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NATO 32: Sweden to join after Hungary's approval | China's domination in Europe's solar industry | EU finalises rulebook on AI | Farmers' protest in Poland



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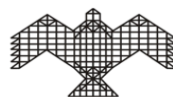
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Source: facebook.com/ab3.army, Kremlin.ru, REUTERS/Marton Monus, Roman Chop/ABC News, AFP, Julia Nikhinson/Bloomberg

War in Ukraine section covers the everyday developments from Day 735 to Day 708 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: Jordan Pettitt/PA, Hungary Today, The Portugal News, Hungary Today, Peter Morrison/AP Photo/picture alliance, SAMEER AL-DOUMY/AFP

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

By Alka Bala, Rosemary Kurian and Padmashree Anandhan

COMMENT

NATO 32: Leaving neutrality, Sweden to join after Hungary's approval

By Padmashree Anandhan

Following the membership of the former neutral Nordic countries, Russia faces a geopolitical quest to balance or showcase its symbolic power against NATO.

On 26 February, Hungary's parliament voted (188 in favour and only six against) favouring Sweden to join NATO. Hungary is the last NATO member to approve Sweden becoming the 32nd member of NATO. During the press conference, Sweden's Prime Minister, Ulf Kristersson, said: "...Nato membership means that we are coming home to a large number of democracies working together for peace and freedom." NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said: "Sweden's membership will make us all stronger and safer."

Following the vote, Sweden and Hungary signed a military agreement to sell Sweden's four JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets.

On 26 February, Hungary's Prime Minister Victor Orban blamed the EU and NATO allies for forcing his administration to vote for Sweden. The pressure increased after Turkey approved Sweden's accession on 23 January. Hungary's vote follows Kristersson's visit to Budapest on 20 February to forge cooperation. On approval, Orban said: "Being members of NATO means that we are prepared to die for each other. It is based on mutual respect."

Key issues

First, the Hungary roadblock and the shift. Orban's tagging with Turkey in blocking Finland and Sweden's entry into NATO was mainly due to his close relations with Turkey and Russia. Budapest's major criticisms against Sweden were over the latter's accusations against Hungary of democratic backsliding and lack of mutual relations. To overturn Orban's objections, a military agreement was needed to win the opposition vote; the fighter jet agreement with Sweden has made it possible, which also means a long-standing military boost. Hungary is also at odds at the regional level, isolated by the

EU and NATO due to blocking EU's decisions against Russia and on Ukraine aid. It does not hold well amongst far-right leaders from France and Italy, as there is no interest in holding formal ties with Hungary. With no investment inflow from Russia, China and Central Asia, Hungary is left with no regional influence, leading to a block in the decision to get few favours. The shift in Hungary's decision to vote in favour of Sweden was possible for many reasons. Change in the government to right-leaning has withdrawn Sweden's criticism of Hungary for democratic backsliding and disregarding minority rights. Hungary's air force's demand for Sweden's Gripen fighter jets and condition to release EU-blocked funds being fulfilled by Sweden and the EU helped ease the decision.

Second, beyond Hungary's opposition. It was not only Hungary that had opposed Sweden's NATO entry. Earlier, Turkey also had issues in getting Sweden on board. Turkey held its decision against Sweden for close to two years under a negotiation to lift the arms embargo and mainly to act against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The group is considered a terrorist by Turkey after a coup attempt in 2016. Another key condition linked to the decision is unblocking the US supply of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey.

Third, the divide within the NATO on Russia. Turkey's opposition and Hungary's delay in voting on Sweden's membership highlights the crack within the NATO alliance. It shows how a few NATO members do not see Russia as the primary security threat. Meanwhile, Finland and Sweden's domestic issues have been macroscopical, and several members view it as an opportunity to negotiate their domestic and military concessions rather

than perceiving Russia's invasion as a prime threat.

Fourth, Russia's NATO expansion conundrum. Sweden and Finland joining NATO creates a direct threat to Russia at the land and sea borders. Given the neutral stance of the two Nordic countries until now and the years of relations with Russia, the leaders have indicated the membership only as a deterrence. Meanwhile, Russia has clearly expressed its intention not to launch a strike into Finland unless there is an attack. It has showcased its interest to be limited to Ukraine.

"Hungary's air force's demand for Sweden's Gripen fighter jets and condition to release EU-blocked funds being fulfilled by Sweden and the EU helped ease the decision."

Way forward

First, NATO's new ring of defence. The renewed borders of NATO and the Nordic countries' high-end technology and advanced military systems will be a boon to NATO's draining stockpile. Finland's border

with Russia would act as a new defence zone for early alerts and detection to defend western and northern Europe.

Second, the challenge to two principal NATO adversaries – the US and Russia. Former US President Donald Trump's criticism of European members' support of NATO and the republican stand against sending aid to Ukraine underline a negative position within the US on Europe's threat perceptions. The US would have to re-think its approach towards NATO, considering the military advancement and geopolitical access that the Nordic brings. Regardless of the leadership, the US' access to the Baltic and Arctic would be an advantage to counter future geopolitical challenges.

For Russia, its key agenda to keep NATO away stands defeated. Finland and Sweden's membership has brought NATO closer. One of the primary objectives of Russia in Ukraine was to keep NATO away. Following the membership of the former neutral Nordic countries, Russia faces a geopolitical quest to balance or showcase its symbolic power against NATO.

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COMMENT

China's domination in Europe's solar industry

By Alka Bala

Considering the economic gain and faster achievement of green goals, policy trade-offs for Europe would indicate an inclination towards a strategic continuation of affordable Chinese imports.

Europe faces strong Chinese competition as it tries to balance the installation of renewable solar energy with the growth of local solar manufacturers. China is accelerating the green transition in Europe with its imports of cheap solar panels flooding the European markets. Europe's expenditure on the import of Chinese solar photovoltaics increased from 5.5 billion euros in 2018 to 20 billion euros in 2022. Ambitious solar energy goals set by the EU Green Deal Industrial Plan (GDIP), RePowerEU, and the Net Zero Industry Act, have made it difficult for local European companies to manufacture solar panels and sustain the demand without imports. EU Solar Energy Strategy as part of the RePowerEU plan aims at increasing the deployment of photovoltaic energy, where it targets to deploy 320GW by 2025 and 600GW by 2030. The EU finds itself in a difficult position, as supply chains are Chinese-dominated and any proposed de-linking would mean hampering the pace of green transition and a delay in achieving solar deployment targets. The Net Zero Industry Act aims at net-zero technologies manufacturing capacity to reach 40 per cent of deployment across Europe by 2030 and reach the EU's target of achieving climate neutrality by 2050.

Why is Europe's solar industry faltering?

China's solar industry which produces the cheapest solar panels and photovoltaic modules has challenged the European solar power industry as it struggles with oversupply and "unfair competition" from inexpensive Chinese products. European companies demand the EU for favourable policies that will enable local production and hinder imports to save them from bankruptcy while making Europe resilient in the long term about renewable energy production.

The availability of cheap Chinese imports has also pushed European countries to stockpile solar photovoltaic (PV) panels. A stark increase in demand for Chinese solar PVs was evident as imports in 2022 increased by 112 per cent reaching more than EUR 20 billion, and in July 2023, EUR seven billion worth of uninstalled panels were present in European warehouses; as a result of overstocking when the prices are low. The oversupply of solar panels by China in the global market is eliminating the opportunities and space for European solar production companies, that charge higher prices, almost two-thirds compared to their Chinese counterparts. The reliance on imports is fuelled by the bloc's target to achieve 45 per cent of energy generation from renewable sources by 2030.

How did China manage to dominate the global supply of solar PVs (photovoltaics)?

China dominates the global solar PV supply chain and in manufacturing capacity as it invested over USD 50 billion in developing the industry, while also successfully creating 300,000 jobs across the value chain. Solar PV products are a vital export for China and its provision of affordable products has allowed it to dominate the global supply chain. Chinese manufacturing of solar PVs is centred in Xinjiang and Jiangsu provinces where 75 per cent of energy production is via coal, as fossil fuels are an essential requirement for electricity-intensive solar PV manufacturing. Although emissions from solar PV manufacturing only account for 0.15 per cent of global emissions, innovations and investment in the industry would enable production to be more sustainable. China's share of the global production of polysilicon, ingot and wafers will soon touch 95 per cent, indicating the Chinese dominance in the green energy

sector and highlighting concerns about price manipulation that the monopoly allows.

What measures can the EU opt?

Solar manufacturing companies are urging the EU to adopt immediate measures to keep the local firms running, which the price pressure heavy from its Chinese competition. European Solar Manufacturing Council (ESMC) in a letter addressed to Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, highlighted the plausible steps of adoption to safeguard domestic industries such as buying up excess inventories to ease the problem of oversupply, coupled with the introduction of protectionist and state aid policies such as tariffs and quotas to avoid risking the closure of a majority of its solar photovoltaic module manufacturing firms. In contrast, there have been demands from the SolarPower Europe group, along with 18 manufacturers and 28 national associations that the EU should not go ahead with tariffs as it would derail the path of “European solar re-industrialisation,” as stated by Walburga Hemetsberger, CEO of SolarPower Europe. They also voiced that tariffs would delay the achievement of the EU’s target of 600 gigawatts of solar installations by 2030 and have suggested reshoring manufacturing units to reach the EU target of 30 gigawatts of production capacity by 2025. Without imports, the EU would struggle to achieve its targets and fears Chinese retaliation if it goes ahead with its de-linking strategy with China in the solar industry. A Franco-German divide is also evident in these negotiations as the latter opposes such a strategy due to its reliance on China for green energy.

The support for protectionist measures is put forward considering the EU’s Net Zero Industry Act target to achieve 40 per cent domestic production of solar manufacturing by 2030. However, factors such as the technological competencies of the current European companies and global market dynamics must be considered. Europe should reframe this target logically, shift its focus from increasing production to ensuring deployment and increasing employment at this stage, and engage in import diversification over time and not

immediately. The current level of stockpiling is enough to mitigate the geopolitical tensions that Europe faces regarding price control and supply from China, if Europe is to face a similar test in the area of solar power, as seen in the case with Russia for natural gas. Considering the economic gain and faster achievement of green goals, policy trade-offs for Europe would indicate an inclination towards a strategic continuation of affordable Chinese imports.

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COMMENT

EU finalises rulebook on AI regulations: Reactions and implications

By Rosemary Kurian

The constant need to document trails of AI activities could help monitor the efficacy of data governance across multiple concerns including copyright breaches and breach of personal data.

On 02 February, 27 EU member countries approved the Artificial Intelligence regulation act known as the world's first comprehensive AI Rulebook. This follows a political agreement between the EU member states in December 2023 after addressing concerns over limiting the growth of homegrown AI models through careful analysis.

What is the new EU AI Law?

The AI Act was first proposed by the EU in 2021 in an attempt to create a set of rules to manage its technological advancements as well as prevent any grave consequences the technology might bear against the general public. It aims to do the latter by setting specific rules for the providers, deployers, importers and manufacturers of AI products and technology within the EU market. Firstly, the act in its Article 3(1) attempts to define AI as "A machine-based system designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy and that may exhibit adaptiveness after deployment and that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments." While the act applies to the aforementioned categories within the EU or third parties that provide systems in use within the EU market, it will not affect military AI systems or those that are used for the sole purpose of scientific research and development. Similarly, no restrictions have been placed on free open-source AI systems unless specific risks have been identified by the EU.

Article 5 of the Act lists out the forbidden activities using AI technology. The EU has proposed a ban on the use of technology that

can influence behaviour through manipulative and deceptive AI systems or its use to exploit individual vulnerabilities. To prevent discrimination and hate crimes, the use of biometric information for the determination of individuals' race, beliefs, sexual orientation, and membership to unions. In addition, the social tracking of an individual to deny them opportunities, use of Remote Biometric Identification (RBI) in public places, creating databases using facial recognition via CCTVs and using AI to deduce human emotions and behaviour in professional and educational spaces is forbidden. Exceptions for law enforcement purposes have been noted.

Article 6 lists out the classification of AI systems that are considered "high-risk" and an amendment of the same added exemptions to those systems that pose "no significant risk of harm, to the health, safety or fundamental rights of natural persons, including by not materially influencing the outcome of decision making." The "high risk" components include biometrics and facial recognition tools not explicitly banned under Article 5, access to public services, private services like insurance and banking, elections, law enforcement, and migration. The producers of such systems must ensure practices of data governance, draft its risk-management measures, monitor its use through a human and record it, and guarantee accuracy and cyber security. The Act further regulates general purpose AI like ChatGPT and Google's Bard by demanding creators to maintain technical documentation, determine the tool's limits, document the copyrighted material used to train the software and abide by the EU's rulebook.

What were the reactions within the EU?

When the final version of the text for the bill was presented in the EU on 24 January, most member states including Austria, France and Germany expressed their reservations until the adoption of the bill by the Committee of Permanent Representatives on 02 February. Three of Europe's largest economies—Germany, France and Italy—expressed their opposition to the stringent regulatory rules for powerful AI systems like Open AI's GPT-4 and Google's Bard. They were attempting to prevent the curb in the advancement of potential European enterprises like Aleph Alpha and Mistral AI that could surpass the American dominance in the field. However, the European Parliament decided against the opposition to prevent the risks arising from the most potent forms of AI. On implementation, France insisted ensuring the development of competitive AI models, balancing transparency with protection of sensitive data, and preventing the overburdening of companies with "high risk" recommendations. Austria raised concerns over data protection through law enforcement exceptions and invasive technologies.

What are its implications?

The European Parliament is set to adopt the AI rulebook on 13 February with a plenary vote due in April. The official adoption will be complete once it is endorsed at a ministerial level. Once the rulebook is officially published in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJ), it could set a global standard as the most comprehensive law on AI. Given that obligations have been applied by the EU on the deployers of AI technology, it applies even outside the EU through non-EU businesses who would want to be providers of the service. Even a non-EU state would have to oblige if it provides an AI service used in the EU or one that can cause an impact within the EU.

The built in system of checks and balances that the new AI Act provides, for example, through policies concerning management of personal information could lead to the responsible use of data and of data governance. The threats of cybersecurity and data breaches, deemed as a threat within the rulebook, could be curbed through the security system created by the Act. The obligations extending to AI technology deployers of "high risk" models urge on impact assessments on fundamental rights and EU code of conduct, which could be duplicated in preventing privacy concerns across systems. The constant need to document trails of AI activities could help monitor the efficacy of data governance across multiple concerns including copyright breaches and breach of personal data.

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COMMENT

Poland: The Farmers' protest on Ukraine grain and EU regulations

By Manoranjan Kumar

The timely response from the EU regarding farmers' interests may slow the protests.

On 28 February, Reuters reported that thousands of Polish farmers flooded the streets of Warsaw, displaying the national flag and sounding handheld horns, intensifying their protest against Ukrainian food imports and EU environmental regulations. They demand the government to withdraw from the EU's Green Deal and halt imports of agricultural products.

On the same day, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that he could not rule out widening a national ban on Ukrainian grains to other products if the EU does not act to protect the bloc's markets. He stated: "We want to help Ukraine, but it cannot be done through actions that are lethal to whole areas of the economy."

On 26 February, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov stated that Kyiv sent a note to Warsaw demanding the Polish authorities find and punish the guilty. The statement came after, on 21 February, protestors blocked the border and opened railway carriages, letting 160 tonnes of grains spill out.

On 22 February, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: "The commission remains committed to delivering solutions to ease the pressure currently felt by our hard-working farming women and men. We are easing the administrative burden on our farmers to help them guarantee food security for European citizens. Simplification of our agriculture policies is a constant priority, at both EU and national level. With this range of actions, we are delivering on the pledge we made to our farmers to accelerate this

discussion. I look forward to hearing the views of our Member States."

Issues at large

First, the farmers' protests across the EU. Farmers across the EU, including Germany, France, Poland, Spain, Greece, and Portugal, face various challenges. Their major concerns are the following: falling selling prices; rising energy, fertilizer, and transportation costs; heavy regulations or red-tapism; debt, cheap imports, and climate change; and new EU green regulations based on the EU agricultural system. Several concerns are country-specific; however, the majority of them are continent-wide. They started protests across Europe last year and intensified by the first week of February. However, national governments have taken steps to meet farmers' demands, with Berlin abandoning its plan to cut diesel subsidies and Paris scrapping a diesel tax increment.

Second, cheap imports from Ukraine. In June 2022, the EU waived taxes, quotas, and trade defence measures on Ukrainian food imports following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This step resulted in the Polish markets being flooded with imported grains and other food products from Ukraine, which created competition between local producers. The Polish farmers called it "unfair competition" as their income decreased by nearly ten per cent. The farmers are concerned about the future of the agricultural sector in Poland and their livelihood. The ongoing farmers' protest across Poland has pressurized the government. Meanwhile, the government banned the import of several products in 2023 and is finding new ways to protect the interests of farmers.

Third, the EU's Green Deal. The farmers are against the EU Green Deal, which aims to make the EU's food and agriculture systems sustainable. The policies include reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides, focus on organic farming, and rewilding lands to increase biodiversity. These regulations increased farming costs, adversely affecting the farmers who needed to receive appropriate prices for their products. Farmers claim it is impossible to compete with importing countries outside the EU, including Ukraine, as they are not bound to follow the EU's Green Deal regulations.

Fourth, extreme weather conditions. Climate change has severely affected European farmers. They are suffering from increasing heat, drought, and flooding. The production of the main crops, including olive, wheat, rice, and fruits, has reduced due to worsened weather conditions. The first month of 2024 has been recorded as the world's hottest January, which destroyed winter crops.

In perspective

With growing discontent among farmers across the EU, Brussels withdrew from several rules of the EU's Green Deal. It includes reducing the use of pesticides by 50 per cent by 2030, delaying the target to leave some lands to improve biodiversity, and scrapping a goal to cut farming emissions from its 2040 climate roadmap. The EU will conduct an online survey to learn about the farmers' concerns during the first week of March. The timely response from the EU regarding farmers' interests may slow the protests. It would firm their faith in Common

Agricultural Policy (CAP). However, the commitment of the EU to stand with Ukraine would likely remain the same.

“ Although Poland has supported Ukraine in the war and helped socially, economically and militarily, the farmers' protest has created a dilemma for the Polish government...”

