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25 Years of NATO's First Expansion | Vladimir Putin elected as President for fifth time | France: First country to enshrine abortion rights in the Constitution



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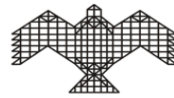
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Source: EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP, EPA-Yonhap, Wam.ae, Qilai Shen/Bloomberg, European Council

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WAR IN UKRAINE: DAILY UPDATES



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 764 to Day 738 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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EM SHORT NOTES



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

Russia: Vladimir Putin gets elected for the fifth time as the President

By Alka Bala

The need to increase defence spending for Europe's security and support Ukraine's aid becomes ever-relevant, even as differences arise within Europe and the US Congress regarding sending more aid to Ukraine.

On 21 March, the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) officially declared Vladimir Putin as the winner of the presidential elections. Putin secured his fifth six-year term as the president and would become Russia's longest-serving leader in the last 200 years upon successful completion of the term. The three-day voting period from 15-17 March witnessed a final turnout of 77.49 per cent, the highest voter turnout in the history of modern Russia. Of the 87.5 million votes, Putin secured 76.3 million votes (87.28 per cent) whereas, the Communist Party candidate Nikolay Kharitonov came in second with 3.7 million votes (4.31 per cent). Other presidential candidates, Vladislav Davankov of the New People political party and Leonid Slutsky of the Liberal Democrat Party of Russia gained 3.85 per cent and 3.2 per cent, respectively. The elections included the participation of the Donetsk and Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (Russia-occupied areas in Ukraine) regions for the first time.

On 18 March, in a post-election speech, Putin stated his dream of a "strong, independent, sovereign Russia" and remarked that the election victory would send a strong message to the West. Putin stated the possibility of a showdown between NATO and Russian troops, which "would be one step shy of a full-scale World War III."

On 18 March, Chinese President Xi Jinping greeted Putin on his victory and said that the victory was a "full demonstration of the support of the Russian people for you," and promised to promote their bilateral partnership. Others including North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and heads of State of Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Tajikistan

and Uzbekistan congratulated Putin on his victory.

On 17 March, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, labelled Putin as a "dictator" who is "drunk from power." Spokesperson of the US State Department. EU's Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borell, questioned the elections over "free and fair" and the lack of real opposition.

What is the background?

First, a brief note on the previous Presidential elections and Putin. After serving two successful terms of Presidency from 2000 to 2008, Putin was forced to step down due to the Constitutional limit of two consecutive terms. Following his endorsement of Dmritriy Medvedev as the next president, Putin assumed the role of Prime Minister. Positions were interchanged between Medvedev and Putin in 2011, garnering resentment from the Russian public. The 2012 Presidential elections resulted in a weak opposition, as stronger candidates either withdrew or were disqualified by the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC). The 2012 elections witnessed abuse of government resources for Putin's Presidential campaign, use of television media to mobilise support, instances of voter fraud and discrepancies in vote tallying. Similar discrepancies were highlighted in the 2018 elections, in regions with high voter turnouts. Over the years, Putin has not faced serious opposition and has garnered 53 per cent, 71 per cent, 63 per cent and 76 per cent of votes in the 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012 elections, respectively.

Second, pre-election controversies. Putin successfully created a controlled pre-approved opposition who supported Russia's military operation in Ukraine. In

contrast, anti-war candidates such as Yekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhdin have been systematically barred from contesting in elections. The treatment of Putin's most vocal critic Alexei Navalny and his death in the Arctic prison before the elections, also has questioned the entire electoral process.

"Putin's promise to implement a developmental agenda would ease the public's dissatisfaction with domestic challenges of living standards and low wages to an extent."

Third, the polling on the election day. According to Ella Pamfilova, the CEC head indicated instances of election disruption, highlighting thirty cases of attacks on ballot boxes "irreversibly damaging" 214 ballots. Protests labelled as "Noon against Putin" marked thousands of voters entering local ballot stations mid-day and ruining ballot papers or voting for candidates other than Putin. Some voters cast their votes for the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny who had endorsed the "Noon against Putin" campaign before his death. Moscow reported "terrorist activities" to halt elections, highlighting the drone shell dropped on a voting station in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia. According to Golos, Russia's independent election monitor, the 2024 elections have been the least constitutional and were an "imitation" of transparency and freedom of choice. Novaya Gazeta, an independent Russian media outlet, reported that at least 31.6 million votes were falsified for Putin. In the four Ukrainian annexed regions, there were reports of vote rigging through coercion for voting, ballot stuffing, and transporting large groups of people to polling booths.

What does this mean?

Firstly, the legitimisation of Putin's Authority. Elections, although provided only pro-Kremlin candidates, essentially legitimised the authority and support for Vladimir Putin. The record-high voter turnout was achieved through large-scale public mobilisation. This also serves the purpose of portraying unity with their leader and legitimises the foreign policy actions that Putin exercises, reflecting the support of the Russian public for Russia's actions. Putin's promise to implement a developmental agenda would ease the public's dissatisfaction with domestic challenges of living standards and low wages to an extent. Political analysts believe that this is a demonstration of legitimacy for the political elite as well.

Second, the implications of elections on the Ukraine War. Putin had indicated Moscow's inclination towards dialogue with Ukraine if it benefitted Russian national interest. However, Kyiv maintains that it would not have a dialogue with the present Russian leadership, hence military options remain the only viable alternative for the near future. Russia in the future also aims to create buffer zones in Kyiv-controlled territories to protect civilians from cross-border Ukrainian attacks. Putin's acceptance speech also indicated the possibility of a confrontation with the NATO and Russian troops.

Third, impact on the West. Putin's victory, indication of continuing with the military offensive, and aggressive ultra-nationalist foreign policy put Ukraine's Western allies in a difficult position. The need to increase defence spending for Europe's security and support Ukraine's aid becomes ever-relevant, even as differences arise within Europe and the US Congress regarding sending more aid to Ukraine.

Ms Bala is an undergraduate scholar at the Department of International Relations, Peace and Public Policy at St Joseph's University, Bangalore. Her areas of interest include Europe, maritime, climate change, and southeast Asia.

COMMENT

Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland: 25 years of NATO's first Eastern Europe enlargement

By Padmashree Anandhan

While the war in Ukraine exhausts its military and economy, can the CIS countries or Finland and Sweden face the Russian threat in the coming decades? If so, will the NATO alliance military arsenal be enough to meet with cracks appearing in its relations with the US?

On 15 March, NATO commemorated 25 years of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland joining the alliance. Accepting their membership in 1999 served as a symbolic and security boon, bringing the West and Eastern Europe closer to NATO. It marked the end of the three countries from being part of the Eastern Bloc and transcending into the Western European group. Since then, efforts of these countries have concentrated on aligning with NATO's standards in defence, democracy, and economies.

On 15 March, marking the Czech Republic's 25th anniversary in NATO, Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský said: "The successful integration of these three countries into NATO's policies and structures helped open the door to other countries in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe."

On 14 March, in a press conference after the meeting with the Poland President, Andrzej Duda, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said: "...a key Ally and a security provider. You are building one of the biggest armies in NATO. You spend around 4 per cent of GDP on defence, topping the NATO table."

On 12 March, Poland's President Andrzej Duda, following his meeting with the US President, Joe Biden, said: "During these 25 years, we have shown that we are a reliable and proven Ally...We are working consistently in this direction in Poland. That is why we are buying the most advanced American weapons in the world." Biden

added: "America's commitment to Poland is ironclad."

What is the Background?

First, the post-USSR NATO security environment in Europe. Post-cold war, NATO had to reform its operations, principles and agenda, this meant forming relations with the central and eastern European countries. At the core, alliance members had a cynical sight of opening to the east as it might trigger a reaction from Russia and were concerned about the activity of NATO near the Russian border. In 1991, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia began to implement reforms and formed a new group, "Commonwealth of Independent States" (CIS), to integrate into Europe. Pressure to integrate into Europe began after the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact with the collapse of their military, political and economic systems. Without guaranteed security or means to guard on one's own, joining the collective defence of NATO proved to be a better option. By 1992, the Visegrád Triangle was formed in the promise by the three to make an effort to align with NATO and gain membership. In 1994, following the talks between the NATO defence ministers and the US, the Senate adopted the "Brown Expansion Amendment" to facilitate a military aid programme in those countries. For the US, the security of the three countries was key to its national interest to enhance regional security. This led to the accession talks during 1997 and 1998, and after a formal invite in 2002, the accession was complete.

Second, the Russian threat. Moscow's concerns sparked over the "Study of Enlargement," the idea of former USSR countries joining NATO. Chairmen of the Committee on International Affairs in the Russian Duma, Konstantin Kosachev, stated that NATO's enlargement will not be taken lightly by Russia, but Putin seemed to be keen on establishing NATO-Russia relations. In one of the BBC interviews in 2000, he said: "I do not rule out such a possibility...in the case that Russia's interests will be reckoned with, if it will be an equal partner." In Putin's circle, it was a contrasting argument, fearing the joining of NATO to not meet its interest, and the anti-NATO rhetoric persisted. Under Putin's leadership, the enlargement was considered a "Big historic mistake." Russia expressed resentment toward NATO moving closer, and this was reflected in its policies towards Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It was perceived as the West's move to control Russia's influence in its neighbourhood.

Third, US and the NATO expansion. The US which initially opposed NATO enlargement and prioritised its equation with Russia. This changed as fears of leaving out the central European countries would extend the line of the "Iron Curtain." Additionally, Poland's free market was progressing well with fast economic growth and stable politics while Russia struggled with reforms. This attracted the Europeans to open to its eastern economies. It was an additional strategy for the US to pursue a double-track approach, where it formed relations with the central European countries, simultaneously creating the NATO-Russia relation through the 1997 Founding Act.

What does this mean?

First, NATO's expansion feat. Until the collapse of the USSR, NATO functioned with only 16 alliance members, has doubled to 32 in 2024. This includes the former CIS countries and the latest Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden) bringing NATO to Russia's western doorstep. Putin's takeover

of Russia as president in 1999, the perception of NATO has altered from responding through foreign policies to direct action through war. What remains to be seen is, Russia's response to NATO's encirclement. While the war in Ukraine exhausts its military and economy, can the CIS countries or Finland and Sweden face the Russian threat in the coming decades? If so, will the NATO alliance military arsenal be enough to meet with cracks appearing in its relations with the US?

"...between 1990-2024, the expenditure has increased from USD 512 billion to USD 1,264 billion the contribution trends across the 10 key members only."

Second, the effectiveness of the defence value along with geography. NATO witnessing the geographic expansion into the west, east and north of Europe leads to the progress in arsenal capacity. Comparing the defence expenditure spending, except for the US, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey and the UK, there was no substantial funding from the rest of the NATO members. Although between 1990-2024, the expenditure has increased from USD 512 billion to USD 1,264 billion the contribution trends across the 10 key members only.

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COMMENT

RUSSIA

Putin's State of the Nation address: Eight takeaways

By Padmashree Anandhan

Russia would proactively engage with such groups to establish global financial architectures and align with Russia's Eurasian partnership.

On 29 February, Russia's President Vladimir Putin delivered the State of the Nation address on the war in Ukraine, Russia's nuclear capabilities, its economy, and relations with the West. The speech comes ahead of the March elections. It focused on giving insights into Russia's strategic objectives and long-term and short-term developments.

1. Putin projects nuclear readiness

Putin highlighted Russia's capacity in strategic nuclear forces, hypersonic nuclear-capable weapons, and Kinzhal and Zircon missiles; he expressed readiness to use the same. Referring to his 2018 address, he confirmed the progress in reaching the weapon capacity. Since 2022, Putin has reiterated Russia's assertion to use nuclear weapons by all means, followed by a 2023 address where he declared withdrawal from the new START treaty.

“The latest speech highlights Russia's expanding foreign policy agenda with ASEAN and Africa. Putin asserted Russia's interest in Africa, highlighting the Russia-Africa Summit, and also expressed to continue partnership in the Middle East.”

2. Putin's sharp statement against NATO deployment

Putin's speech warned of "tragic consequences" if NATO forces were to be

deployed in Ukraine. Reiterating the Wagner coup attempt, Putin warned about the consequences of breaching Russia's sovereignty. On Finland and Sweden joining NATO, Putin assured to strengthen the military in Russia's West.

3. Putin enforces Russia's sovereignty vis-a-vis Ukraine

Putin promised to achieve Russia's goal in Ukraine. He referred to defending Russia's sovereignty and the security of Russian citizens. Although no apparent reference was made to the 2021-2025 military plan for boosting the combat readiness of Russian armed forces, Putin claimed that the Russian military had "gained a huge combat experience" and praised for its firm stance and recent offensives.

4. Putin sees no threat to his presidency

The timing of the speech and Putin's focus on domestic affairs hint at his trajectory for the upcoming presidential elections. Russia's governance system, Putin's constitutional referendum combined with only three supporting candidates' participation, gives Putin a clear path to victory.

