Commences](#)," *Total Croatia*, 03 January 2024)

CZECH REPUBLIC

Parliament approves stricter rule amending gun law

On 26 January, the lower house of the parliament approved an amendment to the gun laws which tightened the rule over owning the weapon for more than a month. The move follows the mass shooting at Charles University which led to the death of 14 people. The suspect who was killed was a licenced gun user with eight legally owned weapons, this became the symbol of the attack as there was a question over whether

the purchases of the weapons nor the suspect have a criminal record. The amendment is yet to pass through the Senate and needs the signature of the president and will come into force not until 2026. It mandates an online register of guns and its owners and demands gun shops to disclose reports if any purchase seemed suspicious. Further police officers will also have the power to seize the weapon under precaution. (Rob Cameron, "[Czech Republic MPs vote to tighten gun laws](#)," *BBC*, 27 January 2024)

DENMARK

Frederik X crowned as the new king of Denmark

On 15 January, after 52 years as Denmark's queen, Queen Margrethe II stepped down and King Frederik X was crowned marking the start of a new era for the Danish monarchy. Frederik X, well-known for his laid-back personality and widespread popularity offers a contemporary touch while respecting his mother's legacy. ("[Denmark: New King Frederik X takes throne from Margarethe II](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 January 2024)

Far-Right Party steps down after election loss

On 10 January, *Politico* reported on The New Right, a political party in Denmark known for its anti-Islam, anti-immigration, and anti-tax stance, decision to step down. Despite receiving 3.7 per cent of the vote in 2022, due to internal divisions within the party, it lost support. This move created an opportunity for other right-wing parties, such as the Danish People's Party, to expand their influence and gain more support from the right-wing electorate. While the future political plans of Pernille Vermund, the founder of The New Right, remain uncertain, it is evident that the right-wing political landscape in Denmark is on the verge of a significant reshuffling. (Barbara Moens and Carlo Boffa, "[Danish anti-Islam, anti-immigration, anti-tax party dissolves](#)," *Politico*, 10 January 2024)

ESTONIA

Bunkers to be built along border with Russia for defence

On 19 January, *ERR News* reported on the decision by Estonia to install hundreds of bunkers along the Russian border, in a plan by the Baltic states to build “anti-mobility defensive installations” to strengthen the Baltic defence, as decided during the 2023 NATO Summit in Madrid. The bunkers would be built in peacetime and could be used for other purposes, and explosives and barbed wire would be avoided to maintain the peacetime. The installations would help prevent a regional military conflict and are expected to start by 2025 at a planned budget of EUR 60 million. However, they wouldn’t be built across the sea coast, which shall employ an alternative maritime strategy using missiles and naval mines. ([“Estonia to build 600 bunkers along Russian border,”](#) *ERR News*, 19 January 2024)

Estonia in favour of investigation against Serbian elections

On 19 January, *ERR News* reported on an open letter signed by Marko Mihkelson, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament), and other EU affairs countries from 16 countries asking the EU to conduct an independent investigation against suspected malpractices in the Serbian parliamentary and local elections. The signatory countries including Denmark, Italy, Germany, France, Ukraine and the UK hope to see Serbia as a member of the EU in this decade and called for the investigation to fulfil its requirement as a democracy respecting the rule of law, and over concerns of its continued allegiance to the Russian Federation. The committees have urged the EU to conduct fresh elections in Serbia, depending on the results of its investigation. ([“Estonia signs open letter calling for Serbian elections investigation,”](#) *ERR News*, 19 January 2024)

Estonian teachers propose long term salary agreement

On 12 January, *ERR* reported on Kristina Kallas, Estonia's Education Minister efforts to initiate discussions with the government

for a mandate to increase the salary of the teachers and improve working conditions for the years 2025-2027. Although there is no proposed pay increase for 2024, the minister emphasised a significant 5.7 per cent raise for 2024. The Estonian Educational Personnel Union (EHL) announced an open-ended strike scheduled for 22 January, which has prompted Kallas to engage in negotiations with relevant stakeholders to devise a state budget strategy (RES). EHL strongly emphasizes the necessity of a collective agreement to prevent future conflicts and aims to bridge the salary gap between kindergarten teachers and those in general education. While the union is open to dialogue, they firmly insist on concrete actions from the government to address the concerns of teachers regarding their pay and working conditions. ([“Kallas seeks government mandate for teachers' long-term salary agreement,”](#) *ERR*, 12 January 2024)

State budget deficit reaches three per cent of GDP

On 09 January, *ERR News* reported an increase in the state budget deficit in December 2023 to three per cent of the GDP which is an unexpected rise. The spokesperson of the Ministry of Finance noted that the deficit had reached 1.5 per cent as of October, followed by 2 percent in November. Due to alcohol excise duties due for implementation from 01 January 2024, the country saw excessive stockpiling in the last couple of months of 2023. Due to late-year forecasts and budgetary additions in the last month, the deficit stood at an unpredicted rate. ([“Estonia's 2023 state budget deficit estimated at 3 percent of GDP,”](#) *ERR News*, 09 January, 2024)

Government receives Piorun air-defence systems from Poland

On 06 January, *ERR News* reported on the government of Estonia decision to enhance its airspace protection with the Polish Piorun air-defence systems. This EUR103 million agreement provides the Estonian Defence Forces with these highly effective short-range weapons significantly strengthening their capabilities. The Piorun system with its impressive eight-kilometre

range and ability to operate day and night has already demonstrated its effectiveness in Poland and Ukraine. It is user-friendly and requires minimal training making it ideal for equipping a dedicated Estonian reservist unit. This ensures the swift deployment and safeguarding of critical infrastructure beyond the immediate frontline. This development represents a significant advancement for Estonian air defence and serves as a symbol of the strong security partnership between Poland and Estonia. The joint procurement emphasises both nations' commitment to regional stability in the face of evolving threats with a focus on fast delivery and technical compatibility. ("Estonia takes delivery of Polish Piorun air-defense systems." *ERR*, 06 January 2024)

Government legalizes same-sex marriage

On 03 January, *ERR News* reported on Estonia's move to legalize same-sex marriage. This significant change resolves long-standing legal uncertainties and establishes equal rights for all couples under the law. Signe Riisalo, Minister of Social Protection emphasised the importance of acceptance and empathy while also facilitating a seamless transition from existing civil partnerships to marriages. This progressive move not only promotes societal advantages but also safeguards individuals' rights concerning property, inheritance, and other legal matters. Effective from 01 January 2024, Estonia embraces inclusivity and upholds the fundamental right to love for all its citizens. ("Same-sex marriage now legal in Estonia." *ERR News*, 03 January 2024)

Boosts defence amid Russia's threat

On 31 December 2023, *ERR News* reported that Estonia significantly upgraded its defence capabilities in 2023. It reported that it is in response to NATO's reevaluation of its eastern flank following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite record defence spending, preparations continue for new weapons and strategic manoeuvres. The Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) established a division to coordinate and direct joint military actions with allied units. Over EUR

500 million worth of deliveries, including weaponry and equipment, marked the third consecutive record year. The contracts with Germany for air defence systems are aimed to bolster Estonia's air threat neutralisation by 2025. NATO's strategic defence plans are underway, ensuring Estonia's fortified stance amidst perceived Russia's aggression. (Joakim Klementi, "Estonia's defense capabilities dramatically improved on year." *ERR News*, 31 December 2023)

FINLAND

Alexander and Pekka head to runoff election after the first round

On 28 January, in the first round of presidential elections in Finland, Alexander Stubb, former Prime Minister emerged as the winner with 27.1 per cent votes. The runner-up position was secured by Pekka Haavisto, former Foreign Minister with 25.8 per cent votes. As per the polls, 74.9 per cent was the voter turnout with major parties vouching to take a strong stance against Russia. Stubb said: "You know what, we made it to the final, but the competition will only begin now." On the same day, Haavisto said: "This is a splendid result from the first round and a very big gap to those behind us." ("Finland: Ex-PM Stubb wins first round of presidential vote." *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2024)

Continues to shut its border with Russia over fear of hybrid operation

On 12 January, *yle* reported on Finland's decision to maintain border closure with Russia. Mari Rantanen, Finland's Interior Minister declared a four-week extension to the complete closure, which was initially imposed in December. The decision to extend the closure is based on the unchanged threat landscape and the paramount importance of national security. There are concerns that a Russian hybrid operation, facilitates the influx of asylum seekers to the border, thereby exacerbating tensions. Despite the occasional passage of a freight train, all eight checkpoints remain steadfast, leaving migrants stranded in the harsh Russian winter. Finnish authorities are now urgently seeking permanent solutions to resolve this frosty diplomatic standoff. ("Finland to keep Russian border

shut until mid-February," yle, 12 January 2024)

FRANCE



Image source: Thomas Samson/AFP

National Assembly approves to include abortion rights in the constitution

On 30 January, France's National Assembly voted in favour of including abortion rights in the constitution. The move comes following Emmanuel Macron, France's President promise in 2023 to constitutionalise the abortion bill. In the lower house, 493 voted in favour while 30 voted against. For an amendment to the French constitution, either both chambers of the parliament approve through a referendum or three-fifths of a majority by a joint session, the latter, being the preferred option of Macron, the next step of Senate approval is scheduled for 28 February. At the parliament, not many major parties stand against the bill but centre-right members seem to oppose as they consider it not necessary to constitutionalise as access to abortion in France is not threatened. ("French lawmakers vote to enshrine abortion in constitution," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 January 2024)

Farmers' continue to protest in Paris despite pledges from Attal

On 28 January, Gerald Darmanin, France's Interior Minister ordered the deployment of massive police to prevent the protests by farmers' from affecting the market. Farmer union from the Lot-et Garon area initially announced to cutdown Rungis International Market, supplies fresh produce across Paris and attempted to block the traffic. On 29 January, the government and the farmers' are scheduled to meet to discuss the

agricultural policy and Emmanuel Macron, France's President pledged to keep farmers' from causing any disruptions. The key concerns of the farmers' remain to be the fuel tax subsidies, environmental regulation, and impact of cheap imports due to EU competition practices. To address this, Gabriel Attal, France's Prime Minister vowed to remove the fuel tax and "simplify" paperwork, but despite such promises farmers' continued to stage protests across France. ("France: farmers and police set to face off in Paris," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 January 2024)

Farmers' protests continue for the second week

On 25 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the blockade by farmers' unions of major highways in south-west France as they approached Paris. Major highways have been barricaded and roads blocked over their demands of reduced diesel prices, EU subsidies and slashed bureaucratic procedures. This marks the greatest challenge in Gabriel Attal, the new French Prime Minister's agenda as the right wing, led by Marine Le Pen's National Rally, takes the opportunity to frame Macron's government against farmers' interests. Meanwhile, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, has inaugurated her "strategic dialogue" with the farmers to heed their concerns and suggest alternatives before the European Parliament elections. ("France: Farmer protests edge closer to Paris," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2024)

French Court deems one-third of the immigration bill unconstitutional

On 25 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the decision by the French Constitutional Council to declare 32 out of the 86 articles of the controversial immigration bill unconstitutional. Almost one-third of the bill has been rejected by the court which has created significant anger and protests against the government. Macron's government was forced to add these parts to gain the support of the far-right parties due to a failure to achieve a majority in the lower house. Marine Le Pen's National Rally called the decision a "coup by the judges."

The bill as law suggested cutting of social benefits for immigrants and made family reunification difficult. ("France's top court rules against parts of immigration bill," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2024)

Two killed during the protest by farmers

On 24 January, the *BBC* reported on the death of a 35-year-old farmer and her 12-year-old daughter as a car crashed into a roadblock during a protest by farmers in Toulouse. In the south-west of France, one of its key agricultural regions, farmers have blocked roads to protest against EU climate policies and energy costs after a meeting with Gabriel Attal, the French Prime Minister. A report on the accident in its initial review suggests that the incident was not deliberate. The victim farmer was a member of the FNSEA farmers' union, a key union leading the protests in France. The protesting farmers have been named "gilets verts" (green jackets), holding the yellow jacket movement as a precursor. (Chris Bockman and Paul Kirby, "French protests: Female farmer and daughter killed as car hits French protesters," *BBC*, 24 January 2024)

French MEP Hayer to lead Renew party in the EU Parliament

On 24 January, *Politico* reported on the decision by the Renew Party, the third largest in the European Parliament, to appoint the French MEP Valérie Hayer as the leader of the Renew Party, ahead of elections in June. The Renew party consists of centrist and liberal politicians and with Hayer, who is also co-leader of the Europe Delegation led by French President Emmanuel Macron, the party could potentially be under French control. Others interested in the post have conducted negotiations with Hayer and agreed to her nomination, in a group content with a single leader nomination. Since the rise of right and far-right parties in Europe, the Renew Party is expected to slide from the third largest to the fourth or fifth position. (Eddy Wax, "French Renew MEP Valérie Hayer on course to lead European Parliament's third-largest faction", *Politico*, 24 January 2024)

Farmers' protests the key agenda before EU elections

On 22 January, *Politico* reported on the continued farmers' discontent in France, becoming the campaign agenda ahead of the European Parliament elections in June. Gabriel Attal, the French Prime Minister, supported President Macron's past efforts and tried to understand farmers' concerns. He promised to give the farmers their fair share and balance their needs with environmental restrictions. Jordan Bardella, a 28-year-old far-right leader and key contender of the campaign under Marine Le Pen's National Rally, blamed "Macron's Europe" for being against the agricultural sector and called for a "state of emergency" of the farming sector. The protests that have spread through France, Poland, Germany and Romania over taxes, subsidy cuts and the EU policy of 'Farm to Fork' have become a deciding factor ahead of EU elections and governments are trying to battle against the mounting pressure from far-right groups who urge a protectionist policy on farming, threatening Macron's rural support base. (Victor Goury-Laffont, "Farmers' protests sweep France, seizing agenda before EU elections," *Politico*, 22 January 2024)

Three police officers suspended over brutal racial assault

On 20 January, the *BBC* reported the suspended sentences of the three French policemen who had brutally assaulted Théo Luhaka leaving him with permanent disability and irreversible anal injuries. The three officers in February 2017, had assaulted Luhaka during a stop and search in Aulnay-sous-Bois, where he was also racially abused and spat at. Officer Marc-Antoine Castelain was handed a 12-month suspension for being found guilty of the assault whereas the other two officers, Jeremie Dulin and Tony Hochart, were handed a three-month suspension for intentional violence. ("Théo Luhaka: French police officers given suspended sentences for brutal assault," *BBC*, 20 January 2024)

Temporary ban for commercial fishing in the Bay of Biscay

On 20 January, according to the *BBC*, France

announced a temporary ban on commercial fishing, starting 22 January till 20 February to protect dolphins. As French marine experts estimate the death of 9000 dolphins in the Bay of Biscay, each year due to being caught accidentally in fishing gear. All boats longer than 8m will be banned, putting 450 vessels out of fishing. This ban sparked criticism from fishermen, who fear the loss of their livelihood and the fishing industry estimated a loss of millions of euros. However, the French government has promised compensation, and according to Minister Christophe Béchu, "75% of losses would be covered and paid as quickly as possible." ("Bay of Biscay: France temporarily bans fishing to protect dolphins," *BBC*, 20 January 2024)

Macron announces key reforms

On 16 January, *Le Monde* reported on a rare press conference hosted by Emmanuel Macron, the French President, in the Elysée Palace, outlining his vision for reforms in his last term in office, after a cabinet reshuffle. Macron told the press that he would introduce uniforms in schools on an experiment basis, make the learning of "La Marseillaise," the French national anthem compulsory, and ensure drama classes for all students to make them confident public speakers well versed with key texts. He further planned to regulate children's screen time for the better use of technology. Macron aims to make the French borders more controlled and crack down on drugs and radical Islam in French streets. Internationally, Macron promised continued support to Ukraine and stated that his decision to join the US alliance against the Houthis in Yemen was to prevent a regional escalation. Macron has turned towards a revitalised last term since the appointment of Gabriel Attal, his new Prime Minister, amid losing support in the country and the Parliament. Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right opposition party Rassemblement National (RN), called his press conference "interminable chatter". ("Macron outlines term's next reforms," *Le Monde*, 16 January 2024)

Lafarge company to be probed for complicity in crimes in Syria

On 16 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the French court's ruling that cement company Lafarge could be held accountable for complicity to crimes against humanity in Syria during the civil war. The Court of Cassation upheld that given Lafarge paid EUR 13 million to possibly elements like the Islamic State to keep its factory in Syria running during the war, they would be held accountable. Lafarge has already pleaded guilty in the US for paying millions to both Islamic State and the Nusra Front. An appeal that was filed by Lafarge's Swiss parent company Holcim was thrown out by the court, upholding a lower court's decision. The lawyer representing Sherpa, a French campaign group, called the act a "partial victory," since they were one step closer to trying the company for crimes against humanity. On accusations that the company put its labour at risk in Syria, the court denied it, given French labour laws do not apply abroad. ("French court rules Lafarge can be probed over Syria crimes," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 January 2024)

New education minister criticised over comments about public schools

On 16 January, *Politico* reported on criticisms faced by Amélie Oudéa-Castéra, the newly appointed French education minister, over her lack of respect for the French public schooling system. Oudéa-Castéra came under fire after criticism of her choice to send her children to elitist private schools. Her children go to a Catholic private school in Paris known for its traditional religious approach, a decision she blamed on the absenteeism of her son's previous public school teacher. She later apologised but has been met with increasing calls to resign from office by unionists and parents' representatives of the public school system, who say she highlights the failure of President Macron's administration over the state of the schools. Oudéa-Castéra was earlier under controversy during her term as sports minister for accusations against the British team Liverpool FC during the UEFA Champions League in 2022. (Victor Goury-Laffont, "Macron's new education minister under fire over kids' private education," *Politico*, 16 January 2024)



Image source: EFE/EPA/YOAN VALAT

Attal brings hopes to re-energise the government

On 13 January, the *BBC* reported on the hopes of French citizens for Gabriel Attal, the youngest French Prime Minister, to revive Macron's government and help restart his second-term mandate. Perceived by positive public opinion as youthful, dynamic and full of ideas, Attal's ability to deal with the right wing will help the moderate government push reforms in the parliament, since Emmanuel Macron, France's President, doesn't hold a majority in the National Assembly. Macron's Renaissance Party believes that Attal can help counter the increasing right-wing wave present in Europe and reduce the influence of far-right parties like the National Rally. However, the National Rally does not view Attal as a threat and awaits the European Parliament election results to test his influence. (Andrew Harding, "[Gabriel Attal: Youngest French PM hopes to revive Macron's government](#)," *BBC*, 13 January 2024)

Draft 'Energy Sovereignty' law draws flak; sceptics on emphasis on nuclear power

On 12 January, *Euractiv* reported on the arguments initiated by the draft 'Energy Sovereignty' law, presented on 08 January by Agnès Pannier-Runacher, French Energy Transition Minister. The law highlights France's energy concerns and priorities for 2030, however, fails to provide quantified targets for renewable energy contradicting the EU's Renewable Energy Directive which requires bringing the blocs' final consumption to 42.5 per cent collective share of renewables. Ministry emphasised

maintaining the installed capacity of the energy programme at 63GW, generated majorly through nuclear and hydroelectric power, meanwhile renewable energies will help in completing the "last mile", as a simple backup to nuclear power. Pannier-Runacher stated a reduction in the share of nuclear power, as old reactors would be shut down complemented with an increase in electricity production to decarbonise the economy. The law will be debated in the National Assembly in late January or early February. (Paul Messad, "[France's 'last mile' strategy for renewables under fire from all sides](#)," *Euractiv*, 12 January 2024)

Gabriel Attal appointed as France's new Prime Minister

On 09 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported that Emmanuel Macron, the French President, appointed Gabriel Attal as his new Prime Minister after the resignation of former Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne was announced. Attal became the youngest Prime Minister in French history at age 34, also setting new standards as the country's first openly gay head of government. Attal's popularity rose, based on opinion polls, when he gained attention as the government's spokesperson during the coronavirus pandemic. Last year, Attal was appointed as the Education Minister under which capacity he banned the use of the abaya, a Muslim dress, in state schools, which was lauded by conservatives that enabled him to be in their favourable opinion, despite being a liberal himself.