As the Polish farmers have blocked nearly all borders with Ukraine, which disrupted the supply of Ukrainian grain to the EU countries, the Ukrainian government delegation visited the border to discuss the protests and a solution as the blockade hit both countries' trade and economy. Although Poland has supported Ukraine in the war and helped socially, economically and militarily, the farmers' protest has created a dilemma for the Polish government regarding its support to Ukraine.

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EM Daily Focus*



Source: EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP, EPA-Yonhap, Wam.ae, Qilai Shen/Bloomberg, European Council

FINLAND

Finland: Presidential elections call for shift in foreign policy

By Padmashree Anandhan

What happened?

On 11 February, Alexander Stubb, from the centre-right National Coalition Party, emerged as the winner in the presidential elections by a narrow margin of four per cent. He gained 52 per cent of the votes against Pekka Haavisto from the centre-left Green League party which secured 48 per cent. On winning, Stubb said: "We are facing a new era in foreign policy where rules are being challenged, and there is a war next door."

On 12 February, President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyan said: "With your leadership, experience, and European commitment, our Union has a new, strong asset."

What is the background?

First, the narrow margin in elections. In the first round of elections held in January, there was a close margin between Stubb from the

National Coalition party with 27.2 per cent, Pekka Haavisto from the Green League seconded with 25.8 per cent. While Jussi Halla-aho from the Finns Party and Olli Rehn from the Centre Party of Finland were placed third and fourth with 19 and 15.3 per cent.

Second, the emphasis on Finland's foreign policy. The President of Finland will engage in country's foreign and defence policy, with fewer powers to intrude into domestic affairs. Stubb will be succeeding Sauli Niinistö who is well among the Finns since his time as Finance Minister, diplomacy, and as a strong leader who held the term for 12 straight years. In case of Stubb, the timings are more crucial with the doctrinal shift of Finland stepping away from neutrality policy and becoming a member of the NATO. Although Stubb pledges to forge a strong stance against Russia and assures support to Ukraine, staying away from domestic issues could be a challenge. Especially after the spark of the racism scandal.

Third, the importance of NATO and nuclear deterrence. Accession to NATO was a key moment for Finland. In the wake of the Cold War, Finland was one of the few countries in

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Europe not to restrain defence capability. Sharing a 1,340-kilometer border with Russia means strengthening of deterrence which means engaging in NATO's "nuclear sharing." Since then, Helsinki never held nuclear weapons nor formed a doctrine. Similarly, at the public level, there is less support for Finland's participation in the nuclear weapon exercise or stationing inside Finland.

What does it mean?

First, the change ahead in Finland's foreign policy. Finland's joining NATO, changing the European security landscape and with block emerging from the US demands for a dynamic foreign policy. The main task of the President will be to seal the latest doctrine with NATO, it has already met the two per cent defence expenditure limit. Finland will have to strengthen its network within the alliance and further its bilateral with the US, the Nordic, and the Baltic to solidify its geopolitical presence. This will be until the relations with Russia is revived.

Second, a hard task to fill Niinistö's shoes. From the statements made by Stubb after Donald Trump, the former US President's threat to NATO, Finland is in for a long run to deepen its relations with the transatlantic. Similarly, a dynamic defence boost at the national level can be expected, but to carry out such critical tasks a good diplomat is required. Niinistö demonstrated to be a strong leader well regarded by the public and also at the policy-making level. His leadership at the foreign policy and security front will be a large vacuum to be filled by Stubb.

FRANCE

Challenges faced by the French wine industry

By Alka Bala

The French wine industry finds itself unsustainable as it faces the challenges of oversupply, poor prices, strict environmental regulations coupled with the phenomena of the decreased consumption of wine. Distressed farmers protested and held demonstrations across the French regions,

blocking highways, disrupting transport and dumping manure in front of government buildings. The French government and the EU have advanced actions to deal with these concerns, promising ease in regulation complexities and financial difficulties.

Why are the French wine growers protesting?

As a wave of farmers' protests spread through Europe, wine growers in Bordeaux held demonstrations against government regulations and taxation as they grappled with increased production costs. Backed by public support, French farmers voiced their concerns regarding the need for government intervention in establishing a minimum price for bulk wine, which would allow them to procure back a certain level of the incurred amount. The protests carried out on 29 January also strongly opposed government plans to eliminate subsidies on agricultural diesel and initiated demands for lowering the fees paid to the Bordeaux Wine Council. Farmers suffer from high production costs due to expensive tractor fuel, and electricity expenses and find themselves entangled in bureaucratic maze of French and EU regulations. Vincent Bougès, president of the Young Farmers of Gironde said "Certain costs are no longer sustainable, and we would also like our products to be valued—to sell at the right price." Earlier in October 2023, wine producers in South France had resorted to radical methods such as hijacking trucks carrying Spanish wine cava and attacking merchant premises as they called for actions to resolve their financial difficulties.

A survey conducted by Gironde's Chamber of Agriculture in 2023 indicated that one-third of the wine producers in the region faced economic challenges, coupled with the overproduction of wine has caused the industry's downfall. In 2023, the annual overproduction of wine was estimated to be 300,000 hl (40m bottles).

What caused the oversupply and decreasing prices?

France is the world's largest producer and the second-largest consumer of wine in the world, however, the figures reflect a declining trend in this consumption.

According to CNIV, the trade association for appellation wine marketing boards, a drop of 70 per cent has been indicated in wine consumption between 1960 and 2020. Based on the EU predictions, France is expected to have a 15 per cent drop in consumption every year. Despite the decline in consumption, wine production in the EU increased by four per cent causing oversupply and sinking prices. Rising inflation due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war resulted in an increase of 13.7 per cent in food prices in France, as compared to 2022. Figures also indicated a change in consumer preference towards alcoholic drinks, as some prefer beer and other alcoholic drinks compared to wine. The sale of wines at low prices by supermarket chains has also made the industry unsustainable. Regional disparities and the extent of challenges faced differ as the French region of Champagne reached its pre-covid sales levels in 2023, Burgundy remained largely unaffected whereas other regions such as Bordeaux, Languedoc and Rhone Valley struggled with oversupply. French farmers face the EU's strict regulations on the use of agricultural chemicals and maintaining environmental standards. In light of such regulations, the EU's plans to expand free-trade agreements with Mercosur countries (The Latin American Southern Common Market) that are not faced with the same set of regulations appear hypocritical and sparked violent protests from French farmers.

What measures have been adopted by the French Government and the EU?

The agenda for the alcohol price floor has been initiated by Isaac Sibille, a French MP of the MoDem party as part of the 2024 Social Security Financing Bill. This would ensure a fixed minimum price for alcohol, safeguarding public health and reviving the wine industry. The series of protests in January urged PM Gabriel Attal to introduce measures on simplifying red-tapism, eliminate the increasing tax on agricultural diesel, and remain opposed to signing the Mercosur free trade deal. The strategic plan introduced in December 2023 to the France AgriMer wine council by Vin & Société and the CNIV focused on increasing innovation in winemaking and viticulture, while also

expanding export markets. A deal between the French government and the Bordeaux farmers aimed to remove roughly 10 per cent of their vines, around 9,500 hectares out of a total of 108,000 hectares. The 57 million euro deal would be partly funded by the government with 38 million euros, whereas the rest would be financed by CIVB. The EU pledged 160 million euros to pull out existing vineyards in the region and undergo a 'Restructuring' of the wine industry and replace it with industrial alcohol to sustain the wine industry. Earlier in November 2023, the French Agricultural Ministry announced an emergency support fund of 20 million euros to aid winemakers who struggling with economic challenges. These measures reflect an encouraging start to deal with the agricultural challenges faced in France, although the farmers doubt the extent of simplification that could be availed in these proposed measures.

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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.

Issues at large

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 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.

In perspective

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.

UKRAINE

The Battle for Avdiivka

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 15 February, the Financial Times reported on continuing difficulty for Ukrainian troops following Russia's encirclement in Avdiivka. Ukraine's new commander-in-chief, General Oleksandr Syrsky, announced reinforcement to balance the shortage in personnel and ammunition. The shortage emerged due to a lag in the military support from the US. On Ukraine's strategy in Avdiivka, Syrsky stated that it was switching from offensive to defensive. He said: "Goal of our operation is to exhaust the enemy, inflict maximum losses on him."

On 17 February, Syrsky issued the order for withdrawal from key locations of the town. Russian Ministry of Defence claimed on the south battleground that it was advancing 8.6 kilometres. The ministry claimed that its troops had "completely captured," leaving 1500 Ukrainian troops dead.

On 19 February, the Centre for Eastern Studies reported that Russian forces had occupied Avdiivka completely, reaching Lastochkyne village in the west.

Issues at large

First, Ukraine's delicate north. At the beginning of 2024, the Russian offensive into Avdiivka succeeded with a breach into the town, resulting in massive losses for Ukraine. This led to the stronger Russian assault breaking down Ukrainian defences. From the ground level, it is a strategic point for Ukraine, which acts as defence storage. 30 miles northwest of Avdiivka is Pokrovsk, which is the logistical hub for Ukraine's military. Additionally, Avdiivka is a fortified town for the troops due to the placement of coal and chemical plants, which provided a defensive position for Ukraine. It is also the

gateway to Donetsk, occupied by Russia and its proxy forces.

Second, supply shortage and prolonging Western support. The aid from the US and Europe, which was fast-paced during mid-2022 and early 2023, began to decline by the end of 2023. This was due to the faster exhaustion of the military arsenal of NATO and European allies and, the higher demand to secure national and regional security. In the US, the Republican objections have stalled the aid to Ukraine. A decline in support means a reduced capacity for Ukraine to launch strikes further and switch to defence mode in the front line.

Third, Ukraine's tactical withdrawal. Following the failure of the spring counteroffensive in 2023, Ukraine's demand surrounded over aid of advanced air defence systems. By 2024, there was a massive exchange of aerial attacks between Ukraine and Russia. Following the slowdown in military aid from the West, Ukraine shifted its demand to more ammunition. While Russia launched an offensive to attain a symbolic victory in Avdiivka, Ukraine struggled to prevent the encirclement with the shortage of critical supplies and personnel. Unlike the Battle for Bakhmut, where Ukraine withstood Russia for nine months to exhaust the Russian military, in Avdiivka, Ukraine chose to withdraw quickly. Given the existing shortage and drag in receiving aid from the West, this could be considered tactical.

In perspective

First, the Kupiansk and Lyman axis is under threat in the north. Ukraine's failure to sustain Avdiivka would mean a subsequent threat to defend other towns on the frontline. The key cities such as Pokrovsk and those in the Kupiansk and Lyman axis will come under direct threat of intense attacks from Russian troops.

Second, it is a strategic and symbolic win for Russia. The withdrawal of the Ukrainian forces from Avdiivka would be the biggest victory for Russia. Although the win may seem symbolic, the town being the gateway to Donetsk, which forms a key part of Donbas, occupied by Russia, would enable

Russian troops to advance further into the west of Ukraine.

Aid to Ukraine: The divide within the US

By Alka Bala

What happened?

On 07 February, in the US Congress, the Republicans shot down the initially proposed USD 118.3 billion bipartisan bill, which aimed at border security measures and foreign aid to US allies. They claimed the bill lacked harsh border security measures and forced Democrats to move ahead with a standalone aid package to Ukraine and Israel.

On 09 February, the US Senate passed the initial vote, 64-19, on advancing the new USD 95.3 billion foreign aid bill focusing on aid to Ukraine, security aid to Israel, Taiwan and Indo-Pacific partners, and humanitarian assistance to Gaza. Chuck Schumer, the Senate Majority leader praised the preliminary vote and Hakeem Jeffries, House Democratic leader called for bipartisan efforts “to support America’s national security priorities.” The meeting between President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on the same day, highlighted the need for Congress to approve the Ukraine aid bill where Biden remarked “The failure of the United States Congress in not supporting Ukraine is close to criminal neglect.”

What is the background?

First, a brief background to the bill. A breakdown of the revised USD 95.3 billion foreign aid bill is as follows: USD 60 billion is allocated for Ukraine’s military aid and non-military assistance; USD 14.1 billion for Israel’s military aid; more than USD eight billion to US’s partners in Indo-Pacific including Taiwan to support their deterrence activities against China. Republicans’ earlier demands for strong immigration measures were carried out through the initial proposal of Foreign aid that accompanied strict border security measures. However, it was killed by the Republicans. Later, Senate Minority Leader, Mitch McConnell and 16 Republicans voted in favour of going ahead with a stripped-

down version of the bill, that excludes the border security provisions.

Second, the background on aid to Ukraine. Earlier in December 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukrainian President had visited Washington to persuade US lawmakers with pleas for more funds for Ukraine’s war against the Russian invasion. Zelenskyy also requested that Congress end its political gridlock and authorize funds for Ukraine. Since 2022, Ukraine has been the top recipient of US foreign aid, as it has already received over USD 75 billion. Aid provided has been used for offensive and counter-offensive activities such as weapons development, training and intelligence of Ukrainian Soldiers against the Russian military. Earlier in 2023, the White House had also agreed to providing Abrams battle tanks, anti-aircraft missiles, cluster munitions, coastal defence ships, and advanced surveillance and radar systems. The immigration influx within the US had become the guiding factor for debate on further foreign aid to Ukraine as Republicans had demanded to first ensure the safety of American borders from the migrant influx before aiding foreign countries to secure theirs.

Third, the divide within the congress. Trump’s call to reject the bill tied with foreign aid, and demand for a separate harsher bill on immigration intensified the existing partition division in the Congress. Former President Donald Trump commands a strong hold over the hard-right Republicans who have committed to delaying the legislation through procedural manoeuvring. The amendment discussions on the bill come a few days before the two-week recess. Unless Congress arrives at a bipartisan decision before the recess, the aid bill will get sidelined as budget negotiations will take priority. Hence the determination of Republicans to slow down the bill holds the chance of killing the bill entirely. The Senate would take the next procedural vote on 11 February, however, it’s uncertain even if the bill passes on to the House of Representatives, whether it would call for a vote. Republican McConnell’s efforts in negotiations with Democratic leader Schumer are faced with a line of opposition

from hard-line Republicans, revealing the factional rivalry in an already divided Congress.

What does it mean?

First, shaping of US foreign policy objectives. Trump and Republicans are pushing towards an “America First” isolationist policy, whereas the Democrats and the White House reiterate their national security commitments to US allies. Whereas the White House views support for Ukraine as a crucial part of ensuring the security of the US and its allies. Democrats position wartime aid as advances against authoritarians who hinder freedom and democracy. A victory for Trump in the 2024 elections will further solidify this stance, of the US withdrawing foreign aid and military support to other nations.

Second, uncertainty for Ukraine. The effects of the lack of Western aid would prove costly for Ukraine as Kyiv depends on international loans and grants to finance half of its budget. The lack of clarity on US military support has left Ukraine’s military capabilities dwindling.

Third, the increasing pressure on the EU. The EU on 01 February had approved a EUR 50 billion aid to Ukraine to be deployed until 2027. However, if the US fails to push forward with the proposed foreign aid bill for Ukraine, it would cast greater pressure on future aid support from EU countries.

Four, the US-Mexico border security. The failure of approval of the border security measures in congress is an attempt by Republicans to highlight the weakness of the Biden administration in tackling the issue of immigrant influx. Treatment of the border crisis as a partisan issue has resulted in the delay of the security proposal to increase Border patrol hiring, enforcement of security measures and establishment of an expulsion authority to oversee matters of migration.

REGIONAL

Third EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum: Three takeaways

By Alka Bala

On 02 February, leaders of the EU member states, Indo-Pacific countries and representatives of regional organisations from East Africa to the Pacific states met in Brussels for the third EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum. The forum was chaired by Josep Borrell Fontelles, Vice-President of the European Commission, the agenda focused on shared prosperity in the region through economic partnerships. The third EU Indo-Pacific Summit emphasised increasing partnerships and collaboration among EU and Indo-Pacific countries, focusing on climate change, greater economic investments, and maintaining international world order through combating geopolitical challenges.

Three takeaways

1. Economic resilience and investments forge the path forward

The EU pushed for a regional approach to achieving shared prosperity and highlighted the need for diversified and integrated supply chains in the Indo-Pacific region. Borrell, underscored the economic importance of the Indo-Pacific and its plans to de-risk the European economy by diversifying supply chains, a lesson learnt from the EU’s over-dependence on Russian gas. Steps taken to achieve shared prosperity and inclusive growth include a recent Free-Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between the EU and New Zealand in July 2023 is under plan to extend to Australia, Indonesia, Eastern and Southern Africa, India and Thailand. Coupled with the EU- Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya and Pacific countries overall the FTA reflects the EU’s “open, sustainable and assertive trade policy”, announced in 2021. Although the ASEAN and the EU work together under the Global Gateway Initiative focusing on improved connectivity, the success of the EU’s ongoing negotiations with ASEAN nations to implement the bilateral FTAs would mark a new chapter in economic cooperation among the regions. A similar outlook on digital connectivity and digital trade agreements, accompanied by binding

digital trade rules highlight a phase of cooperation in the technological sector.

2. Joint actions towards the green transition to combat climate change

The EU- Indo-Pacific collaboration on climate action has been focused on the areas of green transition, disaster risk reduction and ocean governance through the formation of “green alliances.” By indulging in climate financing activities, the EU is helping in the development of top-down approaches towards building climate resilience in the Pacific, South-East Asia and Africa. This can be seen in the joint advancement in the renewable energy sector is materialised through the EU - Bangladesh Agreement and Green Hydrogen Strategy and Roadmap for Kenya, co-funding of hydropower projects in Fiji. The EU’s Global Gateway Strategy encompasses green initiatives, ensuring climate resilience with development in regions where it is being implemented. EU’s plans for a “Sustainable Western Indian Ocean” programme with a EUR 48 million budget including Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros promises the promotion of a blue economy, coastal conservation and sustainable management. Besides the positive developments on the climate action front, there are concerns about the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a climate-conscious trade policy that charges levy on carbon emitted in the production of carbon-intensive goods, imported from non-EU countries. This policy is seen as rather protectionist than a step towards climate action, especially by the East Asian countries owing to the challenges faced by its manufacturing hubs.

3. The promise to greater cooperation against geopolitical and security challenges

Acknowledging the ongoing geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the Russia-Ukraine war and the crisis in the Middle East, the nations underlined their commitment to “reinforce respect for international law and the rules-based international order.” Security partnerships on maritime, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, hybrid threats, and joint naval exercises with Indo-Pacific countries

as part of the EU’s Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) tool in the North West Indian Ocean highlight greater security cooperation. To uphold the freedom of navigation in strife-ridden Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden of the Red Sea, Indo-Pacific countries are working towards measures to protect merchant vessels, and the EU’s naval mission plans in the making.