5. Putin envisions diversifying Russia's foreign policy

Comparing Putin's 2023 speech on Russia's foreign policy approach, diversification can be evidenced by Russia looking beyond Central Asia and the Asia Pacific. The latest speech highlights Russia's expanding foreign policy agenda with ASEAN and Africa. Putin asserted Russia's interest in Africa, highlighting the Russia-Africa Summit, and also expressed to continue partnership in the Middle East.

6. Putin rejects accusations of space weapons

Putin denied allegations by the US over the deployment of space-based weapons. He countered, saying it was intended to attract the US to initiate talks over nuclear arms control. Putin criticized the West for trying to draw Russia into an arms race in an attempt to exhaust, similar to the 1990s USSR. He also blamed it for triggering and prolonging the conflict in Ukraine and using it as a means to target inside Russia.

7. Putin glorifies workers as the new elites

Criticizing the Russians for corruption in the 1990s praised the soldiers taking part in the military operation in Ukraine as true elites and those who could be entrusted. He proposed the "Youth of Russia" project and a monthly federal benefit to provide RUB 5000 to education advisors and RUB 10,000 to education workers. He also identified the gap in average pay across the region and the increasing demand for teachers and doctors. Alternatively, he proposed a new fiscal system for "fair distribution of the tax burden" and a payment system for public

sector employees. He wants to train a million skilled workers in key sectors such as aviation, shipbuilding, pharmaceutical, electronics, and defence industries by 2028.

8. Putin emphasis on boosting multilateralism

Regarding the progress of BRICS and G7, Putin indicated how the global GDP share of BRICS is increasing. According to Putin, in 2022, G7 accounted for 30.3 per cent, whereas BRICS had 31.5 per cent. He projected it to supersede G7 in 2028 with 36.6 per cent growth. He mentioned that Russia would proactively engage with such groups to establish global financial architectures and align with Russia's Eurasian partnership.

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COMMENT

France: First country to enshrine abortion rights in the Constitution

By Padmashree Anandhan

Since 1975, reforms to the Veil laws during the years 2014 to 2016 have helped transition the mentalities of society towards abortions, making it more liberal for women to choose.

On 04 March, the French parliament approved the bill with a three-fifth majority, constitutionalizing women's abortion rights. Article 34 would be amended to include the freedom of women to carry out abortions. President Emmanuel Macron called it a "universal message" to defend abortion rights. France becomes the first country to constitutionalize the right to terminate a pregnancy.

On 04 March, before the vote, French Prime Minister Gabriel Attal stated: "We're sending a message to all women: your body belongs to you and no one can decide for you."

On 04 March, on the "Guaranteed freedom" for abortion, national co-president of Le Planning Familial (a French equivalent of Planned Parenthood), Sarah Durocher, said: "This will give birth to other things... For example, real policies so there is effective access to abortion."

On 26 February, the Senate approved the bill, including women's right to an abortion in the Constitution, with 267 votes in favour and 50 against. This follows the approval from the Assemblée Nationale in January.

Issues at large

First, the French society's historical efforts to secure abortion rights. In January 1975, France took the first step in decriminalizing abortion through the Veil Law, with a close majority among conservatives and liberals. It came after a series of protests, feminist movements, and public debates. Until 1974, 48 per cent of the French population was in favour of abortion, which increased to 75 per cent in 2014. Abortion was once considered taboo, especially among the conservative Christians. However, it is no

longer viewed as "shame or silence." In 1993 and 2001, two laws were passed that decriminalized self-abortion and instituted the offence of obstructing the termination of pregnancy. The change became evident with the involvement of the progressive younger generation and social media, breaking the taboos. The legislations and the change in views revolutionized the perceptions of society and individuals except the evangelical population.

"Making it a constitutional right ensures women additional protection to opt for abortion and makes it tough for politicians to reverse."

Second, reason to constitutionalize. Several constitutional democracies have come far from banning abortions to legalizing with a scope to provide options for women before deciding not to exclude the right of an unborn child. For France, clearance from the Senate and both houses were considered more of a formality. Making it a constitutional right ensures women additional protection to opt for abortion and makes it tough for politicians to reverse. However, debates within the Christian conservative population on protecting the life and rights of children do hinge on societal mentality. But such strong legal mandates can help improve the rights of women.

Third, the debate across Europe. The majority of women in Europe have access to

abortions; however, legal restrictions are a major hurdle. A few examples include Austria and Germany, which regulate the right to exercise abortion under a criminal code. Hungary insists women hear the child's heartbeat before deciding on abortion. The free distribution of abortion pills in Austria and the law against harassment of women who had abortions in Spain were a few other major developments. However, there are constraints for individuals in bearing the cost of the abortion procedure and getting covered under health insurance. Besides, in catholic dominant and eastern European countries, including Andorra, Northern Ireland, Malta, Poland, and San Marino, under moral, religious, and legal grounds, either ban abortion or allow it under restricted circumstances.

“The legislations and the change in views revolutionized the perceptions of society and individuals except the evangelical population.”

In perspective

First, the importance of state intervention. In the 1940s, abortion was perceived as a crime against an unborn child. By the 1950s,

feminist movements gained traction in France. Following the government support in 1975, the feminist movements have gone hand in hand with legislation transforming public opinion, with the exceptions being the conservative evangelicals. Since 1975, reforms to the Veil laws during the years 2014 to 2016 have helped transition the mentalities of society towards abortions, making it more liberal for women to choose.

Second, the role of the leadership. For France, not just the government but also the leadership mattered in shaping abortion rights and reducing the restrictions for women. In 1975, Minister of Health Simone Veil served as a pioneer for women's rights and pushed for abortion rights. She faced challenges from jurists and anti-abortion groups in clarifying the law before the healthcare professionals. This helped in passing the Veil law with a close majority. Although such obstacles were not present for Macron, questions over consent to perform the procedure among the doctors and objections of the conservative group persist. Storming through these obstacles amid a rising right-wing party indicates Macron's ability to anchor the rights into the Constitution.

EM Daily Focus*



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

DENMARK

Greenlandic Inuit's call for colonial justice

By Anu Maria Joseph

On 04 March, the Associated Press reported that 143 indigenous women belonging to the Inuit community in Greenland sued the Danish Ministry of Health for forcing them to be inserted with intra-uterine contraceptive devices (IUDs) during the 1960s and 70s. Besides, they have demanded USD 6.3 million in compensation for human rights violations against them. One of the women, Naja Lyberth, was stated to have told Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa (KNR), a Greenland-based media: "As long as we live, we want to regain our self-respect and respect for our wombs."

On 04 March, the lawyer representing the Inuit women, Mads Pramming, stated: "My clients believe they were subject to a human rights violation because they have had IUDs inserted against their will, and in most cases when they were children."

On 04 March, a case was filed against Denmark's Ministry of Health. The Minister of Health, Sophie Lohde, stated: "This is a deeply unfortunate case that we must get to the bottom of, and therefore an independent investigation has also been initiated."

Issues at large

First, a background to the Greenlandic Inuit community. Inuits are indigenous people from the Arctic regions of North America. They reside in Greenland, the US, Canada, Denmark and Russia. The Inuits of Greenland represent close to one third of the total 155,792 population worldwide. The Greenlandic Inuits or the Kalaallit constitute 89 per cent of Greenland's population. Greenland became a self-governing entity of Denmark in 1979. However, Denmark, its former colonial power, controls its foreign and defence affairs.

Second, the complaints against Denmark's colonial policies. During the 1960s and 70s, the island's population was increasing due to its better living and health conditions. According to the Danish authorities, nearly 4,500 women and girls were subjected to the IUD implant. Several were under the age of

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

12, and many are still unaware of what had happened. In 2022, the Danish government launched an investigation that is due in 2025. In 2018, a group of Inuits, who were taken away from their families for a failed social experiment in 1951, demanded an apology from the Danish authorities. Then, as part of an experiment, around 22 children, now in their 70s, were removed from their families to be re-educated as model Danish citizens. A formal apology was given by Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, in 2022.

Third, the refusal and reconciliation. The Danish government refused to be a part of the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission in 2013, investigating the legacy of colonialism in Greenland. The Danish authorities cited the reconciliation commission as an “insult” to Denmark. In retrospect, the then authorities sought a reconciliation, ignoring acknowledgement and apology. This refusal to take responsibility changed during the recent years. In 2022, Denmark, for the first time, accepted and apologised for its atrocity against the Inuits.

Fourth, the continuing marginalization of the Inuits. Although Greenland enjoys autonomy, it faces several economic, social, health and environmental challenges. The traditional life of the indigenous group has been threatened by forced urbanisation that started during the 1970s. It resulted in increased immigration of Danes and disruption of Inuit kinship. Meanwhile, climate change in the polar region with rising sea levels, rapid warming, melting ice and animal extinction have affected the community's livelihood. A rapid shift in their way of life accounted for multiple health issues. Besides, the presence of rare earths has attracted the investments of external actors including the US and China, which are initiated by the Danish government and marginally benefit the Inuits. In 2023, the UN recorded a lack of effective mechanisms to implement Inuit's rights to free, prior and informed consent in Greenland regarding "tourism concessions, implementing business projects and adopting legislative and administrative acts in Greenland."

In perspective

Denmark's reconciliation with the Greenlandic Inuits needs more seriousness and a swift response. A slow acknowledgement, apology and reparation from the Danish authorities implies that an effective reconciliation is far from reality. Although the autonomy of Greenland from Denmark was hailed as the self-determination and preservation of the community, the continued influence of the Danish government against the interests of the Inuits implies that complete self-determination and preservation is far from reality. The Danish authorities would likely take another three years to accept its colonial atrocity against the women. However, the case of Greenlandic Inuits is an encouragement for indigenous communities across the world to fight for their rights and justice.

PORTUGAL

Luis Montenegro claims victory in the snap elections

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 10 March, Luis Montenegro, leader of Portugal's center-right Democratic Alliance (DA) emerged as winner in the parliamentary elections. The centre-left Socialist Party (PS) which has administered since 2015 slipped down to defeat. Whereas support to the far-right party Chega (Enough) increased. Chega's leader Andre Ventura stated that his party was “available to build a government.” However, Montenegro vowed to not alliance with right-wing populists or rely for any deals. The complete polls result yet to be revealed, DA is expected to win between 83 and 91, PS to secure between 69 and 77 seats and Chega to have increased from 12 to 40 and 46 seats out of 230 in total. DA and PS can be expected to form coalition combined with few smaller parties but might be a challenge with Chega's increased popularity. The increase in support for Chega was due to its two key pledges of addressing excess migration and government corruption. This deemed timely as former Socialist prime minister resigned under corruption allegations over investment projects resulting in snap elections. (“Portugal

election: Democratic Alliance claim victory,” Deutsche Welle, 10 March 2024)

What happened in the elections?

The voter turnout was the highest in last three decades resulting in a clear center-right win. Although the difference between the AD and PS was 2,058 votes, the far-right Chega Party’s performance topped with increase to 18 per cent. Former party, the Socialists which has governed since 2015 leader stated that the chances of Center-right forming coalition with Chega is more possible although it vows to form a minority government with support from conservatives placed in fourth.

What led to the snap elections?

António Costa, Former Prime Minister resigned following a corruption scandal in November 2023. Although he was not directly accused of corruption, the infrastructure minister engagement involvement in corruption linked to lithium exploration schemes and green hydrogen mega-project. This was revealed with Portugal police raid in government residence and ministerial buildings. Following the resignation, the president called for new set of elections to elect new prime minister.

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RUSSIA

ISIS terror attack in Moscow

By Padmashree Anandhan

On 22 March, Russia’s Investigative Committee reported on an attack on the Crocus City Hall, a concert venue in Moscow, leading to the death of 133 and injuring 150 people. Russian President Vladimir Putin called it an “organised mass murder” and

announced the introduction of anti-terrorist and anti-sabotage measures. According to Russia’s Federal Security Service report (FSB), 11 people were arrested in Bryansk, including the four gunmen, under suspicion of direct involvement.

On 23 March, Radio Free Europe reported on the involvement of Tajik citizens in the attack. Interrogation of the detained men disclosed that they were hired by anonymous individuals to “shoot at people” and were offered RUB one million in return.

On 25 March, White House National Security Communications Advisor, John Kirby, said: “...we have been monitoring ISIS that we were able to give the Russians a warning that, in fact, they were heading for a potential terrorist attack in the very near future.”

On 25 March, in a video conference with heads of the government, Putin acknowledged the attackers as “radical Islamists.”

On 24 March, according to France 24, a fresh set of aerial attacks was launched by Russia towards Kyiv concentrated in western Ukraine. The attack was launched a day after Russia claimed to have captured Ivanivske, a Ukrainian village near Bakhmut. The city of Lviv near the Polish border was also attacked, leading to an airspace breach in Polish airspace by Russian missiles.