Attal's political career is known to be incredibly rapid and unstoppable, like his leader Macron's. He became the secretary of state at the education ministry at age 29, making him the youngest member of the modern French Republic. His later posts include head of LREM, government spokesperson, public accounts minister, followed by education minister. Under his new capacity as Prime Minister, a cabinet reshuffle is expected in the LREM's favour against the rapid rise of the far right leader Marine Le Pen ahead of the European Parliament's elections. After several controversies in 2023 over unfavourable pension laws, controversial immigration

legislation as well as a loss of the overall majority in parliamentary elections, Macron wishes to create an enhanced image of the government before his term ends and ahead of the Olympics and Paralympics hosted in Paris 2024.

Originally a supporter of the Socialist Party given his left-wing background, Attal joined Macron's centrist political party 'En Marche' (currently La République En Marche) during its foundation in 2016, and has been identified as a close ally of the President. He is known to have had a privileged background as the son of a Tunisian Jewish lawyer and film producer in France. He was educated in the high-profile private school 'École Alsacienne,' followed by a Master's in Public Affairs at the prestigious Sciences Po. His youth was distinguished due to his communication skills and passionate approach to public speaking about any issue. His skills with the public in tackling his challenges verbally earned him the nickname 'Word Sniper,' ("Macron names Gabriel Attal as France's new prime minister." *Deutsche Welle*, 09 January 2024; Kim Willsher, "Who is Gabriel Attal, the French PM who climbed the ranks in record time?" *The Guardian*, 09 January, 2024)

Borne resigns amid political tensions

On 08 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the resignation of Elisabeth Borne, the French Prime Minister, amid an expected cabinet reshuffle by Emmanuel Macron, the French President. Borne stated the immediate need to push necessary reforms as the cause of her resignation. Tensions arose in the French government after the introduction of contentious immigration laws in the French National Assembly, which would allow the government to deport some foreign nationals. She has also faced criticism for pushing unpopular pension reforms past the National Assembly. In the French presidential system, the responsibility for daily administration falls on the Prime Minister. Macron appointed Gabriel Attal as the new Prime Minister, the youngest to take office and the first openly gay one. ("French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne resigns", *Deutsche Welle*, 08 January, 2024)

GERMANY

Railway union calls for the longest strike in German history

On 24 January, the *BBC* reported on the strike called by the GDL rail drivers' union as an extension of a long-standing dispute with the state-owned Deutsche Bahn (DB). The strike has been called for six days to force the government to fulfil the union's demands of increasing their pay due to inflation and cutting their work hours without a pay cut. Until the strike ends, the DB has announced an emergency timetable for the rail schedule. Such a halt in railways, for a cumulative 136 hours, is the first in recorded history. Volker Wissing, the German Transport Minister, urged for dialogue with the union but offered no acceptable solution. The rail drivers are demanding the cutting of the work week from 38 to 35 hours without a pay cut. The strike has halted significant movement and could cost the German economy up to EUR 1 billion. The current offer by the DB is either a one-hour cut in the work week with no pay cut or a rise in wage by 2.7 per cent. (Paul Kirby, "German train drivers stage longest strike on record." *BBC*, 24 January 2024)

Government pulls subsidies from far-right party

On 23 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the decision by Germany's Constitutional Court to withdraw state subsidies and tax exemptions granted to the far-right party Nationalist Democratic Party of Germany due to a failure to get enough votes. The party is known to have anti-constitutional views which led to the court's decision to suspend state aid. Government officials are deliberating if the same principle can be used against the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). German law states that attempts to undermine the constitutional order of the state are subject to the withdrawal of subsidies. ("Top German court strips financing of extreme-right party." *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2024)

Lawmakers consider creating a 'European army'

On 23 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on a proposal that could allow European citizens

outside of EU countries to serve in the Bundeswehr, the German Army. Boris Pistorius, the German Defence Minister, first suggested the plan due to a severe shortage of personnel in the defence forces. This could allow Europeans in the UK (former EU state) and the neutral state of Switzerland to join the Bundeswehr. Europeans who have spent years in Germany can use the opportunity to speed up their naturalisation process, according to Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, the chair of the Bundestag's defence committee. The proposal foresees the creation of a "European army in the long term," since Germany is cooperating with France and the Netherlands to secure the deal. It could also be extended to potential future members of the EU and even NATO (which will be complicated due to American domestic politics). Pistorius aims to create a war-ready European army within eight years, which Strack-Zimmermann wants done in five, given the creation of bulwarks by Baltic states due to the Russian threat. (Zac Crellin, "[Germany weighs allowing foreign citizens into the army](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2024)

Germany suggests means to curb drug trafficking

On 22 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the decision by Germany to engage in global cooperation to curb the threats of drug trafficking within Europe. Nancy Faeser, the German Interior Minister, stated that drug smugglers were targeting the German port of Hamburg and other major ports in Belgium, France and the Netherlands and perpetuating a "spiral of violence" against journalists and prosecutors in these countries. Faeser would be visiting South America to extend cooperation with them to prevent smuggling into Europe. She also recommended preventative measures through the identification of companies involved in trafficking and threats extended to port workers by cartels. ("[Germany calls for more global action against drug smugglers](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2024)

Doppelganger murders lookalike to fake her death

On 22 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the Bavarian court's dismissal of the plea to delay the trial of a Beautician, who murdered her lookalike, to make it look like it was her death. After contacting the lookalike through Instagram, the accused invited her to Ingolstadt under the promise of a free beauty treatment, where the accused instead took the victim to a wooded area and stabbed her more than 50 times. The reason for the defendant to fake her death is due to disagreements between her family and her former partner. Konrad Kliegal, the presiding judge refused the plea from defence requesting a pause on the trial as new investigation files were submitted to the court. (Richard Connor, "[German 'doppelganger' fake death murder trial moves ahead](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2024)

Scholz condemns right-wing intentions of 'deportations'

On 19 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the support shown by Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor, towards protests condemning plans by the right wing AfD party to mass deport migrants. Scholz likened the plan to Nazi ideology and stated that the act by right-wing extremists was a threat to democracy. Protests arose after the German investigative site Correctiv exposed a meeting among right-wing extremists of the AfD and their plans for mass deportations from Germany. Demonstrations in Hamburg were brought to a close due to overwhelming attendance by protesters, reaching up to 50,000, according to the *Agence-France Presse*. Protesters have planned another 90 demonstrations in German cities including Frankfurt, Nuremberg, Bonn, Berlin and Munich this weekend. ("[Germany: Scholz welcomes protests against far right](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2024)

Bundestag passes bill easing naturalisation and dual citizenship

On 19 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the decision by the Bundestag, the German lower house of the parliament, to pass a bill

that allows naturalisation of citizenship in five instead of eight years and expanded the reach of dual citizenship to most countries (and not just the EU). In a move to increase skilled labour in Germany, Nancy Faeser, the German interior minister, stated that they are replicating the US and Canada in attracting qualified people. The bill was voted against by conservative (CDU, CSU) and far-right (AfD) parties in an attempt to “preserve the value of German citizenship”. The coalition government under Scholz has promised to strengthen laws against illegal immigration and failed asylum seekers. (“Germany’s parliament approves easing dual citizenship”, *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2024)

Destatis reports a gender pay gap of 18 per cent

On 18 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported based on the research by the Federal Statistics Office, Destatis, that women earned 18 per cent less than men since 2020. Women earned an average of EUR 20.84 per hour whereas men earned EUR 25.3. The gender pay gap varied within Germany where East Germany had a lower gap at seven per cent. The gender pay gap could be likely due to women taking greater absences, due to childcare and household responsibilities. According to the report, the pay gap could also be caused by women’s greater involvement in marginal employment and part-time work. Across the EU women are paid 13 per cent less than men. (“Gender pay gap in Germany: Women earn 18% less than men,” *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2024)

Parliament votes for easing the deportation of rejected asylum seekers

On 19 January, according to *El País*, the German Parliament voted for legislation that eases the deportation of unsuccessful asylum seekers, allowing them temporary permission to stay in Germany for reasons such as illness, a child with residency and lack of ID. The legislation increased the maximum length of pre-deportation custody from 10 to 28 days, while specifically focusing on the deportation of individuals who are connected with

criminal organisations. The legislation came through as thousands of people protested against the plans of the far-right to deport migrants. Germany to date has provided asylum to around one million Ukrainian refugees. (“German parliament approves legislation easing deportations of rejected asylum seekers,” *El País*, 19 January 2024)

Citizens’ Council gives nine recommendations on healthier society

On 15 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the newly formed Citizens’ Council’s suggestions to improve public health in Germany, which were presented to Bärbel Bas, the President of the German Parliament Bundestag, on the theme of “Nutrition in Transition.” The key suggestion in a list of nine recommendations was free lunches to every student in German schools, the cost of which must be split between the state and local governments. The Council also suggested the labelling of food to inform consumers of their food choices and new food tax measures with zero per cent sales tax on organic and about 19 per cent for the sale of sugar and non-organic products. The Civil Council was made because Germany attempted to increase civic dialogue in the democracy, choosing 160 citizens at random to come up with key democratic decisions. Bas has considered the suggestions and is due to present it to the Bundestag in late February as a report. (“Germany: Citizens’ group backs national free-lunch program”, *Deutsche Welle*, 15 January 2024)

Hundreds rally against right-wing extremism; Scholz, Baerbock attend

On 14 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on rallies taking place across Germany against right-wing extremism, including major events taking place in Berlin and Potsdam. Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor and Annalena Baerbock, Germany’s Foreign Minister, joined the protests, extending their support for the motto “defend democracy.” The rallies erupted after Correctiv, an investigative journalism portal, released an expose on a secret meeting between far-right extremists including Martin Sellner, an Austrian neo-Nazi, and members of the party Alternative

for Germany (AfG) in Potsdam, discussing remigration and forced deportation. Elections in Germany are yet to prove the rising popularity of the AfD, a eurosceptic, islamophobic and anti-immigration-based political party, which has gained key support from Eastern Germany especially in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia. The EU elections this year will enable the party to show its strength, if any. ("Germany: Scholz, Baerbock attend 'defend democracy' rally," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 January 2024)

2024 emerges as the year of protests of discontent

On 14 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the multiple protests that had taken over Germany, especially by farmers and train drivers' unions, due to sudden changes in EU legislation with little time to adapt. Farmers in Germany started protesting due to subsidy cuts to adapt to a new carbon-neutral policy, which has brought traffic to a standstill. Protesting unions have been supported by far-right political parties like the Alternative for Germany (AfG) feeding on populism. Farmers supported by right-wing extremist parties attacked a ferry that transported Robert Habeck, the German Vice-Chancellor and Economy Minister, a trend similar to protests targeting the residences of officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Support for parties in the fringes has been increasing due to the sudden phasing out of fossil fuels, tax increases, subsidy cuts and political disagreements in the coalition government, which could have significant outcomes in 2024. (Sabine Kinkartz, "Why Germany has gone into protest mode," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 January 2024)

German authorities seek deportation of suspect of Cologne Cathedral attack

On 15 January, a 25-year-old Tajik national was being actively pursued by German authorities for removal after allegedly plotting a terror assault on Cologne Cathedral on New Year's Eve. The Dortmund District Court issued a removal warrant after the suspect and three other people were taken into custody on 31 December and then released. Notably, an Austrian arrest warrant is still pending for a

30-year-old Tajik suspect who was detained in Wesel and is currently being held in German custody. It was observed that the 25-year-old was connected to people who were detained in Vienna, indicating that he may be part of a small terror cell. Targeting crowds outside Cologne's cathedral with a car was the intended attack. The suspects were said to be part of the "Islamic State Khorasan" group (IS-K), which operates in central and south Asia. ("Germany seeks Cologne Cathedral attack suspect's deportation," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 January 2024)

Tesla pauses berlin car production due to Red Sea shipping disruptions

On 12 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the stalling of the German production of Tesla for two weeks due to the impact of the Red Sea attacks. The interference caused by Iranian-backed militants in shipping operations has severely affected supply chains, resulting in the temporary closure of Tesla's Berlin plant and causing delays in deliveries throughout Europe. This pause in production serves as a significant example of how regional conflicts can have far-reaching consequences on global trade. Companies like Tesla are now faced with the challenge of finding alternative, longer, and more expensive routes around the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the unpredictable Suez Canal. ("Red Sea attacks halt Tesla production at German plant," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 January 2024)

Chemical leak reported in Konstanz

On 12 January, a chemical leak was reported from a plant in Konstanz, southwestern Germany. In the incident, seven were hospitalised due to exposure to toxic fumes 25 were reportedly suffering from respiratory tract irritation. According to the police spokesperson, employees of the company initially detected a corrosive gas from the fruit processing and nitric acid, detergent Horolith were the key leaked components. Following the leak, using a protective kit the container was moved out of the building to release the gas in larger atmosphere without causing further fire in the building. ("Germany: Several

hospitalized in Konstanz chemical leak," Deutsche Welle, 12 January 2024)

German rail operator faces new strike action from labour union

On 10 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported that German train travel is currently experiencing fresh turmoil due to the announcement of another strike by the GDL union (labour union). This strike is a result of an ongoing wage dispute with Deutsche Bahn. The union demands shorter working hours of 35 per week, against the current 38 hours, without any effect on pay. Negotiations between the two parties have reached a deadlock. Passenger trains is expected to halt as a result of this strike till 12 January. The union claims that Deutsche Bahn has not made a serious offer since the Christmas break and is demanding improvements in working hours, EUR 555 per month with an inflation bonus, and an earlier agreement. Deutsche Bahn considers the strike to be "unnecessary and illegal" and is offering a wage increase and a longer contract term instead of reduced hours. It also seeks a court injunction to prevent the strike from taking place. Previous strikes have caused significant disruptions, highlighting the immense pressure faced by both sides. ("Deutsche Bahn: German rail union plans fresh strikes," Deutsche Welle, 10 January 2024)

German Farmers block roads protesting subsidy cuts

On 08 January, the *BBC* reported on farmer protests in Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony and Bavaria calling to scrap all plans for cutting subsidies. The cut was imposed in response to a budgetary crisis. Olaf Scholz's government in Berlin faces a challenging start to the year amid predictions of sluggish economic growth for Germany. The arrival of tractors in central Berlin, accompanied by concerns over political radicalization, drew widespread condemnation. In response to the protests Nancy Faeser, Germany's Interior Minister warned of the consequences of "anger disagreement" due to stopping people from going to work. Despite the government's efforts to reduce the farmer's anger by

reversing its plan to abolish "preferential treatment in vehicle tax," the protests seem to continue. (Jessica Parker, "German farmers blockade Berlin with tractors in subsidy row," BBC, 08 January 2024)