Despite the calls for shared prosperity and a joint sustainable future, the summit witnessed an absence of leaders from the big powers. The Foreign Ministers of France and Germany did not participate in the ministerial forum, whereas Antonio Tajani, the Italian Foreign Minister only joined for the later session with Southeast Asian countries. The top diplomats from the QUAD nations and Cho Tae-Yul, South Korea’s Foreign Minister were also not present at the discussion that dealt with crucial aspects of the EU-Indo Pacific cooperation.

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The EU: Special European Council Summit ends with a deal to aid Ukraine

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 02 February, the European Council meeting was held in Brussels and the EU leaders gathered to discuss on two key countries, Ukraine and Hungary. The aim of the meeting was to remove the block over Ukraine aid and grant the aid package worth EUR 50 billion. Apart from this the discussion also included future of European Peace Facility (EPF) which is a fund used for paying “weapon donations” to Ukraine.

Hungary's block

Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister who has been a block in several EU level decisions and has continued to import Russian gas. Hungary blocked the EUR 54 billion military aid package previously in the last held EU summit in December 2023. Orban also opposed Ukraine's membership accession although there was block in initiating the talks for membership. The EU which had initially frozen the pandemic recovery funds worth EUR 30 billion to Hungary decided to release some billions of euros by mid-January 2024. This has been one of the key reasons for Hungary to negotiate down in agreeing to support Ukraine. On arriving at the meeting, Orban has signalled his readiness to compromise on the condition of “...making aid to Ukraine dependent on an annual unanimous vote.” In contrast, the EU leaders have re-proposed giving Hungary the option of an “emergency break” to call for talks on aid instead of new vote.

Response from the EU leaders

According to few EU leaders such as Olaf Scholz, Germany's Chancellor, Kaja Kallia, Estonia's Prime Minister, and Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister stressed on ensuring such summit on re-negotiating support for Ukraine not to repeat. Tusk said: “There is no Plan B. It is up to Orban to decide if Hungary is part of our community or not.” On Hungary's condition on yearly review of aid to Ukraine, the EU leaders

expressed “frustration” over how Hungary can acts as a block every year on the same. Following the deal, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President welcomed the deal and issued a statement: “It is very important that the decision was made by all 27 leaders, which once again proves strong EU unity.” A first batch of EUR 4.5 billion is expected to be sent to Ukraine in March which would strengthen Ukraine's financial stability and boost its economy. After reaching the deal, on the question of the US aid, Ursula Von Der Leyen, European Commission President stated that the deal would help as a booster for the US to send assistance to Ukraine. Michel added: “I'm convinced that this decision is also a signal to the American taxpayers, a demonstration that the EU assumes its responsibility.”

Signing of the deal

Following rounds of discussion for 12 hours, the European Council special summit ended with leaders reaching a deal to support Ukraine with EUR 50 billion for next four years. Charles Michel, the European Council President said: “This locks in steadfast, long-term, predictable funding for Ukraine.” The deal was agreed over a relaxed condition on “optional review” in two years if necessary, adhering to Hungary's demand through a compromise. The European Council released a statement indicating the efforts: “Military support and security commitments will be provided in full respect of the security and defense policy of certain Member States and taking into account the security and defense interests of all Member States.”

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War in Ukraine: Daily Updates*

By Padmashree Anandhan and Rosemary Kurian



Source: facebook.com/ab3.army, Kremlin.ru, REUTERS/Marton Monus, Roman Chop/ABC News, AFP, Julia Nikhinson/Bloomberg

War in Ukraine: Day 735

War on the Ground:

On 28 February, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President visited Albania to partner for a Ukraine-South-East Europe summit with Edi Rama, Albania's Prime Minister. The visit also focused on holding meeting with potential leaders to gather support against Russia and discuss on defence, political and 10-point peace plan proposed by Ukraine. In response, Albania's foreign minister said: "A pivotal moment for fostering bilateral ties and standing in solidarity with Ukraine in its heroic fight against Russia's aggression."

On 28 February, in response to Zelenskyy's visit, the Balkan leaders reiterated their support for peace in Ukraine. They vouched for boosting the idea of arms production in the summit held in Albania. A joint declaration was signed by the leaders assuring their participation in the peace summit to be held in Switzerland. They also

confirmed to support Ukraine in reconstruction and post-war recovery.

On 28 February, China's foreign ministry announced on the upcoming trip of a senior diplomat Li Hui to Ukraine, Europe and Russia. The trip indicated its attempt in carrying out "shuttle diplomacy" and to encourage political solution to Ukraine's crisis.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 28 February, Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation claimed on the "catastrophic" situation in the front line. She brought out the divide amongst the European countries in supporting Ukraine highlighting Macron's statement on possibility of sending European soldiers into Ukraine. She stated how the signal from Europe was opposite and seem as a betrayal for Ukraine.

On 28 February, Russian Presidential

* 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.

Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEP), a Russian think tank released a new study reporting on sanctions imposed by the west to have reached the saturation limit. According to the report in RT the measures which targeted Russia's economic growth were overcome through loopholes and circumventing by trade with third party countries. It provides two scenarios for Russia from the observation. One, simultaneous reduction of price cap of Russian oil to USD 50 per barrel, against imposing of embargo and secondary sanctions. The study reveals that at a negative situation, the GDP is expected to slow to 0.3 per cent but to revive with 1.5 per cent in next two years.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 28 February, Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister hinted on imposing a "temporary" ban in the border with Ukraine as tensions build over entry of Ukraine grain. He said: "We are talking with the Ukrainian side about a temporary closure of the border, the cessation in general of trade." Following the protests by the Polish farmers over Ukrainian grains, Tusk has come under pressure to act on the inflow of Ukrainian grains claimed to be accumulating inside Poland. The reason behind the protest is EU's move in 2022 to remove tariffs on Ukraine grain resulting in flooding of Ukrainian cereal exports into Poland affecting the local producers market.

On 28 February, Ursula Von Der Leyen, European Commission President announced on installation of an office in Kyiv on defence innovation. The office is aimed to serve as exchange of battle field experience and industrial innovation.

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War in Ukraine: Day 734

War on the Ground:

On 27 February, Oleksandr Kamyshin, Minister of Strategic Industries of Ukraine reported on Ukraine's drone production to be matching Iran supplied Shahed drones. He said: "Both in terms of the size of the explosive devices and in terms of range and other technical parameters." He added on Ukraine using other types of drones to fight against Russia and launch attacks across the borders.

On 27 February, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President visited Saudi Arabia, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss on peace formula and prisoner exchange. Saudi Arabia which helped in previous mediations of prisoner swap also assured to partner with Ukraine on economic front.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 27 February, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President vowed to boost the special operations force's mobility and capabilities. The special operation forces which form critical part of Russia's Armed Forces to carry out specific task and be combat ready. Marking the 10th anniversary of takeover of Crimea, Putin stressed to continue strengthening the striking capacity and through supply of "new generation weapons."

On 27 February, Vyacheslav Gladkov, Governor of Belgorod area in Russia reported on the death of three after a series of drone attacks by Ukraine. According to the report from defence ministry, three civilians were killed due to a explosion on a residential building, the drones are claimed to be destroyed by Russia's air defences.

On 27 February, in response to Macron's statement in the Paris conference, Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation called for talks over avoiding direct conflict rather than discussing the possibilities.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 27 February, during the conference in Paris held to gather aid for Ukraine, Emmanuel Macron, France's President expressed the disagreement among the European leaders on deploying ground troops in Ukraine. Despite the differences he missed to rule out the possibility of such deployment in his statement. Macron said: "But no dynamic can be ruled out. We will do whatever it takes to ensure that Russia cannot win this war." This sparked statements amongst the NATO leaders and Russia.

On 27 February, following Macron's statement Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor rejected the notion of deploying troops in Ukraine and Robert Fico, Slovakia's Prime Minister stated the disunited stance among the European leaders on the same issue. Similarly, leaders from Sweden, Spain, Poland, Czech Republic expressed their differences on the plans to send their soldiers into Ukraine.

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War in Ukraine: Day 733

War on the Ground:

On 26 February, Ukraine's Armed Forces confirmed on full withdrawal from Lastochkyne, a village five kilometres from Avdiivka. The move is observed as a proactive step to form defence over Orlivka-Tonenke-Berdychi axis and deter Russia from advancing in the west direction.

On 26 February, Dmytro Lubinets, Ukraine's Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights reported on killing of seven Ukrainians by Russian troops. Those who surrendered as

prisoners near Bakhmut were killed on 24 February and he also added on establishment of a Russian military unit which is suspected to have carried out the killing.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 26 February, Denis Pushlin, Russia appointed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) head declared complete occupation of the Avdiivka in Donbas. He confirmed on withdrawal of Ukrainian troops and assured of no danger in the town. Russia's defence ministry officers claim on capturing close to 200 Ukrainians during the clearance process. On the same, Russia's defence ministry announced the capture of Lastochkyne after an intense combat. It also reported on increasing efforts of Ukraine to defend its frontline and launch counterattacks. According to the report in RT, capture of the village is intended to establish a defence line between Orlovka, Tonenkoye and Berdychi villages.

On 26 February, Anton Siluanov, Russia's Finance Minister issued statement on changing economic landscape of developing countries. Indicating the superseding growth of developing economies over G7 countries, he stated that "The world is undergoing a global economic shift." On the same, he added Russia's growth in GDP (3.6 per cent), industrial production (3.5 per cent) and household incomes (5.4 per cent).

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 26 February, Hungary's parliament passed vote in favour of Sweden to join NATO with a ratio of 188:6. One of the last members to give clearance, making it the 32nd member of NATO. The addition would mean stronger NATO in the Nordic, and Baltic Sea. Following the vote, Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's Prime Minister said: "The parliaments of all NATO member states have now voted in favour of Swedish accession to NATO." On the same, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General said: "Sweden's membership will make us all stronger and safer." The deal between Hungary and Sweden on providing of Swedish-built fighter jets was an addition to

convince Hungary.

On 26 February, following the conference in Elysee palace, Emmanuel Macron, France's President reflected on growing aggressiveness of Russia and its position on ground. While the aid from the US delays, "no consensus" was reached in sending western troops to Ukraine. He called for full support to prevent Russia from winning. He announced for formation of a coalition to support Ukraine with missiles and bombs from medium to long range. During the meeting, Zelenskyy called the West to not let Putin expand his aggression. He also criticised the EU for supplying only 30 per cent of the shells of the total pledged.

On 26 February, Olaf Scholz, Germany's Chancellor commented on sending of the Taurus missiles to Ukraine. Scholz ruled out the chances of long-range Taurus sent to Ukraine as it requires German personnel. Ukraine has long-demanded for the missiles to strike with precision but Germany continues to resist. This has led to a tussle between the eastern and western European countries on ensuring military support to Ukraine risking the regional integration.

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War in Ukraine: Day 722

Ukraine struggles to keep Avdiivka as Russian attacks increase

War on the Ground:

On 15 February, the *Financial Times* reported on how the battle of Avdiivka, the town 20 kilometres north of the Russian-occupied Donetsk, is becoming a crucial test for General Oleksandr Syrsky, Ukraine's new commander-in-chief. Syrsky has sent reinforcements to the region where battle has intensified, amid concerns of rationing of ammunition in short supply, since the US's failure to approve fresh aid. The situation has been termed "absolutely critical" by a spokesperson for the elite 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, with Ukraine switching to a defence strategy to "exhaust the enemy." Zelenskyy pledged "maximum attention" to Avdiivka amid parallels being drawn with the unsuccessful defence of the Bakhmut town. Ukraine could lose several experienced troops especially since it is set to replenish its ranks and mass mobilise, made more difficult in Avdiivka due to shortage of western supplies of ammunition.

The Centre for Defence Strategies noted the "increased encirclement threat" posed by Russian forces against Ukrainian forces near Avdiivka. General Oleksandr Tarnavsky, the commander of the south-east Ukrainian forces, stated that Russia had attacked Avdiivka with 17 air strikes, 57 assault missions and 599 artillery strikes to seize the region and Ukraine's supply routes. Further, since Avdiivka opens a channel to Donetsk, a Russian victory would make it difficult for Ukrainian forces to recapture the largest city in the Donbas region, occupied by Russian troops.

On 15 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the upcoming visit by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President to Germany for a meeting with Olaf Scholz, the German Chancellor. Zelenskyy is also set to attend the Munich Security Conference which will host heads of states and military experts from 40 countries. The shortage of supplies from allied nations would be a topic of discussion at Munich, which will also be attended by Kamala Harris, the US Vice President. While the US Senate passed the

USD 60 billion Ukraine aid bill, it is yet to be passed by the House of Representatives with a Republican majority who are likely to block the aid. Scholz said: “assistance from the United States is indispensable.”

Meanwhile, Ukraine attempts to raise arms production at home since mid-2023, with support from other actors. The Baltic states and Poland have expressed unhindered support.

On 15 February, World Bank released a report on updated Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3) jointly with the Government of Ukraine, the European Commission and the UN. According to the report, the cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine rose up to USD 486 billion from USD 411 billion in 2023. In 2024, Ukraine estimated USD 15 billion for reconstruction with focus on private sector mobilisation, housing and soft infrastructure restoration, and energy and transport. The RDNA3 stated already securing USD 5.5 billion through Ukraine’s partners, with an unfunded amount of USD 9.5 billion. Denys Shmyhal, Ukraine’s Prime Minister, stated that Ukraine was on its path to recovery despite Russian aggression with the help of international partners, and deemed Russian frozen assets in the West as the main resource along with calls for private investments. Olivér Várhelyi, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, expressed continued EU support to Ukraine to address “the short and medium-term challenges” identified in the report. The RDNA3 report has assessed the direct damage in Ukraine to be worth USD 152 billion, concentrated in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Kyiv oblasts.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 15 February, *ABC News* reported that in the latest bout of exchanges of long-range missiles between Ukraine and Russia, a missile strike in the Russian city of Belgorod near the Ukrainian border killed six and injured 18. It was followed by a Russia firing of 24 cruise and ballistic missiles into Ukraine. Russia announced that its air defence systems intercepted 14 Ukrainian missiles over Belgorod, a region frequently

under Ukrainian fire. Oleh Syniehubov, the Governor of the Kharkiv region, stated that the Russian fire into Ukraine killed five and injured 10.

On 15 February, *RT* reported on the regret expressed by Vladimir Putin, Russia’s President, of delaying his offensive in Ukraine, stating that he was trusting of his adversaries with diplomacy. The 2014 Russian coup in Ukraine ended “by peaceful means” through the Minsk Accords which granted autonomous status to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine. Russia stated that its offensive in Ukraine was launched to protect the people of Donbass, where the 2014 coup had created an “anti-terrorist” operation launched by Ukrainian authorities. Russia further blames Ukraine for closing all channels of negotiations with Russia.

On 14 February, *RT* reported that the superyacht ‘Amadea’ owned by Russian multimillionaire Suleiman Kerimov was seized by the US government which is costing American taxpayers USD 600,000 a month to maintain. The yacht seized in Fiji under sanctions imposed against certain Russian businessmen, is currently being requested by the US government to be auctioned off, given its maintenance bill to be “excessive.” Eduard Khudainatov, another Russian billionaire and chair of Russian oil energy giant Rosneft between 2010 and 2013 attempted to block the auction claiming ‘Amadea’ to be his, which American prosecutors rejected, calling him a “straw owner” disguised by Kerimov. Meanwhile, Khudainatov’s lawyers have urged the judge to prevent the auction until the determination of “whether the seizure was unconstitutional.”

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 14 February, *Politico* reported on loopholes in the Baltic border rules around implementing sanctions against Russia. The republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have the strongest sanctions against Russia over its war with Ukraine, but the inability to effectively manage the 1600-kilometre border with Russia have led to evasion of sanctions on goods that can have dual

purposes. The primary concerns are lack of manpower, funding and administrative backup to implement the regulations. The complexity arose from the longer list of sanctions and difficult legislation surrounding them. Further, truck drivers can take goods to Belarus, which has not been subjected to sanctions, so stating destination as Belarus resolves half the barriers. Arturs Kovalenko, the head of the customs services in Latvia, noted that less than half the goods cleared for customs have reached their declared destinations. Corruption in the Baltics adds to the concern, especially in the customs departments.

On 15 February, the *Associated Press* reported on the upcoming bilateral security agreement due to be signed between Zelenskyy and Emmanuel Macron, the French President, with France offering “long-term support” to his counterpart. Macron had earlier stated that the French agreement with Ukraine would be similar to the UK’s agreement with Ukraine, where the former promised a security package worth GBP 2.5 billion. A French representative stated that it marked a “collective approach” from the G7 countries to support Ukraine with military equipment.

On 15 February, *ERR* reported that Hanno Pevkur, Estonia’s Minister of Defence, signed declarations of intent with his Baltic counterparts, agreeing to join the drone coalition led by Latvia and the demining coalition led by Lithuania. The Estonian decision is meant to support Ukraine “in both combat and humanitarian demining.”

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War in Ukraine: Day 721

Ukraine military claims destroying Russia’s warship in a sea drone attack

War on the Ground:

On 14 February, *Financial Times* reported on Ukraine military claims on destroying a Russian Ropucha-class landing vessel in the Black Sea. According to the report, the Cesar Kunikov, a 113 m long vessel housing a crew of 90, was struck by Ukraine’s V5 sea attack drones in the south coast of Crimea, a region occupied by Russia since 2014. It marks the latest effort by Ukraine in destroying the Russian blockade of the Black Sea. Ukrainian exports have resumed especially from the southern ports of the Black Sea, despite attacks on port facilities via Russian attack drones.

On 14 February, *The Kyiv Independent* reported on Oleh Syniehubov, the Governor of Kharkiv Oblast, report on Russian forces missile attack in the Velykyi Burluk village. According to the report, around 80 kilometres east of Kharkiv, injuring at least seven people. The Governor stated that S-300 anti-air missiles were most likely used to carry out the attack that hit two residential buildings. Several people remain trapped under the building rubble.

On 14 February, Oleksandr Syrskyi, Ukraine’s commander-in-chief and Rustem Umerov, Ukraine’s Defence Minister, visited the front-line positions near Avdiivka and Kupiansk to meet with the units defending the areas. Syrskyi noted the numerical advantage of the Russians along with their use of aerial bombs and heavy mortar and artillery firing against Ukrainian targets,

suggesting the operation to be “extremely complex and stressful.” Umerov assessed the resources with the military in order to strengthen Ukrainian capabilities and prepare “a coordinated repulse of the enemy.”