Issues at large

First, the IS-Khorasan (IS-K) and its recent attacks. The IS, formed in 2014, attracted ousted members of the Pakistani Taliban, non-believers and followers of Shia Islam. Its composition of militants from Central Asia and the formation of networks in Central Asia, Russia and Chechnya have become the spark points of the spread of terrorism in Iran, Turkey and Russia. Between 2019 and 2021, its activity peaked in Afghanistan and on withdrawal of the US, it staged one of the most devastating attacks on the Kabul airport. Since the Taliban takeover, its rate of launching successful attacks has reduced significantly.

Second, the Islamic State (IS) and Russia. Islamic militancy has been an issue for Russia since it invaded Afghanistan, followed by militancy in Chechnya. In recent years, after the formation of ISIS, the Kremlin's intervention in Syria has been a primary factor in the former's approach towards Russia.

Third, the US intelligence warning about the attack and the Russian response. On 07 March, the US warned about an imminent threat for Moscow from extremists and recommended avoiding large gatherings during the next 48 hours. Russia perceived it as a "obvious blackmail," by the US to trigger fear among Russians.

In perspective

First, contextualising the attack in the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin sees the IS attack as a trigger for Russia to react, thereby diverting its attention from the war in Ukraine. Putin hinted at Ukraine's involvement in the attack and accused Kyiv of providing a window for the perpetrators to escape. Increased aerial attacks in Western Ukraine on 23 and 25 March would underline Russia's response to the militant attack in Moscow.

Second, the expansion of IS-K. After 2019, ISIS staged attacks in eastern Syria has managed to escape from the international restrictions and expand through regular recruits and operate in Central Asia, Sahel, east, central Africa and Asia.

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 Nihinson/Bloomberg

War in Ukraine: Day 764

War on the Ground:

On 28 March, Ukraine's air force reported on shooting down of 26 drones targeted by Russia in the eastern, southern and southeastern axis of Ukraine. According to the report, Russia launched 28 Shahed drones over Odesa, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia areas resulting in injury of two women and damage of a residential building from the debris. Mykola Oleshchuk, the head of Ukraine's air force said: "On the night of March 28, 2024, the enemy launched a missile air strike against Ukraine using three Kh-22 cruise missiles and an Kh-31P anti-radar missile (from the Black Sea)."

On 28 March, Denys Shmyhal, Ukraine's Prime Minister held a meeting with Donald Tusk, Poland's Prime Minister on the tensions over grain exports. Shmyhal visit to Poland comes after the EU signed a revised deal to extend the tariff-free food imports from Ukraine. Although the deal is yet to

approved by the European parliament, Poland has been key transit line for Ukraine to send its grain and produce since Russia's disruption of the maritime routes in the Black Sea.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 28 March, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President denied the comment on possibility of Russia attacking a NATO member such as the Czech Republic, or any Baltic states. He affirmed to counter only the F-16 fighter jets if supplied to Ukraine. He said: "The idea that we will attack some other country — Poland, the Baltic States, and the Czechs are also being scared — is complete nonsense. It's just drivel...If they supply F-16s, and they are talking about this and are apparently training pilots, this will not change the situation on the battlefield."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

* 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.

On 28 March, Major General Christian Freuding, Germany's armed forces announced to provide 10,000 artillery shells to Ukraine from its stock. The aid will form part of the three-stage plan of Germany in ammunition deliveries. The Czech Republic's initiative to gather ammunition for Ukraine has pushed the target to 800,000 pieces which is now joined by the 20 EU and NATO members including Germany, France, Denmark, the Netherlands and Canada. Freuding added that, the second stage of delivery will include 180,000 rounds of shells scheduled to deliver between early May and end of 2024. Germany also intends to train Ukrainians inside Ukraine and has a record of training 10,000 military personnel in Germany. On the training, he added: "The focus is always on training on the weapons systems that we provide to the Ukrainian armed forces, both tactical training, operator training and also training technicians to maintain and repair them."

On 28 March, Poland's security services reported on a raid of a Russian spy network. According to Jacek Dobrzynski, the Internal Security Agency spokesperson said on the agency's investigation: "...conducting activities as part of an investigation into espionage activities for Russia directed against European Union countries and institutions." The raid was conducted in cooperation with the Czech Republic and as a result it sanctioned two "pro-Russian" Ukrainian politicians.

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War in Ukraine: Day 762

War on the Ground:

On 26 March, Sergiy Popko, Kyiv's military administration head reported on injury of five after a Russian missile strike in Kyiv. He also observed additional two ballistic missiles launched from Crimea resulting in damage of residential building and electricity grid leading to electricity outage. On the same Bridget Brink, US Ambassador to Ukraine claimed the missiles to be "hypersonic," and called for assistance.

On 26 March, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's Foreign Minister released a statement on receiving USD 880 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF). The move marks the third set of financial assistance under the EFF and will be used to cover Ukraine's budget expenditures and macro financial stability. The EFF was formed to raise the reserves of the Ukraine's national bank and to stabilise its balance of payments and overcome its economic problems and issue reforms.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 26 March, Russia's Ministry of Defence claimed on targeting Ukraine's command and control facilities along with its defence industrial base. It reported its success in hitting the targets such as Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) and shooting down of 131 drones, two S-200 air defence missiles and 15 HIMARS and vampire missiles. The attack follows multiple drone strike in Kyiv and Lyiv military and energy infrastructures.

On 26 March, Dmitry Peskov, Russian parliament spokesperson reported on the majority of Russian's agreeing with the government's policies on Ukraine. In an interview to a Russian newspaper, he denied the comments on existence of "gap" in Russian society over the recent presidential election. He stressed on the votes received to be unprecedented with large turnout which led to victory of Putin.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 26 March, Emmanuel Macron, France's President warned Russia to not retaliate on

Ukraine over the attacks in Moscow. He confirmed on having information on involvement of ISIS-K or Islamic State (IS) in the recent attack and claimed on witnessing similar attempts inside France. He said: "...cynical and counterproductive for Russia to use this context to try and turn it against Ukraine."

On 26 March, in its daily intelligence update, the UK Ministry of Defence reported on Russia's ability to gather manpower "for two armies in 2024." It stated that Russia faced challenges in accumulating equipment and providing training. The composition of the force was yet to be known but it is expected to contain "mechanized, armored, artillery and logistics." In a statement it said: "...given Russia's limited training widespread use of legacy equipment and infrastructure issues, it is likely these units will suffer similar resourcing problems."

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War in Ukraine: Day 761

War on the Ground:

On 25 March, *Ukrainska Pravda* reported on increase in the death toll from the missile attack in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in mid week of March to six. Previously, after the Russia-launched Kh-59 missile on Kryvyi Rih in the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast caused the destruction of a high-rise building, three people had been reported dead in the initial reports, which rose in the following days, with 40 reported injured.

On 24 March, in his national address, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's President, stated that Russia had launched around 190 missiles, 140 Shahed drones and almost 700 guided aerial bombs. He thanked the Ukrainian defence forces and noted that Ukraine's "sky shield requires significant strengthening." In response to Russian attacks, restoration efforts were taken in Kharkiv to restore electricity and heat supply to people. Zelensky confirmed receiving of the EU's EUR five billion under the Ukraine Assistance Fund, with an additional micro-financial tranche of EUR 4.5 billion. The IMF had approved close to USD 900 million, and Canada had granted Ukraine CAD two billion in macro-financial support. He further stated the success in procuring favourable defence packages that include drones, armoured vehicles and artillery, and finalised air defence packages with Spain on a bilateral level.

On 25 March, according to *The Guardian*, Ukrainian armed forces (UAF) attacked two Russian military ships stationed in the Russian annexed region of Crimea. Yamal, a communications centre and Yazov, a key infrastructure of the Black Sea Fleet, were the targets hit. Russia had reportedly attacked an underground gas storage in Ukraine to target their energy infrastructure. Since most of Ukraine's storage capacity for gas lies in the western part of Ukraine, major damage was averted. However, Ukraine has increased energy imports and halted energy exports after Russian attacks on its energy facilities, with DTEK, Ukraine's biggest energy producer, losing 50 per cent of its capacity and major blackouts affecting cities. According to Serhiy Kovalenko, the head of the energy distribution firm Yasno in Ukraine, Russia targeted both generation and distribution infrastructures in Ukraine.

On 21 March, according to *Le Monde*, explosions were observed in Kyiv after Russia launched several missiles and drones into the city, raising air alerts. Vitali Klitschko, Kyiv's mayor, noted that fragments fell on a kindergarten in the Sviatoshnskyi district while cars and an apartment building caught fire due to the first major attack in the capital since January. The USD 60 billion Ukraine aid

package remains uncertain in the US Congress, due to a block by Republicans in the House of Representatives, as Zelensky urged for more Western air defences post increased aerial bombardments on both sides. Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, stated that he was “confident” that the impasse in Congress would soon be overcome. Kyiv escalated its drones, rockets and artillery fire in Russia’s Belgorod across the Kharkiv border, killing three people.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 25 March, according to TASS, Russian troops breached the Ukrainian army defences near Verbovoye in the Zaporozhye region, seizing five strongholds, as stated by Vladimir Rogov, the chairman of the public movement We Are Together with Russia. He noted that “the enemy has suffered heavy manpower casualties” and drew parallels with the Russian success in Rabotino in the Zaporozhye region. In late February, the Russian Defence Ministry announced the gaining of control of Rabotino after an offensive military operation.

On 25 March, *RT* stated through an opinion that the US’s explanation of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow is flawed, having shaken Russian consciousness and public security. Russia is skeptical of the US’s claim of an Islamic State connection, with no discernible IS pattern derived from the attack. The organisation is further believed to have been defeated to its core by Russia in Syria. After catching the gunmen who fled the scene, Putin criticised Ukraine for allowing the gunmen to flee into Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ukraine claims that the attack is of Russia’s own doing.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 25 March, according to the EUEA, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs, gave a speech stating that security and defence as well as aid to Ukraine have taken the centre stage in the EU’s affairs. March marks the third anniversary of the creation of the European Peace Facility (EPF), an extra-budgetary fund and second of the adoption of the Strategic Compass, the EU’s new defence and

security strategy. The EPF has a ceiling of EUR 17 billion, which acts as the backbone for funding Ukraine in its war efforts. Further, military equipment worth EUR 31 billion have been delivered to Ukraine since the war began. Later, the EU would train 60,000 Ukrainian soldiers and by the end of the year, have donated more than one million artillery shells to Ukraine. The defence industry within the EU has additionally supplied 400,000 shells to Ukraine through commercial contracts. The EU’s Foreign Affairs Council decided to create a Ukraine Assistance Fund under the EPF with an endowment of EUR five billion, and Borrell has recommended the redirection of 90 per cent of the extraordinary revenues from Russian assets to Ukraine. Borrell noted the need to increase global defence and security partnerships and increase Europe’s capacity to react to international crises abroad while increasing investments in defence to boost the EU’s defence industry.

On 25 March, according to *Reuters*, Emmanuel Macron, France’s President, stated that the gunmen responsible for the terror attack in the Moscow concert hall were part of a branch of the Islamic State (IS) who had earlier attempted to attack France. Macron and his Gabriel Attal, Prime Minister stated that the threat posed by IS was the reason to increase security alerts in France over the last months, especially in sensitive sites like schools. Macron termed Putin’s insistence as “cynical and counterproductive,” since France and its partners obtained the source of the attacks as the IS through their intelligence services. Attal pointed out the foiled attempt by the same branch of the IS that carried the Moscow attack in Strasbourg, eastern France. Under France “Sentinelle” operation to prevent such attacks, around 3000 soldiers have been deployed for operation in sensitive and public sites in France, having avoided two attacks already, according to Attal. France has further stated that it is prepared to increase cooperation with Russia on its intelligence services in order to “continue to fight effectively against these groups which are targeting several countries.”

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War in Ukraine: Day 759 & 760

Ukraine struggles to keep Avdiivka as Russian attacks increase

War on the Ground:

On 24 March, according to *France 24*, a fresh set of aerial attacks was launched by Russia towards Kyiv concentrated in the western Ukraine. The attack was launched a day after Russia claimed to have captured Ivanivske, a Ukrainian village near Bakhmut. The city of Lviv near the Polish border was also attacked, leading to a airspace breach in Polish airspace by a Russian missile. So far, no casualties have been reported. Ukraine claimed its air defence system hit "about a dozen" missiles. Bridget Brink, the US Ambassador to Ukraine, condemned Russia, accusing it of "violating international law." Andiy Sadovy, the Mayor of Lviv, stated that around 20 missiles and seven Iran-made Shahed drones were fired in the region, targeting "critical infrastructure facilities."

On 23 March, according to *the Kyiv Independent*, Ukraine's Air Force announced that it intercepted 31 out of 35 Shahed drones launched by Russia from the Kursk region and Cape Chauda in Crimea. Donetsk

was also targeted by Russia with at least four S-300 anti-aircraft missiles. Ukraine's anti-aircraft missile units and mobile fire units were engaged after the attack by drones downed above Poltava, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions.