Heavy rains risk flooding and disrupt routine

On 06 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on severe flooding in Germany caused by incessant rains, leading to disrupted transportation, shutting schools and crop failures. Several states in northern Germany were severely flooded, with dykes on the verge of collapse. The German Weather Service (DWD) announced a halt in rains and the arrival of frost, which could aid the dykes in holding back water. However, farmers find that flooding prevents the frost from reaching the soil. The leading cause of severe flooding in Lower Saxony and other northern parts is the disappearance of almost 70 per cent of wetlands, disrupting the normal course of water flow. The recent cutting of funding by the German coalition government for climate change events, could affect any attempts at environmental protection and adaptation. (Alex Berry, "Germany's flooded farmers brace for winter frost," Deutsche Welle, 06 January 2024)

Tragic death in Mulheim migrant fatality occurs following altercation with police

On 08 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the unfolding of a tragic event in Germany that resulted in the loss of life of a 26-year-old Guinean man following a confrontation with police at an asylum centre. The man allegedly assaulted staff members and subsequently engaged in a scuffle with officers. Despite the use of a taser to calm down, the man tragically lost consciousness and passed away in the hospital. The police who are currently investigating stated their attempt to use tasers twice without success. Two officers sustained injuries during the incident and the man's death has prompted concerns and demands for a thorough investigation from the Social Democrats. ("Germany: Migrant dies in Mülheim after police scuffle," Deutsche Welle, 08 January 2024)

Farmers stage protest against increase in tax

On 06 January, *Politico* reported on intense demonstrations in Germany against budget cuts. More than 100 protesters criticized Habeck for proposing an increase in taxes on diesel fuel and other agricultural benefits. This highlights the escalating tensions over the government's austerity measures which have sparked significant farmer protests in recent weeks. The government denounced the protest as "shameful" and a violation of democratic norms. Farmers continue to demand a complete reversal of the tax increases and plan larger protests for the following week. ("Mob of German farmers accosts top Green as protests escalate," *Politico*, 06 January 2024)

Scholz visits Saxony-Anhalt due to floods alert

On 04 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor visit to Saxony-Anhalt, where the village of Bennungen, near the river Helme, remained on high alert. Members of Scholz's Social Democratic Party (SPD) urged the federal government to consider declaring a state of emergency, allowing extra borrowing for flood relief in the worst-hit northern Germany. By 03 January, about 100,000 individuals, encompassing emergency services and volunteers, were activated in Lower Saxony, and French emergency crews were also present to contribute to flood relief in the region. In the Lilienthal area in one of the most severely impacted regions, 20,000 residents were forced to evacuate. ("Germany: Flooding persists in north and east, Scholz visits," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 January 2024)

Inflation relaxed to 5.9 per cent; Food and energy prices remain high

On 04 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported Germany's ease in inflation to 5.9 per cent in 2023 compared to 6.9 per cent in 2022 as published by German Statistics Agency Destatis. While inflation had been consistently decreasing since June, there was a rise in December, driven by persistent increases in food and energy costs, 4.5 and 4.1 percent. According to data

released, 2023 proved better than 2022, as German industry's dependency on Russian fuels was hit and faced high prices after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. ("Germany sees inflation ease to 5.9% for 2023," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 January 2023)

"Deutschlandtrend" opinion poll reveals pessimistic country prospects for 2024

On 05 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the results of a nationwide poll of 1,321 eligible voters executed by pollster Infratest Dimap. The report revealed citizens' fears over harsh weather conditions, price rise and refugee influx, while also indicating uncertainty over of Russia-Ukraine war and Israel-Hamas war. Therefore, only nine per cent believed that these conflicts to end by 2024. Voters' perspectives on Germany's stance in Ukraine have generally remained steady, however, 41 per cent of respondents now view Germany's financial aid to Ukraine as overly extensive, reflecting the country's escalating budgetary challenges. Germany had pledged USD 8.6 billion as military aid in 2024. Around 80 per cent of voters expressed skepticism over the chances of the US reducing its Ukraine support and the EU managing the balance. Nationally, only 19 per cent are satisfied with Scholz's performance, with just 17 per cent approving of the federal government's overall job. (Sabine Kinkartz, "War, inflation, flooding: Germans' negative outlook on 2024," *Deutsche Welle*, 05 January 2023)

GREECE

Church opposes government-backed same-sex marriage bill

On 06 January, *ekathimerini* reported the government's failed efforts to reconcile with the Church of Greece on same-sex marriage and parenthood, leading clerics to urge lawmakers against supporting the impending bill in Parliament. The Holy Synod's Christmas circular opposing the legislation is believed to be linked to the government's inclination to expedite the bill rather than delay it until after the European elections. The government advised a cautious approach, emphasizing its commitment to institutionalize same-sex marriage while attempting to minimize

opposition. ("Tug-of-war with Church over same-sex marriage," *ekathimerini.com*, 06 January 2024)

Rescue operation initiated for 21 migrants trapped near Rhodes

On 06 January, a shipwreck of a migrant boat carrying 21 individuals in the coast of Rhodes in Turkish waters was reported. Although the Turkish Coast Guard managed to rescue 18 people from the wreckage, an intense search operation was launched to locate the remaining three individuals. Greek patrol boats, a Super Puma helicopter, and a nearby vessel surveyed the northeastern waters. This shipwreck off Rhodes serves as a reminder of the ongoing migrant crisis. ("Shipwreck with 21 migrants off Rhodes, rescue operation under way," *ekathimerini.com*, 08 January 2024)

Green energy sector employment surges by 90 per cent in a decade

On 06 January, *ekathimerini.com* reported on the research conducted by Piraeus University Yannis Maniatis, a former Environment and Energy Minister and socialist MP revealed a shift in focus towards sustainable practices in the past decade from 2012-2022 and reflected growth in green energy sectors as photovoltaics, bioenergy, hydropower, wind energy. The findings by the World Economic Forum highlighted the positive impact of green transition and climate change adaptation with the rise in green energy professions. ("Green energy employment soars, research shows," *ekathimerini.com*, 06 January 2023)

Historic site of Alexander the Great's crowning reopened after restoration

On 06 January, the *BBC* reported on the reopening of the Palace of Aigai, one of the most significant sites in Greek antiquity, after restoration. The Palace, built by Alexander the Great's father Philip II in the then capital of Aigai, was the site of the former's crowning in 336 BC. The restoration of the UNESCO World Heritage Site took sixteen years and EUR 20 million with the help of the EU, and was declared a "monument of global importance" by

Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister. The palace, the largest in ancient Macedonia, featured banquet halls, places of worship and courtyards. (Kathryn Armstrong, "Palace of Aigai: Greece reopens huge Alexander the Great monument," *BBC*, 06 January, 2024)

HUNGARY

Chief economist expects GDP to exceed four per cent

On 11 January, *Hungary Today* reported the government's commitment to exceed economic growth beyond four per cent in 2024, focusing on pillars of growth in a balanced manner. A solid increase in working capital and major investments seen in the establishment of car factories and battery plants will facilitate in momentum of investments and GDP. Gergely Suppan, Chief Economist at the Ministry of National Economy, highlighted the possible setbacks due to external price shocks, however, the current deflationary nature of commodity and energy prices depicts a positive future for the economy. Subsidised loan initiatives programs such as the Széchenyi Recreation Card and the Baross Gábor Re-industrialization Loan Program will help in strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises and will increase domestic investment. ("Government to Focus On Fortifying the Pillars of Economic Growth," *Hungary Today*, 11 January 2024)

Teachers' to receive a pay rise after the arrival of the EU funds

On 15 January, *Hungary Today* reported on the impact on teachers after the crucial release of EUR 10 billion financial release from the EU. This guaranteed their long-awaited pay rise of 32.2 per cent. After initially connecting pay increases to EU subsidies, the government finally gave assurances about its commitment, announcing a two-phase rise to achieve 80 per cent of the average graduate income, with a 21 per cent increase for 2024 and a 71.8 per cent increase by 2025. ("With Guarantees Received for the Arrival of EU Funds, Teachers' Pay Rise May Commence," *Hungary Today*, 15 January 2024)

Hungarian Defence forces to lead mission to support Bosnian police

On 04 January, *Hungary Today* reported on the decision of the EU Political and Security Committee to make Hungarian Defence Forces lead the EU's peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a year. The commander of the mission, Major General László Sticz, emphasised the potential use of new equipment like helicopters post-2018 military reform. The EUFOR ALTHEA mission will support local authorities, prioritise Bosnian police assistance. Sticz underscored the importance of an impartial and credible international military force with deterrent capabilities. ("[Hungarian Defense Forces Lead EU Peacekeeping Mission in Bosnia](#)," *Hungary Today*, 04 January 2024)

Receives HUF 300 billion from EU's RePowerEU plan

On 29 December 2023, *HUNGARY today* reported that Mihály Varga, Finance Minister, confirmed the arrival of HUF 300 billion in EU funds. The move followed the approval of the amended recovery plan by EU finance ministers on 08 December. The RePowerEU funds, totaling EUR 779.5 million, were transferred to Hungary. Varga highlighted the addition of a EUR 3.9 billion loan tranche and a EUR 0.7 billion non-reimbursable fund to the recovery plan. He emphasised a focus on green transition investments, constituting 67.1 per cent of the total program. The initiative responded to the energy crisis due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, aiming to boost renewables, diversify energy supply, and enhance energy efficiency. ("[Nearly 780 Million Euros in EU Funding Arrives](#)," *Hungary today*, 29 December 2023)



Image source: Snorri Thor/NurPhoto/picture alliance

ICELAND

Volcano Erupts for second time forcing evacuation

On 14 January, the volcano in southwest Iceland erupted for the second time in less than a month, shooting lava into a fishing hamlet and lighting up the skies over the region. Just recently, in late December 2023, 3,800 inhabitants of Grindavik returned to their homes following a forced evacuation due to a previous eruption. Although no lives were at risk this time, some infrastructure are at risk of damage. Since this eruption does not produce a lot of ash into the atmosphere, it is not anticipated to cause any problems for air traffic. On the Reykjanes Peninsula, a volcano has erupted five times since 2021 and this time the protective barriers meant to shield Grindavik from the lava have been breached. ("[Iceland: Reykjanes volcano erupts for 2nd time in weeks](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 January 2024)

ITALY

Inquiry highlights data privacy violations by ChatGPT

On 29 January, the *BBC* reported on the inquiry by Italy's Data Protection Authority (DPA), which found breaches of data protection rules. The chatbot by OpenAI collects personal data from its users to train its algorithms. DPA's "fact-finding activity" found breaches of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. Italian spokesperson demanded the need for "implementing an age verification system" and an "information campaign to inform users on their right to opt-out from the provision of their personal data." OpenAI had earlier reported continuing its talks with the Italian regulator and has 30 days to prepare its

defence. (Imran Rahman-Jones, "[ChatGPT: Italy says OpenAI's chatbot breaches data protection rules](#)," *BBC*, 29 January 2024)

Summit in Rome commences with the Africa Union

On 28 January, the Italy-Africa summit began in Rome under the Mattei Plan. The summit aims to present African country's vision for the development of Africa. 25 African leaders along with representatives from the EU took part to discuss strategic partnerships, causes of irregular migration, counter-smuggling gangs. It is also aimed at making Italy an energy hub to facilitate supplies from Africa and help Europe. In a press conference, Georgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister said: "Everything that happens in Africa concerns us, from migration to security and supply chains. For us, the proper development of the African continent is fundamental." She also highlighted Italy's approach towards Tunisia in addressing the migrant and refugee entry and indications of a reduction in the numbers. On the same, the European Commission issued a statement calling the Mattei Plan of strategic partnership to fit well with its "joint vision of 2030 between the EU and Africa Union." The Mattei Plan discussion will also include talks about agriculture and the environment where Italy and Africa can work together. ("[Italy summit to present vision for African development – PM](#)," *Ansa English*, 28 January 2024; [EU gives blessing to Mattei Plan, says 'fits our vision'](#)," *Ansa English*, 28 January 2024)

Influencers to be bound by stricter rules of Italian Communication Authority

On 18 January, the *BBC* reported that Italian social media creators would have to follow the same rules as traditional media outlets as they would come under the supervision of the Italian Communications Authority. The influencers will strictly have to label brand collaborations, and commercial interests, present disclaimers for advertisements and are liable to pay hefty fines if they fail to do so. Initially, the rule shall apply to influencers that have more than a million followers, but "soon other influencers will also have to adapt to them",

said Giacomo Lasorella, head of the Italian Communications Authority (AGCOM). ("[Italian influencers to be bound by tighter rules](#)," *BBC*, 18 January 2024)

Former Italian prime minister suggests reforms to the EU single market

On 04 January, *Politico* reported on Enrico Letta, the former Italian Prime Minister's plan to propose changes to the policies guiding the EU single market and national subsidy systems. In his role as the reviewer of the state of the single market, Letta found a consistent 'brain drain' from certain EU economies to more opportune ones, leaving countries like Romania, Poland, Italy and Portugal at a major skills-based disadvantage. He noted that the freedom of movement must entail the freedom to stay. Further, his report will also include major changes to policies on state subsidies that benefit some industries over others, instead proposing a European industrial policy over "a national fragmentation." (Jacopo Barigazzi And Giovanna Faggionato, "[EU single market czar outlines key reforms](#)," *Politico*, 04 January 2024)

Venice implements stricter tourist rules

On 30 December 2023, Venice's city council restricted tourist groups to under 25 people and prohibited loudspeakers on tours, effective from 01 June 2024. The move is aimed at curbing mass tourism's disruption; these rules cover the city centre and adjacent islands. The move sought to safeguard residents from noise, disturbance and to foster more sustainable tourism. ("[Italy: Venice bans large tourist groups and loudspeakers](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2023)

KOSOVO

Joins Europe's borderless zone; Sparking hope for closer ties

On 03 January, *Le Monde* reported on a long wait "visa D-day" was celebrated by Kosovars on 01 January when the Schengen area's open borders welcomed them for the first time without the need for a visa. This historic move towards EU integration brought relief to those who saw it as a sign of recognition for Kosovo's future. Alongside there is also fear of abuse of new

freedom, Kosovo enters a new era of free movement eager to demonstrate its readiness to be a responsible partner in the European family. ("[Kosovo joins Europe's visa-free Schengen zone.](#)" *Le Monde*, 03 January 2024)

LATVIA

Protests demanding to stop import and transit of Russian goods

On 23 January, according to *ENG.LSM.lv*, the association, The Rising Sun (Austošā Saule) protested the continued import of Russian goods, as it is immoral. Latvia is also undergoing discussions as to whether to stop the transit of Russian food grains to third-world countries as it contains the risk of being stolen from Ukraine. Armands Krauze, Agriculture Minister on 23 January called for a ban on Russian agricultural and food imports in the EU and sanctions for Russian grains at the EU Council of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers. ("[Rally against imports from Russia in Rīga.](#)" *ENG.LSM.lv*, 23 January 2024)

NATO airspace policing duties to be hosted in Latvian air space

On 09 January, *LSM* reported on a takeover of Latvia of the Baltic airspace policing mission under NATO as Estonia's Air Force Base Āmari is under repair. NATO patrols have been performed in the region since the Baltic states joined in 2004, first in Šiauliai airbase in Lithuania and then including Estonia's Āmari on a rotational basis. German armed forces will arrive in Latvia for test flights following which the National Armed Forces Aviation Base in Lielvārde will take over from 01 March. NATO presence has increased in the Baltic due to the threats associated with the Russia-Ukraine war. ("[Latvia gradually takes over Baltic air police hosting duties.](#)" *LSM*, 09 January, 2024)

LITHUANIA

Youth remain uninterested in politics

On 11 January, *Delfi.en* reported on the lack of interest showcased by Lithuanian youth towards political processes and civic responsibilities in the country. Umberto Masi, the President of the Lithuanian Youth

Council, agrees to insufficient youth participation and blames the flaws in civic education as the primary cause. Further, the period of Russian occupation of Lithuania, mental health issues and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to youth behaviour. Given the effect each issue has on the youth, Masi stated that youth voices often go undervalued. Lithuanian youth are passionate about ecology, climate change, LGBTQIA+ rights, education and employment. Masi suggested that the youth need to hone towards being better citizens through practical activities in the form of civic and community engagement and rethink the methods used in schools. He further stressed the importance of the need for the youth to feel heard on matters that directly affect them. (Gabija Zdanytė, "[Why young Lithuanians, too, are disappointed with politicians, explained.](#)" *Delfi.en*, 11 January 2024)

LUXEMBOURG

Frieden wishes to mend ties with Hungary's Orbán

On 16 January, *Politico* reported on Luc Frieden, the new Luxembourgian Prime Minister's plan to 'build bridges' between the EU and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán's government has consistently expressed its criticism of the EU through its pro-Russia stance, disruption of Ukraine's membership in the EU and EU policies on migration. Orbán had also vetoed an aid package worth EUR 50 billion for Ukraine from the EU. However, Frieden believes that Orbán is pro-European and wants his counterparts in the EU to make an effort to understand him better and be more open to different and opposing views, which could enable them to achieve a common goal. While Frieden supported Orbán, he also expected a Hungarian effort to mend its relationship with the EU. Hungary is believed to be the latest victim of democratic backsliding, leading to the freezing of EUR 11.7 billion of earmarked EU funds. (Nicolas Camut and Barbara Moens, "[Luxembourg's new PM wants to be the EU's Orbán whisperer.](#)" *Politico*, 16 January 2024)

NORWAY

Government passes controversial bill allowing deep sea mining

On 09 January, the *BBC* reported on the Norwegian government's decision to allow deep sea mining, which could lead to catastrophic outcomes for marine life. By doing so, Norway became the first country to enable the action to extract minerals including lithium, scandium and cobalt— key to green technologies. The government stated that it would proceed cautiously especially while issuing licences, and assured that mining activities would commence only after further studies and exploration with the aid of private players, who can now bid for around 280,000 square kilometers of national waters. The government has specified that opening up didn't imply mining. Marine biologists have expressed their concern about the detrimental effects on marine life. The UN-based International Seabed Authority (ISA) is set to finalise rules on deep sea mining in 2024. (Esme Stallard, "[Deep-sea mining: Norway approves controversial practice](#)," *BBC*, 09 January, 2024)