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 14 February, *RT* reported on Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary for the Russian President Vladimir Putin refute over the reports by Reuters claiming the proposition by Putin towards a ceasefire with Ukraine via the US. In his interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin had earlier stated that Russia had continued contacts “through various (American) agencies.” He further stated that an end to war can only be brought once weapon supply to Ukraine is halted. The report highlighted Putin’s claims on Russia is willing to negotiate with Ukraine provided Zelensky cancels the anti-negotiation decree with Russia.

On 14 February, *Novaya Gazeta* reported on a new legislation allowing the government to confiscate “money, valuables, and other assets” belonging to individuals who get convicted for “spreading false information about the Russian army.” This is an extension of a previous law used to imprison critics of the war, imposed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. On 22 January, the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, passed the bill against “scoundrels and criminals” for the “safety of the Russian Federation.”

On 14 February, *Novaya Gazeta* reported on St Petersburg court sentence to Zhumagul Kurbanova, a 66-year-old woman, to 10 years in prison for setting fire to a military enlistment office. It was one of 28 incidents in Russia where pensioners were blackmailed into the deed by unknown individuals. Kurbanova was sentenced to serve in a ‘penal colony’ with payment of damages worth EUR 929 (RUB 91,965). The unknown scammers stole her savings and offered her RUB 50,000 in return for setting fire to the establishment. The Russian government accused the Ukrainian intelligence for the attacks.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 14 February, Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, announced NATO’s defence spending, noting an “unprecedented rise” in the defence contribution of its allies in Europe and Canada. He stated that the allies have added more than USD 600 billion since the 2014 Defence Investment Pledge, with an 11 per cent increase in defence spending in 2023. Stoltenberg expects NATO’s 18 allies to spend at least two per cent of their GDP towards defence in 2024, which have been met only by three. On 14 February, Ministers of the NATO countries are set to discuss in the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group on increasing the production of ammunition (NATO has already set contracts worth USD 10 billion) and boosting NATO’s new defence plans. Ahead of the meet Stoltenberg welcomed the EU package aid for Ukraine. Defence ministers are expected to discuss on strengthening NATO’s deterrence, defence and Ukraine’s on ground needs.

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War in Ukraine: Day 720

IISS reports: Russia to sustain war for two to three more years

War on the Ground:

On 13 February, Ukraine Armed Forces (UAF) claimed on destroying 10 enemy attacks in the Avdiivka axis. According to the report, 52 combat engagements were carried out in the front line, this includes 12 attacks in the Avdiivka direction. It reported on Russian forces launched one missile, 94 air strikes and 89 multiple launcher rocket attacks resulting in killing and injury of civilians and damage of civilian infrastructure. Similarly attacks were observed in Sivershchyna and Slobozhanshchyna axis, Kupyansk axis, Lyman, and Bakhmut axis.

On 13 February, in an interview to German channel ZDF, Colonel Genral Oleksandr Syrskyi, Ukraine's new Commander-in-Chief observed an increase in "technological progress" in UAF and in armed combat. He stated that there was increased usage of drones by Ukraine and Russia and is most exchanged in the combat zone leading to more process in armed struggle. He added: "we are already seeing the use of ground-based robotic platforms, modules that are controlled remotely, which again makes it possible to save the lives of our servicemen."

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 13 February, the TASS reported on Russian officials issue of arrest warrant against Kaja Kallas, Estonia's Prime Minister and Taimar Peterkop, Esotnia's Secretary of State for playing a role in destroying Soviet WWII memorials in public places. Kallas stated that the monuments were symbols of colonial occupation and historical "wounds" and the removal has paced up since the Russian offensive in Ukraine. Dmitry Peskov, the Russian spokesperson, stating that Kallas actions were "outrageous" and waging "war with a common history". Estonia is one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters from the EU, pledging EUR 1.2 billion till 2027, as well as building defence lines along the Baltic border with Russia with a proposed 600 bunkers.

On 12 February, on the Finland elections, Dmitry Peskov, the Russian spokesperson, stated that Alexander Stubb as the new President of Finland would mean "dialogue would not be possible" between the two states, reiterating Stubb's statements. Stubb stated earlier that during his term, Finland would have "no relations" with Russia as long as the war in Ukraine continued, stating that Russia would use it as a "propaganda."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 February, according to a study by the Munich Security Conference (MSC), Russia dropped in its position as a leading threat concern among G7 countries, barring Japan and the UK. Based on public opinions in the G7 countries, the Russian threat has dropped to fourth position compared to 2022, with threats like cyber attacks, climate change, radical Islamic terrorism and migration replacing it. Germany and Italy showcased the sharpest fall in concerns over Russia. Ukraine is "still considered an ally" by the G7 nations but lesser compared to last year, according to the study. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, had stated during his interview with American journalist Tucker Carlson that the US portrays "an imaginary Russian threat" and that he had no plans of aggression against NATO and the West.

On 13 February, a report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) based in London found that Russia potentially lost more than 3000 tanks throughout its offensive in Ukraine, which is equivalent to its entire prewar active inventory. They however noted that Russia has enough low quality replacements worth years of storage which can replenish active losses at a rate of "90 tanks per month," which could sustain it for three more years of war. Ukraine too has suffered heavy losses but has been constantly replenished by western allies with technological upgrades. The report noted that global defence expenditure has increased by nine per cent, exceeding USD 2.2 trillion in 2023, leading with the US and NATO countries. Bastian Giegerich, the Director General of IISS, noted that there are "challenges of scaling up production" and has laid open the cracks in the military

preparedness of Europe. The EU might miss its promised target of delivering Ukraine with artillery shells.

On 13 February, the EU declared its plan to impose sanctions on several companies in mainland China, for the first time, for aiding Russia in bypassing European sanctions and buying European dual-use goods. The sanctions could also include companies in Turkey, India and Serbia. China and Russia had declared a “no-limits friendship” between the two countries and several reports suggest that China is aiding Russia in the invasion of Ukraine. The EU aims to impose its 13th set of sanctions against Russia before 24 February marking two years since the Russian offensive in Ukraine. In December, Charles Michel, the EU Council President issued a notice to Xi Jinping, the Chinese Premier, with a list of suspected companies providing dual-use goods. Only on approval from the EU member states the proposed EU sanctions can be imposed.

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War in Ukraine: Day 719

War on the Ground:

On 12 February, Mikhailo Fedorov, the Ukraine’s Digital Transformation Minister, stated that Ukraine plans on the mass production of long-range missiles as a threat to Russian targets. It aims to produce one million drones by the end of 2024. Several drone attacks were reported in Russian oil depots including in Bryansk, Oryol, and Leningrad. Fedorov stressed on the government’s efforts at “deregulating the drone market and increasing funding for it,” stating the importance of Ukraine’s private

sector in drone making. Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian President has earlier signed a decree for the creation of a new branch within the Ukraine Armed Forces (UAF) dedicated to drones.

On 11 February, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine’s President continued his efforts at a complete “reboot” of the top posts in the Ukrainian defence forces, as Russian drone attacks continued with the latest including the capital Kyiv. After Oleksandr Pavlyuk replaced Oleksandr Syrskiy as Ukraine’s new commander of the armed forces, presidential decrees announced Yuriv Sodol as the new commander of the combined forces, and Brig. Gen. Ihor Skibyuk as the new commander of the air assault forces for his role as the architect of Ukrainian victory in Kharkiv. Ukraine announced that all drones sent to Kyiv had been destroyed and no casualties were reported.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 12 February, the Russia’s Foreign Ministry announced the imposition of sanctions against 18 British military and political figures as a response to their “confrontational course” towards Russia. The Ministry, according to Tass, accused the UK to be involved in the “fabrication of anti-Russian narratives,” aiding the “neo-Nazi regime” in Ukraine, and discrediting the “constitutional order and socio-political processes” in Russia. Those imposed with sanctions include Simon Asquith, the Royal Navy Director of Submarines, Tim Neal-Hopes, the National Cyber Force Commander, and James Cartlidge, the Minister of State for Defence Procurement.

On 12 February, Dmitry Peskov, the Russian military spokesperson stated that the Starlink internet terminals were not officially ordered or commissioned in Russia, denying claims made by Ukrainian intelligence stating otherwise. Elon Musk, the owner of SpaceX that manufactures the Starlink terminals refuted the Ukrainian allegation, stating on X that “no Starlinks have been sold directly or indirectly to Russia,” separately clarifying no business relations with the Russian government. Musk had earlier donated 20,000 Starlink

terminals to Ukraine after the launch of the Russian offensive but refused to activate services in Crimea, the reason stated as the imposition of the US sanctions in Russia and Crimea.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 February, *The Guardian* reported on French military and cybersecurity agency comments on spotting a Russia based network spreading disinformation in western Europe. The Viginum agency was started in 2021 to identify digital interferences from foreign entities, which involved in activities to influence public opinion. According to the agency, it found Russia to be setting out a manipulation campaign for the upcoming European elections under the name "Portal Kombat." It found that such disinformation was spread through social media, and messaging traced back to Moscow. For 2024 elections, the European Commission had flagged disinformation as one of top threats and Věra Jourová, the EU's Vice President urged France, Germany and Poland to fight such disinformation networks.

On 12 February, Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor assured Germany's commitment to spend two per cent of its GDP on NATO defence. The statement comes after Donald Trump, former US President blamed the NATO countries on not meeting the benchmark to defend against Russia. He said: "We have to move away from manufacturing towards large-scale production of defence equipment." Rheinmetall, one of the largest defence production company of Germany increased its production after demand for ammunition rose and is expected to provide 200,000 artillery shells each year.

On 12 February, the European Council decided on the use of profits from confiscated Russian assets to finance the reconstruction of Ukraine. Similar to steps taken by the G7 the EU's decision aims at routing the confiscated Russian assets under special circumstances to Ukraine through the EU's budget. The EU aims to use central depositories like Belgium's Euroclear to set aside profits generated by assets belonging

to the Russian central bank, the proceeds of which could amount to EUR four billion per year. Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukraine's Foreign Minister, welcomed the decision, stating that "the aggressor must pay." Peskov had earlier vowed to retaliate on the decision to confiscate and freeze Russian assets.

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War in Ukraine: Day 715

War on the Ground:

On 08 February, Ukraine's Armed Forces (UAF) reported on pressure on the front line in Avdiivka from the Russian forces. According to the report, Russia is observed to be keen on capturing the town leading to months of intense attacks. Vitaly Barabash, Avdiivka's Mayor said: "Unfortunately, the enemy is pressing from all directions. There is not a single part of our city that is more or less calm." In the recent day, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President had also indicated the difficulty in fighting in the town and capturing this would be symbolic as the war forwards into third year. UAF claimed on defending 40 assaults in Avdiivka in past 24 hours.

On 08 February, Zelenskyy replaced Valerii Zaluzhnyi with Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi as the new Ukraine Commander in

Chief. Following Zelenskyy's discussion with Zaluzhnyi on the need for renewing the leadership of the UAF, the decision was made with an intention to switch battlefield tactics and strategy. Zaluzhnyi said: "The tasks of 2022 are different from the tasks of 2024. Therefore, everyone must change and adapt to new realities as well. To win together too."

On 08 February, the UN Committee called on Russia to stop transfer of children from Ukraine and provide information of those deported. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child included a panel of 18 "independent experts" who stressed on ending the "forcible transfer of children from Ukraine." According to Ukraine, close to 20,000 have been deported since February 2022 which Russia denies.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 08 February, *RT* published key takeaways of Tucker Carlson, Fox News Journalist with Vladimir Putin, Russia's President. In the report, Putin criticised Ukraine for not fulfilling its social welfare commitments to the population in Donbas and siding with the West to fight Russia. These were seen as the reasons to spark the war and continue till now. On the possibility of a conflict with the NATO, Putin said that there will not be one unless there is a direct attack on Russia from NATO countries. He blamed the NATO for not keeping its promise in accepting Russia into the alliance in 2008 and called west's tactic in Ukraine as a "colossal political mistake."

On 08 February, Ministry of Defence of Russian Federation claimed on prisoner exchange of 100 Russian prisoners with Ukraine. The exchange was aided by the UAE and the received personnel will be sent for medical and mental healthcare. The move comes after the failed exchange where 65 POWs died in destruction of Il-76 aircraft over Belgorod.

On 08 February, Russia's oil company, Rosneft warned Germany's Economic Ministry over expropriation of shares. In a report published by Reuters, Germany was found to be planning for nationalisation of

Rosneft activities in Germany. This includes turning 54.17 per cent shares held in Berlin's Schwedt refinery. Although the German government is unsure of its final decision, the oil refinery was categorised under "trusteeship in September 2022" following the war in Ukraine. According to Rosneft, it assured to take protective measures for its shareholders and such expropriation will lead to damage to "investment security service."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 08 February, Marc Thys, former deputy chief of Belgium highlighted the pressure faced by Europe to improve its production capacity to meet the national and Ukraine's arms demand. The concerns are starting to emerge as the doubts over US support to Ukraine continue. The chief warned on time span of five to seven years to reach the industrial threshold for "credible deterrence." On the same issue, during the European Investment Bank Group Forum, Charles Michel, European Council President said: "We could invest at least €600 billion in defense over the next 10 years."

On 08 February, video of the interview held by Carlson and Putin was released. On 09 February, *Politico* published a set of critical takeaways. According to the report, Putin's aim remain clear on de-nazifying Ukraine, and showcasing a grim image on the US and its support to Ukraine to matter less in the war. Carlson was heavily criticised for turning this as an opportunity for Russian propaganda.

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War in Ukraine: Day 714

War on the Ground:

On 07 February, *The Washington Post* reported on Russia's attacks into Ukraine using ballistic cruise missiles and Shahed-type drones resulting in death of at least five and wounding several civilians. The attacks were focused across six regions and hit at least three major cities including Kyiv. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukraine's President stated that Kyiv's top priority was the accumulation of air defence and electronic warfare systems to prevent drone attacks from Russia. According to the Ukrainian armed forces, 44 Russian drones and missiles were intercepted by them, out of a total of 64.

On 07 February, *the Verkhovna Rada*, Ukraine's parliament, passed the updated government's mobilisation bill after the first reading, to ramp up conscription for mobilisation in 2024. The initial bill failed due to differences over curbing of rights of those who evade conscription. The updated version promises a transparent recruitment process with annual leave for military personnel in instalments. It bans the conscription of those aged between 18-24 years and instead proposes a five-month training, and enables volunteers to "resolve personal issues and prepare for mobilisation," before conscription through a two-month reprieve.

On 06 February, Rafael Mariano Grossi, the IAEA Director General, held meeting with Zelenskyy to discuss his team's agenda before visiting the Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant. His goals include the assessment of the status of the plant's cooling systems key for its safety and the level of qualified staff of the plant which has been shut down for the past year and a half. The plant has six reactors contains a significant amount of nuclear fuel that must be adequately cooled. Grossi is expected to visit Moscow to discuss the future of the nuclear plant.

The Moscow View Claims by Russia

On 07 February, the Russia's defence ministry claimed on a successful attack against Ukraine's defence industry facilities that were involved in the production of "naval drones, coastal missile systems, munitions for multiple rocket launch systems, and explosives." According to the report, high-precision long-range weapons to carry out the explosions, were used destroying 1,055 Ukrainian troops leading to improvement in Russia's positions in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). It also claimed destroying Ukrainian MiG-25 fighter jet, two US-based M777 howitzers and a Paladin self-propelled gun supplied by the US.

On 07 February, *RT* reported on the bombing of the New York village in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) by the Russia's Air Force. Located in the west of Gorlovka and north of Donetsk, the village forms part of the front line. A Ukrainian 'Baba Yaga' bomber drone was identified in the region by the 132nd Gorlovka Brigade, which prompted Russian bombers to initiate an airstrike using glide bombers. As per the report, the attacked Ukrainian base was a potential warehouse for ammunition.

On 07 February, *Vedomosti* indicated a 41 per cent increase in the supply of Russian pipeline gas to the EU. A 32 per cent increase of gas supply via Ukraine was noted in January 2024, compared to 2023 ratios, the remaining being transited via the TurkStream pipeline, the last two pipelines supplying energy from Russia to central and western Europe. While the actual volumes of gas being delivered remains lower than agreed upon rates due to the closure of the Sokhranova pumping station by Ukraine, the sudden increase in demand from the EU was due to low temperatures.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 07 February, Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor expressed his confidence over the congressional approval of the aid for Ukraine, after the failure of the Ukraine support bill earlier. During a meeting with his NATO counterparts in Brussels, Sullivan stated his intention to push the aid bill through the House and the

Senate with “no alternative” for Ukraine. Ukraine has warned that its treasury and ammunition are emptying due to the Russian campaign and is waiting for a USD 60 billion aid promise from the US.

On 07 February, Joe Biden, the US President, blamed Donald Trump, the former President for the failure of his government’s bipartisan bill aimed at providing Ukraine with billions in aid. The legislation for Ukraine aid could be Biden’s last shot at securing his national interests for Ukraine. Biden accused Trump of “weaponising” the conflict and urged Republicans to reconsider their opposition, the failure of which could lead to an end to US aid into Ukraine. This could halt the delivery of weapons worth USD 13 billion and affect Ukraine’s demand for USD 8.5 billion in financial support for the war.

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War in Ukraine: Day 712

War on the Ground:

On 05 February, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine’s President during his daily address indicated dismissing one of the top military officers. He hinted: “a reset, a new beginning is necessary,” without mentioning a single

name but working towards a larger replacement of state leaders. He added: “If we want to win we must all push in the same direction, convinced of victory, we cannot be discouraged...” The statement comes as tensions brim between Zelenskyy and Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Commander-in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine over increased demand for ammunition, personnel shortage and a failed counteroffensive. A new round of mobilisation has been one of the mismatched topics.

On the same day, Zelenskyy proposed to Ukraine’s parliament to continue the martial law and mobilisation for 90 days more. The law was first declared on 24 February 2024 and has been extended till now. Under the martial law, men aged between 18 and 60 with few exceptions will not be allowed to exit Ukraine and can be called for military service.