On 23 March, according to *The New York Times*, Ukraine's Foreign Ministry denied Russia's accusations on Ukraine's involvement in the Moscow terrorist attack. Ukraine stated that it "categorically denies" any such accusation, for which the responsibility was claimed by the Islamic State. Medvedev threatened to "mercilessly destroy" the attackers, even if it is the Ukrainian state. Ukraine accused Russia of using its old tactic of using violence at home as a pivot point in its wars.

On March 23, according to *The Kyiv Independent*, Ukraine's military intelligence agency (HUR) along with local resistance groups, carried out a joint attack against a group of Russian servicemen in the occupied city of Melitopol. The explosions killed about 20 soldiers, and damaged two Kamaz trucks and a UAZ pickup truck in Melitopol, in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Military intelligence has reported on the operations by local resistance forces in the occupied cities of Ukraine, including attacks and explosions at the railway infrastructure in Melitopol.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 22 March, Dmitry Azarov, Governor of Russia's Samara Oblast, reported on drone attacks against two oil refineries in the Samara Region. In the Kuibyshev Oil Refinery, "a primary oil refining unit caught fire" with no reported casualties. The attack on the Novokuibyshevsk Oil Refinery was repelled and no damage was reported to its equipment.

On 23 March, according to *RT*, Russia's Investigative Committee announced that the death toll after the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow has risen to 133, with search still ongoing. Emergency services in Russia continue to dig through the rubble for more information, after the building was partially destroyed. Over 150 people were

wounded in the attack. Four armed suspects with assault rifles entered the rock concert, shooting civilians at point-blank range and setting the building on fire. Law enforcement forces caught them in the Bryansk Region on Russia's border, suspecting that they were crossing over to Ukraine.

According to Russia's Federal Security Service report (FSB), the attack was well planned to exert more casualties. 11 have been arrested in Bryansk including the four gunmen under suspicion of direct involvement. Following the attack, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President calling it a "organised mass murder" in his address expressed his condolences for the victims and announced introduction of anti-terrorist and anti-sabotage measures. He also confirmed the arrest of the gunmen and said: "The Federal Security Service of Russia and other law enforcement agencies are working to identify and uncover the entire terrorist support base." Russia's news media reported on Tajik citizens involved in the attack.

According to the Tajik government, there was no official information received from Russia. Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the opposition party claimed on having information on engagement of many Tajik citizens and criticised the government for its authoritarian policies "radicalising" few citizens. According to a report in *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, in an interrogation with the detained men, under a harsh investigation disclosing being hired by anonymous to "shoot at people" and another claimed being offered RUB one million to kill people on site.

On 23 March, according to *RT*, Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, denounced the "bloody and barbaric" terrorist attack in the Crocus City Hall in Moscow and vowed to punish all those involved, in a video message. 24 March was announced as a national day of mourning in memory of all the victims. Putin further thanked the first respondents and citizens that helped the attack's victims and vowed to prevent any future attack through "additional anti-terrorism and anti-saboteur measures."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 23 March, according to the *Associated Press*, the US Congress approved USD 228 million in military aid to the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia under the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI). The funds for the three NATO members and neighbours of Russia will "fast track several military infrastructure and capability development projects," according to Hanno Pevkur, Estonia's Defence Minister. The BSI began in 2017 to aid the Baltic states in developing military capability, and the focus is on developing land forces, maritime situational awareness and air defence, with a slight increase from the fund allocation in 2023. An agreement was earlier signed between the US and the Baltic states for a five-year defence cooperation through 2028.

On 24 March, according to *The Guardian*, Poland stated that it would demand an explanation from Russia after a Russian missile breached into Polish airspace for a brief period before attacking Ukraine. The missile strike was part of a series of regular aerial attacks into Ukraine. The Polish Armed Forces Operational Command (RSZ) stated that following the "intensive long-range aviation activity" by Russia, they were in a state of heightened readiness. Polish military radar systems observed a breach in airspace over the town of Oserdow for 39 seconds. Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, the Polish defence minister, stated that had there been a threat of attack on a Polish target, they were prepared to shoot down the Russian missile. Russia blames Ukraine for the Moscow terrorist attack that killed at least 133, stating that suspects were fleeing into Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's President, denied the accusation of the act already claimed by the Islamic State, accusing Putin of shifting the blame.

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War in Ukraine: Day 758

Moscow witnesses a terrorist attack a month after the US warns

War on the Ground:

On March 22, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's president, reported on a massive missile and drone attack of Russia using Shahed drones. He said: "There were more than 60 'Shaheds' and almost 90 missiles of various types overnight." Zelenskyy stated that in response to the attacks, rescue was initiated and efforts to restore electricity was triggered. Highlighting the rapidity of the Russian attacks, he demanded for support from the West.

On 22 March, Herman Halushchenko, Ukraine's energy minister reported on a "largest attack" on its energy sector. DniproHES Ukraine's hydropower company confirmed the same on an attack on

Ukraine's largest dam and a subsequent damage to a power line leading to Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Halushchenko added: "The goal is not just to damage, but to try again, like last year, to cause a large-scale failure of the country's energy system." Apart from this the Dnipro Hydroelectric Station in Zaporizhzhia was also reported hit "eight times" and observed as one of the largest attacks.

On 22 March, on the progress of mediation, Li Hui, China's Eurasia envoy stated that there was a "significant gap" between Ukraine and Russia in the peace talks. He said: "...at the end they all agree that the war must be resolved through negotiations rather than guns." Hui also stressed on the need for China to "play a more constructive role," in the mediation and the necessity for rounds of negotiations to resolve the conflict.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 22 March, in response to the attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure Russia's defence ministry stated that the strikes were of "retaliatory" nature. It claimed on attacking "...military-industrial complex, railway hubs, arsenals and places were Ukrainian troops and foreign mercenaries." According to the ministry, the strikes had achieved all targets with 49 retaliatory attacks.

On 22 March, according to *TASS*, Russia's security service FSB reported on arrest of seven Moscow residents related to a pro-Ukraine militia. According to FSB: "The seven detained residents of Moscow maintained contacts with the Russian Volunteer Corps, acting as part of (the) Ukrainian army." The arrested were accused for discussing the ways to carry out violent actions against the "law enforcement agencies, servicemen and foreigners."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 22 March, *The Washington Post* reported on the rise in the death toll to 115 after a group of gunmen fired in one of the concert venues. On the same, Russia's investigative committee confirmed on receiving warnings

from the US government a month ago on the “planned terrorist attack,” in Moscow. According to the committee death toll is expected to rise with more than 107 hospitalised and arrest of the four gunmen who launched the attacks. On 22 March, the Islamic State claimed against the attack in Russia in Krasnogorsk and it showcased the vulnerability of Russia to such attacks. On 07 March, the US government had reportedly warned on the planned attack in Moscow based on intelligence report.

On 22 March, Germany and France signed a historic deal on developing the “tank of the future.” The same was confirmed by defence ministers of Germany and France. As per the plan, Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) production will be divided between the countries in 50-50 proportion. Boris Pistorius, Germany’s Defence Minister said: “We’ve agreed on how to divide up all tasks for this project.” Apart from this, the France-German company (KNDS) will also install a branch to produce ammunition and military equipment. This will also include training of Ukrainian soldiers and production of spare parts for Germany and France installed systems in Ukraine.

On 22 March, the EU leader high-level summit in Brussels agreed on support to Gaza and called for a “humanitarian pause” in Gaza. On Ukraine, the EU leaders agreed on the increasing need for Ukraine’s political, financial, economic and humanitarian support. In a joint statement: “The European Council is ever more steadfast in its support for Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized border. Russia must not prevail.”

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War in Ukraine: Day 757

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

War on the Ground:

On 21 March, according to *Ukrainska Pravda*, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine President, urged leaders of the EU to provide air defence for protecting Ukraine’s frontline cities. Zelenskyy urged them to help protect Kharkiv, Sumy, Dnipro, Odesa, Kherson and other cities. He further urged leaders to boost their ammunition supplies to Ukraine to “destroy” Vladimir Putin, Russia’s President “aggressive potential now.”

On 21 March, according to *the Associated Press*, the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia met to discuss the Czech plan, aimed to support Ukraine with ammunition supplies from third countries. Hungary and Slovakia stated that they were not ready to change their policy on refusal to provide arms to Ukraine. The Czech plan aims to acquire ammunition from non-EU third countries to be provided to Ukraine. Jan Lipavsky, the Czech Foreign Minister, stated that “it’s necessary to boost support for Ukraine in all areas.” The plan aims to obtain 800,000 artillery shells for Ukraine. The Czech Republic aims to deliver the first shells by June 2024.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 21 March, according to *RT*, the Russian Defence Ministry announced that the Russian forces “liberated” the Tonenkoye village in the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR), following taking over the town of

Avdeevka in mid-February. Tonenkoye forms part of the Orlovka-Tonenkoye-Berdychi line. Orlovka was taken over by the Russian military earlier in the week, causing disruptions in Ukrainian communication in the latter two villages in the line, with Berdychi facing active combat. The Ministry further noted that Ukrainian forces lost 320 soldiers, a tank, four armoured and seven unarmoured vehicles.

On 21 March, according to *RT*, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, stated that despite sanctions from the West, Russia had doubled its export of petroleum products to Africa. In an interview, Lavrov further stated that with Iran's "legal rights" to export oil being restored, there was no threat on the Russian export market. He explained that within the framework of OPEC+ of which Iran and Russia are members, "...there is a clear understanding of how to negotiate and seek compromises," and therefore, "no one is at a loss, no one is offended," when asked about competition from Iran in the oil export market. After the EU reduced its energy exports from Russia since the beginning of the war with Ukraine, Russia has increased its energy exports to Asia and Africa, with China and India emerging as key buyers. Ghana, Libya, Tunisia and Togo have reported a 100 per cent growth in Russian oil imports. Growth in imports by Morocco, Senegal and Nigeria was also noted.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 20 March, according to *Politico*, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, asked Sauli Niinistö, former Finnish President, to prepare a report on means to enhance Europe's civilian and defence preparedness. Since "Putin's ambition does not end in Ukraine," von der Leyen stated that the EU could learn from Finland so that "people can be prepared for all emergencies, including military, hybrid threats and natural disasters." Finland's 1300 km long border with Russia is a reason for its superior security policy. Von der Leyen addressed the member states' concern of a potential EU power grab on matters of defence, stating that "the whole organisation

of troops is competence of member states." On 21 March, according to *Politico*, leaders of the EU were divided on the means to finance weapons to support Ukraine while Russia increased its military offensive. At the EU Summit in Brussels, the leaders agreed on the need to increase spending on defence to arm Ukraine but disagreed on the means to achieve it. The leaders of the 27 member states agreed on the need to approach the European Investment Bank to ease its lending policies for defence companies despite the risks to the bank, but failed to agree on the bigger picture for European financing of weapons, which is through defence bonds. While France, Estonia and Poland were among those who agreed to push the idea of EU joint bonds, Germany, The Netherlands and Austria opposed the notion.

On 22 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Tobias Billstrom, Sweden's Foreign Minister, stated that with the joining of Sweden and Finland into NATO, the security of the Baltic Sea region will be improved, given the prospect of a "prolonged" war with Russia. Russia now remains the only non-NATO member around the Baltic Sea. Billstrom reinstated his continued support for Ukraine against Russian invasion, for which Sweden would provide political, financial and military assistance. He further stated Sweden's decision to join the Czech initiative to procure ammunition for Ukraine. Billstrom added that the EU must utilise all means to ensure Ukrainian victory so that it "puts a stop to Russia once and for all." Sweden officially joined NATO last month after it, along with Finland, left their policy of neutrality after Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Global Fallout: Implications of the War

On 21 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Rafael Grossi, the Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), noted the importance of the role of nuclear energy to secure the goal of low carbon emissions compared to fossil fuels, but highlighted the challenges faced due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Grossi stressed on the "international consensus" reached to include nuclear energy in tackling global warming, especially for Europe. However,

with Russia being a key supplier of fuel for nuclear power plants, the attempts at reducing the reliance on Russia by the US and Europe might take some time. Currently, “the majority of the market” for supply lies with Russia. He further emphasised on the dangers posed by the war to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the front lines, a catastrophe that has so far been prevented due to certain guidelines by the UN Security Council. Grossi predicted that “probably within the next four or five years,” Western Europe and North America will witness the arrival of the first Small Modular Reactors (SMR), which have one-third the capacity of regular large nuclear power plants but which are cheaper and easier to install for regions with limited grid coverage.

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War in Ukraine: Day 756

War on the Ground:

On 20 March, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President unveiled the peace formula in his speech at the third Summit for Democracy. He reiterated the world's need for a balance between force and rules. The speech invited the Global South, Europe, the Indo-Pacific and all the regions to support re-establishing the international rules-based

order. Zelenskyy underscored Ukraine's efforts to restore food security through its 'Grain From Ukraine,' humanitarian food programme. The call for action and peace formula comes ahead of the preparations for the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland.