Ban on diesel cruise ships sparks fears of diminished tourism

On 04 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the Norwegian Parliament's decision to adopt a zero-emission policy and to allow only cruise ships that use greener alternative fuels to sail from 2026. Espen Barth Eide, Norway's Foreign Minister stated that "ships produce world's highest emissions per passenger and travelled kilometre and pollute the fjords." A swift ban on diesel cruise ships threatens the livelihood of residents of Geiranger Fjord, who depend largely on mass tourism, which will take a hit post-implementation of the policy. The existing technology that uses Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) achieves "far too little" according to the government which proposes a switch to electric-powered cruise ships. The residents however hope for a longer transition period ensuring that tourism and livelihood remain unaffected. ("[Norway bans polluting cruise ships](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 January 2023)

Tesla continues to dominate in electric cars market

On 03 January, *novinite.com* reported on how Tesla remains dominant in Norway for the third consecutive year despite challenges from labour unions in the sale of electric cars. In 2023, 83 per cent of newly purchased cars were equipped with electric plugs and Tesla secured a remarkable 20 per cent share of the market. This surge in electric vehicle adoption is driven by favourable tax incentives and Norway's ambitious objective of phasing out petrol and diesel cars by 2025. Despite facing opposition from unions in Sweden regarding worker rights, Tesla's sales in Norway showed no signs of deceleration, underscoring the unwavering dedication of the Nordic nation toward an electric-powered future. ("[Electric Cars Dominate Norway's Market, Diesel and Gasoline Face Phase-Out](#)," *novinite.com*, 03 January 2024)

POLAND

President Duda pardons arrested former ministers

On 23 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Andrzej Duda, Poland's President's decision to pardon two former ministers belonging to his party, who were arrested a few weeks ago. Mariusz Kaminski and Maciej Wasik, the former ministers, were seeking refuge in the President's Palace, and were arrested due to the conviction of abuse of power carried out during 2007. Kaminski and Wasik are supporters of Duda and his Law and Justice Party (PiS), which led Poland for eight years. The ex-ministers were pardoned by Duda in 2015, which was overturned by Poland's Supreme Court in 2023. Duda's decision created a rift between his party, the PiS, and Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk. ("[Poland: Duda pardons politicians jailed for abuse of power](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2024)



Image source: RADEK PIETRUSZKA/EPA

Poland's ambitious climate action plans ripple through the EU

On 15 January, *Politico* reported Poland's increased efforts in tackling climate change, as confirmed through Urszula Zielińska, a senior official from Poland's new government urged the EU to adopt the ambitious 90 per cent emission reduction targets by 2040. So far, Denmark, Poland and Bulgaria have rallied to the EU on the adoption of stricter targets, as it also faces prominent opposition to green legislations, as the EU's Green Deal project garnered criticism from conservative politicians. 2040 targets are a middle ground between the 2030 goal of slashing 55 per cent emissions and 2050's goal of reaching climate neutrality. However, a Commission assessment showed that the EU might only achieve the 51 per cent emissions target set for 2030, highlighting the need to ramp up its efforts. (Zia Weise, "Poland's climate surprise pressures EU to pitch ambitious 2040 target," *Politico*, 15 January 2024)

Ex-ministers arrested over abuse of power

On 10 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the arrest of two former ministers belonging to the Law and Justice Party (PiS), convicted of abuse of power. The ministers allegedly took refuge in the Presidential Palace with the support of Andrzej Duda, the Polish President belonging to the PiS. Donald Tusk, the Polish Prime Minister, earlier accused Duda for protecting the ministers and obstructing justice. The Presidential pardon that was granted to them in 2015 by Duda was overturned by Poland's Supreme Court. Supporters of the PiS have, however, condemned the arrest. ("Polish police arrest ex-ministers at

presidential palace," *Deutsche Welle*, 10 January 2024)

ROMANIA

The need for better education for the Roma people

On 07 January, *Deutsche Welle* in an opinion highlighted the importance of better educational opportunities to integrate the Roma people into the general population. Romania, as the country with the largest Roma population, has failed, much like an EU public policy, in enabling the inclusion of the Roma people. The cause is noted as systemic violence and racism, which fail to enable equal and efficient education opportunities to the minority community. Schools for the Roma people have less facilities, inexperienced teaching staff and low budgets compared to other schools, which, together with existing social and economic constraints, prevent any growth or "integration" within the community. Having observed the failure of state policy, the Roma Education Fund (REF), an NGO, has enacted a process aimed at counteracting the failures of existing policies towards the community in order to better integrate them into the mainstream. (Ciprian Necula, "My Europe: The Roma need genuine educational opportunities," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 January, 2024)

EU agrees to lift air and maritime border controls with Bulgaria

On 30 December 2023, EU countries unanimously decided to remove air and maritime internal border checks with Bulgaria and Romania. The border checks would be removed by 31 March 2024, ending 12 years of negotiations. Fernando Grande-Marlaska Gomez, Spain's Minister for the Interior, hailed this as a significant step toward strengthening the Schengen area. Talks are sought to continue regarding the lifting of internal land border controls. Discussions are aimed for the full inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria in the Schengen zone. Ursula von der Leyen, EU's President, termed the decision historic, signalling a positive stride for both countries and the Schengen area. Negotiations, driven by Spain's Presidency, sealed the agreement

just before the transition to Belgium's leadership. (["Schengen area: Council agrees to lift air and maritime internal border controls with Bulgaria and Romania,"](#) *European Council*, 30 December 2023; Jones Hayden, ["Bulgaria, Romania get official green light for partial entry into Schengen,"](#) *Politico*, 31 December 2023)

RUSSIA

Putin's contender submits a bit to take part in the election

On 31 January, Boris Nadezhdin, a potential candidate for Russia's presidential election submitted close to 100,000 signatures from supporters to register for the election. Following this, the Central Election Commission will authenticate the signature and decide his candidacy. Nadezhdin is considered the only anti-war candidate and he said: "People understand that their lives and the safety of their families is threatened by what (Russian President Vladimir) Putin is doing." On submitting the signatures, he stated on calling for protests if rejected by the commission. (["Putin challenger submits bid to run in Russian election,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 31 January 2024)

Putin joins three other registered candidates for upcoming presidential elections

On 29 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the Central Election Commission announcement of the registration of Russian President Vladimir Putin for presidential elections to be held from March 15-17. Putin joins the three registered candidates, Leonid Slutsky, leader of the nationalist LDPR party, Vladislav Davankov, deputy speaker of the State Duma, and Nikolai Kharitonov, Duma deputy from the Communist party. Boris Nadezhdin, another potential candidate has until 31 January to collect 105,000 signatures supporting his campaign. In his fifth presidential election, a victory for Putin would make him the longest-serving ruler in Russia since the 18th century. (["Russia: Putin registered as presidential candidate,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 29 January 2024)

Communists gather for the centenary of Lenin's death

On 22 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the celebration of 100 years since the death of Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the USSR. Few communists gathered near Moscow's Red Square, to pay their respects outside the mausoleum where Lenin lies, in a gathering led by Gennady Zyuganov, the General Secretary of the Russian Communist Party. Vladimir Putin's absence was noted, as a critic of Lenin, blaming him for committing grave errors in dismantling Tsarist Russia. The opinion of the Russian population on Lenin is divided between being a revolutionary saviour or a "ruthless despot." (["Russian communists mark 100 years since Lenin's death,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 22 January 2024)



Image source: Alexander Zemlianichenko / Associated Press

Top diplomat Sergei Lavrov dismisses US proposal to resume nuclear arms talks

On 18 January, *El País* reported the rejection of the US proposal for Russia and the US to resume dialogue on nuclear arms control. Russia's Foreign Minister stated the nation's disapproval of engaging in talks with the US, given its hostile policy against the former and its military support to Ukraine. Asking the US to revisit its current hostile policy, allowing nuclear inspections is the US trying to establish control over Russia's nuclear arsenal, and to identify the risks that it faces. The New START treaty, which was signed in 2010, by the US and Russia was the only existing arms control treaty between the nations, It was halted during the pandemic and discontinued as Russia suspended its participation as the US

and NATO stated it supported Ukraine and was committed towards the Russian defeat. ("Russia's foreign minister rejects a US proposal to resume talks on nuclear arms control," *El País*, 18 January 2024)

3000 protestors gathered in support of a jailed environmentalist

On 18 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported a rare protest in the remote Bashkortostan region against the prison sentence of local environmentalist Fail Alsynov. He had campaigned in support of protecting the Bashkir language but was labelled as "inciting hatred" by the authorities. Broadly, the protest is also an expression of dissatisfaction against their government, as they demanded the resignation of the Bashkir Prime Minister. The police had used tear gas and batons against the protestors who had gathered in sub-zero temperatures, -20 Celsius. ("[Russian police crack down on rare protest in remote region](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 January 2024)

Putin says Asia to be Russia's far east key

On 15 January, *Sputnik* reported on Vladimir Putin, Russia's President address on the Far East. He called it a "golden gateway" to Asia, emphasising its importance in securing Russia's future and forming alliances with rapidly expanding Asian economies. He referred to the area as the "Arctic's sibling" in determining Russia's future, highlighting its size, wealth of resources, and logistical ability. Putin promised further development work, emphasising not only the extraction of resources but also technology cooperation and deeper commercial connections with Asian countries. ("[Putin: Russia's Far East Region Important for Development of Nation's Ties With Asia](#)," *Sputnik*, 15 January 2024)

Russian forces begin using Yastreb-AV systems

On 02 January, *Sputnik* reported on Russia's new Yastreb-AV artillery reconnaissance systems. According to the report, the systems are designed to provide intelligence and targeting data to Russia's artillery units. It utilises advanced sensors, communication and data processing to help

commanders identify enemy position quickly and with precision. On the same, Russia's defence ministry reported on usage of the systems in the operations in Ukraine under the "counter-battery combat." ("[Russian Armed Forces Receive New Yastreb-AV Artillery Reconnaissance System](#)," *Sputnik*, 02 January 2023)

SERBIA

Protest continues across Belgrade calling for new elections

On 30 December 2023, protestors gathered in central Belgrade calling for a new round of elections. One of the protestors said to *Deutsche Welle*: "We want proper electoral registers and new elections under fair conditions. I hope many more people will take to the streets." Although the protests remain small but are staged every day, the majority stay at home. The opposition party, Serbia Against Violence, a pro-European alliance was observed to still invoke public interest through a hunger strike. One of the opposition ministers, Marinika Tepic who had held out for 12 days said: "I'm just hungry for freedom and justice." The protest sparked following the continued victory of Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President heading the Serbian Progressive Party through fraud as claimed by the opposition. The opposition argues that the elections were "rigged" due to "falsification of the electoral register." (Nemanha Rujevic, ("[Political tensions high in Serbia amid vote fraud protests](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2023)

SLOVAKIA

Heat pump rises as a sustainable alternative in the European energy market

On 03 January, *The Slovak Spectator* reported on the increasing investments in the heat pump industry as an effective and sustainable fuel alternative, following a rise in energy prices spilling from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Given the increased demand, investments have increased by both existing manufacturers and newer businesses from western Europe, according to the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO).

The largest European investors are German companies, following a change in legislation favouring the sustainable heat pump industry, feeding into its domestic demands as well. (Jana Liptáková, "[Energy crisis fuels heat pump investments in Slovakia](#)," *The Slovak Spectator*, 03 January, 2024)

SLOVENIA

Five trapped in a biodiversity hotspot due to high water levels

On 08 January, the *Associated Press* reported on the strangling of a family of three along with their two guides in Slovenia's Krizna Jama cave, a biodiversity hotspot after a heavy flood of eight kilometres. The rescue effort involving over 35 specialised personnel was deployed while the subterranean waters are expected to reduce which can take more days. This incident highlights the risks inherent in guided cave tours. ("[5 people are trapped in a cave in Slovenia after heavy rainfall causes water levels to rise](#)," *Associated Press*, 08 January 2024)

SPAIN

Bill to grant amnesty to Catalans fails in the lower house

On 30 January, the controversial bill to grant amnesty to the Catalan separatists was rejected in the lower house of the parliament. The bill was pushed by Pedro Sanchez, Spain's Prime Minister in exchange of the support received from the Catalan political group to form the coalition government in 2023. Although the law trigger domestic protests and opposition from the Popular Party headed by Alberto Nunez Feijoo, the bill was important for Sanchez to maintain the government. The bill suffered a setback with no support from the Junts party which comprises Catalans. Junts withdrew its support to the bill asking points on terrorism to be removed. This is because, some of the Catalans who were part of the 2017 secession bid have been charged under terrorism-related crimes. ("[Spain: Amnesty bill for Catalan separatists rejected](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 January 2024)

18 people from a shamanic group arrested for providing psychoactive drugs

On 18 January 2024, the *BBC* reported the arrest of 18 members of a shamanic organisation by Spanish police, alleging their involvement in providing hallucinogenic drugs to its members under the promise of promoting physical and mental health through such consumption. Police also seized EUR 24,000 (USD 26,000), in various currencies, and one kilogram (35oz) of mescaline. Some of the suspects are charged with human trafficking, violation of workers' rights and smuggling, whereas the group leader posthumously was sexual crimes and promotion of illegal immigration. Besides Spain, the group has been reported to be active in 10 other countries, including Belgium, Ireland, Mexico, Colombia and Turkey. (Sam Hancock, "Spain shaman arrests: Police say group sold psychoactive drugs to members," *BBC*, 18 January 2024)

Unemployment dips to record low since 2007

On 03 January, *spainenglish* reported the lowest unemployment rate in Spain since 2007, having decreased 4.59 per cent since December 2022. As of 2023, over 20.8 million employed people with social security benefits, with the highest annual job creation since 2018 excluding post-Covid recovery. The Balearic Islands peaked with the highest employment rates in the country, with Catalonia, Valencia and La Rioja being exceptions with an increase in unemployment rates. New employment policies have mostly benefited women and the youth, as Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez noted record female employment in the country. ("[Unemployment in Spain reaches its lowest level since 2007](#)," *spainenglish*, 03 January, 2024)

SWEDEN

NATO armed troops from Sweden to be sent to Latvia in 2025

On 08 January, *LSM* reported on the addition of Swedish troops into a Canada-led NATO's enhanced forward presence battle group based in Latvia. Sweden is set to become the 32nd member of NATO once Hungary and Turkey agree to its membership. Sweden is set to send a battalion of 800 soldiers with armoured

vehicles, combat cars and potentially 'Leopard' tanks to Latvia in 2025 in order to ensure NATO's presence in the region. (["Sweden to send NATO troops to Latvia in 2025," LSM](#), 09 January, 2024)

Lowest temperatures reported by the Swedish Meteorological Institute

On 03 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the continuing record cold temperature in Sweden. According to the report, the temperatures hit low to minus 40 degrees Celsius. The same was reported by the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute ranging between minus 40 C and 30 C at Kvikkjokk-Årrenjarka, a Lapland mountain in the northernmost, Nikkaluokta in north Sweden, and city of Umea. In response to the cold weather condition, trains were suspended till 04 January. Comparing the temperatures of February 2001, Sweden has witnessed the coldest temperature of minus 44 degrees Celsius. (["Extreme cold: Temperatures drop below minus 40 C in Sweden," Deutsche Welle](#), 03 January 2024)

SWITZERLAND

EPFL study reveals health effects of heat islands

On 23 January, *Swissinfo* reported on the health costs and adverse effects of health islands based on the study undertaken by the federal technology institute, the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) in Lausanne. The research highlighted the financial costs amounting up to CHF180 per adult per year due to the effects of heat islands, whereas also reported how these result in increased cardiovascular and respiratory risks and risks at reducing overall life expectancy. The research also underlined how the heat islands of Geneva cause four additional heat-related deaths, but prevent 3.4 cold-related deaths, per 100,000 residents per year. (["Urban heat islands have a health cost, according to Swiss study," Swissinfo.ch](#), 23 January 2024)

New food laws to come into effect from February

On 23 January, *Swissinfo* reported a revision of food laws focusing on reducing certain

chemicals, with emphasis on increasing transparency for consumers, such as a declaration of origin of baked goods by retail sellers as wholesale import prices rose by 65 per cent in the last decade. The Swiss government has imposed maximum limits for the use of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, "forever chemicals," as they have harmful effects on the development of foetuses and immune systems of adults. Changes in allowing redistribution of unsold food are aimed at reducing food waste commitments by 2030, as currently 2.8 million tonnes of food waste per year is generated in Switzerland. The new law allows for on-farm slaughter, allowing for a humane option as earlier it was required to transport animals to slaughterhouses, according to the Food Safety and Veterinary Office. (["New Swiss food laws for 2024: bread, chemicals and food waste," Swissinfo.ch](#), 23 January 2024)

Swiss Councillor in India to finalise FTA

On 21 January, *Swissinfo* reported on the meeting between Guy Parmelin, the head of the Swiss Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research and his Indian counterpart to reach an agreement on free trade between India and the EFTA countries. The negotiations for the agreement that went on for 16 years, concluded with agreements on patent protection and investment promotion among other things. The agreement would create jobs in India and encourage eco-friendly technology while also benefiting the poor, according to Parmelin. (["Swiss economics minister in India for final push on EFTA trade agreement," swissinfo](#), 21 January 2024)