On 05 February, the Kyiv Independent reported on total of nine attacks across Ukraine killing one civilian and injuring five. According to the report, 36 attacks were launched in Kherson oblast damaging residential zones, similarly 18 attacks were observed in Kharkiv, and across Donetsk, Avdiivka, “Chernihiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, Sumy, and Mykolaiv oblasts.” Although no casualties were recorded.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 05 February, Denis Manturov, Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister issued a statement confirming the expected increase in the drone supply to Russian military in 2024. According to Manturov, Russia also intends to spend USD 1.1 billion for research and development to produce more drones in next three years. He said: “The range of products is very wide, from heavy unmanned aerial vehicles [UAVs] to first-person view [FPV] drones.” He also highlighted how this industry would be one the important areas to “build competencies and production volumes.”

On 05 February, Russia has tagged two US based journalists, writer Tom Rogan and chief editor Hugo Gurdon as “extremists and

terrorists." According to Russia's federal financial monitoring service, a criminal case has been filed against for writing "Bombing the bridge would thus be a very personal rebuke to Putin's ambitions and his propaganda narrative," which was considered as a trigger to terrorism. Apart from them 29 more have been labelled the same.

The West View: Reponses from the US and Europe

On 05 February, the Netherlands government announced sending six more F-16 fighter jets apart from the 18 pledged to Ukraine after the cancelled plan on sale of the aircraft to private company. Kaja Ollongren, Netherlands' Defence Minister said: "Ukraine's 's aerial superiority is essential for countering Russian aggression."

On 05 February, Donald Trump, former US President along with the Republicans leaders jointly condemned the deal proposed in the Senate to aid migration, Ukraine and Israel. They called it a "waster of time" and "dead on arrival," and Trump rejected the aid against immigration while other republicans called the border deal to be concerning. Whereas Mitch McConnell, Senate's Republican leader and Chuck Schumer, Senate's Democratic leader supported the bill worth USD 118.3 billion. There is also opposition rising from "progressive democrats" such as Alex Padilla. While the division persists in the US over the bill, first round of procedural vote is schedule for 07 February.

On 05 February, the French government held talks with Russia's ambassador over killing of two French belonging to non-governmental organisations in Ukraine. The French workers were killed on 01 February in a Russian strike near the front line in the north of Dnipro River. In response to the killing Maria Zakharova, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation called it a "tragedy" and blamed France for triggering the conflict in Ukraine through supply of weapons.

On 05 February, UK's Ministry of Defence reported on Russia's limitation in achieving

its revenue target for 2024. It suggested Russian government on considering other policy measures to manage its public spending to meet the target citing Russia's plan to increase its spending by 26 per cent. The ministry predicted the set spending per cent to be emerging from an expectation of 22 per cent increase in revenue and 25 per cent growth in oil and gas revenue. For Russia to meet the revenue target, it recommended cutting of "contribution to National Welfare Fund and increase its domestic taxes and debt to finance Russia's public spending." It warned over the medium to long term economic effects from inflation and fund used towards invasion in Ukraine. According to the report, Moscow had spent more than USD 100 billion on its military in 2023 and in 2024 the defence budget is expected to increase 70 per cent more than 2023.

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War in Ukraine: Day 710 & 711

War on the Ground:

On 03 February, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President claimed on receiving two defence systems and indicated the

shortage they face. He reported on intense fighting in Avdiivka and the difficulty in countering Russia. The same was confirmed on 04 February by Ukraine's general staff. According to the report, 27 attacks were observed which was seen as an attempt to take over village of Novokalynove. After Bakhmut, Avdiivka has become another symbolic battle between Ukraine and Russia testing their resistance.

On 03 February, Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk claimed on being hit by 14 drones and two Ovod missiles by Russia. The Ovod missile known as Kingbolt, a cruise missile had hit Ukraine's energy supply sites resulting in power shutdown for more than 15,000 and affecting two heating plants in Kryvyi Rih.

On 04 February, Serhii Naiev, Commander of the Ukrainian Joint Forces reported on countering Russian forces attack in an attempt to breakthrough the Sumy frontline. He reported on Russia's target on 16 communities on 03 February including Yunakivka, Bilopillia, Krasnopillia, Velyka Pysarivka, and Esman. According to the report, Russia's attack was viewed as its experiment to test Ukraine's defence.

On 04 February, Zelenskyy visited southern frontline in the village Robotyne in southern Zaporizhzhia. Meeting the soldiers he said: "I have the great honor to be here today, to reward you, because you have such a difficult and decisive mission on your shoulders to repel the enemy and win this war." The move comes after 65th brigade of Ukraine succeeded in an assault against Russian forces gaining back control in Robotyne.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 03 February, Andrey Bocharov, Russia's governor of the Volgograd region reported on fire at the Volgograd oil refinery over shooting down of the drone. No injuries were reported and the fire was instantly controlled and he criticised Ukraine's security service (SBU) for carrying out the attack. On the same Russia's defence ministry reported on taking down seven drones over Belgorod, Volgograd and Rostov-on-Don.

On 04 February, Russia blamed Ukraine for attacks in Lysychansk, a city controlled by Russia since July 2022. According to the report, 28 were reported dead and 10 rescued from the attack on a bakery in Lysychansk. Russia's foreign ministry called for quick response and condemnation from international organisations.

On 04 February, Russia's Federal Tax Service reported on filing legal complaint against Sweden's furniture manufacturer IKEA. The complaint was filed in Arbitration Court of Moscow asking for RUB 12.9 billion. The furniture company stopped its businesses in Russia following sanctions and sold its factories but still owns assets in Russia. According to the real estate register the warehouse owned by IKEA outside Moscow was used it as "distribution centre" for retail and online stores. The warehouse is estimated to be worth RUB 34 billion and the company aims to rent it for three years instead of selling as per reports from Kommersant but IKEA has denied such claims.

The West View: Reponses from the US and Europe

On 03 February, Hanno Pevkur, Estonia's Minister of Defence announced on Estonia state decision to send artillery shells to Ukraine contributing to the EU-wide pledge. Previously pledged FGM-148 Javelin missiles were reportedly delivered to Ukraine. The FGM-148 Javelin has been in force for 20 years extensively used against Russia. A fire-and forget weapon allows the use to take cover and a high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) is capable of neutralising tanks.

On 04 February, *ERR News* reported on the joint appeal by Riho Terras, Estonia's MEP presented to the European Council. In the appeal, MEPs from more than 15 countries called on the EU to "not recognise" the legality of Russian presidential elections scheduled for March. In the appeal they called Putin's administration as "...criminal, corrupt, responsible for crimes against its own people, and responsible for countless illegal acts." They called the elections as a "criminal farce" as it is held after the Russian forces have annexed the occupied territories.

In such scenario, elections held is seemed illegitimate.

On 04 February, Chuck Schumer, leader of the Democratic party in the upper chamber of congress revealed a “compromise bill” including an aid to Israel, Gaza and to address the immigration problem with Mexico apart from Ukraine aid. The step is viewed to resolve both domestic and foreign policy but to be passed requires support from 60 senators out of 100 which needs Republicans support.

On 05 February, *Financial Times* reported on the persisting problem over granting military aid to Ukraine. On 01 February, the EU leader won the Hungarian block over funding to Ukraine and now stuck with Germany's opposition. The European Peace Facility of EUR 12 billion fund was set outside the EU budget which to be support by the EU member states depending on their economy size. This fund has reduced after giving of EUR 5.6 billion to the EU member states following their shipment of arms to Ukraine. Now, this facility which requires additional funding to reimburse the member states is paused due to debate within to reform the fund to benefit both Ukraine and Europe's arms industry.

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War in Ukraine: Day 708

War on the Ground:

On 01 February, Ukraine's interior ministry reported on missile attack near Kupiansk, one of the frontline areas under Russia's control. Four people were injured and a medical facility was damaged according to the report. On the same Russia's defence ministry claimed on shooting down 11 drones of Ukraine in Belgorod and Kursk areas near the border.

On 01 February, Kyrylo Budanov, Chief of Ukraine's GUR military intelligence unit highlighted Ukrainian forces plan to increase attacks on Russia's infrastructure sites. In a statement he said: “Hypothetically, there is a plan according to which all this is happening. I think that this plan may include all major critical and military infrastructure in Russia.” Apart from this he also called on the US to send A-10 fighter jets to improve Ukraine's offensive capabilities.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 01 February, Russia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement on Russia and China government holding a joint meeting in Beijing to asses the biological security concerns. This was aimed to address the threats from bioweapons, especially those developed by the US military. According to the statement, under the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention (BTWC) treaty format the coordination and interaction was held to take check on biological activities of the US.

On 01 February, *RT* reported on Russia's Investigative Committee statement on identification of all the passengers from the Il-76 aircraft. According to the Committee, more than 670 “body fragments” were recovered from the crash site and the genetic material were collected to identify the victims. Following this, it confirmed that it belonged to the 65 prisoners of war including Russian crew members. It also released a video covering the crash site and gathering of evidences.

The West View:

Reponses from the US and Europe

On 01 February, in its intelligence report, the

UK Ministry of Defence highlighted Russia's move in combining former Wagner troops into its national guard. After the fall of the Wagner group leader, Rosgvardia has become the latest private army of Vladimir Putin, Russia's President and has been reportedly recruiting volunteers on contractual basis to serve in Ukraine (six-month) and Africa (nine-month). This was viewed as Russia's ability to impose control and command on the Wagner group.

On 01 February, *ERR News* reported on increase in the medicine trade between Russia and Estonia by 600 times, especially in exporting of blood transfusion equipment. According to the report, the medical equipment was the most exported goods with a value of EUR 57.5 million in 2023 between the two countries. This was due to the demand from Russia's hospitals, laboratories, blood banks related to Russia's Ministry of Health to help injured Russian soldiers. The same was confirmed by Estonian Tax and Customs Board on exports

crossing 5.6 metric tonnes in 2021, whereas this increased to 3,400 metric tonnes in 2023.

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EM Short Notes*

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



Source: Jordan Pettitt/PA, Hungary Today, The Portugal News, Hungary Today, Peter Morrison/AP Photo/picture alliance, SAMEER AL-DOUMY/AFP

CZECH REPUBLIC

Government to abstain from the voting on the EU migration and asylum pact

On 08 February, as reported by *Radio Prague International*, the Czech Republic is not ready to vote on the EU migration and Asylum pact, scheduled for March. The pact aims to build effective controls regarding migrants and the secure and faster return of failed asylum seekers. It also aims to bring in “compulsory solidarity” where all member states would have to take in a certain quota of migrants or financially aid the overburdened countries. Although earlier Prague supported the draft legislation, however in the recent cabinet session Martin Kupka, Minister of Transport, highlighted reasons to not support the pact in its current form. He stated that after the changes made to the draft post “negotiations with the European Parliament, the possibility of preventing illegal migration at EU’s external borders” was limited. He reiterated that the Czech Republic was not obliged to accept migrants even if the EU immigration and asylum pact

gets approved by the majority. (“Czechia not ready to support new draft of EU migration and asylum pact,” *Radio Prague International*, 08 February 2024)

FRANCE

Birthplace citizenship withdrawn on the French Island of Mayotte

On 15 February, Gérald Darmanin, France’s Interior Minister announced that people on Mayotte, a French Island in the Indian Ocean will no longer enjoy the automatic right to citizenship by birth. The island which has been a county of the French Republic since 1841 has been experiencing mass immigration. Asylum requests in Mayotte reached a record high of 142,500 in 2023. Mayotte’s proximity to the African islands of Comoros has sparked the “small boat” problem, with hundreds of migrants arriving every week to seek asylum in the French Island nation. However, there have been criticisms from the political left as they believe it breaches the “Republican principle of universality,” and consider *droit du sol*- (right of the soil) birthplace

* 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.

citizenship as an essential French value. People of Mayotte have opposed the influx of migrants by setting up roadblocks by "citizens' committees." They called for measures to stop this immigration. Estelle Youssouffa, a Mayotte Member of the Parliament said: "If not, we will be perpetually the prisoners of our geography." Darmanin believes that abolishing birthplace citizenship would reduce the lure of migrants. (Hugh Schofield, "[French citizenship row engulfs Indian Ocean island of Mayotte](#)," *BBC*, 15 February 2024)

Sociologist and political-scientist Alfred Grosser dies at 99

On 08 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the death of Alfred Grosser, a Jewish-origin intellectual and German-French writer in Paris. Grosser's contribution towards Franco-German relations is significant in restoring bilateral ties between the two nations post-Second World War.

Completing his studies at Sciences Po College in Paris, he has authored more than 30 books and publications explaining the mindset of the French and the Germans, while providing internal and external perspectives. He was also a recipient of awards from both countries for his work, and had even received the highest honour of France- Grand Cross of France's Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor (Légion d'Honneur). His unconventional opinions on Israel provoking a war with Iran in 2007 had garnered him criticism as an antisemite, however, he highlighted that people should be able to criticise Israel without being tagged as an antisemite. (Sarah Judith Hofmann, "[German-French sociologist Alfred Grosser dies at 99](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 08 February 2024)

Farmers' protest and EU response, a recede for green goals

On 07 February, *Politico* reported French farmers' protest against EU environmental standards and import of grains from Ukraine, comprising only 1.5 per cent of the population had forced Emmanuel Macron, French President Emmanuel Macron and Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President to reverse the green

farming rules. It also restricted the massive food imports from Ukraine and scraped the plans to eliminate pesticide use. The upcoming European elections have forced Paris and Brussels to double back on environmental commitments, garnering the strongest political consequences from France, even as the rest of Europe faces farmer's protests such as in Germany, Poland, Italy and Belgium. Macron's disapproval of the EU's Free Trade Agreement with the Latin American Mercosur bloc has sparked criticism from other EU nations. Jordi Cañas, European Parliament's delegation for Mercosur views this move as an attempt to "divert the attention of farmers." Whereas Macron believes that if Brussels does not take actions to simply rule in support of the farmers, it would lead to a win for the far-right in European elections. (Giorgio Leali and Victor Goury-Laffont, "[The French farmer on a tractor is back — running the EU](#)," *Politico*, 07 February 2024)

Macron addresses a ceremony for French victims of October attacks

On 07 February, the *BBC* reported on the ceremony held in remembrance of the French victims of Hamas attacks in Israel. Emmanuel Macron, France's President paid tribute to 42 French who were killed, six injured and three were believed to be taken hostage by Hamas. Macron called the 07 October attacks as "the largest antisemitic attack of our century," and drew parallels between the 2015-2018 jihadist attacks in Paris, Nice and Strasbourg and the former. The presence of deputies of the far-left France Unbowed (LFI) at the ceremony drew criticism from the victims as the former has not labelled Hamas as a "terrorist" group and instead refers to it as "an armed offensive of Palestinian forces." France has the largest Jewish community in Europe with almost 500,000 people. (Laura Gozzi, "[Macron leads ceremony for French victims of Hamas attacks](#)," *BBC*, 07 February 2024)

Attal survives his first no-confidence motion, calls to "break partisan lines"

On 05 February, *Euractiv* reported on Gabriel Attal, France's Prime Minister

surviving his first no-confidence motion filed by all left-wing parties, Greens, the Communists, the far-left La France Insoumise (LFI) and the Socialists (PS). The motion only received 124 votes out of the required 289, as the far-right and conservatives did not support the motion. The conservative party, Les Républicains (LR) abstained from voting as it found itself divided between both sides. Manuel Bompard, an LFI lawmaker accused Attal of supporting unfair competition among farmers and food imports affecting domestic food sovereignty. Attal accused the left of “blocking” legislative work and expressed his commitment to “break partisan lines” work with all. (Théo Bourgerie-Gonse, [“French PM Attal survives first vote of no confidence,” Euractiv](#), 05 February 2024)

Farmers unions to suspend the roadblocks

On 01 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Arnuaud Gaillit of Young Farmers (JA) one of the biggest farmers unions called an end to the roadblocks as the government announced financial assistance and measures to address their problems. Additionally, he also asked the farmers to “move to a new form of mobilisation.” Gabriel Attal, French Prime minister promised cash payments, ease of rules and protections against cheaper foreign goods leading to a diffusing of tensions after two weeks of protests. However, protests continued at Brussels, as grievances at the EU level, such as rules that force farmers to leave part of their land as fallow and its increased import of Ukrainian agricultural products since its invasion in 2022. ([“France: Farmers unions call for end to roadblock,” Deutsche Welle](#), 01 February 2024)

Nestlé under investigation over water treatment practises

On 31 January, French authorities reported on opening an investigation against the Swiss food company Nestlé under suspicion of fraudulent practises of treating water. According to the report, the investigation comes after a government probe reported in *Le Monde* said: “...one in three mineral

water brands in France undergoes purification treatment supposed to be used only on tap water.” Following a complaint from France's ARS health regulator, the investigation was launched to find out if the natural mineral water label was misleading or not. According to Nestlé Waters, it had passed some waters such as Perrier and Vittel for food safety purpose but had “lost track” on complying with the regulations. As per the French law under the EU directive, it bans “disinfection of water” for which has to be naturally high quality. ([“French prosecutors to investigate Nestlé over mineral water treatments,” Le Monde](#), 31 January 2024)

Farmer protests expand to Rungis market resulting in arrest

On 31 January, following Gabriel Attal, France's Prime Minister repeated assurance to grant subsidy and tax cuts the farmer protests continued in Paris. Despite government warning to the protestors to not block major sites such as Rungis supermarket, farmers gathered outside resulting arrest of 91. The aim of the farmers was to stop the food deliveries to the supermarket against demand for better pay and lesser environmental regulation. According to one of the police chiefs, Laurent Nunez: “Cannot tolerate disturbances to public order.” (“French farmer protests: Dozens arrested at Rungis food market in Paris,” *BBC*, 31 January 2024)

GERMANY

Foreign Minister Baerbock visits Israel to push for a ceasefire

On 14 February, *The Times of Israel* reported the arrival of Annalena Baerbock, German Foreign Minister in Israel, for her meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister, Isaac Herzog Israeli President and Foreign Minister Israel Katz. Her fifth visit to Israel since 07 October comes with the agenda to push for a ceasefire, as Israel plans to continue with its operations in Rafah. Earlier on X, Baerbock wrote about the 1.3 million people in Rafah seeking protection and stated that an Israeli offensive “on

Rafah would be a humanitarian catastrophe.” She indicated the need for a pause in fighting and would talk about the hostage release and humanitarian situation in Gaza with the Israeli counterparts. (Lazer Berman, [“German FM arrives in Israel, expected to push Israeli officials for a ceasefire,”](#) *The Times of Israel*, 14 February 2024)