On 20 March, according to *European Pravda*, the European Commission disbursed the first tranche of EUR 4.5 billion to Ukraine. This is part of its Ukraine Facility, the four-year support mechanism worth 50 billion euros aimed at “recovery, reconstruction and modernisation of Ukraine,” as stated by Josep Borell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

On 20 March, the *Kyiv Post* reported the Russian launch of an X-59 missile aimed at Kharkiv, striking a private enterprise and a residential building, killing three people and injuring five. According to the State Emergency Service of Ukraine, there remains the possibility of “individuals trapped under the rubble.”

On 20 March, according to a report by the UN Human Rights Office, focusing on the situation in Ukraine. Post the full-scale attacks by the Russian Federation on 24 February indicated a ‘climate of terror’ with violations such as detention, torture and enforced disappearances committed against the people who oppose the occupation. The report highlighted the re-routing of Ukraine's internet and mobile networks through Russian networks, curbing freedom of expression and privacy. The report noted the destruction of infrastructure and resources in Ukraine and the government's challenge in rebuilding and restoring the same.

On 21 March, *The Indian Express* reported the telephone conversation between Narendra Modi Indian Prime Minister and Volodymyr Zelenskyy Ukrainian President. The conversation focused on the India-Ukraine Partnership and the ongoing conflict with Russia, where India reiterated its support towards the efforts for peace and provision of humanitarian assistance.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 20 March, according to *RT*, Ukraine's ability to start domestic production of NATO-standard 155 mm artillery shells will not materialise until the second half of 2024. Ukraine's defence industry was observed to be suffering from poor investment, shortage of stable sources of gunpowder, and procurement problem. However, Russia attributes the decline in Ukraine's manpower as the larger factor for its declining military capabilities.

On 20 March, *RT* reported the plans for the evacuation of 9000 children from Russia's Belgorod region to Penza, Tambov, and Kaluga, regions deeper inside Russia. Vyacheslav Gladkov, local Governor stated that the first group of 1200 children will be relocated on 22 March as Kyiv's forces strike targets behind the front line. The plans for evacuations come after Putin's announcement "to create a buffer zone to protect border regions from long-range Ukrainian strikes and cross-border raids."

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 20 March, according to *Azerbaijan24*, Radoslaw Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister, welcomed the idea of NATO troop deployment in Ukraine as "not unthinkable," as stated by Emmanuel Macron, French President. Sikorski admitted that the presence of Western forces in Ukraine is an 'open secret.' However, Sikorski reiterated that Poland would not send troops to Ukraine, succumbing to Russian propaganda.

On 20 March, as part of the EU's political and economic support to Ukraine, the Council agreed to renew the suspension of import duties and quotas on Ukrainian exports until 05 June 2025 and would thus establish a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA). The Council and Parliament also plan on implementing a new safeguard for sensitive products such as poultry, eggs, sugar, oats, maize, groats and honey.

On 20 March, according to *Euronews*, the EU plans on deploying interests from frozen Russian assets worth 3 billion euros to

Ukraine per year. Dens Shmyhal, Ukraine's Prime Minister welcomed the EU's proposal and stated that "using the interest was only the first step" calling for "full confiscation or other use of all frozen assets." Although the funds were proposed for reconstruction in Ukraine, 90 per cent of them would flow through the European Peace Facility, which provides Ukraine with munitions.

On 20 March, the US Department of the Treasury reported sanctions on two Russian agents, Ilya Andreevich Gambashidze and Nikolai Aleksandrovich, Tupikin for their involvement in malign influence via their companies, Social Design Agency (SDA) and Structura. According to the report, these companies have implemented fake campaigns, impersonated news websites, and created fake social media accounts on the direction of the Government of Russia.

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War in Ukraine: Day 755

War on the Ground:

On 19 March, Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, held a discussion with European Council President, Charles Michel to initiate talks over Ukraine’s accession to the EU. On the same day, the EU’s High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell called for the transfer of the profits from frozen Russian assets to the European Peace Facility. Till now, 70 per cent of the assets frozen are held in the Belgian central securities depository, which amounts to EUR 190 billion.

On 19 March, Ukraine’s Prime Minister, Denys Shmyhal held a meeting with Luxembourg’s Foreign Minister, Xavier Bettel, during his visit. This resulted in the signing of an agreement on technical and financial cooperation as a symbol of solidarity and to strengthen the bilateral equation.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 19 March, Russia’s government announced the replacement of naval head. Northern Fleet Commander, Alexander Moiseyev will be replacing Nikolai Yevmenov to act as Commander-in-Chief for the Russian Navy. Moiseyev has served in many nuclear submarines in the Northern Fleet as part of the combat element group and also functioned as submarine forces commander. According to the report in *TASS*, the replacement of Yevmenov comes due to frequent Russian losses in the Black Sea, which has granted Ukraine access to the maritime corridor to export its grains. This has triggered Russia to boost its defence of the Black Sea Fleet.

On 19 March, Russian forces reported on capturing Orlovka, one of the frontline villages in the Donetsk oblast. In a statement released by the Russian Defence Ministry: “In the Avdeyevka direction, units of the Battlegroup Center liberated the settlement

of Orlovka in the Donetsk People’s Republic and improved their forward edge positions.” It also claimed to be advancing in the Kupyansk zone, destroying 30 Ukrainian troops using firepower and improving positions.

On 19 March, Russia’s Defence Ministry claimed a successful strike on sabotage and paramilitary groups which is accused of being connected to Ukraine. The ministry released a video showing the air strike targeting the groups in the Belgorod border area.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 19 March, following the Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting, the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin assured the continuity of Ukraine aid and expressed its determination to support with necessary resources. In response to the delay in the US bill of USD 60 billion aid in the Congress, he said: “We were only able to support this much-needed package by identifying some unanticipated contract savings.” He mentioned that in total the Contact group had generated USD 88 billion as security assistance to Ukraine and this will continue into two tracks. One being, giving near-term support for the Ukrainian troops and two, helping the Ukraine leaders in planning its defence and deterrence.

On 19 March, Germany’s Defence Minister Boris Pistorius announced a new military package worth EUR 500 million for Ukraine. This will include the “Federal Army’s stockpile” and shells to meet the immediate needs of Ukraine. In the medium term, Germany is expected to order 100,000 shells from the defence industry and contribute to the Czech initiative and deliveries are scheduled for the summer. He said: “This shows that the help and support from Germany remains unbroken and is still by far the largest in Europe.”

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War in Ukraine: Day 754

War on the Ground:

On 18 March, Ukraine's Sumy area was under attack from Russian missiles as reported by Volodymyr Artiukh, Governor of Sumy. According to him, there was increased shelling and tactical aviation combined with multiple launch of rocket systems compared to earlier weeks. As per report from the Ukrainian air force, five missiles were targeted towards northeastern Kharkiv and another two towards Sumy's border. In the past one week, 285 residents have been evacuated and 22 drones in total were launched out of which 17 was claimed to be destroyed by Ukraine's air force.

On 18 March, Amnesty International, a UK based human rights organisation reported on Russia's measures in Crimea in suppressing Ukrainian identity. The report stated Russia's efforts in the last 10 years to delegitimise Ukraine's sovereignty. It criticised Russia for imposing restrictions over Ukraine's Crimean Tatar identities in education, religion, media and judicial system. As per the report: "Changes to the curriculum and the almost total eradication of Ukrainian language tuition are designed to ensure that younger generations will lack the knowledge and awareness to challenge the Russian narrative surrounding Crimea's

history." It also found that such policies were used in altering the ethnic makeup.

On 18 March, Shin Won-sik, South Korea's Defense Minister reported on North Korea transporting 7,000 containers of weapons to Russia so far which had begun in July 2022. Shin stated that North Korea was initially found to be using ships and had shifted to rail networks for transporting the arm supplies.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 18 March, in a conference after the presidential election win, Vladimir Putin, Russia's president warned over the impossibility of avoiding a direct conflict with NATO. Putin claimed on stationing of troops by NATO inside Ukraine along with the French and English on ground. Putin warned over such deployment as a trigger for a third world war. He said: "There is nothing good in this, first of all for them, because they are dying there and in large numbers." On the possibility of a ceasefire, Putin expressed willingness for negotiation on the French proposal for a Ukraine ceasefire during the Paris Olympics. He also placed the condition of consideration of Russian interests on frontline in the talk.

On 18 March, Dmitry Peskov, Russian parliament spokesperson hinted on having a buffer zone between Russia and Ukraine as the only solution to protect Russia from Ukrainian attacks. Peskov claimed on the increased attacks on the border impacting public facilities and residential buildings and demanded for a buffer zone. This is observed as the first idea from Russia following increased attacks in Belgorod and other neighbouring border zones.

On 18 March, Vyacheslav Gladkov, Governor of Belgorod reported on death of four near the border of Belgorod city. This totals to 13 in the past week, according to him: "A 17-year-old and a man died of their wounds on the spot before the ambulance arrived. Our rescuers pulled a little girl from under the rubble of the same house."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 18 March, EU foreign minister's held a meeting in Brussels to discuss on war in Ukraine. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy led the discussion where 27 countries agreed on a EUR five billion aid to boost Ukraine's armed forces. The aid will come under European Peace Facility for military assistance which consists of Ukraine Assistance Fund which allows Europe to circulate support to match Ukraine's military needs. Borrell added: "With the fund, we will continue to support Ukraine defend itself from Russia's war of aggression with whatever it takes and for as long as we need to."

On 18 March, Germany and Poland announced on a joint cooperation to increase the production of ammunition to supply Ukraine. Boris Pistorius, Germany's Defence Minister and Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, Poland's Defence Minister stated that ammunition would not suffice but helping ramping the production will grant major support. Pistorius highlighted the German-Polish cooperation in the security and defence policy as an indication of solidarity.

On 18 March, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's President congratulated Putin on winning the elections and expressed his interest to mediate negotiation between Ukraine and Russia. He also added on the Turkey-Russia relations to be on the "positive evolution."

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War in Ukraine: Day 748

War on the Ground:

On 12 March, Russian volunteers in support of Ukraine claimed on launching a cross-border attack in Russia. The group known as "the Freedom of Russia Legion" confirmed destroying Russian armoured military vehicle in Tyotkino a village in Kursk oblast. Another group called the Sibir Battalion claimed "As promised, we are bringing freedom and justice to our Russian land." Whereas, Russia's defence ministry counter claimed on repelling these volunteer forces after inflicting damages. On the same, Ukraine's military intelligence confirmed that the groups were operating independently and not under Ukraine's orders.

On 11 March, the UN scientific and cultural organisation reported that restoring of Ukraine's scientific infrastructure will amount to USD 1.26 billion. According to the study published by UNESCO, till now 1,443 building and laboratories of 177 scientific institutions to be destroyed. Additionally, more than 750 pieces of scientific and technical equipment were damaged.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 12 March, Andrey Klyckov, Russia's local governor reported on fire because of a drone attack on Oryol fuel depot. According to the fuel and energy complex was attacked and in response, special services were sent to control the fire. The oil processing unit in Kstovo in Novgorod was also under fire after the attack. Russia's air defences claimed on destroying the Ukrainian drones targeted towards Moscow.

On 12 March, Russian forces claimed on capturing a village in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk known as Nevelske. The forces also confirmed on making advances in eastern Donetsk since the 2022 self-declared annexation. Russia's defence ministry stated that it has occupied Ukraine's "favourable line and positions," following the village

capture.

On 12 March, Russia reported on crash of Il-76 military cargo in northeast of Moscow. According to the report, the military transport plane crashed in the Ivanovo area right after takeoff. Engine fire is the suspected reason behind the crash and no survivors were reported.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 12 March, the US announced a stopgap package of military aid to Ukraine. Jake Sullivan, US National Security Advisor announced the emergency aid avoiding congress's block. The assistance will include USD 300 million worth weapons and equipment to meet the most needed demands of Ukraine. The move also times as Donald Tusk and Andrzej Duda, Poland's Prime Minister and President visit the US to discuss on strengthening the NATO's eastern front. Tusk said: "NATO must accept that if not today, then tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, operational capabilities on NATO's eastern flank must be greater." Joe Biden, the US President expressed the emergency package to be not enough as the USD 60 billion package remains blocked by the Congress.

On 12 March, the *BBC* reported on Sweden and Finland joining NATO's largest military exercise "Steadfast Defender" to counter Russian aggression. This would involve 90,000 military personnel held across Europe's eastern flank in the coming months marking the first test of NATO's military plan planned to transit troops and equipment in a "speed and scale," to boost allies if come under any attack. The first stage of the exercise is expected to take place in Finnmark in northern Norway which is 120 kilometres from Russian border. Pal Jonson, Sweden's defence minister called the membership of Sweden and Finland as "mother of all unintended consequences."