Footwear maker On criticised for making unethical profits

On 19 January, *Swissinfo* reported on the steep growth of the Swiss footwear maker On, which prides itself on having Tennis legend Roger Federer as an investor, through unethical means. On has the fifth largest market capitalisation in the world and increased its net sales by 68.7 per cent in the first year. However, the Swiss consumer magazine Ktipp noted that On has exorbitant markups that cheat Swiss

consumers by a minimum of 10 per cent. On is also known to pay its suppliers, mostly in Vietnam, an average minimum wage based on Vietnamese standards and below a living wage despite its steep profits. (Anand Chandrasekhar, "[Is Swiss footwear brand On getting too greedy for its own good?](#)," *Swissinfo*, 19 January 2024)

Swiss Food Bank rescues 6,500 tons worth of "waste" food

On 08 January, the Swiss Food Bank reported on a 400-ton increase in surplus food products rescued in 2023 compared to 2022, with 25 tonnes of food being saved daily, reducing waste and producing 18.6 million meals for people in need. The expansion was credited to more retail stores in central and northern Switzerland, an improved partnership with Migros Aare. The foundation Migros Aare observed that there was a rise in poverty due to "violence, natural disasters, and electricity shortage" resulting in increased demand for food. Helping thousands through the efforts, the Swiss Food Bank redistributes leftover goods from large Swiss distributors to approximately 500 social institutions, such as soup kitchens and homeless shelters. ("[Thousands of tons of Swiss 'waste' alleviates poverty](#)," *swissinfo*, 08 January 2024)

Exploring the potential uncovering a new energy source in the Swiss Moors

On 08 January, *Swissinfo* reported on Switzerland's energy narrative over peat. It is derived from marshlands such as the "Great Marsh," flourished during the 19th century during industrialization and with the rise of steam power. Bern (a committee known as the 'Holzkammer' assumed responsibility for peat instead of wood in 1737) initiated a movement to supply hospitals and vessels in Lake Thun vessels with the first batch of cuts of peat (underground wood). However, with the high usage of coal, peat gained prominence leading to extractions from the moors. As a result, by the 20th century, peat consumption and land reclamation severely depleted the moors. This was stopped after the adoption of the "Rothenturm initiative"

in 1987 safeguarded the remaining 10 per cent of the original moorland. This compelled Switzerland to seek alternative sources of sustainable energy. ("[The energy source from the Swiss moors](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, 08 January 2024)

Culling of wolves alarming for European biodiversity

On 04 January, *Swissinfo* reported on Bern's decision to allow a preventative culling of up to 70 per cent of the wolf population, citing threats to livestock. The government's decision came following a thirty per cent annual increase in the predator's population, a sentiment that has spread as a cross-border issue in Europe. While EU nations are bound by strict conservation laws, the European Commission proposed to downgrade the status of wolves from "strictly protected" to "protected", creating freer rules like Switzerland. The EU's decision is also based on a livestock conundrum, with some critics accusing Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission's President, of furthering a personal agenda. However, a large-scale culling needs the approval of the 27 EU members and therefore might not materialise soon in European policy even if it has Swiss backing. (Domhnall O'Sullivan, "[Wolf crackdown in Switzerland: a sign of what's to come in Europe?](#)", *swissinfo*, 04 January, 2024)

Government abolished tariffs on industrial products to boost economy

On 03 January, *Swissinfo.ch* reported on Switzerland's step towards reducing costs for consumers and manufacturers by eliminating tariffs on industrial imports. This move is expected to result in lower prices and a wider range of products on Swiss shelves. The abolition of import duties on machinery, raw materials, bicycles, clothing, and other industrial goods is estimated to generate annual gains of over CHF 860 million. The government believes that the economic boost from increased output will outweigh any concerns about lost customs revenue. This decision reinforces Switzerland's position as a business and industrial hub, creating a

more vibrant and competitive market for both its citizens and industries. ("Switzerland abolishes tariffs on industrial product imports," Swissinfo.ch, 03 January 2024)

THE NETHERLANDS

Targets to cut obesity lowered marking the failure of 2018 National Prevention Plan

On 17 January, *Politico* reported plans of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) to lower its targets for tackling obesity. The target outlined in the 2018 plan was to lower obesity to 38 per cent among adults and 9 per cent among children, however, these targets have now been reduced to 55 per cent for adults and 14 per cent for children. Other measures to introduce a sugar tax, reduction in VAT for fruits and vegetables and banning and phasing out food advertising were not implemented. Concerns among Dutch NGO Foodwatch are high as more than half of the adult population is obese in the Netherlands, and the involvement of fast-food companies in policy-making for public health will not help in achieving targets. (Alessandro Ford, "Lower obesity in the Netherlands? Fat chance, says government," Politico, 17 January 2024)

Three-fold rise reported in asylum-seeking minors

On 09 January, *NL Times* reported on the surge in unaccompanied child asylum applications in the Netherlands from 2,191 in 2021 to about 6,000 in 2023. Immigration and Nationalisation Service (IND) authorities expressed concern over a trend where families send children first, exploiting perceived advantages in family reunification procedures. Ruben Brekelmans, the Netherlands People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) parliamentarian emphasised stricter Dutch policies, border controls, and detentions and cited sustainability and fairness concerns. While the European asylum rules detain the adult asylum seekers to make assessment, this is impermissible in case of Children. The Rutte IV Cabinet in an attempt to tighten family reunification rules nationally, failed. This leaves the task to the

incoming government. ("Sharp increase in unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the Netherlands", *NL Times*, 09 January 2024)

Heavy rainfalls causes flooding of major highways and provinces

On 05 January, the *NL Times* reported on the state of flooding in eastern and northeastern Netherlands, leading to road safety concerns and concerning water levels in the Maas River. The flooding of N345 and N36 led to road closures, and freezing temperatures increased the risk of road transportation. The water level in the Maas River reached its highest, releasing 1,700 cubic metres of water per second south of Maastricht at Sint Pieter. The weirs (low dams) along the Maas have been raised to allow the flow of water, currently declining based on inflow from France and the Ardennes. The Noord-Brabant province is simultaneously using available water storage facilities to prevent flooding in the region. ("Major roadways flooded in the east and northeast Netherlands", *NL Times*, 05 January, 2024; "Highest Maas River water level has passed Maastricht; Noord-Brabant opens flood defenses," NL Times, 05 January, 2024)

Healthcare workers feel unprotected as aggression is on the rise

On 03 January, *NL Times* reported on healthcare professionals' concerns over their safety as 90 per cent reported a notable increase in aggressive incidents. According to the report, one in three healthcare workers experience verbal and physical attacks from patients weekly. These attacks include screaming, threats, and even spitting, are often carried out by patients and their families, primarily stemming from psychiatric issues or disagreements regarding treatment. This alarming rise in violence leaves healthcare workers feeling vulnerable and unsupported, as only 20 per cent believe that appropriate consequences would be enforced. The recent survey conducted by NU'91 highlights the dire state of the healthcare system, emphasising the urgent need for effective measures to safeguard its invaluable workforce. ("Increase in

aggression towards people who work in health care," *NL Times*, 03 January 2024)

THE UK

DUP sign deal with the UK ending the political deadlock

On 30 January, the leaders of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) signed a deal with the UK government to revive the power-sharing government in the Northern Ireland. The move comes after two years of "power vacuum" where the nationalist part Sinn Fein won with majority and DUP disagreed to form government due to clash over post-Brexit trade arrangements. To address this the UK and the EU reached a deal to ease the border checks and to bifurcate the goods moving through the Northern Ireland, the UK and the EU. Despite the deal, the DUP continued to boycott and on pressure, the UK approved GBP three billion for public services and made "legislative assurances" to put back DUP. The details of the deal still undisclosed, DUP has agreed to form the government with Sinn Fein party. ("Northern Ireland eyes end to government shutdown," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 January 2024))

Rwanda bill faces criticism in House of Lords

On 30 January, the *BBC* reported the criticism faced by Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister's flagship Rwanda bill during the first stage of debate in the House of Lords. The attempt to kill the bill by Liberal Democrats failed after a vote that allowed the bill to move to the next stage. Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby remarked the bill's damage to "national unity" and to asylum seekers. Lords also criticised the shoddy nature of the bill, how it "punishes" asylum seekers and not smuggling gangs. The government's declaration of Rwanda as a safe country was met with opposition and was seen as an attempt to overturn the facts. Division within the Conservative Party on the bill is evident, as 60 Tory MPs backed the bill without any amendments whereas dozens suggested their willingness to abstain or oppose the bill entirely. Voting on the bill in the House of Lords is expected to take place

by next month. (Sam Francis, "Rwanda Bill criticised by peers at first stage in House of Lords," *BBC*, 30 January 2024))

DUP members 'take a decision' on restoring power-sharing

On 30 January, *BBC* reported on Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) deciding on the deal for restoring power sharing. Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, leader of DUP, provided a detailed update to other executive members in a meeting held in Lisburn on the deal to restore power-sharing government at Stormfront. DUP has been in dialogue with the UK government for changes in arrangements agreed in the UK-EU Windsor Framework deal. Details of the deal are yet to be released by the party. Still, aspects of the deal discussed would include an east-west political body to discuss interests between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, a business organisation similar to InterTrade Ireland focusing on trade, and new legal guarantees of access for Northern Ireland traders dealing with Great Britain. (Enda McClafferty, "DUP officers 'have taken a decision' on the deal to restore power sharing," *BBC*, 30 January 2024))

House of Lords called for delay of ratification of UK-Rwanda treaty

On 23 January, the *BBC* reported the House of Lords voted 214 to 17, urging the government to not ratify the treaty until the gaps in Rwanda's Asylum procedures are completed. Although the vote is a non-binding motion, it represents the extent of opposition Prime Minister Rishi Sunak will face. The motion was proposed by Lord Goldsmith, Labour Party's former Attorney General highlighted the 10 outstanding issues with Rwanda's asylum system and reported that "protections promised by Rwanda's treaty haven't been introduced yet." According to the government, the new treaty establishes an appeal body, an independent committee with powers to enforce the treaty and a monitoring committee, which will allow the asylum seekers and their lawyers to file complaints. (Sam Francis & Harry Farley, "Rwanda asylum scheme: Peers vote against

approving Rwanda treaty," BBC, 23 January 2024)

UK Health agency declares national incident; cites surge in measles

On 19 January, *Politico* reported the declaration of a national incident by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) stating the need for immediate action to increase the uptake of measles, mumps and rubella vaccines (MMR). Jenny Harries, Chief Executive of the agency also cited the need for a long-term plan to prevent large measles outbreaks. Risk groups involve women, babies and children with weak immune systems. Besides London, West Midlands witnessed the highest cases and reported 216 confirmed and 103 probable cases in Birmingham city. The agency also reported on the risks faced by low-vaccinated communities. (UK disease agency declares national incident as measles cases soar," Politico, 19 January 2024)

Rwanda Bill passed in House of Commons with 320 to 276 vote

On 18 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported lawmakers voted in favour of the much-debated Rwanda Migrant Bill in the House of Commons. The bill was positioned as a contentious immigration policy as it planned to send Asylum seekers arriving in England to Rwanda, as illegal and legal migration increased in the UK. As part of Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister "Stop the Boats" campaign, the bill was widely debated as there were concerns about the safety of asylum seekers in Rwanda and whether this bill would violate international humanitarian law. The motion to tighten the bill was quashed by the government and revealed a conflict of opinion among the Tory MPs. As one-fifth of the Conservatives backed in favour of the Bill, two party members, including deputy chairman Lee Anderson resigned in protest. (UK: House of Commons passes Rwanda migrant bill", Deutsche Welle, 18 January 2024)

Politico reports Truss's lobby over export of security goods to China

On 15 January, *Politico* reported on a private letter written by former Prime

Minister Liz Truss addressed to Kemi Badenoch, the British Business and Trade Secretary, lobbying for the sale of military equipment to China on behalf of Richmond Defence Systems, a firm in her constituency of Norfolk. British security officials had earlier blocked a licence to Richmond Defence Systems from exporting landmine disposal equipment to China. The security rules were made for the safety of the British foreign policy and that of its ally Taiwan. Truss had in 2023 made a speech in Taiwan urging Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to declare China as a "threat" to the security of Taiwan, also calling for provision of more arms to Taiwan for its self-defence. Truss' political career including her brief time at 10 Downing Street was built on a harsh anti-China policy, which the letter correspondence has brought into question. Her spokesperson justified the act as concern for her constituents. (Graham Lanktree, "Liz Truss secretly lobbied ministers to 'expedite' defense exports to China," Politico, 15 January 2024)

Budget cuts "torpedo" Scottish climate change targets

On 15 January, the *BBC* reported on the failure of the Scottish government to achieve its woodland cover targets due to a budget cut by the British government. Afforestation in 14,000 hectares of land would be cut down to 9,000 hectares. Scotland's Forestry Grant Scheme supporting the creation of woodlands has been cut down by 41 per cent, according to forestry groups Woodland Trust Scotland and Confor. Stuart Goodal, the CEO of Confor, noted that the Scottish government's ambitious efforts had been falling short over the last five years, but the new budget cuts could widen the gap. This could affect Scotland's aim of net zero emissions by 2045. Mairi Gougeon, the Scottish Rural Affairs Secretary, stated that the government will try to maximise its efforts at creating woodlands, which, despite the cuts, would be more than the rest of the UK's forest cover. (Kevin Keane, "Climate change target warning over forestry cuts", BBC, 15 January 2024)

Heavy snow alert disrupts travel in Scotland

On 16 January, the *BBC* reported on new travel warnings released by Scotland's transport services as temperatures drop to minus four degrees Celsius. Public transport agencies have warned of difficult driving conditions with 20 centimetres snow above the surface. The transport resilience team announced that they would be managing resources based on the situation. Transport Scotland will minimise the effects of any disruptions that may befall the transport sector. Drivers have been urged to stay careful and travellers to postpone their plans due to a yellow alert for ice and snow throughout Scotland. Railway passengers were urged to check the ScotRail website to know the status of trains. As schools closed down due to extreme weather conditions, the situation is expected to persist until Thursday. ("Travel warning as snow and ice alert extended to all of Scotland", the *BBC*, 16 January 2024)

Northern Ireland to witness mass union strikes

On 16 January, the *BBC* reported on the upcoming union strikes by members from 15 unions due to a prolonged lack of pay rise amid heightened inflation. Many including nurses, bus drivers, teachers and civil servants will join the strike on 18 January due to significant pay rise in the rest of the UK. Chris Heaton-Harris, the Northern Ireland Secretary, allocates the budget to Northern Ireland, which the employers suggest is not enough to match up to workers' demands. The strike is potentially the biggest in Northern Ireland since the Ulster Workers' Council strike of 1974. Transportation services and schools are expected to be affected on Thursday, as will be health services. Several hope that a settlement with the DUP could potentially dilute the protests. (Finn Purdy, "Who is going on strike on Thursday? And other questions answered," the *BBC*, 16 January 2024)

Impending job losses as Welsh Gwynedd Shipping Company ceases operations

On 15 January, *BNN Breaking* reported the closure of Holyhead-based Gwynedd

Shipping Company engaged in services of shipping, transport, warehousing, and customs clearance leaving the local community worried about the job losses. An Anglesey Council spokesperson has stated the County Council's commitment to alleviate the effects of closure and provide opportunities to the displaced while working in close collaboration with the Welsh government and other partners. The company's closure directly impacts the livelihood of the employed 50 staff and spreads a broader fear of potential job loss. (Saboor Bayat, "Gwynedd Shipping Ceases Operations: A Blow to North Wales' Shipping Industry," *BBN Breaking*, 15 January 2024, "Gwynedd Shipping: Reports Welsh logistics company has shut," *BBC*, 16 January 2024)

Rwanda Bill likely to be shot down; faces opposition from both sides

On 16 January, the *BBC* reported the decision of more than 60 Tory MPs to toughen up the Rwanda Bill through amendments to ensure that it's watertight as the discussion resumes in the House of Commons today. The legislation faces opposition from both sides of the Conservative Party, as the right feels it would not prevent legal challenges while the One Nation Party group feels any amendments to the bill would risk breaking international law. However, the decision of Lee Anderson and Brendan Clarke-Smith, two Deputy Conservative chairmen, to vote for the amendments is viewed as a rift within the Conservative MPs. (Kate Whannel, "Tory deputy chairmen back move to 'beef up' Rwanda bill," *BBC*, 16 January 2024)

Government designates Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organization

On 16 January, James Cleverly, the UK Home Secretary declared that Hizb ut-Tahrir will be designated as a terrorist group due to the organisation's support for terrorism on the deadly Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. They characterised the organisation as antisemitic and underlined that the action was intended to stop it from operating. The plan which is yet to be approved by members of the parliament, a

vote is anticipated this week, is expected to come into effect on 19 January. Approved individuals who are supporters or members of Hizb ut-Tahrir may face criminal charges under the UK Terrorism Act, which carries a maximum term of 14 years in prison and a fine of up to GBP 5,000. The group has previously been outlawed in a number of other nations, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and Germany. ("UK to label Hamas-backing Islamist group as a terrorist organization," *Politico*, 16 January 2024)

Met Office issues snow warnings

On 16 January, the *BBC* reported of the Met Office's yellow warnings over the Northern Ireland, Scotland, and north Norfolk due to Arctic winds bringing snow and freezing temperatures to the UK. Schools in northern Scotland closed due to heavy snowfall, and more snowfall is predicted in the affected districts. A severe weather alert was issued for northwest England by National Highways and drivers were advised to expect travel interruptions. Up to 15 centimetres of snow was predicted to fall in certain places, and temperatures below. ("UK weather: Cold blast brings snow to many parts of UK," *BBC*, 16 January 2024)