Microsoft: EUR 3.3 billion investment in AI and data centre infrastructure

On 16 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the largest EUR 3.3 billion investment by tech giant Microsoft in Germany highlighting the latter’s commitments to an open economy. The investment would double the existing capacity of Microsoft’s “AI and data centre infrastructure” in Germany and boost its cloud computing applications. Brad Smith, Microsoft Vice Chair mentioned the lack of AI skills in Germany, and that the investment would allow for training of 1.2 million people with new AI capabilities. Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor dubbed this investment as a “commitment to progress, to growth, to modernity,” and hoped it would revive the German economy. ([“Germany: Microsoft to invest €3.3 billion in AI capacities,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 15 February 2024)

German Chancellor and Poland Prime Minister aim for joint defence support to boost Europe’s security

On 12 February, Olaf Scholz German Chancellor criticised Donald Trump former US President for his claim on “withholding security” from NATO alliance for not spending sufficient budget on defence. Scholz said: “Let me clearly say due to recent developments that any relativizing of NATO’s collective defense guarantee is irresponsible and dangerous and is only in Russia’s interests.” Trump’s statement also triggered shock for Poland, prompting Donald Tusk, Poland’s Prime Minister to call for joint defence support with Germany to boost Europe’s security. Tusk said: “There is no reason for the EU to be weaker than Russia.” As per NATO’s spending guideline of meeting two per cent of GDP, many NATO members have not met, whereas Germany

is expected to meet the limit by 2024 by spending out of the main budget. ([“Scholz says Trump NATO remarks 'irresponsible and dangerous',”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 12 February 2024)

Over 150,000 people protest against AfD’s plans for “remigration”

On 03 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, around 150,000 people attended a demonstration against the far-right ideologies marking their dissent against the plans for the “remigration” of immigrants, referring to their mass deportations. The protests emerged after the report by Corrective, an investigative network on the far-right meetings attended by political parties Alternative for Democracy (AfD) and Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and neo-Nazis aiming at “remigration.” The protestors and 1300 associations gathered in front of the German Parliament, the Reichstag building. Politicians from the Social Democrats Party extended support to the protests, where Olaf Scholz, German Chancellor stated on X that these protests are a “strong signal for democracy and our constitution.” ([“Germany: Tens of thousands in Berlin protest far right,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 03 February 2024)

Strike across 11 major airports demanding increase in hourly wages

On 01 February, Germany’s airport association ADV reported on cancellation and delay of 1000 flights affecting more than 200,000 passengers due to one-day strike across 11 airports. The strike began on 31 January at the Bonn airport with a passenger control staff not reporting for the night shift. Following this security staff stopped working at the Frankfurt, Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Leipzig, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Hanover, Stuttgart, Erfurt and Dresden airports after the trade union called “industrial action.” According to the report, the strike is expected cause major disruptions and flight cancellation with the main security checkpoints to remain closed. The trade union Verdi called for strike over failed negotiations with the Association of Aviation Security Companies (BDLS). They have demanded for increase in hourly

wages of EUR 2.80, whereas the BDLS proposed for a four per cent rise which was not close to the demanded rate. ([“Germany: Local public transit workers to strike on Friday,” Deutsche Welle, 29 January 2024](#))

Olaf urges for joint opposition against AfD

On 31 January, Deutsche Welle reported on Olaf Scholz German Chancellor’s statements in Bundestag general debate, where he urged for a joint opposition against the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. Scholz addressed the Friedrich Merz, leader of the opposition and stated that “we should stand together as democrats,” while also voicing his support of the protests against AfD’s discussions on “remigration.” Merz joined in denouncing AfD where he stated that AfD would cause the final downfall for Germany. Rise of support for the far-right parties become evident as latest polls indicated them as second in position at 23 per cent. ([“Germany: Scholz calls for joint opposition against far-right,” Deutsche Welle, 31 January 2024](#))

Destatis reports on increase in consumer prices

On 31 January, Germany’s federal statistics agency Destatis released a report on the state of inflation in Germany for January 2024. According to the report, the consumer prices had increased by 2.9 per cent which was lesser from 3.7 per cent in December. It is considered the lowest since June 2021, whereas the energy cost was 2.8 per cent less in January compared to 2023. Overall, the inflation across Europe has restarted towards a downward trend which might not be sufficient for the European Central Bank (ECB) to lower borrowing cost in short period. Timo Wollmershäuser, ifo economic research director said: “Inflation is therefore likely to fall only slowly in the coming months.” ([“German inflation drops to slowest pace since mid-2021,” Deutsche Welle, 31 January 2024](#))

GREECE

Bill on same-sex marriage and adoption of children gets Parliament approval

On 16 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the Greece parliament voted in favour of the bill on same-sex marriage becoming the first orthodox Christian country to legalise the civil marriage of same-sex couples. The bill was approved with a cross-party majority vote of 176-124. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister remarked on the bill’s approval as “a milestone for human rights.” The bill also guaranteed the adoption rights for same-sex couples. However, the law does not allow for surrogacy parenthood for male couples, for allows it for women who cannot have children due to health issues. The bill received cross-party support from the centre-right New Democracy party, four left-wing parties, including the opposition party Syriza. However, Archbishop Ieronymos, head of the Orthodox Church of Greece, condemned the law as a “new reality that seeks only to corrupt the homeland’s social cohesion.” ([“Greece legalizes same-sex marriage,” Deutsche Welle, 16 February 2024](#))

Divide among the political parties over same-sex marriage and adoption

On 07 February, *Politico* reported on Kyriakos Mitsotakis Greece Prime Minister’s attempt in the parliament to pass a bill legalising same sex marriage. The vote being scheduled for 15 February, has not gained much support among his party members, making Mitsotakis rely on leftist opposition group to pass the bill. This has led to the metropolitan bishops to organise protests and warned: “..those who vote for it cannot remain members of the church.” The bill recognises the “right of same-sex couples to adopt,” According to the report, his push behind the bill is viewed to attract the international to repair the earlier reputation damages. In terms of support, both the right and left-wing Syriza party is observed to be divided over gay marriage and adoptions, whereas the stance of centre-left remains unclear. As per the survey by Pew Research Center, many in Greece along with Poland, and Hungary remains to be against same-sex marriage. (Nektaria Stamouli, [“Greece’s Mitsotakis makes progressive pivot with same-sex marriage bill,” Politico, 07 February 2024](#))

HUNGARY

Farmers association organise protest against EU rules

On 12 February, *Hungary Today* reported on the protests held by Hungarian farmers' association MAGOSZ and the Hungarian Chamber of Agriculture (NAK) combined with farmer with tractors, harvesters and trucks. This resulted in blocking of passenger and freight traffic. The protestors carried banner and Hungarian flags for five kilometres blaming the European Commission and in support of Hungarian agriculture. István Jakab, president of MAGOSZ on behalf of the farmers called for the application of the EU rules to other European countries that are applied to Hungary especially denoting to Ukraine. ("Hungarian Farmers Protest against the Extension of Unlimited Ukrainian Imports," *Hungary Today*, 12 February 2024)

ITALY

Danilo Calvani becomes the face of radical farmers' movement

On 14 February, *Politico* reported on Danilo Calvani, a 61-year-old farmer who has camped outside the capital along with his union, Betrayed Farmers C.R.A plan to hold protest against the government by occupying Circus Maximus. There has been a shift among the farmers' unions in the current movements. large farmers' unions have been sidelined by the smaller ones that use radical methods and messaging and are currently representing the protesting farmers in Italy. Calvani accused Coldiretti of being the "most corrupt agricultural union, that serves only their interests and aligns with multinationals." Whereas members of Betrayed Farmers C.R.A. have resorted to Coldiretti flags. Calvani also expressed his disapproval of the government conducting dialogue with unions like Coldiretti instead of talking to the farmers. Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing Lega (League) party visited the farmers and reiterated League's commitment to Italian farmers against the politicians of Brussels. (Alessandro Ford, "The furious farmer taking on Italy's agri

giants," *Politico*, 14 February 2024)

NORWAY

Authorities give warnings over powerful storms since 1992

On 31 January, *ABC News* reported on Norwegian meteorologists warning over the storm "Ingunn" which is expected to hit Central Norway. As per the authorities this storm might be the most powerful one since 1992, with gusts that could go up to 126 to 180 kilometres per hour. There have been reports of precautionary measures taken as ferry lines connecting Norwegian Islands temporarily stop their services. Closing of schools, tunnels and bridges indicate the seriousness of red hazard warnings. As of 31 January morning, no flights were cancelled. ("Norway prepares for biggest storm in 30 years," *ABC News*, 31 January 2024)

POLAND

Catholic church opposes government plans to reduce religious classes

On 14 February, *Notes from Poland* reported the opposition of Poland's Catholic church against the government's plans to reduce the number of hours of religious classes, and called it an "infringement of human rights." The government plans were to not include the grade from religion in school certificate and the grade average. Barbara Nowacka, Poland's education minister argued that two hours of religious classes a very "is excessive" and introduced government plans to reduce it to one hour per week as students also have other subjects. The Committee for Catholic Education of the Polish Bishops' Conference (KEP) opposed this decision and argued that religious classes are part of pupil's right to religious freedom and right to education and also included "parents' rights to teach and raise their children according to their religious convictions." KEP also expressed the impact of this decision on the loss of livelihood for "thousands of religious teachers." Religious classes in Poland are optional for pupils, and recently a decline in attendance has been witnessed. In Warsaw, only 29 per cent of high school students opted for these classes in 2022, whereas

two cities Wrocław and Częstochowa have expressed to stop funding the subject. ("Catholic church in Poland opposes reducing number of religion classes in schools," *Notes from Poland*, 14 February 2024)

Citing insufficient solutions Poland opposes the EU migration pact

On 09 February, according to *Notes from Poland*, Poland expressed opposition to the EU's migration pact, although it received support from the majority of EU members. The government of Poland cited that solutions provided in the migration and asylum pact were insufficient as it did not adequately address the "situation of countries bordering Belarus and Russia" as they face "strong pressure within artificially generated migration routes." The government also raised concerns about the prospect of future disputes within EU institutions as the "pact does not strike an appropriate balance between responsibility and solidarity." Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister has opposed receiving any relocated asylum seekers under the pact. ("Poland opposes EU migration pact but majority of member states approve measures," *Notes from Poland*, 09 February 2024)

PORTUGAL

Council of Ministers approve 26.65 million euros for recovery as Algarve drought eases

On 14 February, according to *The Portugal News*, based on data from the Portuguese Institute of the Sea and Atmosphere (IPMA), the districts of Beja and Faro and southern parts of the district of Setúbal remained in the moderate drought class, however, the intensity had come down from 38 per cent to 20 per cent between December and 31 January. Data from IPMA also highlighted that January was the hottest month in the last 58 years, in air temperature and rainfall. The Council of Ministers approved a budget of EUR 26.65 million to respond to the drought situation and adopt measures for increasing water availability and supply. Out of the allotted amount, money would also be aimed at other methods to increase efficiency such as EUR 10 million to

increase tourism, EUR 2.9 million for management, and 350 thousand euros for agriculture. ("Algarve drought eases," *The Portugal News*, 14 February 2024; "€26.6 million to help ease Algarve drought," *The Portugal News*, 09 February 2024)

Agriculture Ministry guarantees additional payment for farmers

On 13 February, according to *The Portugal News*, Maria do Céu Antunes, Minister of Agriculture guaranteed that farmers would receive 90 per cent support for organic farming and integrated production whereas the remaining 10 per cent would be paid in June. Without approval from the European Union, the Portugal government currently only has the financial availability to make a payment of 25 per cent. Armando Lopes, one of the farmers' representatives, remarked that some of their demands were met. Farmers had also raised demands for the inclusion of agricultural diesel as a production factor and for VAT exemption, however, the government responded that this fell outside its purview of review. The demonstrations for reinforcement of irrigation and water efficiency plan were currently being stopped but would resume if "the promises are not met." ("Payments for farmers guaranteed," *The Portugal News*, 13 February 2024)

ROMANIA

Ruling parties disagree over the electoral calendar

On 14 February, *Romania-Insider* reported the disagreement between the ruling parties Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Liberal Party (PNL) as they failed to finalise the electoral calendar. Liberals wish to hold local elections during the same time as European elections on 09 June, as an effort to maintain the party's relevance in the European Parliament whereas Social Democrats want the general elections coinciding with the first round of presidential elections and voice demands for a joint Social Democrat presidential candidate. This friction between the ruling coalition has resulted in pursuing of different election strategies, where the best step for Liberals could be to sacrifice the European Elections and run its candidate for the

Presidential elections. The decision-making for the electoral calendar has been pushed for three days. ("Political deadlock over electoral calendar in Romania," *Romania-Insider*, 14 February 2024)

RUSSIA

Boris Nadezhdin, a pro-peace candidate against Putin banned from election

On 08 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported the ban on anti-war candidate Boris Nadezhdin by Russia's Central Election Commission from standing in the upcoming presidential elections. Nadezhdin was the opposition's best hope against Vladimir Putin, the current Russian President who would now run against three namesake opposition candidates, backed by the Kremlin. The ban on Nadezhdin was justified by citing the incorrect signatures obtained from the supporters, where out of a random sample of 60,000 signatures, 9,147 signatures were declared invalid. However, Nadezhdin plans to challenge this decision in the Supreme Court, believing "sooner or later, I will be the President of the Russian Federation." Nadezhdin during his election rally had campaigned against Russia's war in Ukraine. ("Boris Nadezhdin: Russia bans antiwar candidate from election," *Deutsche Welle*, 08 February 2024)

Yandex, 'Russia's Google' pulls out of the country at a loss

On 06 February, the *BBC* reported Yandex, selling its operations in Russia for RUB 475 billion, to Russia. The handover of the Dutch-based parent company took place in a USD 5.2 billion deal, which was far less than its estimated value of USD 30 billion in 2021. Yandex, often known as 'Russia's Google' is now a fully owned Russian entity, and was termed as "an asset to the entire Russian society," by Anton Gorelkin, deputy head of the Russian parliament's committee on information policy. Arkady Volozh, co-founder of Yandex had Publicly spoken out against Russia's Ukraine invasion, however had to face sanctions from the EU as Yandex faced allegations of "promoting state media and narratives, and removing of critical content against Kremlin." Earlier in 2022, Yandex had sold some of its online

resources to state-controlled media VK, to comply with government demands. (Mariko Oi, "Yandex: Owner of 'Russia's Google' pulls out of home country," *BBC*, 06 February 2024)

Nikolay says no withdrawal from the Arctic Council despite low activity

On 06 February, Nikolay Korchunov, Russia's Foreign Ministry Ambassador issued statement on the Russia's decision to not withdraw from the Arctic Council. He highlighted on Russia keeping its "options for foreign policy" open even in case of the council activities not meeting its interest. He said that the council was operation at "its lowest capacity," and Norway's failure to restart since it lacks support from other members. The Arctic Council established in 1996 is a high-level intergovernmental forum to promote cooperation and protection. Western countries have suspended their activities since Russia's invasion into Ukraine. ("Russia Not Ruling Out Withdrawal From Arctic Council if Necessary," *Sputnik*, 06 January 2024)

Russian cosmonaut sets world record for space deployment

On 04 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Oleg Kononenko, a Russian Cosmonaut breaking the world record for space deployment as he completed 878 days in the International Space Station, as announced by Roskosmos, Russia's space agency. Kononenko expressed his pride in Russia holding the record for "total duration of human stay in space." Russia and the US cooperate with each other on ISS international projects, despite the continuing Russia-Ukraine war. Kononenko is expected to complete 1000 days in space on 05 June. ("Russian cosmonaut breaks record on space deployment," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 January 2024)

SPAIN

Eight arrested after killing of two police officers in Barbate

On 12 February, the *BBC* reported on the arrest of eight including drug dealers and money launderers following the killing of two officers Miguel Angel Gomez Gonzalez and David Perez Carracedo. This comes

after the officers were injured in a boat chase in southern port of Barbate under suspicion of drug trafficking. According to the report in *El Pais*, Miguel Moline, Barbate's Mayor had earlier requested for assistance after "narco-boats" were spotted. The incident sparked shock across the local community insisting on giving more powers to police and in a statement, the Spanish Guardia Civil officers' association (AUGC) said: "Long demanded a "real plan" to provide officers with better means and resources to fight drug traffickers." They also called for resignation of Spain's Interior Minister. (Laura Gozzi, "[Spain: Eight arrests after two officers die in 'narco-boat' chase](#)," *BBC*, 12 February 2024)

Unemployment increases by 2.2 per cent, indicates low productivity

On 02 February, *Euronews* reported on Spain's struggle with employment as it increased by 2.2 per cent in January, raising the number of unemployed people to 2.77 million. The recent rise in unemployment was attributed to majorly service sector and agriculture sector. Spain's struggle with unemployment is due to its tight labour market regulations evident in the housing and healthcare sectors, creating a dual labour market system. In Spain, semi-skilled and unskilled people, and immigrants are mostly employed temporarily in seasonal sectors, thus leading to seasonal unemployment during the off-peak times. Spain's economy is also witnessing low productivity as it grapples with talent and capital issues. However, Spain's government has assured that it will continue with its cost-of-living measures as Spain's headline inflation rose to 3.4 per cent in January. (Indrabati Lahiri, "[Why is Spain struggling with increasing unemployment?](#)," *Euronews*, 02 February 2024)

Catalonia to face water restrictions due to drought emergency

On 01 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the announcement of a drought emergency in Catalonia as reservoirs in Mediterranean region reported a drop in reserves, 16 per cent below of capacity. Pere Aragones, head of the regional government termed this as "worst drought in the last century." Owing

to the emergency rules, residents will reduce five per cent of their domestic water consumption from 210 litres to 200 litres per day, whereas for farmers the rules require to reduce 80 per cent of their water usage. Officials are considering the option of bringing water to Catalonia by ships. ("[Spain: Catalonia declares drought emergency for Barcelona](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 01 February 2024)

SWEDEN

Government drops probe over Nord Stream explosions, cites lack of jurisdiction

On 07 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Sweden dropped its investigation against the explosions on Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines. The unexplained explosions took place in the Baltic Sea in 2022 on the gas pipelines that transport natural gas from Russia to Germany. Mats Ljungqvist, Sweden's Public Prosecutor's investigation reported that since Swedish interests and its citizens were not targeted hence Sweden lacks the jurisdiction to undertake the investigation. Sweden would be handing over its evidence to Denmark and Germany as they are still examining the blasts. Dmitry Peskov, Press Secretary for Russia President Vladimir Putin remarked on the dropping of the investigation as a "remarkable decision." ("[Sweden drops Nord Stream explosions investigation](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 February 2024)