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War in Ukraine: Day 747

War on the Ground:

On 11 March, *CNN* reported that Russia is producing thrice the artillery shells compared to the US and Europe for Ukraine's cause, projecting a potential second Russian offensive in Ukraine. NATO intelligence found that Russia is producing 250,000 artillery shells a month, with three million shells a year, as opposed to a mere 1.2 million ammunition produced by the US and Europe for Ukraine. The USD 60 million Ukraine aid at a stalemate in the US Congress too falls short of Russian production targets. A NATO official called the situation "a production war" as Russia is apparently running its factories "24/7", while importing more from Iran and North Korea. However, NATO officials suggest that it wouldn't lead to a Russian battlefield victory in the short term yet.

On 11 March, *Reuters* reported on the destruction of 15 out of 25 Russian Shahed drones by Ukraine during an overnight attack in the Ukrainian port of Odesa. Oleh Kiper, Odesa's regional governor, stated that several Shahed drones coming from the Black Sea were repelled by the air defence system, but noted the damage of an administrative building, an infrastructure facility and few commercial buildings without reported casualties. Russian bombardment of Ukrainian ports has

increased especially since it pulled out of the UN-brokered deal on allowing the flow of food exports, since Ukraine is a major grain producer having found alternative routes like Odesa via the Black Sea.

The Moscow View:

Claims by Russia

On 11 March, TASS reported that the Russian Battlegroup Center attacked around 350 Ukrainian targets including “two command outposts, 14 strongholds and roughly 90 field artillery positions” near the Avdeyevka region along the line of engagement, according to Alexander Savchuk, Battlegroup spokesperson. Some 60 airstrikes were conducted near the settlements of Ocheretino, Berdychi and Novokalinovi in Donetsk. Further, five Ukrainian drones and a HIMARS rocket were destroyed by the Russian air defence forces.

On 11 March, the TASS reported that ships from the Russian Pacific fleet arrived at the Chah Bahar port of Iran, led by the Varyag guard missile cruiser, as part of joint naval exercise ‘Maritime Security Belt- 2024.’ Navy representatives from Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Oman, India and South Africa will act as observers. The Russian Marshal Shaposhnikov frigate, warships and a supply ship from the Chinese Navy, at least 10 ships, support vessels and three helicopters from the Iranian Navy too will be part of the drills, according to the ministry.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 11 March, Ulf Kristersson, the Swedish Prime Minister, made a speech at the ceremony commemorating Sweden’s accession into NATO, marking Sweden’s historic decision to step out of non-alignment. The event at Brussels was joined by Swedish Crown Princess Victoria, cabinet ministers, the Commander-in-chief, and six national party leaders. Sweden was prompted to join NATO after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, thereby threatening its security at the crossroads of northern Europe. Kristersson stated that Sweden will add to NATO’s ability and vice versa, as it already meets the NATO standard of allocating 2 per cent of its GDP to defence spending. The Swedish flag was hoisted in

Brussels to join 31 other Allies. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, welcomed Sweden, stating that “joining NATO is good for Sweden, good for stability in the North, and good for the security of our whole Alliance.”

On 11 March, Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy was tasked to boost Europe’s defence and industrial bases in view of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine as a matter of great urgency. Borrell noted that after two years of war, the stocks are depleting and the “war of stocks” has become a “war of production.” An immediate action is to task an increase in ammunition production. A lack of investment and capital in the defence industries is potentially slowing it down, leading to import of equipment. Borrell urged the fragmented European defence industry to cooperate and enable joint procurement for a common European interest, and boost industries through increased financing and offering incentives. He stressed on long-term defence partnerships with Ukraine and the need to make Europe “defence ready.”

On 11 March, *Kyiv Independent* reported on the upcoming meeting between Fumio Kishida, the Japanese Prime Minister, and Joe Biden, the US President, on 10 April, to “strengthen the joint production system” for defence equipment to aid Ukraine. The US is unable to produce enough artillery shells and air defence systems for Ukraine, and Japan, after revising its law that allows certain weapon transfers, which is helping restore American supplies. Japan had stated in December that it would send Patriot surface-to-air missiles to the US, taking a policy shift from its earlier pacifist stance against arms exports. The change is not just to aid Ukraine, but also to prepare for any potential of Chinese aggression in the future. Japan has contributed USD eight billion in humanitarian aid and assistance to Ukraine, but its Constitution prevents the shipment of lethal military equipment.

On 11 March, Viktor Gulevich, the chief of the general staff of the Belarusian Armed Forces stated that Belarus was preparing for “maintaining a high level of combat and

mobilisation readiness" in view of the political climate aggravated by Russian invasion in Ukraine. An inspection to monitor the same is being carried out in response to NATO preparations across Europe. The designated units of the Belarusian armed forces are set to conduct a series of exercises replicating the NATO exercises, which it plans on intensifying in the future. Currently, the Dragon 24 exercises led by Poland are underway within the NATO Steadfast Defender military drills, known to be the largest in Europe in several decades.

On 11 March, *The Guardian* reported that Copper International, a crypto currency firm, transferred more than USD 4.2 million worth of digital assets to the crypto wallet of Jonatan Zimenkov, part of an alleged Russian arms-dealing network. Zimenkov was imposed with sanctions by the US in February for alleged assistance to Russian invasion of Ukraine, as part of the "Zimenkov network" which is an arms dealing and sanctions evading network. While there are no suggestions that Copper International breached any regulations, the event highlights the opaqueness of crypto currency and the anonymity it offers.

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War in Ukraine: Day 745 & 746

War on the Ground:

On 09 March, Ukraine's air force claimed of destroying 12 out of 15 Iran-made Shahed drones. A bomb attack was reported in Kherson resulting in the damage of a building and injury of a child. Another attack was reported in centre Dnipropetrovsk, a village by the Dnipro River which led to the death of another child.

On 10 March, Government of Ukraine reported on Russia's strike using S-300 missile in Myrnohrad, an eastern town resulting in injury of many and death of three as shelling continued across Donetsk. Another attack was observed by Russia using Shahed drones in Dobropillya killing one more person in Chasiv Yar.

On 10 March, Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Foreign Minister expressed consent to join cruise missile exchange proposed by David Cameron, UK's Foreign Secretary to help Ukraine with long-range weapons. According to the report in *Deutsche Welle*, Berlin can supply the Taurus missiles to the UK in return of it supplying long-range Storm Shadow missiles to Kyiv.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 09 March, Russian forces claimed on destroying 47 drones of Ukraine launched across southern region in Rostov. According to Russian army, the air defence systems which flew over Belgorod, Kursk, Volgograd and Rostov oblasts were shot down and destroyed. Vasily Golubev, Governor of Rostov reported on a drone strike in Taganrog city near Sea of Azov and only one rescue worker was injured. On the same day, Ukrainian forces claimed on destroying 12 to 15 Russian drones.

On 10 March, Russia's defence ministry reported on several drone attacks in Novgorod and Leningrad oblasts located more than 1000 kilometres from Ukraine border. According to Roman Starovoit, Governor of Kursk reported on death of a woman and fire at an oil depot from the debris. Following this, the ministry reported on shooting down three drone attacks and imposing of airspace restrictions in response to the drones.

The West View:

Responses from the US and Europe

On 09 March, in an interview to *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, David Cameron, UK's Foreign Secretary warned against sending western troops to Ukraine even if it was for training. He suggested the training mission to be held outside Ukraine as deployment of foreign soldiers in Ukraine would turn them as targets for Russia. He also urged for long-range weapon support for Ukraine and UK's plan to cooperate with Germany to surpass the problem over Taurus missile supply.

On 10 March, *The Guardian* reported on the EU's fights towards rising false claims in the social media on war in Ukraine. According to the report, pro-Russian are expected to be spreading the claims across Facebook, X, and TikTok showing Ukrainian refugees as criminals and Ukraine officials diversion of western aid into buying luxury yachts and villas. Such spread of information was observed as propaganda aimed at weakening the EU and promoting anti-immigration parties such as Germany's AfD, France's National Rally and the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands.

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War in Ukraine: Day 744

Zelenskyy, Erdogan talks opens possibility for Ukraine-Russia peace summit

War on the Ground:

On 08 March, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's President held meeting in Istanbul. As part of his trip to promote "peace formula," Zelenskyy proposed the same, discussed on release of Ukrainian prisoners and called for safety in Black Sea corridor. Mainly the discussion brought out the prospect of Turkey mediating a peace summit between Ukraine and Russia. Erdogan on the same said: "We are ready to host a peace summit where Russia is also present."

On 08 March, multiple attacks were reported in Kupiansk, Synegubov, Chernihiv, southern Odesa and Black Sea port in Odesa. Oleh Synegubov, Governor of Kharkov reported on death of two from multiple rocket launcher attacks in Kupiansk area. In Synegubov located four miles from Russian border, a guided aerial bomb was reported to have killed a woman. Whereas in remaining areas one more was killed and damage was facilities. According to Ukraine's air forces 33 drones were intercepted out of 37 and 18 of Shahed drones were destroyed. The attacks were concentrated in Odesa and in the Black Sea port compared to other areas.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 08 March, *RT* reported on death of two due to a drone attack in Russia's Belgorod area which borders with Ukraine. The attack was confirmed by Vyacheslav Gladkov, Governor of Belgorod. According to him

three Kamikaze drones attacked the periphery of the village of Rozhdestvenka. He said: "As a result of the explosions, two people were killed and a third man was seriously injured."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 08 March, Grant Shapps, UK's Defense Secretary during his visit to Ukraine pledged to provide 10,000 drones worth GBP 125 million of "cutting-edge" technology as part of the drone package. He also announces increase in the total aid to Ukraine on drones from GBP 200 million to GBP 325 million. Till now drones have been used by Ukraine to counter attack, surveillance, carry grenades and drop explosives in the Russian captured areas.

On 08 March, Petr Fiala, Czech Republic's Prime Minister confirmed raising funds to purchase first set of 300,000 artillery shells for Ukraine under an international initiative out of 800,000. He said: "We have managed to raise enough money to buy the first batch of 300,000 artillery shells." The move comes as Ukraine faces shortage in ammunition and EU's failure to deliver one million shells by March.

The Global Fallouts: Implications of the War

On 08 March, India's authorities reported on detainment of Indians accused of being part of a trafficking network which engaged in sending people to fight in Russia. The statement was issued by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on holding of raids in 13 locations. It found 35 to have been sent so far to Russia and of which two were sent as "helpers" and were reported to have died while fighting. On the same Indian embassy in Russia confirmed the death of one. In response, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India issued warnings to Indians on the risks of being recruited for support role in Russian army. Randhir Jaiswal, MEA spokesperson said: "The CBI yesterday busted a major human trafficking network conducting searches in several cities and collecting incriminating evidence. A case of human trafficking has been registered against several agents."

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War in Ukraine: Day 743

France's President and Maia Sandu, Moldova's President signed a defence cooperation agreement

War on the Ground:

On 07 March, *Ukrinform* reported on Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President meeting with Grant Shapps, UK Secretary of State for Defence to discuss on defence cooperation. The discussion focused on boosting Ukraine's air defence, long-range capabilities and the need to fill the ammunition shortage. The importance of the Black Sea and need to establish an operational a transport corridor was also discussed.

On 07 March, *Ukrinform* reported on Serhi Lysak report on attack in the Nikopol city of Dnipropetrovsk area. According to the report, houses, outbuildings and power lines were damaged. The attack was observed to be carried out using five kamikaze drones but no casualties were reported.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 07 March, *RT* reported on Russian forces interception of six Ukraine's fixed-wing drones. The drones were targeted towards far-east of Russia as confirmed by Russia's defence ministry. These were destroyed when flying over Kursk, Bryansk and Tula areas. Of them, blast of two drones over Bryansk area resulted in damage and

casualty on the ground. Kursk and Bryansk have been subject to attacks since the war but Tula located much further into Russia, 200 kilometres from Ukraine has come under attack for the first time.

On 07 March, *RT* reported Aleksandr Pavlyuk, Russia's Commander of the Ground Forces statement on Ukraine's troop re-organisation plan. Pavlyuk observed Ukraine to be strategically re-organising its troops for a future counteroffensive. He predicted that the key goal could be to prevent Russia from advancing and to implement that Ukraine was withdrawing its exhausted forces to renew with a new strike group in the front line. In response Pavlyuk said: "...do everything possible to prepare the troops for more active actions, and to seize the initiative."

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 07 March, Emmanuel Macron, France's President and Maia Sandu, Moldova's President held a meeting to discuss defence collaboration. This comes after continued risk of Russian aggression for Moldova. The meeting resulted in signing of defence cooperation agreement between France and Moldova. Macron assured "unwavering support" and is observed to be signing cooperation agreements to boost the defence of former USSR countries. He said: "France restates its unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders."