Five migrants reported dead while crossing the English Channel

On 13 January, the *BBC* reported the arrival of the first batch of migrants picked up by the Border Force vessel in Dover, Kent County indicating a small boat crossing after the longest gap of 26 days seen in the past five years. The UK Home Office spokesperson stated their commitment to intercept vessels and crackdown on dangerous crossings, which although reduced crossings by 36 per cent last year, 2023 remained with the second highest year recording 29,437 crossings. On 14 January, *Stars and Stripes* reported the death of five Syrian migrants who suffered from the winter temperatures while crossing the English Channel from northern France. French rescue services assisted 30 migrants travelling in a capsized boat, and recovering them from freezing waters. Authorities have reported to increase in coastal surveillance as weather conditions

in the channel have improved after the winter, increasing the chances of crossings. (Rosie Blunt, "First migrants of 2024 cross English Channel," *BBC*, 13 January 2024; "5 migrants killed in another tragedy on perilous sea crossing from France to Britain," *Stars and Stripes*, 14 January 2024)

NHS vital care under criticism

On 12 January, the *BBC* reported that the NHS is facing a critical situation. An alarming analysis has uncovered a concerning fact that important objectives related to A&E, cancer care, and planned surgeries have been consistently missed for a minimum of seven years throughout the UK. As a result, patients are left in a state of uncertainty for months, enduring the consequences of this systemic failure. Heartbreaking stories of late-stage cancer diagnoses and excruciating waits for necessary procedures have emerged. The NHS is on the verge of collapse due to understaffing, insufficient funding, and the backlog caused by the pandemic. Consequently, patients are the ones bearing the burden. While the Labour party boldly promises to meet crucial targets if elected, it is evident that the NHS requires immediate action rather than mere empty words. It is imperative to make sustained investments and implement significant reforms to ensure that the NHS can provide the vital care that patients desperately need and deserve. ("The key NHS targets that have never been met," *BBC*, 12 January 2024)

Dilemmas ahead for Sunak as he gets ready for 2024 elections

On 08 January, in an opinion published in *Politico* highlights the seven 'tripwires' ahead of the 2024 elections. The challenges are regarding the timing of the call for polls, where a vote in the latter half of 2024, would allow for the economy to produce good results. Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister faces electoral challenges with by-elections in Wellingborough and Kingswood, risking a Tory majority amid concerns of a potential wipeout in the upcoming general election. Potential leadership contenders, including Suella Braverman and Robert Jenrick, dissatisfied with Sunak's performance, may pose

challenges for Sunak amid concerns about electoral setbacks and internal divisions within the Conservative Party. Sunak's plan to permanently deport asylum seekers to Rwanda faces legal and legislative challenges, creating internal divisions within the Conservative Party. Amid immigration and inflation concerns, Rishi Sunak faces challenges fulfilling his National Health Service waiting time reduction pledge, compounded by a junior doctors' walkout and ongoing public service strikes, including London's underground network. In anticipation of the upcoming budget, Jeremy Hunt, UK's Chancellor contemplates tax cuts, including the possible elimination of inheritance tax, stirring debates within the Conservative Party. Ultimately, in the face of an 18-point polling gap, Rishi Sunak's ultimate test lies in the upcoming general election in 2024 against Labour Party's Keir Starmer. (Andrew McDonald, "[7 tripwires for Rishi Sunak as 2024 fires up](#)", *Politico*, 08 January 2024)

British Library to deplete 40 per cent reserves to recover from cyber attack

On 06 January, according to *The Financial Times*, the British Library plans to utilize 40 per cent of its reserves, approximately GBP 6-7 million, to recover from a crippling ransomware attack that left most of its services inaccessible and released 573 gigabytes of sensitive files, customer and personal data as the library refused to pay a GBP 600,000 ransom. Rhysida hacking group, tied to the Russian-affiliated Vice Society as per the US government, may keep the British Library's services offline for over a year, highlighting the need to defend critical national infrastructure. Despite ongoing communication with the government, the library has not formally requested funds from its sponsor Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and aims to use its funds to recover. (Rafe Uddin and Daniel Thomas, "[British Library to burn through reserves to recover from cyber attack](#)", *The Financial Times*, 06 January 2024)

Sunak contemplates remedial action to support victims of post office scandal

On 08 January, the *BBC* reported on the

government of UK proposal to exonerate postmasters convicted for faulty accounting, theft and fraud due to the faulty software. It proposed measures involve removing the Post Office's power for appeal. The Metropolitan Police which is currently investigating the "potential offenses" against the court of Justice announced 50 new victims. The government, police, and public inquiry are all committed to achieving closure and justice in this ongoing scandal. ("[Post Office scandal: Rishi Sunak considers measures to clear all victims](#)," *BBC*, 08 January 2024)

Sunak defends Rwanda bill

On 07 January, the *BBC* reported on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak denying doubting if the deterrence motive would work in the government's Rwanda policy as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Sunak told *BBC* that scrutinising the policy was his occupation which didn't amount to lack of belief in the effectiveness of the policy. The Rwanda policy aims at asylum seekers to the UK to be sent to Rwanda for processing and resettlement, which the government argues would deter people from entering the UK on small boats. The scheme, which was first announced during the leadership of Boris Johnson, was allegedly faced with a difference of opinion by then Chancellor Sunak. Sunak is currently pushing the Safety of Rwanda Bill to be passed in the UK, and refuses to be influenced by any order from the European Court of Human Rights blocking such deportation. (Kate Whannel and Laura Kuenssberg, "[Rishi Sunak denies doubting Rwanda plan when chancellor](#)," *BBC*, 07 January 2024)

Government reports in decrease in the migrant crossing in English Channel

On 02 January, the Government of the UK reported on the decrease in entry of migrants into the UK through the English Channel. According to the data released, UK witnessed 36 per cent (29,437) drop in 2023 compared to 2022 (45,775). On the same Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister stated on how the government's priority has been on stopping such boat arrivals. He added: "That is why we have taken action to stop the boats, return hotels to their local

communities and deter those wanting to come here illegally from doing so.” According to the report, the government had spent EUR 3.46 billion annually in processing the migrants asylum process and had cleared 92,000 asylum cases by 2023. It had processed more than 112,000 cases with 67 per cent granted asylum. ([“UK: Nearly 30,000 migrants crossed Channel in 2023,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 01 January 2023)

Eurostar resumes services after tunnel flooding disruption

On 30 December 2023, Eurostar, an international rail service, cancelled 41 trains due to tunnel flooding in England. The move affected travel between London, Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Floods disrupted routes near Kent’s Ebbsfleet station. The company apologised and confirmed a return to normal service on 31 December. Thousands faced travel challenges before new year. Eurostar attributed the issue to “unprecedented” flooding. Weather warnings by the Met Office remained effective, with speed restrictions anticipated despite one tunnel’s reopening. HS1, managing London-to-channel tunnel routes, assured the line’s morning operation after resolving the Thames Tunnel flooding. The cause of the initial leak remains undisclosed. ([“Eurostar resumes rail services after flood disruptions,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 31 December 2023; Saskia O’Donoghue, [“Eurostar services resume following travel chaos,”](#) *Euronews*, 31 December 2023)

TURKEY

Parliament approves Sweden’s accession into NATO with 287 in favour

On 23 January, *Politico* reported on the decision by the Turkey’s parliament to ratify Sweden’s membership into NATO, with a majority of 287 votes to 55 in the assembly. Following the ratification, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkey’s Prime Minister, is expected to sign the final approval for accession. The diplomatic talks which went over 20 months concluded positively for Sweden, as Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary-General, focused his attention on getting Ankara’s approval as he

expected Hungary to be a lesser problem. Erdoğan, however, turned out to be a lesser problem for Sweden than Viktor Orbán, the Hungary’s Prime Minister. Orbán is following the same disruptive strategy he follows in EU policy making, which leaders of NATO earlier considered an act for relevance. Orbán has shown his criticism over Sweden’s claim of democratic backsliding in Hungary. Orbán’s Hungary is the last NATO country in the 31-member military alliance to approve Sweden’s accession. Sweden left its policy of neutrality and approached NATO after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. (Stuart Lau and Leyla Aksu, [“Turkey approves Sweden’s NATO bid, leaving Orbán as final holdout,”](#) *Politico*, 23 January 2024)

Defence ministry claims attack on Syria and Iraq

On 13 January, *Politico* reported on Turkey’s airstrikes on Kurdish militants in Syria and Iraq. The strike comes in response as a retaliation to the attack on its military bases in Iraq. In the airstrike, Turkey destroyed “29 bunkers, shelters, oil facilities in the Metina, Hakurk, Gara and Qandil regions in northern Iraq and northern Syria.” According to Turkey’s defence ministry, the attacked sites had belonged to Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG). Turkey considers both the groups as terrorist organisations and has carried out regular bombing in Syria and Iraq. Hakan Fidan, Turkish Foreign Minister said: “We will fight to the end against the PKK terrorist organization within and outside our borders.”

Government undertakes trial procedures against alleged spies for Israel

On 06 January, *Le Monde* reported on several detainees in Turkey awaiting trial for crimes of “political and military espionage” on behalf of Israel. Yilmaz Tunc, the Justice Minister, announced on social media that 26 individuals would be referred to court, 11 released under judicial control conditions and eight were to be deported. Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad had vowed to destroy Hamas officials outside of

Palestinian territories, which was met with a serious warning from Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President. Relations between Israel and Turkey soured again since the war in Gaza as Erdogan asked for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to be tried for "war crimes," while Israel hunts for Hamas officials in Turkey, known to historically be a safe harbour for them. (["Turkish court jails 15 suspects ahead of trial for spying for Israel,"](#) *Le Monde*, 06 January, 2024)

Hotel faces trial over fatal buildings collapse in turkey

On 05 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on a trial against Grand Isias Hotel following the severe earthquakes that struck Turkey in 2023 over building collapse. A charge of "conscious negligence" was placed because of poor building quality the Grand Isias Hotel collapsed after the earthquakes killing 72 people including Northern Cyprus students. Questions concerning government accountability and the state of building standards were raised due to this incident. The prosecution claimed that the hotel was unlawfully altered and inappropriately extended without permits and requested for harsh terms of up to 22 years. In addition, the trial seeks Turkey's commitment to enhance building safety and avert such tragedies in earthquake-prone areas. (["Turkey earthquakes: Trial over collapsed hotel begins,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 05 January 2024)

Sunak proposes to postpone Spring elections

On 05 January, *Politico* reported Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister recent hint to hold the vote of spring elections in the latter half of 2024. While Sunak's Conservative Party currently trails in the polls, the timing decision lies within his control. This delay comes despite pressure from Labour leader Keir Starmer, who is observed to capitalize on economic concerns and challenge the Tories'. With the spring budget, tax cuts, and local elections already in play, the stage is set for a potentially pivotal showdown later 2024. (["Rishi Sunak appears to rule out spring UK election,"](#) *Politico*, 05 January 2024)

Storm Henk hampers travel and power supply

On 03 January, *Le Monde* reported on Environment Agency's warning over flood as Storm Henk hit parts of England, with strongest gusts reaching 151 kilometres per hour hitting Isle of Wight. Residents near Northampton, were evacuated due to rising River Nene waters, leading to eight flood warnings in Wales, including a severe one. Additionally, 10,000 customers faced power outages, major roads were closed, and train services disrupted due to fallen trees from high winds. (["Storm Henk causes flooding and travel disruption in UK,"](#) *Le Monde*, 03 January 2024)

England: Junior doctors initiate a six-day strike demanding pay rise

On 03 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on six-day strike staged by thousands of junior doctors in England. In the 75-year history of the National Health Service (NHS) the strike is considered the longest. The reason behind the strike is due to the long-running demand of the doctors for pay rise. Since the offer by British Medical Association (BMA) for a rise of eight to 10 per cent failed due to the counter offer of 35 per cent by the junior doctors, the strikes reemerged. According to the junior doctors union: "Add to this years of pay erosion, and it's no wonder that morale on the frontline has never been lower." Due to the strike, the NHS reported on severe impact on "All routine care." (["England doctors stage longest-ever strike over pay,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 05 January 2024)

Police arrests 189 ISIS members

On 30 December 2023, 189 individuals linked to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) was apprehended in widespread raids across 37 cities. Ali Yerlikaya, Turkey's Interior Minister, emphasised zero tolerance for terrorism, revealing the arrests made in cities like Ankara, Istanbul, and Gaziantep. The operation followed previous arrests connected to a embassy attack plot. (["Turkey arrests 189 Islamic State suspects,"](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 30 December 2023)

REGIONAL

Post-Brexit requirements on food importers likely to cause supply disruptions

On 30 January, the *BBC* reported on the new guidelines on food and plant product imports into the UK post its exit from the EU's single market. The new food checks require consignments of fresh food and plant imports from the EU to contain a veterinary certificate, leading to increased red tape. The consignments are required to adhere to the guidelines from 31 January, however actual food checks at the border would take place only after three months. Checks are expected to bring in food inflation, raising the overall level of prices by 0.2 per cent over three years. Concerns are raised regarding the limited availability of vets, increased expenses and the potential loss of perishable goods due to the delay, causing a pause or disruption in the continuous supply of goods. Labour Party proposes the need for a Veterinary Agreement with the EU, catering to the raised concerns. (Faisal Islam, "[New Brexit food checks will test Britain's supply chains](#)," *BBC*, 30 January 2024)

Reports estimates major victory for far-right in the EU elections

On 25 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) that predicted a major victory for far-right parties in the European Parliament elections in June. The report sees a potential coalition between conservative parties and radical groups in the Parliament that could significantly alter EU policy towards climate and immigration. The AfD in Germany is emerging as the second largest in the state, and Geert Wilders' party for Freedom won most seats in the Netherlands. The report predicts far-right victory in France and Italy and a close second in Spain, Sweden and Germany in the polls. A far-right victory could hamper the European Green Deal and create anti-immigration policies that could affect the European agenda, given member states accept. (Roshni Majumdar, "[Right-wing parties forecast for gains in 2024 EU elections](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2024)

EU farmers express their frustration over the EU "technocrats"

On 24 January, *Politico* reported on the frustration of farmers protesting across the EU over the policy decisions made by "technocrats" in the EU, claiming that the EU's climate-friendly policies were harming their livelihoods. Several French farmers are headed to the European Parliament to express their anger. The "over-regulation" by the EU through carbon emission cuts and high taxes have made farmers susceptible to unfair international competition. The EU's decision to cancel import duties for grain from Ukraine due to the Russian invasion has led to protests in Romania and Poland due to unfair competition and threat to their source of income. The far-right parties have utilised the protests to propagate their agenda. Farmers suggest they are largely apolitical because they do not believe any party reaching them can help them as the EU "technocrats" "call the shots" in policies. (Nicolas Camut, "[Frustrated farmers slam EU 'technocrats' who 'call the shots' in Brussels protest](#)," *Politico*, 24 January 2024)

Estonia and Turkey celebrate a hundred years of diplomatic relations

On 23 January, the countries celebrated a hundred years of diplomatic relations since the day Turkey recognised the independent Republic of Estonia while calling to continue cooperation in the future. Margus Tsahkna, Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs praised Turkey for never officially acknowledging the Soviet occupation of Estonia and highlighted the nation's significance in ensuring security. A brief timeline of their relations would trace the nations signing a treaty of friendship between Estonia and Türkiye on 01 December 1924, leading to the opening of an Estonian Consulate General in Istanbul in 1929. The nations restored their ties formally on 23 October 1991, followed by which Embassy of the Republic of Estonia was opened in Ankara in 2005. ("[MFA: Estonia, Turkey celebrate century of diplomatic relations](#)," *ERR News*, 23 January 2024 and "[Estonia and Türkiye: 100 Years of Diplomatic Relations](#)," *Embassy of Estonia Ankara*)

Von der Leyen drafts election campaign standards for commissioners

On 22 January, *Politico* reported on the document, dated 21 January, drafted by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen sets out rules and ethical standards to be followed by commissioners who want to run for European Parliament elections scheduled in June. According to the rules, the commissioners who want to contest as a candidate for European Parliament elections or stand as their party's lead for becoming European Commissioner President will not be allowed to use the staff, budget and other office resources for their Commission for their campaign purposes. They are also guided to have separate social media accounts to differentiate between their statements made as a European Commissioner and as a candidate. Von der Leyen is yet to confirm if she will be running for a second term, however, the announcement regarding the same is expected next month. This document would be adopted by the College of Commissioners on 24 January. (Barbara Moens, "[Don't give up the day job! Von der Leyen sets out election campaign rules for commissioners \(including herself\)](#)," *Politico*, 22 January 2024)

European Commission to adopt an Economic Security Strategy

On 19 January, *Politico* reported on the European Commission plan to adopt an Economic Security Strategy by 24 January to deal with the economic risks accompanied by the geopolitical tensions between China and the US. Brussels through the new strategy aims to protect and promote domestically developed technology and industry, a common approach for exports and a monitoring of external investments. The entire strategy is mostly non-binding legislation, with three strategic papers and one proposal positioned as guidance for the members. This proposal would increase Brussels' powers as now the Commission would be able to screen external investments made by the bloc members, which was earlier solely limited to the powers of national governments. (Camille Gijs, Pieter Haeck, Kathryn Carlson and Koen Verhelst, "[EU](#)

[warms up for fight over economic security](#)," *Politico*, 19 January 2024)

The EU considers its Red Sea mission to deter Houthis

On 22 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on a plan proposed by the EU to deter the Houthi attacks targeting commercial vessels in the Red Sea. After the US-UK strike against the Houthis in Yemen, the EU decided on an alternative maritime mission with a defensive nature, separate from the US-led 'Operation Prosperity Guardian.' The EU fears a greater escalation in the war if it interferes against the Iran-backed militants. The EU's foreign diplomacy service, the European External Action Service, has suggested sending warships in the Red Sea to patrol the region. They recommend the reorientation of Agenor, an existing French mission in the Strait of Hormuz. Antonia Tajani, the Italian Foreign Minister, stated that the expansion of the Agenor mission is an easy solution. The EU, however, remains concerned about potential escalation of conflict, as well as a potential failure of the mission, which could make it look weak. (Ella Joyner, "[Red Sea crisis: Can EU warships deter Houthi rebels?](#)," 22 January 2024)

Baltic Assembly reassert support for Ukraine; To set up common Baltic defence zone

On 19 January 2024, according to *ENG LSM.Iv*, the Baltic Assembly comprising of parliaments of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania reasserted their unequivocal support for Ukraine's "integration into Europe and the Euro-Atlantic space" while demanding the need for Jānis Vucāns, vice-president of the Baltic Assembly said: "European actions to ensure the complete victory of Europe." The assembly also emphasised the provision of military, financial and political support to Ukraine to enable them to recover their territories, while urging the international community to increase their sanction on Russia. The countries also agreed on setting up common Baltic Defense zones on their borders with Russia and Belarus. As per this plan, the states would focus on building while also constructing "anti-mobility defensive installations," to ensure missile-

artillery cooperation while Estonia plans on building 600 bunkers, along the 294-kilometre-long border with Russia.