SWITZERLAND

Swiss soldiers to train in Austria in 2025

On 03 February, Thomas Süssli, Swiss Army Chief announced the upcoming schedule of Swiss soldiers to receive training on urban warfare in Austria by 2025. Swiss army would be training on foreign soil after two decades, previously it had trained in Lower Austria in the mid-1990s. The military training would involve a battalion size of 1000 soldiers, and Süssli highlighted a corresponding call to troops. Süssli also stated on army's investment of CHF13 billion in the reconstruction of Swiss defence abilities and underscored the possible construction of a training facility in

a mountain valley. ("[Swiss soldiers to train on foreign soil for first time in 20 years](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, 03 February 2024)

Wave of farmers' protests reaches Switzerland

On 03 February, *Swissinfo.ch* reported protests by around 30 Swiss farmers who drove into Geneva with their tractors, demanding remuneration for their work, whereas 30 to 40 farmers protested in the Basel regions. Led by Uniterre in Geneva, a French-speaking Swiss farmers' union raised demands for transparency regarding profits. Farmers' criticised the supermarkets for the low prices that they paid them. The protests grouped by more than 200 people, raised their call for protest via Instagram. ("[Swiss farmers protest supermarket 'rip-off'](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, 03 February 2024)

Switzerland to achieve "closer institutionalised cooperation" with NATO

On 02 February, *Swissinfo.ch* reported in an opinion, on the Swiss announcement of working closely with NATO given the "deterioration in the security situation." The government statement highlighted greater defence and security cooperation with NATO and the EU to strengthen the Swiss capabilities. Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlighted that the Swiss neutrality policy needs restructuring. Although Swiss wants closer ties with NATO, it draws the line at membership, as joining NATO officially would cost the country its neutrality. Considering membership as a disadvantage in this regard, Lea Schaad, a researcher at ETH Zurich underscored the importance of having a neutral state said: "where meetings can be held. Geneva wouldn't be Geneva were Switzerland in NATO." (Thomas Stephens, "[Switzerland and NATO: just flirting or the start of a wild marriage?](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, 02 February 2024)

THE NETHERLANDS

Appeals Court halts export of F-35 fighter jets to Israel

On 12 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the Appeals Court in The Hague called for a halt in the export of parts of F-

35 fighter jets to Israel. Israel is using them in "serious violations of international humanitarian law," the ruling by Judge Bas Boele stated. According to the ruling, the government has to comply with it within seven days after judgement. The case was petitioned by three human rights organisations, Oxfam's Dutch affiliate, PAX and The Rights Forum, and argued that delivery of these weapon parts would make Netherlands complicit in the war crimes committed by Israel. The lawyers of the Dutch government raised the argument that the weapons in Dutch warehouses are US-owned and made, and questioned the jurisdiction of authorities to intervene as it is a US-run operation. ("[Dutch court bans export of F-35 fighter jet parts to Israel](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 February 2024)

THE UK

Economy in recession, data shows slowdown in all major sectors

On 15 February, the *BBC* reported the UK economy falling into recession as data from 2023, indicated an economic slump over the last two quarters with a decline of 0.3 per cent between October and December. In the previous quarter between July to September, the economy shrank by 0.1 per cent. Overall growth for the UK economy in 2023 was only 0.1 per cent. According to the Office for National Statistics, major sectors were affected, such as retail, healthcare, education, manufacturing and construction. Jeremy Hunt, Chancellor of the Exchequer is exploring means to reduce public spending to allow for tax cuts in the Budget for 06 March. However, Ruth Gregory, Deputy chief economist at Capital Economics remarked that "this recession is as mild as they come." This sets as a drawback to the pledges made by Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister who assured for growth, cutting down small boats and NHS waiting list. (Dearbail Jordan & Faisal Islam, "[UK economy fell into recession after people cut spending](#)," *BBC*, 15 February 2024, James Fitzgerald, "[Rishi Sunak's five pledges in tatters as UK slides into recession](#)," *Politico*, 15 February 2024)

Use of facial recognition technology debate continues due to warning over social harm

On 13 February, *The Irish Times* reported concerns about the use of facial recognition technology (FTR) by An Garda Síochána, Ireland's National Police and Security Service. An Garda Síochána aims to use FTR to improve investigative procedures in crimes such as murder, child sexual abuse and abductions. It believes that facial recognition technology would help in analysing hours of footage at a faster pace than humans. However, academicians raise the "chilling effects" as they believe the use of this technology would have private life implications and social harm. Senator Robbie Gallagher of Fianna Fáil is concerned that the draft Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill is going forward despite the concerns raised by bodies such as the Data Protection Commission, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), and Digital Rights Ireland (DRI). The need for making this legislation airtight was highlighted. Currently, an Oireachtas committee hearing is occurring where experts are providing insights on the use of technology and legal challenges regarding the current draft legislation. (Mark Hilliard, "Academics warn of facial recognition technology's 'chilling effects' and potential social harm," *The Irish Times*, 13 February 2024)

Inflation rate maintains at four per cent

On 14 February, *Euronews* reported on continuing stable rate of UK's inflation till January. According to the report, UK's inflation rate stayed to four per cent following reduction in prices of furniture, household goods, food and non-alcoholic beverages. Earlier, experts had predicted a slight increase of 0.2 per cent but the inflation maintained due to reduction of prices of certain goods. Danni Hewson, head of financial analysis at AJ Bell said: "But the best news for all households came from falling food inflation, with prices actually coming down on a month-by-month basis for the first time in more than two years, a factor which helped offset other cost pressures." (James Thomas, "UK inflation remains steady at 4% as food prices fall,

beating expectations," *Euronews*, 14 February 2024)

Sinn Fein First Minister considered a historic point for the Northern Ireland

On 06 February, in an editorial, *Le Monde* reported on the latest history point in the Northern Ireland following the formation of new government with Michelle O'Neill as First Minister. It is historic since the Sinn Fein party, a political section of the Irish Republican Army in the civil war between 1968-1998 and took the wheels since 1921 creation post partition of Ireland. It is known for its support for a united Ireland, with O'Neill leading the government alongside Emma Little-Pengelly from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) sets a new stage to implement the Good Friday Peace Agreement (1998). This deal ended the three decades of fighting between the Catholic republicans and protestant unionists. The agreement instructs for a referendum for reunification, a shift is not in the radar. Although the success is perceived as way forward to pushback the moment in the North. ("A historic turning point for Northern Ireland," *Le Monde*, 06 February 2024)

Sunak visits the newly appointed First Minister O'Neill, who calls for increased allocations

On 05 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Rishi Sunak, the UK Prime Minister visited the newly appointed administration of Northern Ireland in Belfast. In the meeting, First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly pressed on demands for British to boost its budget offered for the region. Sunak remarked the meeting with the executives was "very constructive" and that the GBP 3.3 billion offered as an incentive was "significant and generous." ("Northern Ireland presses visiting Sunak on budget," *Deutsche Welle*, 05 February 2024)

Nationalist leader Michelle O'Neill appointed as the First Minister

On 03 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the appointment of Michelle O'Neill as the First Minister becoming the first nationalist leader. She will share power with Emma Little-Pengelly, the deputy First Minister, of

the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Despite O'Neill being the first minister-designate since May 2022, the DUP's boycott of the assembly delayed the appointment and its concerns over the checks and trading rules for Northern Ireland introduced post-Brexit. DUP's deal with the UK government agreed in the previous week on eased customs checks and other legal changes had assured the unionists. ("Northern Ireland elects first-ever nationalist leader," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 February 2024)

Welsh government proposes new law to conserve wildlife

On 31 January, the *BBC* reported on the Welsh government proposal for a new law to control the loss of wildlife and conserve nature. This includes forming of an independent watchdog to monitor organisations and hold them accountable for environmental issues such as sewage spills and air pollution. On enforcement, the public bodies in Wales will be subject to disclose nature recovery action plan. Opposition parties have voiced out stating the plan was long overdue and urged for a "crack on." This comes after recent continued criticism against the Welsh government over the gap in environmental protection post-Brexit. Earlier, people had the option to raise concerns on the government or public bodies if found to not abide the green laws to the European Commission but it has turned around after the UK's exit from the EU. The latest proposal would serve as new environmental principle and is expected to have eight commissioners and 12 additional staff to support the governance body. (Steffan Messenger, "Nature laws to protect wildlife in Wales," *BBC*, 31 January 2024)

TURKEY

Nine trapped underground after landslide in a gold mine

On 13 February, after a landslide nine workers were trapped in a gold mine in eastern Turkey near Erzincan province. According to Ali Yerlikaya, Turkey's Interior Minister there was no further report on the state of the workers but confirmed the ongoing rescue operation. He said: "We

installed our [rescue] vehicles, our generators, and our night lighting equipment." The difficulty in rescue operation arose due to the presence of mass amount of cyanide-laced soil in the mine. On the same the mining company Anagold Mining issued a statement: "...most important priority in this difficult process ... is the health and safety of our employees and contractors." ("Turkey: Several trapped after landslide hits gold mine," *Deutsche Welle*, 13 February 2024)

Security arrests seven people on suspicions of information sharing with Mossad

On 03 February, the *BBC* reported the seven arrests by a joint raid by police and MIT, Turkey's intelligence agency on suspicion of sharing information with Mossad, Israeli intelligence. In January, 34 arrests were made on similar suspicions of "military or political espionage" according to Yilmaz Tunc, Turkey's Justice Minister. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's President has warned of "serious consequences" to Israel over its target of Hamas members on Turkish soil. Turkey is a strong Palestine supporter and has termed Netanyahu's actions undertaken in Gaza as "genocide." (Robert Greenall, "Turkey Israel: 'Seven arrested for passing information to Mossad," *BBC*, 03 February 2024)

REGIONAL

EU shelves water resilience plan against droughts and floods

On 15 February, *Politico* reported on the European Commission plan to present a "climate resistance" proposal on 12 March. This has been delayed as a large part of southern Europe, including Sardinia, Catalonia, and Sicily, is suffering from drought. According to the European Drought Observatory, about 17 per cent of the EU territory has been experiencing drought conditions since late January. On January 24, Virginijus Sinkevičius, the Environment Commissioner, wrote on X, "Gearing up our work for the essential upcoming Water Resilience initiative. It will be of [utmost] importance for the future of Spain as the country is heavily affected by droughts." Clair Baffert, Senior Water Policy

Officer at WWF's European Office expressed her disappointment at the "irresponsible" decision by the Commission as floods and droughts are already affecting parts of Europe, at the "cost to communities, farmers, our food supply and nature." (Leonie Cater and Zia Wiese, "[EU puts water resilience plan on hold as drought grips Spain, Italy](#)," *Politico*, 15 February 2024)

EU member states demand for an extra decade to reach air pollution targets

On 15 February, *Politico* reported on the demand by European Union member states for a delay of ten years in meeting their air pollution targets. European Parliament has been pushing for speeding up of efforts by the nations to reach the 2050 zero pollution target and address the issue of 253,000 premature deaths in 2021 across the bloc. The negotiations on new targets are scheduled to take place on 20 February, and EU countries although agreeing on strict targets also request a 10-year extension to conform with the rules, allowing them for time till 2040, instead of 2030, to implement their strict air quality regulations. Countries believe that the European Parliament's new targets are "not realistic." The reason behind European Commission to push for the air pollution target was due to 59 infringement cases against member states for not reaching their air pollution targets, the top being Poland, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania and Portugal. Parliament intends to finalise the legislation on pollution targets before the elections in June and next set of discussion is scheduled for 20 February. (Louise Guillot, "[EU countries demand 10 extra years to meet air pollution targets](#)," *Politico*, 15 February 2024)

Repatriated Albanians use illegal means to return to Britain

On 14 February, *BalkanInsight* reported the use of illegal means by repatriated Albanians, to materialise their dream of moving to Britain. In 2022, around 12,000 Albanians used small boats to travel across the English Channel and enter Britain, since then the number of illegal migrants has come down. However, the aspirations and efforts of the repatriated Albanians have

been sustained over time. The high cost incurred in these travelling attempts has made these youngsters "the victims of debt bondage," according to Jahir Cahani, a local activist in Northern Albania. Youngsters sell their property and cattle in their hometowns in Albania and take up loans, to make their travel to Britain using relatively less guarded airports such as Vienna, Barcelona and Ireland with the help of smugglers and fake passports. The youngsters who end up reaching Britain join in illegal activities such as labour-intensive cannabis production. The migration has caused around 176 schools in Albania to close and raises dangerous concerns as students leave their studies unfinished to join organised crime networks. (Bashkim Shala, "[Repatriated Albanians Find New Routes Back to Britain](#)," *BalkanInsight*, 14 February 2024)

European Parliament approves uniform payment system across the EU

On 14 February, the European Parliament approved a draft of EU regulations on payment services. This means cheaper transactions with safety and uniform across the EU. The regulation aims to inform user on the cash machine fees and ensure social media companies handle impersonation scams. Marek Belka, a MEP in the European Parliament said that the objective was to make the system more "user friendly." Belka added: "If the Facebooks of the world make money on posting ads ... they should take responsibility if those ad accounts are fraudulent." The plan was approved with 39 votes in favour and one against, it also allows EUR 100 cashback as an offer without registering as payment provider. (Jack Schickler, "[EU Policy. MEPs approve measures to tackle impersonation scams](#)," *Euronews*, 14 February 2024)

Spain and Ireland urge for review of the EU-Israel agreement

On 14 February, Pedro Sánchez, Spain's Prime Minister and Leo Varadkar, Ireland's Prime Minister jointly called the European Commission to review the EU-Israel agreement on emergency basis following the worsening humanitarian crisis. In a joint letter they raised concerns over Israel's

military campaign and violation of human rights and international law. They highlighted their findings on Israel actions to be in violation of the Genocide Convention. In Europe, Spain, Ireland, and Belgium considered the most critical against Israel. In the joint statement they said: "We ask that the Commission undertake an urgent review of whether Israel is complying with its obligations, including under the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which makes respect for human rights and democratic principles an essential element of the relationship." (Jorge Liboreiro, "[Spain and Ireland call for 'urgent review' of EU-Israel agreement over war in Gaza](#)," *Euronews*, 14 February 2024)

EU scraps promoting lab-grown meat from climate proposal

On 09 February, *Politico* reported on the European Commission scrapping its initiative from its climate agenda for promoting "lab-grown and plant-based meats" following the request from Janusz Wojciechowski, Agriculture Commissioner. Earlier, the EU released its climate goal for 2040 on 06 February including the concessions to farming sector. The previous draft included conditions on producing healthier diets through right incentives, but in the final version the "diversified protein intake" was removed. Lab-grown meats, plant-based alternatives and novel protein were considered as key products to reduce environmental impact. Especially Beef is viewed the largest source of greenhouse gases, although full ban on lab-grown produce has not initiated yet, few governments like Italy have proposed laws. ("[EU dumped lab meats from climate plans on farm chief's demand](#)," *Politico*, 09 February)

Work piles on European Commission as it investigates 50 deals

On 07 February, *Politico* reported on the increase in work by European Union regulators as they investigate deals based on the new rules aimed at non-EU companies that are supplied with State support, especially from China. The rules entered into force in October and require

EU officials to investigate whether the state-funded businesses increase unfair competition for European companies. Currently, the European Commission has 50 deals under review for unfair advantages for foreign subsidies. The Commission had only expected to review 30 in a year; however, it has cleared 12 in four months. Lawyers also raised concerns about the Commission not being adequately equipped to handle the increased number of filings. (Varg Folkman, "EU team combating Chinese subsidies struggles with a flood of deals," *Politico*, 11 February 2024)

EU unable to agree on a consent-based definition of rape

On 07 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the inability of the European Union to agree to a standard consent-based legal definition for rape. Frances Fitzgerald an Irish Member of the European Parliament who was in charge of formulating common guidelines for violence against women in the EU, remarked her displeasure on "disturbing insights into the attitudes to rape" by certain member states and over the inability to get the definition into the directive. Different EU member states have different regulations on rape and its definition; 14 member states follow an "only yes means yes" approach, which specifies clear consent for sexual activity. Whereas Germany and Austria follow the "no means no" principle which means the victims would have to prove their verbal refusal, while the other 11 member nations, including France and East Europe countries, consider resistance to violence or threatening situations as elements of rape. However, the EU's proposal for a uniform law on rape and violence has been met with opposition from Germany, France and Hungary as they believe the "only yes means yes" principle lacks a "legal basis for provision in European primary law." (Lucia Schulten, "[EU fails to agree on legal definition of rape](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 07 February 2024)

Commission launches infringement procedure on Hungary

On 08 February, *About Hungary* reported on

the European Commission's formal letter to Hungary indicating the launch of an infringement procedure over Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Act. The Act, which has been in force since December 2023, has powers to investigate activities carried out by foreign bodies, states or individuals that might violate Hungary's sovereignty or influence the outcome of elections and voter's will. The law restricts candidates and parties from using foreign funds and allows for punishment under criminal law for doing so. EC found the law as volatile of the "democratic values of the Union; the principle of democracy and the electoral rights of EU citizens" and other rights regarding privacy and protection of personal data and freedom of expression and association. Hungary can take two months to reply to the formal letter. Zoltán Kovács, Hungary's State Secretary for International Communications and Relations remarked that Brussels and the "dollar left" are attacking the new law as it limits foreign influence and that "the main supporter of the dollar left was George Soros" in the 2022 campaign. He reiterated that according to the law, "accepting campaign funds from abroad is a criminal offense." (["Zoltán Kovács: The sovereignty protection law is being attacked because its aim is to prevent foreign influence," *About Hungary*, 7 February 2024](#) and ["EC to launch infringement procedure over Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Act," *About Hungary*, 08 February 2024](#))

European Parliament calls for a global moratorium after Norway's clearance for deep-sea mining

On 07 February, the *Environmental Justice Foundation* reported on the European Parliament's response to the call for a global moratorium on the industry as a response to Norway's decision to allow deep-sea mining in the Arctic, earlier in January. Anne-Sophie Roux, Deep Sea Mining Europe Lead, remarked that currently there is a lack of scientific knowledge and "Any mining activity would therefore contradict Norway's commitment to the precautionary approach, sustainable management, and international climate and nature obligations." The resolution by the