On 07 March, Bill Blair, Canada's Minister of National Defence announced ammunition support to Ukraine. He assured to increase investments to boost domestic production of 155 millimetres of artillery shells worth CAD 4.4 million in three manufacturers. The investment is expected to improve research, advance the design and increase production to NATO standard to meet the increased demand for Ukraine.

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War in Ukraine: Day 742

Russia accuses Ukraine for multiple drone attacks in Kursk Oblast

War on the Ground:

On 06 March, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President reported on death and injury of people in Odesa due to Russia's strike. According to the report, explosions were reported near the conference zone where Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greece's Prime Minister took part. According to him: "We heard the sound of sirens and explosions that took place near us [but] did not have time to get to a shelter." Odesa has come under frequent attacks since the end of the Black Sea grain deal. Both leaders discussed on the importance of the port and the need to restore it to boost Ukraine's sea route.

On 06 March, Rafael Grossi, director of the International Atomic Agency warned against dangers behind a rushed restart of the Zaporizhzhia plant. Grossi who is scheduled to meet Vladimir Putin, Russia's President since 2022 is expected to discuss the risks connected to the nuclear power plant. The site being shut down for a long interval, he called for implementing safety measures to maintain restraint.

On 06 March, Ukraine's military announced its plan to form a separate unit for counter-offensive action for 2024. Oleksandr Pavliuk, one of the top military commanders said: "We will stabilize shortly...to prepare troops for more active actions." He added that the Ukraine military intends to withdraw weaker units and restore back in shape later in 2024.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 06 March, Roman Starovoyt, Kursk governor accused Ukraine for attacking fuel tanks in Russia's largest iron ore plants. According to the report, the drone attack caused fire in the warehouse located in Zheleznogorsk. The mining and processing plant is 90 kilometers from the Ukraine border and is owned by a Russian Oligarch Usmanov who is on international sanction list. There have been no claims from Ukraine on the drone attack.

On 06 March, Maria Zakharova, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson denied the arrest warrants issued by the ICC against two Russian officials. She called it a provocation and of "no significance" to Russia. Authorities from Kremlin denied to "recognize" the warrant citing the acts of Ukraine officers.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 06 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on a recent poll held by Germany's news agency DPA on public opinion over sending of Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine. The survey found 58 per cent of the participants to be against and only 30 per cent were in favour of the missile support. This included 2,169 Germans, poll held between 01-05 March 2024. Till now Olaf Scholz refuses to send Taurus missiles to Ukraine.

On 06 March, Germany announced to take part in Czech initiative in buying ammunition for Ukraine. Similarly, France also expressed interest in procuring support for the group. The move comes as the EU is challenged to reach the ammo production targets as Ukrainian troops face the shortage on ground.

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War in Ukraine: Day 741

Ukraine claims destroying Russian warship using its Magura V5 naval drone

War on the Ground:

On 05 March, Ukraine's Armed Forces (UAF) claimed to have destroyed Russia's warship close to Crimean Peninsula. According to Andriy Yusov, UAF spokesperson, "Sergey Kotov" of "Project 22160" class Russia's patrol boat was damaged earlier in an attack in September 2023. This was destroyed completely by "Magura V5" Ukrainian naval drones. On the same Ukraine's military intelligence reported that Russia's boat faced damage in the stern, starboard and port sides in the Kerch Strait which is a narrow waterway dividing Crimea from Russia's Taman. Russia is yet to report on the event, whereas Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President called it "a symbol of the occupation."

On 05 March, Ukraine claimed on launching nine drone and artillery attacks on Russia's Belgorod area near the border. According to the report, no casualties were recorded but strikes led to fire at a train station and subsequent power outage in a village near Kursk.

On 05 March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued warrant against two senior Russian officials (army lieutenant and navy admiral), Lt. Gen. Sergei Ivanovich Kobylash and Adm. Viktor Nikolayevich Sokolov who were accused of committing war crimes in Ukraine. According to the court: "Crime against humanity of inhumane acts...are each allegedly responsible for the war crime of directing attacks at civilian." They were found responsible for striking Ukraine's electric infrastructure during October 2022 and March 2023. In response, Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to

Ukraine's President called the move: "extremely symbolic."

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 05 March, in an interview to *TASS*, Vladimir Putin Russia's President disclosed BRICS group plan to create a payment system using digital technologies. Yury Ushakov, a senior foreign policy to Putin said that the goal was to create one within the group to facilitate digital currencies and blockchain. This would enable ease of transaction at state, person and business level. The move is viewed to replace currency usage in place of USD.

On 05 March, *RT* reported on Ukraine's drone attack in Belgorod and Kursk areas. According to the report, four plane-type UACs were deterred by Russia's air force. The same was confirmed by Vyacheslav Gladkov, Belgorod governor who reported on the emergency services handling the fire in the "infrastructure object." A warning was issued to the residents over threat of drones and Ukraine was observed to be using Kamikaze drones in Russia.

On 05 March, Maria Zakharova, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson issued a warning against Germany on media freedom. She warned about situation of expelling of German journalists from Russia in a rebuttal if Germany expelled Russian journalists. On the same Anton Gorelkin, Russia's State of Duma MP accused the US for encouraging Germany to reduce Russia's journalistic presence. On the same day Alexander Lambsdorff, German Ambassador was called and handed an "official protest and demand" to clarify the audio leak and the phone conversation on plans to strike Crimea bridge.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 05 March, the European Commission revealed its plans to establish a defence industry programme of EUR 1.5 billion with an agenda to improve the production and procurement of weapons. This is mainly to reduce dependency over US armaments. Under the programme, 27 EU member states are asked to gather minimum 40 per cent of

their defence equipment by 2030. It also intends to increase intra-EU defence trade to 35 per cent with finances for the programme to follow through the EU budget between 2025 and 2027. In a statement the Commission said: "To increase European defense industrial readiness, member states need to invest more, better, together, and European."

On 05 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Poland-NATO troops exercise in Vistula river. 20,000 NATO troops along with battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers and equipment took part in the exercise in northern Poland. This forms part of the larger operation "Dragon 24" under NATO's "Steadfast Defender" which will be held across 2024. The current exercise will include 15,000 Polish troops supported by 5,000 from eight other NATO members.

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War in Ukraine: Day 740

Poland and Sweden sign anti-tank deal worth EUR 1.5 billion

War on the Ground:

On 04 March, in response to Russia's state media the *TASS* report on damage of a railway bridge in the southwestern Samara area, Ukraine's military intelligence claimed responsibility. Russia's railway authorities announced suspension of the traffic over the bridge. In a statement released by Ukraine's military intelligence: "A railway bridge over the Chapaevka River in Russia's Samara region was blown up. On 4 March 2024, at

around 6:00 am (0200 GMT), the bridge was damaged by blowing up its support structures." It claimed stating the bridge was used for transiting "military cargo," such as ammunition to Chapayevsk town in Russia.

On 04 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on three Ukrainian children visit to Washington to bring awareness on child deportations. Ihes Pohl, DW correspondent stated the aim of the visit was to convey their story to convince the US MP's to continue the aid support. According to the report, the three were abducted in Mariupol, sent to Russia, and were brought back into Ukraine. Close to 20,000 children are held hostage and so far, only 300 have been rescued.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 04 March, Sergey Chemezov, Russia's head of the state armaments corporation Rostec spoke on the expensive Armata, Russia's latest battle tank. According to him, the tank is considered superior of all due to its functionality but it was less possible to deploy by Russia due to its price. The Armata T-14 introduced in 2015 was not under production line due to technical issues. Since Russia intends to invest to boost its military, it has replaced this with T-90 tanks and used on ground as its cheaper.

On 04 March, Russia's defence ministry claimed on Russian forces destroying a second-US provided M1 Abrams tank in Donbas. According to the statement released, the tank was spotted in the outskirts of Avdiivka and along with this another Ukrainian tank was also reportedly destroyed. Till now Ukraine has received 31 Abrams tanks as per the pledge from the US.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 04 March, Poland signed an anti-tank weapons deal with Sweden worth EUR 1.5 billion. The move comes in effort to boost defence in response to Russia's invasion. This includes equipment, many rounds of ammunition, and Carl Gustaf M4 anti-tank weapons. Poland also expressed interest in utilising Sweden's expertise in holding a territorial defence and intends to build defence cooperation. Pål Jonson, Sweden's

Defence Minister said: "good and concrete discussions.. about common security issues and continued support for Ukraine."

On 04 March, in the diplomatic forum held by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's President Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Prime Minister emphasised on the effect of war in Ukraine on Europe's political landscape. He stressed on ending the war to avoid losses for Hungary. He also denied the allegations of being a pro-Russia and reiterated his Hungarian interest as priority. Highlighting his support for Sweden, he asked for respect for Hungary within the international community and need to build relations with NATO. According to him, Hungary's priority would remain on EU presidency, and EU enlargement in the Balkans.

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War in Ukraine: Days 738 & 739 Germany calls for investigation on audio leak on Ukraine by Russian media

War on the Ground:

On 02 March, Oleh Kiper, Odesa's governor reported on death of seven and injury of eight following a drone strike by Russia in Odesa. According to him, a residential building was struck causing death and extensive damage to infrastructure. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President said: "We need more air defense capabilities from our partners. The Ukrainian air shield must be strengthened in order to effectively protect our people from Russian terror."

On 03 March, Zelenskyy stressed on delivery

of missile systems by the West after the attack in Odesa killing close to 11. Condemning the attacks, he stated the increase in deaths of civilians to be due to delay in supply of weapons.

The Moscow View: Claims by Russia

On 02 March, *RT* reported on a powerful blast in St. Petersburg damaging an apartment. St. Petersburg National Guard confirmed the attack and predicted to have caused by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). There were no casualties reported but building damage and evacuation was recorded.

On 03 March, *RT* reported on Ukraine's new set of drone strike in Crimea. Russian forces claimed to have destroyed 38 UAVs using air defence systems. Apart from this there was no damage or casualty report. In response Russia announced closure of many highways connecting to Crimea.

On 03 March, *TASS* reported on China's readiness to promote peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. Li Hui, Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Eurasian Affairs stated China's aim to mediate talks between both for political settlement of the crisis. He stressed: "...history shows that any conflict must ultimately be resolved through negotiations, and the more acute the contradictions, the greater the need for opening a dialogue." The move comes as part of Hui's tour to Europe.

The West View: Responses from the US and Europe

On 02 March, after Russia's state media observed to have leaked a recording of German high-rank officers, Germany's defence ministry confirmed the authenticity of the recording. The audio includes a talk on how Taurus cruise missiles can be used for destroying a bridge in Crimea which was assumed to be a video conference between four air force officers. It also provides instances of UK troops on ground with links to storm shadow missiles. According to the ministry's assessment, the conversation was from air force but could not confirm if any alterations were made. Olaf Scholz,

Germany's Chancellor called it a serious matter and said: "It will now be investigated very carefully, very intensively, and very quickly."

On 02 March, Sandor Lezsak, Speaker of Hungary's Parliament signed the final ratification of Sweden's accession into NATO. The signing was previously paused due to objections from the MEPs. This means Sweden has overcome the last hurdle from Hungary.

On 03 March, following the record leak, Boris Pistorius, Germany's Defence Minister criticised Russia saying: "It is about using this recording to destabilize and unsettle us." He called the leak as part of Putin's "information war." The leaked conversation was reportedly taken place in Webex online platform.

On 03 March, in its daily intelligence, UK's Ministry of Defence reported on increased casualty for Russia in February compared to last two years. According to the report 983 casualties were observed per day in February. In a statement: "The increase in the daily average almost certainly reflects Russia's commitment to mass and attritional warfare." It estimated 355,000 personnel to have been killed since 2022.