According to Arvydas Anušauskas, Lithuanian Defence Minister, the country stated its current collaboration with the US to develop HIMARS rocket capabilities. Whereas Latvia stated the completion of its anti-mobility plans, and increase in other border-strengthening steps. ("Baltic parliaments reaffirm strong support for Ukraine," *ENG LSM.lv*, 19 January 2024 and Sergey Goryashiko, "Baltic states plan common defense zone on Russia border as security concerns mount," *Politico*, 19 January 2024)

Lithuanian Prime Minister discusses the EU security with Commissioner Breton

On 19 January, *EN Delfi* reported on the meeting held by Ingrida Šimonytė, the Lithuanian Prime Minister with Thierry Breton, European Union Commissioner for Internal Market and discussed matters of strengthening the EU security and defence industry. Šimonytė also called for increased military support to Ukraine, while highlighting that future strategies should ensure the development of defence capabilities production and reserves. On the economic front, she underlined the importance of involvement and integration of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU supply chains. ("PM discusses strengthening of EU security and defence industry with Commissioner Breton," *EN Delfi*, 19 January 2024)

EU Commissioner promises production of a million shells annually

On 20 January, *ERR News* reported that Thierry Breton, the EU Commissioner for Internal Market, met with Kaja Kallas, the Estonian Prime Minister, to discuss the EU's increasing capacity towards defence preparedness. In an attempt to aid Ukraine in its war against Russia, Kallas had proposed the 'One Million Shells Initiative' as a target for annual production for joint procurement by the EU. Breton stated that the EU would reach its target of producing a million shells a year by March-April, 2024, and exceed its capacity by the end of the year. (EU commissioner Breton: Million

shells will be produced in Europe by April," *ERR News*, 20 January 2024)

Sparks over treatment of the EU migrants to the UK

On 18 January, *The Guardian* in an opinion piece reported the row over the treatment of the EU migrants in the UK, citing the difficulty faced by a Spanish woman, residing and living in Bedfordshire on her re-entry to the UK, after a family visit to Spain. Britain, post-Brexit has been denying 4000 EU migrants into the country every quarter, citing undocumented work and study plans. According to Oxford University's Migration Observatory, most of the people rejected are from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Portugal. Highlighting the loss of growth and trade as a result of Brexit, it's questionable if Britain has succeeded in "taking back control of its borders," as 142,000 EU citizens wait in anxiety and uncertainty for their settlement applications to be reviewed since September 2023. Whereas hostility in Britain's actions regarding migration has led to a demand for reciprocal behaviour by the EU citizens. (María Ramírez, "EU citizens are being kicked out of the UK. In Spain, people are asking: why not treat Brits the same way?," *The Guardian*, 18 January 2024)

NATO to start the biggest military exercises with 90,000 personnel

On 18 January, *El País* reported NATO's plans to conduct the biggest military exercises, named 'Steadfast Defender 24', would involve troops from 31 member nations including the recently joined member, Sweden. Exercises are scheduled to begin next week and troops will move through Europe till the end of May. The exercises come through as the Russia-Ukraine war continues and are aimed at displaying the strength and ability of the alliance to defend its entire territory up to the borders of Russia. The UK is expected to send 20,000 troops, accompanied by fighter jets, surveillance planes, warships and submarines and is expected to deploy them in Eastern Europe from February to June. ("NATO to start biggest wargames in decades next week, involving around

90,000 personnel," *El País*, 18 January 2024)

EU institutions prepare to challenge transfer of funds to Budapest

On 18 January, *El País* reported the European Parliament's 345-104 vote to challenge the European Commission if it had all the necessary measures "to protect EU's financial interests", before releasing funds to Hungary. The funds were supposed to be released after Hungary's show of support for rule of law reforms on the independence of the judiciary and political interference. However, the parliamentarians feel that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hadn't done enough to earn the funds. They also criticised European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for her approval of funds before Hungary abstained to vote on a crucial Ukraine vote at a summit. EU leaders fund themselves at odds with Orbán's actions and have blocked funds of around 20 billion euros due to similar rule of law concerns. ("European Union institutions gear up for a fight over Orbán's rule of law record, funds for Hungary," *El País*, 18 January 2024)

German arms industry ramps up production for Ukraine

On 16 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported in an opinion article about Germany and Russia increasing arms production as the Russia-Ukraine war continues. Germany will be delivering the fourth Iris-T battery by the end of the winter and four more systems by 2024 according to Ukrainian Air Force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat. Two major German arms contractors sending supplies to Ukraine are Rheinmetall, providing ammunition for Ukraine's anti-aircraft tanks and Diehl Defense, which produces Iris-T. Earlier, Russia had presented its arms production figures, which stated a 50 times increase in ammunition production of small arms and a seven times increase in the production of tanks. However, Nico Lange, a security expert, commented on the quality of Russian battle tanks, which appear to be refurbished and lack modern targeting devices, highlighting its risks in combat. He emphasised how the outcome of

a long war is ultimately decided by the quality of weapons. (Frank Hofmann, "German arms makers boost supplies for Ukraine," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 January 2024)

Nicholas Schmit as the lead Socialists' candidate for the EU elections

On 15 January, *Politico* reported that Nicolas Schmit, the EU commissioner for jobs and social rights would be the front-runner from European Socialists, who would go against Ursula von der Leyen if she agrees to run for another term. Schmit enjoys support from Germany's Social Democratic Party and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). In the absence of strong centre-left candidates who enjoy popularity throughout Europe and can withstand the politics outside, Schmit positions himself as an experienced candidate both in the national politics of Luxembourg and European politics. (Barbara Moens, Eddy Eax and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Nicolas who? Socialists close in on challenger to take on Ursula von der Leyen," *Politico*, 15 January 2024)

Talks over naval operations in Red Sea to re-establish security

On 12 January, *Euractiv* reported a scheduled discussion in the Political and Security Committee to take place on 16 January regarding a potential joint naval operation proposal by EU's diplomatic service EEAS. The EU proposal aims to act from the "Red Sea to the Gulf," while also struggling to balance deterrence and further escalation in the Middle East. Recognising the urgency that rerouting of ships from the Red Sea would disrupt global supply chains, EU diplomats would at the earliest finalise plans by 22 January, and launch operation by February, either by joining the Operation Prosperity Guardian with the US-led coalition or join the French-led joint surveillance mission Agenor operation which covers the entire Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, parts of Arabian Sea, and is conducted under the broader framework of European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz. (Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU mulls potential joint naval mission in Red Sea amid Houthi attacks," *Euractiv*, 12 January 2024)

EU waste export ban threatens collapse of recycling industry

On 12 January, *Euractiv* reported on the threats facing the European recycling market following the EU's announcement of a ban on the export of plastic waste both inside and outside of Europe. The Belgium-based industrial packaging recycling organisation Valipac has warned that without export of waste for recycling, EU countries will be forced to stock waste only to be burned eventually, due to lack of demand for recyclable plastics in the region. The key issue is insufficient capacity within Europe to recycle the stockpiled waste. Of the 100,000 tonnes of waste in the form of plastic collected in Belgium alone, 24,000 tonnes are exported outside the region. The EU prefers creating packaging from virgin plastic over use of recycled plastic and unless capacity to recycle isn't increased, the EU recycling industry faces significant risk of collapse. (Frédéric Simon, "Recycling market in Europe faces 'collapse' after EU waste export ban," *Euractiv*, 12 January 2024)

European liberals reject alliance with nationalists post EU-elections

On 09 January, *Politico* reported on Stéphane Séjourné, leader of the European Parliament's liberals, rejection to collaborate with the nationalists if the June elections yielded a right-wing majority. He stressed the need to control European destiny, wary of far-right claims of chaos. Séjourné highlighted EU achievements in managing COVID-19 vaccine procurement, regulating social media, and establishing a unified migration system. While polls foresee a slim majority for the current coalition, Séjourné warned of an "ungovernable Europe" as right-wing factions gain momentum. He pledged not to align with the far-right or nationalist European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR), potentially impacting future parliamentary coalitions and progressive policymaking. (Eddy Wax, "EU liberal leader rules out right-wing alliance post-EU election", *Politico*, 09 January 2024)

Commissioner Breton proposed EU defense fund plan

On January 09, *Politico* reported Thierry Breton, the EU Internal Market Commissioner, vouched for a EUR 100 billion defense fund for the EU. This was aimed to boost joint weapons procurement, to enhance the EU's war preparedness. Presentation to the European Defence Investment Program (EDIP) is scheduled to take place on 27 February and he emphasised on domestic arms production. Breton, overseeing defense, envisions reaching the goal of one million artillery shells for Ukraine by spring. He asserts that the EU can match Russia's weapon production in 18-24 months, and insisted on considering it "extremely important" for the EU to have equivalent capabilities. (Eddy Wax and Laura Kayali, "Breton aims for 'huge' €100B defense fund," *Politico*, 09 January 2024)

Commission divided over full trade liberalisation with Ukraine

On 05 January, *Politico* reported on European Commission plan to propose the extension of temporary measures. It recommends the EU continue to waive import duties on Ukrainian goods until June 2025. Janusz Wojciechowski, EU Commissioner for Agriculture warns that measures may lead to a situation similar to the uncontrolled influx of agricultural products in 2022. This has impacted the eastern European countries (EU member states) with challenges faced by Poland's agribusiness industries due to grain influx from Ukraine. He emphasised how duty-free imports undercut the domestic industries and such measures will result in adding Russia to drive Kyiv's exports from African and Asian markets. However, the final decision will be taken by Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President and Valdis Dombrovskis, Trade Commissioner who support full liberalisation. (Bartozs Brzeziński, "Von der Leyen's team split over free trade with Ukraine," *Politico*, 05 January 2024)

European Commission recommends stricter rules for well-being of pets

On 09 January, *ERR News* reported on the European Commission's decision to introduce stricter laws governing the safety

of dogs and cats, as 74 per cent of EU residents demand that they be better protected. Suggestions are made to include rules based on premises, feeding, socialising and healthcare. Breeding that might negatively impact the offspring and inbreeding is proposed to be prohibited, as is illegal trade of dogs and cats through stricter transportation rules. Dogs over the age of eight and cats over six must be bred only with the prior permission of the veterinarian, and all cat and dog breeders require licences. The suggested regulations are uniform within the EU, but states are at the liberty to impose tougher restrictions. Punishments are to be decided by individual member states and data be provided to the EU every three years. (["European Commission looking to introduce tougher rules for handling of pets"](#), *ERR News*, 09 January, 2024)

Kosovo to allow Serbian license plates without covering national symbols

On 05 January, *Daily Sabah* reported Kosovo leadership's decision "to remove the paper stickers or stickers regime for cars with Serbian license plates." The move was described as "an expression of positive neighbourly relations" and was made following Serbia's complete acknowledgement of license plates from the Republic of Kosovo, according to an official statement. Petar Petkovic, the head of Serbia's office for Kosovo, stated that this initiative by Belgrade would grant "unrestricted movement for all vehicles" from Kosovo. The implementation of this decision was set to commence on 01 January. Although Serbia does not acknowledge Kosovo's independence, it has made multiple concessions, within the EU-led dialogue, to ease the lives of people travelling or residing at the borders. (AFP & Pristina, "[Kosovo follows Serbia's footsteps to end license plate issue](#)," *Daily Sabah*, 05 January 2024)

German-French energy cost cuts raise unequal competition concerns

On 04 January, *Politico* reported concerns from smaller EU member states as they find themselves unable to compete with Germany's tax breaks and subsidies and

French pricing mechanisms in the energy industry. Their attempts to artificially cut domestic power prices independently, risk criticism from other nations that lack resources to support their industries which highlights potential harm to the single market and Europe's competitiveness against global rivals. Although Paris and Berlin assert compliance with EU rules in their bid to cut energy costs, their measures undermine the competitiveness of the EU's single market as these measures also act as a large subsidy splurge, constituting 46 per cent of the total EU spending on energy price relief. (Victor Jack, Varg Folkman and Giovanna Coi, "[Franco-German energy cash splash strains EU single market](#)," *Politico*, 04 January 2024)

Council Prez Michel to run in EU Parliament Elections, foresees leadership changes

On 07 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Charles Michel, European Council President declaration of his candidacy for the upcoming European Parliament elections in June. He indicated to step down from his current role if elected as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP). This move comes amid transformative times for the EU, marked by Russia's war on Ukraine. As Michel campaigns at the forefront of the liberal Belgian Reformist Movement (MR) party, his potential victory may lead to the search for new leaders in both the European Commission and the European Council, adding complexity to the process of succession and compromise among the EU leaders. ("[EU's Charles Michel to quit Council presidency, run as MEP](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 January 2024)

Power cable between Finland and Estonia goes offline

On 06 January, *Sputnik* reported on the shutdown of electricity transmission through Estlink 1, the high-voltage connection between Finland and Estonia, after a possible malfunction. The cable commissioned in 2007 went offline while its power capacity stood at 50 MW, according to the operator of Fingrid, the Finnish power grid. Estlink 1 is part of two underwater power cables between the two

countries in an attempt to integrate the energy markets of the Scandinavian region and the Baltic states within the EU region and a possible attempt at diversifying Europe's energy sources. ("[Outage Occurs at Estonian-Finnish Undersea Power Cable Estlink 1](#)," *Sputnik*, 06 January, 2024)

Commission's DSA Showdown with Tech Giant X: The Climactic AI Showdown

On 06 January, *EURACTIV* reported on the upcoming conclusion of the EU's AI law with a potential conflict between Germany, France, and Italy over "foundation models" risking the agreement. While France advocated for approval, Germany's Digital Minister strongly opposes it and Italy remains uncertain. If three more dissenters emerge the bill could be blocked, whereas opposing will also lead to political risks and delays in the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA). The European Commission demonstrates its authority by initiating an investigation into X (likely Twitter) for alleged violations of the DSA sending a clear message to all major tech companies. ("[AI, final Act? Commission's DSA showdown with X](#)," *EURACTIV*, 06 January 2024)

EU announces restrictive measures against crimes involves in Myanmar

On 03 January, the European Council released a statement announcing the alignment of some EU-allied countries to its restrictive measures against crimes involved in Myanmar. The candidate countries of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia, members of the European Economic Area, Armenia, along with the EFTA countries Liechtenstein and Norway, agreed to implement the Council's decision. The Council added four individuals and two entities against whom restrictive measures will be implemented, which will be implemented by aligned countries nationally. Restrictive measures include asset freezes, funding to aligned parties to the Tatmadaw, travel ban into EU territory, along with funding blocks and embargoes, in order to pressure Myanmar against

human rights violations. ("[Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the alignment of certain countries concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Myanmar/Burma](#)," *European Council*, 03 January 2024)

INTERNATIONAL

Amazon's iRobot deal falls through; The EU slams it anti-competitive

On 29 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Amazon's decision to discontinue its proposed acquisition of iRobot, an automatic Roomba vacuum cleaner manufacturer for USD 1.7 billion. This decision comes through as the European Union believes the acquisition would be anticompetitive and would hinder the sales of its competitors in France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Amazon views this decision of the European Commission as imposition of "undue and disproportionate regulatory hurdles." The termination of the deal resulted in a fall in the shares of iRobot to more than 14 per cent in trading. ("[Amazon abandons iRobot buyout after EU objections](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 29 January 2024)

Meloni proposes energy investment plan in the Rome Summit

On 29 January, Giorgia Meloni Italian Prime Minister sought to diversify its energy supplies and aims to be the energy hub in the southern Mediterranean. According to her Africa Plan, she plans energy investments, where Italy would collect energy from Africa via pipelines and distribute it throughout Europe. Meloni's proposal seeks a non-predatory-patronising approach towards Africa, treating them as partners. She also highlighted diverting 70 per cent of the EUR four billion climate fund in support of green transition in developing countries to fund this plan. (Hannah Roberts, "[As Meloni embraces Africa, Europe holds its breath](#)," *Politico*, 29 January 2024)

Red Sea crisis disrupts shipping of perishables from Europe

On January 26, *Politico* reported the

disruption caused in shipments of perishables from Europe, especially southern Europe, due to the re-routing of ships around Cape of Good Hope, given the crisis in the strait of Bab el-Mandeb. The re-routing comes with the cost of a delay of three weeks, a five-fold increase in container prices and risks of possible decay of fruits and vegetables en route. Countries such as Italy, Cyprus and Greece find it difficult to reach their goods into Asian markets incurring losses of billions of euros. Such concerns have resulted in exports being dumped on the Europe market, where Europe is used as a transit route or a destination for these goods. Although French manufacturer Danone negated “any significant short-term impact,” it’s evident that the EU is facing uncertainty in its global supply chains. (Alessandro Ford, [“Spoilage alert: Red Sea crisis hits Europe’s fresh food trade,” Politico](#), 26 January 2024)

Burkina Faso receives tonnes of wheat as gift from Russia

On 26 January, Nandy Some Diallo, Burkina Faso’s Minister for solidarity and humanitarian action expressed gratitude for the grain delivery of 25,000 tonnes of wheat from Russia. Ties between Moscow and Burkina Faso which was closed since the fall of USSR gained back after Russia opened its embassy again in December 2023. The country which is currently witnessing acute food shortage and quarter of all children under age five experience stunted growth. This is due to severe security crisis and the failure of the military junta to counter Islamist militants. Russia being one of the largest producers of wheat is predicted to supply 45 million tonnes of wheat by 2024. (Natasha Booty, [“Burkina Faso thanks Russia for 'priceless gift' of wheat,” BBC](#), 28 January 2024)

The US grants sale of F-16 jets to Turkey

On 27 January, the US government approved sale of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey worth USD 23 billion following Turkey’s ratification of Sweden’s NATO accession bill. As per the deal, 40 F-16 fighter jets will be sent to Turkey along with modernisation kits. The US will also be sending 40 F-35 fighter jets to Greece worth USD 8.6 billion.