Parliament also raised concerns about the impact of Norway's deep-sea mining on the EU fisheries, food security marine biodiversity and other impacts on its neighbours. Reports claim that deep-sea mining will provide financial benefits only to a limited few. (["European Parliament responds to Norway's decision to open the Arctic to deep-sea mining by calling for a global moratorium on the industry," *Environmental Justice Foundation*, 07 February 2024](#))

French right-wing joins Italian and Polish conservative groups in EU Parliament

On 07 February, *Politico* reported on Marion Maréchal, leader of a right-wing fringe party, who announced that Nicholas Bay, its member of the EU Parliament will now join the Euroskeptics, joining forces with Italy's Brothers of Italy and Polish Nationalist Law and Justice. Maréchal remarked that joining the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups would allow them to "reduce the centrist influence in the European Parliament." The move of one MEP also may seem not highly significant, but it is indicative of the larger shift towards the right wing within the EU parliament as the June elections approach. ECR is currently composed of far-right parties from Spain's Vox and Finlands, The Finns and also of moderate conservatives, Flemish nationalists NVA, and the Czech Civic Democratic party. (Eddy Wax, ["France's right-wing star joins forces with Italy's Giorgia Meloni in EU Parliament," *Politico*, 07 February 2024](#))

Michel highlights increased investments in economy and defence at EIB Forum

On 07 February, Charles Michel, President of the European Council congratulated Nadia Calvino, the newly appointed Head of the European Investment Bank (EIB) at the EIB Group Forum in Luxembourg. In his keynote address, Michel emphasised the importance of improving the European economic base through investment, innovation and technology and focus on security and defence. He highlighted the significance of the EU single market. The importance of data sharing between nations

was also considered as vital as it will lead to the provision of better care. Most importantly, Michel highlighted the joint orders and cooperation in military arms production. While mentioning the eight per cent increase in defence budgets of the European allies, he called for an investment of EUR 600 billion in the next ten years. Ultimately he also outlined the necessity for greater job creation and making the economies innovative and competitive. (["Keynote speech by President Charles Michel at the European Investment Bank Group Forum 2024," Council of the European Union, 07 February 2024](#))

Commission proposes two targets to set the climate goals right

On 06 February, the European Commission proposed two recommendations to meet the EU climate goals. One, it vouched for a 90 per cent cut in the greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. This target is set to help the EU on track to achieve the net zero emission by 2050. In 2022, the emission was reduced by 33 per cent and the commission stressed on more focus for citizens to enjoy the benefit from climate transition. Two, it proposed a document with plans to "capture and store" millions of tons of carbon dioxide (CO2) emission by 2050. The proposal comes a juncture where the EU witness mass farmer protests and a tight climate target to meet. Key reasons behind the proposal are to target climate neutrality and increased CO2 reductions. (["European Commission pushes to slash emissions by 2040," Deutsche Welle, 06 February 2024](#))

Ursula relaxes the chemical pesticide use

On 06 February, Ursula Von Der Leyen, European Commission President proposed withdrawal of a plan to cut the pesticide use in agriculture as a negotiation against the farmer protests. She indicated that the earlier announced green transition as "symbol of polarization," and the initial target to half down the chemical pesticide use in the EU had paused in the discussions in the European Parliament. On the farmers, she added: "Many of them feel pushed into a corner...our farmers deserve to be listened to," but she also insisted on turning the

European agriculture into a sustainable form of production. The pesticide problem is only one out of the grievances stated the farmers on protest across Europe where the larger environmental regulation remains debated. (["EU's von der Leyen backtracks on cutting pesticide use," Le Monde, 06 February 2024](#))

Hungary's vote to Sweden's accession prolongs

On 06 February, in the session held by Hungary's opposition to vote for Sweden's accession only 51 MPs participated out of 199 prolonging the decision. While one of the MPs from the left liberal opposition party criticised Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister for the delay, the conservative Jobbik party and far-right Mi Hazánk party found the vote against its interest. Following this David Pressman who was the attendees in the parliament said: "Sweden's accession to NATO is an issue that directly affects the national security of the United States and also the security of the entire alliance." (Niklas Zimmermann, ["Continue waiting for a yes from Budapest," Frankfurt Allgemeine, 06 February 2024](#))

Russian hacker Akira suspected of being behind the cyber-attack on Icelandic University

On 04 February, according to *Iceland Review*, net safety specialists and the staff at Reykjavík University (HR) continued to restore the University system and recover files after a ransomware attack. The attack is believed to have been conducted by Akira, a Russian hacker group which usually employs ransomware to steal data and demand payments. Although the university stated that attackers only received basic information on the student body, it has recommended that students and staff be aware of "phishing and use two-factor authentication wherever available." Classes are expected to resume from 05 February. (Andie Sophia Fontaine, ["Russian Hackers Believed to be Behind Cyber Attack on Icelandic University," Iceland Review, 04 February 2024](#))

Italy overtakes Germany in economic growth

On 02 February, *Politico*, based on official statistics reported Italy increased economic growth by 0.5 per cent whereas Germany's growth reduced by 0.2 per cent. The growth plan for the fiscal year indicates a 0.6 per cent growth, whereas Germany's forecasts reflect a 0.4 per cent. Other positive indicators on Italy's economy show a 15-year low for unemployment at 7.2 percent compared to the earlier 13 per cent, and the low risk of premium on Italy's debt. Accompanied by Germany's dependence on Russia's cheap energy, the German economy is bearing the brunt of geopolitics due to its deep ties with China and the effects of the Chinese slowdown are reflected in Germany's exports to China. According to the European Commission's forecasts, Italy's fiscal deficit will remain at four per cent above its GDP, whereas the German deficit is expected below 0.4 per cent of GDP, however, German tax hikes and subsidy withdrawals might hinder economic growth. The new expensive carbon taxes would also take longer to show positive results, according to Holger Schmieding, chief economist at Berenberg Bank. (Ben Munster, "Do not adjust your set: Italy is growing faster than Germany," *Politico*, 02 February 2024)

EU approves AI rules after two years of negotiations

On 02 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported the EU's approval of rules governing artificial intelligence (AI) safety and use. EU's draft legislation on AI rules was brought out in 2021, however, it received the final go-ahead from the EU's 27 countries on 02 February. Thierry Breton, EU Commissioner for Internal Market remarked the Artificial Intelligence Act as "a historical first." The AI act will govern rules on the use of AI in industries ranging from banking, and the military, to medicine and travel. Countries like Germany and France who opposed the legislation in December, changed their stance after being lobbied by tech companies. The European Parliament would vote on these rules in March or April. Although AI will help boost production and

ease workload, its ability to produce deep fakes and spread disinformation raises concerns regarding its use. ("EU states approve landmark AI rules," *Deutsche Welle*, 02 February 2024)

Russia- Belarus plan to implement nine scientific union state programs

On 01 February, *Belta* reported Russia and Belarus' plans to implement nine scientific and technical Union State programs in 2024. Aleksei Kubrin, Deputy Secretary of the Belarus-Russia Union State stated that their set goals have been met on each stage and these programmes and revised as part of regular monitoring. He also mentioned a 38 per cent increase in funding, with the amount exceeding RUB six billion, compared to RUB five billion of the last year. In 2024, plans are also in place to implement six programs of last year concerning with national security, whereas three high tech programs will be implemented this year, for the first time. ("Belarus, Russia to implement nine sci-tech Union State programs in 2024," *BelTA*, 01 February 2024)

Eurozone inflation drops marginally by 0.1 per cent reports Eurostat Office

On 01 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the announcement of Eurostat Statistics Office regarding the slight drop-in inflation rates in Eurozone. The rates fell in January, by 0.1 per cent compared to December, from 2.9 per cent to 2.8 per cent. Although the expectations were at a drop of 2.7 per cent, nevertheless European Central Bank remains satisfied with the slight progress and its positive of reaching its target of bringing inflation down to two per cent soon. Price of food and semi-luxury goods increased by 5.6 per cent however, still less from the rise of 6.1 per cent seen in December. Additionally, drop in energy prices have been evident but slower. ("Eurozone: inflation sinks slightly to 2.8%," *Deutsche Welle*, 01 February 2024)

The EU passes Ukraine aid overcoming Orban's resistance

On 02 February, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the unanimous approval for the EUR 50

billion aid package for Ukraine after meeting with resistance from Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister. After an hour-long meeting, the 27 EU leaders came to an agreement to pass a fund consisting of both grants and loans from the EU budget. Orban has consistently blocked EU decisions and expressed his friendly relations with Russia, leading to delayed EU policies, exasperating the EU. Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister, expressed his anger with the "Orban fatigue" across the EU. The decision to pass the aid package was previously stalled by Hungary, prompting a second dedicated summit. A point of contention among EU members is the annual "debate" over the review of the aid package, which officials say is "toothless." Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President embraced EU's decision and stated that it "proves strong EU unity." (Ella Joyner, "[EU overcomes 'Orban fatigue,' passes €50 billion Ukraine aid,](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 02 February 2024)

INTERNATIONAL

Germany becomes third-largest economy as recession drags Japan down

On 15 February, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Germany overtook Japan as the world's third-largest economy as the latter fell into a technical recession. In 2023, Germany's gross domestic product (GDP) accounted for USD 4.5 trillion, whereas Japan's GDP stood at USD 4.2 trillion. The yen had a seven per cent depreciation in 2023 and had an 18 per cent slump compared to the dollar in 2022 and 2023, according to the Bank of Japan. India with its 1.4 billion population comprising of a youth majority and higher growth rates is projected to overtake both nations as they face issues of labour shortages, aging populations and falling birth rates. According to Takuji Aida, chief economist at Credit Agricole, the Japanese economy could shrink further in the fourth quarter due to slowed global growth, weak domestic demand, and the effects of the New Year's earthquake, and the Bank of Japan would downgrade its upcoming GDP forecasts. ("[Recession in Japan makes Germany third largest economy,](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 15 February 2024)

Serbia and UAE sign MoU on development and cooperation of AI

On 14 February, *BalkanInsight* reported the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Serbia and UAE by Ana Brnabic, Serbian Prime Minister and Mihailo Jovanovic, Serbian Minister of Information and Telecommunications and Faisal Al Bannai, Secretary General of the UAE's Advanced Technology Research Council at the World Government Summit held in Dubai. The MoU will focus on "closer cooperation between Serbia and the UAE in the field of development and application of AI," as stated by Brnabic. The language model developed by UAE is equivalent to US-based ChatGPT, and under the MoU, Serbian institutes would be able to use UAE's model. Earlier, Serbia had signed MoUs with G42 Cloud, UAE-based AI and cloud computing company, and China's BGI Genomics. (Katarina Baletic, "[Serbia, UAE, Sign MoU Closing Cooperation on Artificial Intelligence,](#)" *BalkanInsight*, 14 February 2024)

Danish Armed Forces to participate in the largest NATO exercise

On 12 February, according to Danish Defence, the Danish Armed Forces would participate in Steadfast Defender 24, the largest NATO exercise conducted in decades, in collaboration with 31 allied nations and approximately a total of 90,000 soldiers. The NATO plan will take place in two parts, where in the first part Danish Armed Forces will be part of British-led maritime exercises and Norwegian-led exercises in the Arctic region. Denmark would provide support as the host nation and 1,200 Danish soldiers would take part across the services, such as the Navy, Air Force and Special Operations Command. Steadfast Defender 24 aims to reinforce the NATO alliance and the plans were adopted at the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania in 2023. ("[The Danish Armed Forces to Participate in Major NATO Spring Exercise,](#)" *Danish Defence*, 12 February 2024)

Historical tales of caution highlight Carlson as the latest in the trend to support tyrants

On 08 February, *Politico* reported on Tucker Carlson and his support for Russia as he set to interview Vladimir Putin, the Russian President in Moscow. His support for Putin and Russia was earlier made evident when he had argued for Washington's support to Russia in the Ukraine war and had labelled Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President as a Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He is also in tune with Putin's call for traditional values, against LGBTQ+ rights. *Politico* draws similar parallels in the past regarding Walter Duranty, bureau chief of the New York Times in Moscow from 1922 to 1936 where he interviewed Joseph Stalin and falsely reported on the millions of deaths in a deadly Ukrainian famine. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Soviet Union however, the New York Times had discredited it. Insights of other supporters of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler were William Joyce and Unity Mitford who amplified the Nazi propaganda. (Jamie Dettmer, "[Tucker Carlson joins long line of 'useful idiot' journalists helping tyrants,](#)" *Politico*, 08 February 2024)

900 civil servants from the US, UK and EU dissent over Israel Policy

On 07 February 2024, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the anonymous letter with 900 signatories consisting of civil servants from the US, UK and the EU expressing their discontent with the actions taken by their respective national governments. EU and the US have not backed the idea of a ceasefire, even as deaths in Gaza crossed 27,500. The US continues to provide financial military support to Israel, whereas the EU has called for "humanitarian doors and pauses," in Gaza. These civil servants highlighted the "silencing culture" in the government, and have asked the governments to rethink their Israel policy that supports the nation "without real conditions and accountability." Israeli officials have rejected the accusations carried out in the letter and referred to such an act as an attempt to ruin Israel's good relations with other countries. German Foreign Ministry

mentioned that it "takes note" of the letter, whereas the European Commission said that it was "looking into" the statement. (Rosie Birchard and Ella Joyner, "[Gaza war exposes dissent on EU Israel policy,](#)" *Deutsche Welle*, 07 February 2024)

Germany and Mongolia upgrades relations to a strategic partnership

On 07 February, according to a German press release, Mongolia and the Federal Republic of Germany upgraded their bilateral ties and cooperation to the level of a Strategic Partnership after the Mongolian visit by Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German President from 07 to 08 February. Based on the partnership, Mongolia has promised to support Germany's permanent seat at the UN Security Council and engage in collaborations in the UN peacekeeping operations. Commitments to the expansion of trade, economic collaborations, and greater investments as part of Mongolia's Vision 2050 were made, whereas cooperation in education, health, science, culture, sports and gender-inclusive healthcare were highlighted. A joint agreement on cooperation in archaeology and mining would ensure collaboration in natural resources, industry and technology. The countries plan to combat the climate crisis through the deployment of green hydrogen technology and renewable energy. Germany also supported the national Billion Trees movement initiated by Ukhnaa Khurelsukh, Mongolian President. ("[Joint Declaration regarding the Strategic Partnership between Mongolia and the Federal Republic of Germany,](#)" *Federal Foreign Office*, 07 February 2024)

Framing of Swiss-Chinese relations during geopolitical uncertainties

On 06 February, *Swissinfo.ch* reported on the framing of Swiss-Chinese relations as the Swiss Foreign Ministry formulates a new strategy for China relations for 2025. China is Switzerland's third-largest trading partner and Swiss authorities had been cautious to not jeopardise its economic ties, even as the EU, US, UK and Canada imposed sanctions on China in 2021, for its human rights violations against the Uighurs. Swiss

welcomed the Chinese Premier Li Qiang in January 2024, resulting in the updating of the existing Free Trade Agreement between them. However, this does not cover the export of all Swiss goods, and exporters will still have to pay around USD 200 as Chinese customs duty. Switzerland hopes to restart its dialogue with China on human rights and ensure more transparency this time. However Swiss policy on China would remain pragmatic and neutral even as other countries and the EU are focusing on “de-risking,” and reducing its dependencies on China. (Geraldine Wong Sak Hoi, “[How Swiss-Chinese relations are weathering geopolitical storms](#),” *Swissinfo.ch*, 06 February 2024)

Meloni’s visit to Tokyo aims at strengthening bilateral ties

On 04 February, *Nova News* reported on Giorgia Meloni, the Italy’s Prime Minister’s visit to Japan from 04 February to 06 February, focusing on strengthening their bilateral relations and smooth transition of the G7 Presidency, as Japan passes the helm to Italy. The visit will allow the countries to deal with issues of focus in Japanese and Italian Presidencies of G7, which includes the development of AI technology and its governing rules, peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and greater economic collaboration. The bilateral meeting also aims to discuss political, economic, commercial and cultural cooperation, whereas also discuss the development of the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), a multilateral initiative between Italy, Japan and the UK aimed at developing sixth-generation stealth fighter planes. PM Meloni is set to meet Japanese business leaders, to boost industrial collaborations with a special focus on the microelectronics sector. (“[Meloni flies to Japan: focus on bilateral partnership and G7](#),” *Nova News*, 04 February 2024)

US-UK strikes on Houthis “not an escalation” says Defence Secretary Shapps

On 04 February, the *BBC* reported on the US and UK strikes with partners Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands

and New Zealand against Houthi military targets in Yemen. According to the Pentagon, the strikes attacked Houthis’ weapons storage facilities, missile systems, and launchers. The attacks were followed by a statement by David Cameron, the UK’s Foreign Secretary on the “repeated warnings” given to the group and highlighted that “Houthi attacks must stop.” Grant Shapps UK’s Defence Secretary justified the attacks as attempts to “preserve the freedom of navigation” and not to escalate the conflict and casualties. Houthis have warned of a “response and punishment” for the strikes. (“[Houthi Red Sea attacks 'must stop,' UK says](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 04 February 2024 and Alex Smith, “[Grant Shapps says UK and US strikes on Yemen Houthis 'not an escalation'](#),” *BBC*, 04 February 2024)

EU and Swiss aid Zimbabwe in building climate-smart agriculture

On 03 February, *Swissinfo.ch* reported on efforts by the EU and Switzerland’s investment of EUR 200 million to help Zimbabwe adopt sustainable practices and make it climate resilient. To deal with poor agricultural output due to the lack of rainfall and climate adversities, the Team Europe Initiative on Greener and Climate-Smart Agriculture supports farmers through animal husbandry. Supporting the country’s livestock sector, the focus is on rearing indigenous cross-bred goats. Out of the total EUR 207 million, Switzerland’s contribution amounts to EUR 34 million. Apart from their 20 support programmes, focused on agriculture, energy, nature conservation and livelihood, training is also provided to the locals to negotiate prices, market and increase production. However, recipients of the programme have indicated a greater need for slaughterhouses and better transportation. The Zimbabwe government’s support for cultivation of Maize, sorghum and pulses has been followed with instructions for no-till farming as it conserves soil nutrients. (Daisy Jeremani, “[Switzerland helps bring about climate-resilient agriculture in Zimbabwe](#),” *Swissinfo.ch*, 03 February 2024)

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