Sale of fighter jets to Turkey was withheld in the congress earlier due to its delay in approving Sweden’s entry into the NATO, Turkey’s human rights record and also its act to hold Russia accountable for the war in Ukraine. ([“US approves F-16 fighter jet sale to Turkey worth \\$23bn,” BBC](#), 26 January 2024)

Trump's victory could mean the end of NATO's security in Europe says Daalder

On 25 January, *Politico* presented the opinion of Ivo Daalder, former US ambassador to NATO on the potential weakening of the NATO military alliance led by the US, if Trump is elected as the President of the US. During his previous term, Trump had warned that NATO was obsolete, therefore he would pull out American support. With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the significance of NATO to Europe’s security was brought into light. If the US pulls out of the alliance, it will continue to exist, with most members being Europeans and Canada. However, it would lose its efficiency since many resources including the supreme commander of NATO have been US contributions. It would cease to be a formidable threat of deterrence to Russia, putting European security at risk. Even if an elected Trump does not pull out of the military alliance, it would weaken in its potential without a significant US presence, given Trump’s dislike towards most international alliances that invest in the security of other states. (Ivo Daalder, [“What another Trump presidency would mean for NATO,” Politico](#), 25 January 2024)

Swiss and Russian Foreign Ministers meet ahead of the UNSC meeting

On 23 January, *Swissinfo* reported Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis meeting with Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister in New York, before the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Meeting, and stated on their discussion of “important issues.” The previous week, Russia had rejected Switzerland’s initiative to undertake a World Peace Initiative with Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine’s President. Cassis had met several Foreign Ministers in New York, including the major intermediary between the Russia-Ukraine war, Turkey.

([“Swiss and Russian foreign ministers meet in New York,”](#) *Swissinfo.ch*, 23 January 2024)

Tenth EU- Egypt Association Council meeting; calls to promote multilateralism

On 23 January, the tenth EU-Egypt Association Council meeting took place in Brussels marking the 20th anniversary of the Association Agreement. The meeting co-chaired by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Sameh Shoukry, Foreign Minister of Egypt, reviewed the development made in the Joint Partnership Priorities and called for increased multilateralism and cooperation for rules-based international order, and reiterated their cooperation for maintaining stability and peace in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Africa. The meeting expressed their concern for the humanitarian losses in Gaza and jointly expressed their support for a two-state solution which would end the occupation and establish an independent Palestine State drawn on the lines of 04 January 1967, while reiterating the need for humanitarian pauses in the ongoing conflict and protection of civilians in accordance to international law. EU reiterated its support towards Egyptian water security while both parties acknowledged the freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea. The meeting also focused on their commitment towards climate change mitigation and the development of sustainable agriculture and industry. Other areas of focus reiterated in the joint statement include efforts against combating terrorism, cooperation in technology innovation and adoption of a comprehensive approach to migration governance. ([“10th EU-Egypt Association Council meeting: Joint press statement by Egypt and the European Union,”](#) *European Council* 23 January 2024)

Germany extends economic partnership with Vietnam

On 23 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the visit by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German President in Vietnam, to expand

German economic interests in Asia. The visit is an effort to push Germany’s ‘China-de risking strategy’ during his four-day tour of Southeast Asia. Steinmeier was welcomed with military honours at Hanoi by Vo Van Tthoung, the Vietnamese President. Both presidents signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) facilitating the flow of skilled labour from Vietnam to Germany, one clear of “bureaucratic hurdles.” ([“German president visits Vietnam with business delegation,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 23 January 2024)

British Conservatives divided over Trump Support for 2024

On 23 January, *Politico* reported the clear distinction among Conservatory Party MPs for their support for Trump 2.0, as a strong number of Tory MPs have expressed praise for the former president. Paul Goodman, editor of *ConservativeHome* along with other Tories, position Trump as ‘pro-Britain’ and given the growing closeness between China, Russia and Iran, they believe the US would attempt to project similar strength. Trump’s support by the ex-Prime Minister Boris Johnson, highlighted how his “presidency can be a big win for the world.” However, other conflicting Tories were amused at British politicians supporting a candidate who has “no respect for rule of law and democratic institutions.” (Andrew McDonald, [“Britain’s Conservatives are warming to Donald Trump 2.0,”](#) *Politico*, 23 January 2024)

The US & the UK launch fresh strikes against Houthis

On 23 January, the *BBC* reported on the second joint attack by American and British forces against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, hitting eight targets targeting ships in the Red Sea. The US and the UK stated that the attacks were to enable the “free flow of commerce” in the Red Sea, a key global choke point, and to de-escalate the conflict. A joint statement suggested a potential new round of strikes, if necessary, against Houthi targets. David Cameron, the British Foreign Secretary, stated that the UK demands a “permanent, sustainable ceasefire” in Gaza. The strike aimed at “self-

defence" from Houthi attacks was conducted with the support of Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands. (Ruth Comerford and Frank Gardner, "[US and UK launch fresh strikes on Houthis in Yemen](#)," *BBC*, 23 January 2024)

Putin's potential visit to Pyongyang in the works

On 21 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Russian President Vladimir Putin's potential visit to Pyongyang as North Korea's state agency news (KNCA) reported the president's willingness for the same when he met North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui in Moscow. KNCA also reported on the agreement of both nations for greater strategic and tactical cooperation, whereas Russia expressed its gratitude for North Korea's support in its war against Ukraine. The US predicts a drastic change in the threat posed by both these countries if they continue seeking closer ties, while Russia acquiring ballistic missiles from North Korea has also raised concerns among the US and its allies. The KNCA is yet to release a date for Putin's North Korea visit, however, it's expected to take place in the foreseeable future. ("[North Korea says Putin planning Pyongyang visit](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2024)

Russian aircraft crashes in Afghan's Badakhshah province

On 21 January, according to *Deutsche Welle*, a Russian aircraft, presumed as a Russian chartered ambulance is reported to have crashed in Badakhshah, a mountainous province sharing borders with China, Tajikistan and Pakistan. Four among the six onboard survived the crash, including the pilot, whereas two were reported dead by Taliban Officials. The flight was en route to Moscow, via Uzbekistan from Thailand and had refuelled in India, according to their statement. The ambulance charter was a Dassault Falcon 10 jet, which was French-made in 1978. ("[Russian plane crashes in northeastern Afghanistan mountains](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 January 2024)

Four-man space crew lands on International Space Station

On 20 January, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the mission Ax-3, operated by Axionm Space, landed on the International Space Station. The four-man crew consisted of Axiom Commander Lopez-Algeria, a Spanish retired NASA executive, and the second in command, Walter Villadei, Italian Air Force Colonel. Joined by Marcus Wandt, who represented the European Space Agency, and Turkey's first astronaut, Alper Gezeravci represented the Turkish Space Agency. Launched from NASA's Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, using the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and Crew Dragon capsule, the astronauts will spend two weeks on International Space Station ISS, studying the effects of microgravity on human beings among other things. ("[Four-man crew arrives at ISS with Turkey's first astronaut](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 20 January 2024)

EU & US near deal to allow police access to e-info to investigate cases

On 18 January, *Politico* reported on the decision between the EU and the US to reach a deal that would allow European police forces to access information from American tech firms to investigate cases. The agreement has had previous concerns over breach of privacy and potentially, civil rights. The US can already access information from major companies like Google, Amazon and Meta through its CLOUD Act (2018) while data requested from the EU take years to get approved. The concerns to the agreement include both a breach of privacy and potential by countries with democratic backsliding to misuse the powers. (Clothilde Goujard, "[EU, US near deal on police access to online data](#)," *Politico*, 18 January 2024)

EU sets a maximum limit of EUR 10,000 for cash payments aiming to reduce money laundering

On 19 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported the EU's plan to combat money laundering and cryptocurrency. Financial intelligence units of member countries will have increased powers to supervise suspicious accounts

and suspend transactions. New rules also require crypto-asset providers to undergo due diligence report suspicious activities of their customers, and monitor transactions up to EUR 1,000 or more. This EU regulation will expand to football clubs and agents as well. EU hopes that these measures will help in tackling widespread money laundering and terrorist financing. (Roshni Majumdar, “EU seeks cash payment limit, tougher money laundering rules,” *Deutsche Welle*, 19 January 2024)

Russia and Niger strengthen bilateral military cooperation

On 17 January, according to *RT*, Russia and Niger have agreed to increase military cooperation and military-technical cooperation to deal with insecurity in the Sahel region. The statement from the Russian Defence Ministry came after talks between Nigerien defence chief Salifou Modi and his Russian counterparts, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and Alexander Fomin. Niger’s government post-coup is aiming to strengthen ties with Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Iran to collaborate in areas such as defence, agriculture, energy, healthcare and crude oil. The new government has shown signs of cutting ties with its former Western partners as they terminated all military treaties with its former colonial power, France. (“[Russia strikes African military cooperation agreement](#)”, *RT*, 17 January 2024)

Russia-North Korea boosts ties as top diplomats meet, discuss US escalating tensions

On 17 January, *RT* reported talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korea’s Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui, aimed at strengthening bilateral ties, “ensuring peace and stability in Northeast Asia” and boosting cooperation in areas of science, culture and trade. Choe’s visit was preceded by the North Korean leader’s visit to the Kremlin in September 2023. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, stated Moscow’s stance on the US and its Asian satellites trying to destabilise the region, causing an escalation in tensions between North and South Korea, as the latter conducted joint military drills with the US throughout 2023.

(“[US policy on North Korea destabilizing region – Lavrov](#)”, *RT*, 16 January 2024, “[Putin meets with North Korean foreign minister](#)”, *RT*, 17 January 2024)



Image source: Peter Klauzner/REUTERS

Switzerland and China agree to bolster free trade

On 15 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the joint declaration made between Viola Amherd, the Swiss President, and Li Qiang, the Chinese Premier, on the sidelines of the annual meeting in Davos. Both parties agreed to expand the existing free trade agreement, which had stalled post concerns over human rights in China, and improve bilateral relations. Switzerland had in 2013 become the first country in continental Europe to have signed a free trade deal with China. Talks between the foreign ministries of both countries towards a stronger free trade agreement are expected to follow. China has further agreed to provide visa-free entry to Swiss citizens in China, which Switzerland has agreed to reciprocate. China is Switzerland’s third largest trading partner. (“[China, Switzerland agree to strengthen trade ties](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 15 January 2024)

Global divisions displayed through diverse speeches by China and EU

On 16 January, *Politico* reported on the open cracks in global politics as Li Qiang, the Chinese Premier, and Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, gave their speeches at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos. Li Qiang offered a speech of a confident China that welcomed foreign investments with “open arms” in an opportune economy that has recently seen a decline and loss of confidence. He emphasised on increased

coordination between China and the west in technology, green goals and the free market while calling the US a “capricious” force in global politics. Von der Leyen emphasised on the need for democracy and freedom in a Europe that was portrayed as the global leader to woo investors. She urged for a renewed link between the public and private sector in the face of great divide and confrontation in global politics. This year’s rendezvous at Davos proved to be excessively portraying a divided world, with a small US delegation leaving the Swiss Alps unusually early. (Claudia Chiappa and Jamil Anderlini, [“China vs. EU in Davos: Dueling speeches display global divisions,” Politico](#), 16 January 2024)

“Limited, single action taken in self-defence” says Sunak against Houthis

On 16 January, in response to reports of more attacks by Houthis in the Red Sea, Rishi Sunak, UK’s Prime Minister withheld military actions in response to the new attacks, while also reiterating the nation’s commitment to protect its security and interests when required. Backed by opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer US-UK strikes as “targeted action” and highlighted that escalation in the Middle East should be avoided. Sunak outlined the risks of inaction “...weakening of security and damage to freedom of navigation and the global economy” to justify the strikes. (Becky Morton, [“Rishi Sunak: Strikes on Houthis intended as 'limited, single action',” BBC](#), 16 January 2024)

The WEF continues to be the perfect networking opportunity

On 15 January, the *Financial Times* in an opinion juxtaposed the relevance of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in the changing world order with its continued reverence. Attendants of Davos were described by Samuel Huntington, a revered political scientist, as those with fluid national borders and no national loyalty, a notion that has changed in recent years. The WEF’s 54th annual summit will be attended by 300 public figures and 1,600 leaders in business in an attempt to discuss the most pressing economic, political and social concerns globally. The *raison d’être* of

Davos expanded from Klaus Schwab, the founder’s 1971 dream of an avenue to share management practices among leading businesspersons. Davos offers the golden opportunity to network with industry experts. Therefore, despite exorbitant attendance expenses, membership costs (starting at EUR 50,000) and vague themes, thousands are willing to attend the WEF every year. The scale and consistency of the opportunity that the festivities offer journalists, politicians and business leaders at Davos is unmatched, and as the *Financial Times* points out, becomes cause for regular attendance due to the “simple fear of missing out.” ([“Is Davos still worthwhile?” The Financial Times](#), 15 January 2024)

US strikes in Yemen leave Spain, Italy and France concerned

On 13 January, *Euractiv* reported on the second American strike against Houthi rebels in Yemen soon after the success of a joint US-UK strike against Houthi targets inside Yemen. The second attack targeted a radar site, in an attempt to weaken their ability to target commercial vessels in the Red Sea, according to the US Central Command. The initial attacks targeted military airports near Sanaa, Yemen’s capital, a naval base near its Red Sea port and several military sites. The Houthis responded with a warning for revenge for the act of “terrorism” against them. The Red Sea attacks were a spillover of Israel’s war on Gaza, also causing soaring oil prices, and tensions mounted over whether the new strikes against Houthis would lead to regional escalation. Several European countries like the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark actively supported the allied strike in Yemen, while Italy, France and Spain remain on the fence over potential escalation of regional conflict in the Middle East. ([“US strikes Yemen again while Italy, Spain, France sit on the fence,” Euractiv](#), 13 January 2024)

2023 sets record for highest global temperatures

On 09 January, Copernicus Climate Change Service confirms 2023 as the warmest year since 1880, surpassing the 2016 peak and

posing a threat to the Paris Agreement's 1.5 degrees Celsius target. The urgency for global leaders to adopt policies combating climate change, however, seems to be lagging as the 2023 elections in the Netherlands and Argentina saw right-wing populists opposing aggressive climate action, while the possibility of former President Trump's return raises concerns about the future of U.S. climate policies. The imminent risk of irreversible tipping points, such as the west Antarctic ice sheet collapse, underscores the urgency for proactive measures given the unpredictable and long-lasting impacts of climate change. Alex Ruane NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies climate impacts director said: "The climate system doesn't care about politics." (Zack Coleman, "It's a scary time' as world shatters temperature record," *Politico*, 09 January 2024)

Blinken visit to Turkey and Greece in attempt for regional de-escalation

On 06 January, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State week-long tour to the Middle East, in an attempt to prevent a regional escalation of the war in Gaza. Blinken met with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's President to discuss de-escalation, Israel's aggression, establishment of the Palestinian state and uninterrupted delivery of aid into Gaza.

They separately discussed Turkish approval of Sweden's membership in NATO. Blinken later met Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greece's Prime Minister to reiterate their alliance in containing the conflict. ("Blinken meets with Turkish, Greek leaders amid Gaza war," *Deutsche Welle*, 06 January, 2024)

Chinese probe into French Liquor, straining relations with EU

On 05 January, *Politico* reported on China's investigation into potential dumping by European liquor producers, particularly targeting France's brandy sector in response to the EU's trade assertiveness. This includes a probe into Chinese electric vehicle subsidies that was strongly pushed by French government. The ongoing investigation by Beijing shall target cognac, Armagnac and other brandies which generate a USD 1.57 billion (EUR 1.44 billion) export business for spirits groups like Remy Martin or Hennessy, while further straining the already tense relationship between the European Union and China and is also likely to impact the upcoming state visit to Beijing by Alexander De Croo, Belgian Prime Minister. (Koen Verhelst, Antonia Zimmermann and Camille Gijs, "Chinese liquor probe escalates trade tensions with Brussels," *Politico*, 05 January 2023)

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