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EM Short Notes*

By 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

ARMENIA

Despite a sanctions regime; Armenia's trade with Russia increases

On 28 March, according to *Euractiv*, Armenia's exports to Russia tripled in 2022 and doubled in the initial months of 2023 despite the Western sanctions regime, increasing concerns over its relations with Russia. While the political relations between Armenia and Russia have deteriorated, their trade has flourished, especially since the former joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2014, making Russia its largest trading partner. According to 2023 data, Russian trade accounted for 35 per cent of Armenia's foreign trade compared to the EU's 13 per cent share. Such dependency risks the implementation of any sanctions without guaranteed economic downfall in Armenia. (Anna Pambukhchyan, "Armenia's exports to Russia raise concerns over sanctions circumvention," *Euractiv*, 28 March)

BELARUS

Opinion in Deutsche Welle reports decrease in release of prisoners with illness

On 09 March, in an opinion published by *Deutsche Welle*, reported on the uncertainty for the disabled and people with illness in Belarusian prisons. According to the report, close to 40 people with disabilities or serious illness in Belarus were found to be among political prisoners. Since 2021 five had died in the prisons while many have grim possibilities to be released. Right activists argue that the death of those prisoners was from "inhuman treatment" and denied "high-quality medical care." Under the governmental law, authorities take responsibility for the health conditions of those detained but at the judiciary level it was observed to be a setback. Since 2010, there was a 1.3 per cent decrease from 10 per cent in allowing release of such prisoners under health conditions by the Judiciary. At the government, Vasily Savadsky, former head of medical service of

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the Ministry of Interior says health aspect was often being exploited to enforce statements from the defendants by the investigators. Although, release under medical grounds is possible which includes tuberculosis, cancer or diabetes. ("Belarus: Little mercy for sick or disabled prisoners," *Deutsche Welle*, 09 March 2024)

ESTONIA

State observes 75th anniversary of March deportations

On 25 March, according to *ERR News*, Estonia held commemorative ceremonies on Monday to observe the 75th anniversary of the March deportations. In March 1949, 22,000 people from Estonia and more than a total of 90,000 people from the Baltic states were deported to Siberia. Hanno Pevkur, Minister of Defense laid a wreath at the Victims of Communism Memorial, to remember the victims of the deportations. Traditions included lighting candles on Freedom Square in Tallinn and hoisting of mourning flags. The Estonian Memory Institute plans to establish informative plaques in multiple languages whereas a red light installation is to be projected on the seaward-facing side of the Patarei Sea Fortress. The Estonian National Museum in its permanent exhibition "Encounters" included items that deported people carried to Siberia ("Estonia marks 75th anniversary of March deportations," *ERR News*, 25 March 2024)

FRANCE

French lower house approves bill banning hair discrimination

On 29 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the French National Assembly approved a bill outlawing any discrimination based on hair and hairstyle with 44 votes in favour and two against. The bill was drafted by Olivier Serva, a Black MP from Guadeloupe, stating that the bill would help the victims of such suffering, especially for Black women who have been observed to be ruled out for jobs because of their hairstyles. The bill also includes redheads, blondes and bald men. After the National Assembly approval, the bill will go to the Senate for approval, but a majority of conservatives in

the upper house means that a favourable outcome is less certain. The opponents of the bill call it unnecessary and merely "symbolic" since any discrimination based on looks is already banned by law. Laws to prevent hair discrimination already exist in 20 US states and as guidelines in Britain to prevent such discrimination in schools. ("French National Assembly votes to outlaw hair discrimination," *Deutsche Welle*, 29 March 2024)

France set to connect Flamanville nuclear reactor to the grid by mid-2024

On 28 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, EDF, the French state-owned energy company, announced that it received approval from the nuclear supervisory authority to put a new nuclear reactor in the grid. The reactor, located in Flamanville on the English Channel, is set to be loaded with fuel in the coming weeks. It will be connected to the grid in mid-2024, late by 12 years per initial plans, the construction for which began in 2007. The plant is excessively over budget, with initial planned costs at EUR 3.3 billion and current estimates as high as EUR 12 billion. France is the second largest producer of nuclear energy after the US, and a shift to nuclear energy comes as concerns over global warming increase. France is set to extend the operating life of 32 of its 56 reactors if safety concerns are met. Germany, on the contrary, is phasing down its nuclear power and focusing on renewable sources like wind energy. ("France set to commission new nuclear plant," *Deutsche Welle*, 28 March 2024)

France condemns the 1961 Algerian massacre in Paris

On 28 March, according to *Le Monde*, the French Assemblée Nationale approved a resolution condemning a brutal police crackdown on protests supporting the Algerian independence in 1961, calling it "bloody and murderous repression". The bill was introduced by Sabrina Sebaihi, a Green lawmaker and Julie Delpech, a Renaissance party MP, which was voted in favour by 67 lawmakers and 11 against.

Emmanuel Macron, the French President, after years of coverup by the French, condemned the act as “inexcusable” in 2021. The text calls for official commemoration of the massacre, which was undertaken “under the authority of police prefect Maurice Papon”, a Nazi collaborator in the 1980s. Sebaihi described the act as “the first step” towards “recognition of this colonial crime”. (“French lawmakers condemn 1961 Paris massacre of Algerians,” *Le Monde*, 28 March 2024)

France set to provide EUR 30 million to UNRWA

On 28 March, according to *Le Monde*, France will provide EUR 30 million to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) conditional on the agency’s neutrality, according to the French foreign ministry. Christopher Lemoine, the foreign ministry spokesperson, stated the importance of the aid agency in Gaza, urging that “it must imperatively be able to continue its work”. No timeline for the payments have been given so far. France had funded the agency with EUR 60 million in 2022. The employees of the UNRWA had earlier been accused of their alleged involvement with Hamas’ attacks by Israel leading to a UN investigation into the matter and firing of accused employees. (“France set to provide €30 million to UNRWA Palestine aid agency,” *Le Monde*, 28 March 2024)

Macron visits Brazil to boost business

On 25 March, according to *Politico*, Emmanuel Macron, the French President, travelled to Brazil to convince Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the Brazilian President, to strengthen ties between both countries through increased investments. An official in Elysée noted that Macron wanted to make up for a “four-year eclipse and a virtual freeze in political relations” during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, in his first official visit to South America. To boost investments in Brazil, especially to promote the green sector, Macron is joined by around 120 French business representatives. He will meet Lula in the

tropical metropolis of Belém, which Lula aims to transform into the capital of green transition and host the COP 30 climate conference there. Macron had earlier criticised Brazilian beef exports and a trade deal between the EU and the Mercosur bloc of which Brazil is the largest member, to appease French farmers. Lula had responded by criticising Macron’s protectionist policy. The controversy is set to remain the “elephant in the room” during the bilateral visit. Macron and Lula have differing views on the war in Ukraine, with the former a staunch supporter of Ukraine and the latter continuing his “neutral” position. However, Macron is expected to find common ground, including the reform of the IMF and World Bank where Brazil is underrepresented, as well as taxing the richest, in an attempt to take steps “towards each other.” (Giorgio Leali, “Macron bets on investments and fraternité to charm Lula in first visit to Brazil,” *Politico*, 25 March 2024)

Government increases security patrols post Moscow terror attacks

On 25 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, France was reported to have increased its armed patrols in public places after the Moscow terrorist attacks which killed 137 people and injured 140. “Islamic State Khorasan Province” (IS-K) group claimed responsibility for the Moscow attacks. Afghanistan-based IS-K is one of the dangerous branches of the Islamic- State group responsible for the death of thousands in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Gabriel Attal, French Prime Minister stated on French security “We have decided to raise the Vigipirate state to its highest level: attack emergency.” France had been on high alert already as it awaits the Paris Olympics and Paralympics this year. (“France raises terror alert after Moscow theater attack,” *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2024)

Macron urges EU leaders to increase defence spending

On 21 March, according to *Financial Times*, Emmanuel Macron, the French President is set to urge leaders at the EU summit to increase defence funding, in the backdrop of Russia’s threat, Europe’s struggles to

increase support for Ukraine and the possibility of withdrawal of the US support if Donald Trump ascends presidency. The demand arises as the bloc explores innovative solutions to fund increased defence spending. One of the proposals includes the use of earnings from frozen Russian assets, to invest more in defence and use the funds for weapons for Ukraine. However, this has been met with opposition as countries show concern over the legality of the same. The joint borrowing option was discussed but later ruled out by Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark. Charles Michel, European Council President voiced his support for European defence bonds as "...a powerful means to strengthen our technological innovation and industrial base." (Henry Foy, Paola Tamma, Leila Abboud, and Guy Chazan, "[Emmanuel Macron to revive demands for European defence bonds](#)," *Financial Times*, 21 March 2024)

Operation launched to curb drug trafficking networks in Marseille

On 19 March, France's President Emmanuel Macron announced the launch of a large-scale operation on drug smuggling in Marseille. The move comes as he recalled the death of many due to gang criminality and the city being the host to many events of the Paris Olympics triggered the launch. He visited La Castellane, one of the most affected neighbourhoods due to drug wars. The launched operation to track such drug networks, traffickers and will be destroyed as per Macron's comments. Marseille being the second largest city has been subject to violence due to increase gang wars. ("France launches major anti-drug crackdown in Marseille," *Deutsche Welle*, 19 March 2024)

Court of Paris finds the 28 people guilty of cyberbullying

On 19 March, the *BBC* reported on imprisonment of 28 people for 18 months under the cyberbullying case. The judges found the suspects guild of harassing a influencer triggered through a campaign by French rapper Booba on "thieving influencers." The court of Paris stated that

the act had "real consequences" to the subject and Booba will also face a separate trial. Defendants of the case were fines EUR 700 and were asked to pay an additional penalty of EUR 54,000 to the influencer. (Ian Casey, "[Magali Berdah: Dozens jailed in France's largest cyberbully case](#)," *BBC*, 19 March 2024)

France's Competition Authority fines Google

On 20 March, French authorities announced fining of Google for breach of an agreement in paying media companies. According to the report, it will be fined EUR 250 million for not paying and reproducing the same online. France's Competition Authority stated that the fine was only for failing the follow the commitment made in June 2022. Google and many other similar platforms have been subject to accusation of making billion from news without splitting the revenues with who circulate it. This has been tried to be addressed by the EU through "neighbouring rights" which grants print media to ask for compensation for the content online. ("French regulator fines Google €250 million," *Le Monde*. 20 March 2024)

Macron announces legislation approving "aid in dying" under stipulations

On 10 March, in an interview to *La Croix* and *Libération*., Emmanuel Macron announced a legislation on assisted dying. This grants eligible patients to have control of a lethal product "alone or with assistance." Patients who suffer from an incurable disease and life-threatening illness in a short-term to medium term and cases of unrelievable pain can "ask to be helped to die." This also includes minors and adults suffering from psychiatric conditions such as Alzheimer. Once a medical professional consents for the lethal substance and agrees to administer or with help of a third party (volunteer, doctor, or nurse), can be carried out in care homes, or elderly homes. In this move, Macron avoided mentioning the term assisted suicide or euthanasia to give priority to the patient's consent. ("[Macron announces bill](#)

allowing 'aid in dying,' under 'strict conditions,' *Le Monde*, 10 March 2024)

Macron insists on including abortion rights into EU 's Charter

On 08 March, Emmanuel Macron, France's President following the vote for abortion rights in France vouched for extending the same into EU's basic law. Indicating how the societal norms are no longer etched in stone, called for guaranteeing of freedom to allow abortion and inclusion in EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights. The statements come as France imprinted the amendment into its 1958 constitution in a special public ceremony. ("Macron says he wants abortion added to EU rights charter," *Le Monde*, 08 March 2024)

Parliament constitutionalises abortion rights of women

On 04 March, France's parliament approved the bill with three-fifth majority to constitutionalise women's abortions rights. Through the approval, Article 34 will be amended to include the conditions to put freedom of women under practise for an abortion. Emmanuel Macron, France's President called it a "universal message" across the globe to defend abortion rights. The decision echoes back to the US Supreme Court decision which reversed women's constitutional rights to abortion. France will be the first country to establish the right to terminate a pregnancy while many countries across Europe stand divided. First legalised in 1975 in France, the law allowed abortion up to 10th week and later extended to 14th week by 2022. Across Europe the divide can be viewed between the catholic countries, right-wing governments and eastern Europe. In the catholic countries like Spain, Malta, and Hungary doctors, healthcare providers refuse to give the abortion services under religious and moral basis. Whereas in the case of right-wing parties and eastern European countries unless there is threat to life or under situations of rape, incest imposes strict policies and ban on abortion. ("Why France enshrined abortion rights in its constitution," *Deutsche Welle*, 04 March 2024)

Parliament to vote to constitutionalise abortion rights

On 04 March, *Politico* reported France constitutionalising abortion rights following efforts of Emmanuel Macron, France's President. According to the report, this is expected to send a message across the Europe and transatlantic on support to reproductive rights at same time on how to gain political points as Europe witness rise of right. This amendment will be included in the constitution if upper and lower house approve with three-fifth in favour. While abortion rights are supported across France without any debate earlier, constitutionalising was opposed given the existing guarantees for women. Under the doubt of the rights coming under question in future the current government has pushed for including in the constitution. ("France moves to make abortion a constitutional right amid rollbacks in US and Europe," *Politico*, 04 March 2024)

FINLAND

Continues to be the happiest country in the world

On 20 March, the world happiness report published the top 10 countries in the happiness index. According to the report, Finland continued to be the happiest country for seventh time along with other Nordic countries, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland placed in the top. It also found increasing unhappiness amongst the youth in western countries especially with the US and Germany dropping down from top 20. This was replaced by new two countries, Costa Rica and Kuwait in 12 and 13 places whereas eastern European, Serbia, Bulgaria and Latvia also highlighted increase in happiness. It was a grim picture for Afghanistan following the Taliban take over which remained the last one in the list. According to Jennifer De Paola, a happiness researcher at the University of Helsinki: "Finnish society is permeated by a sense of trust, freedom, and high level of autonomy." Combined with this, the strong welfare society and low corruption and free access to healthcare and education were the key components for Finland to top the index. ("Finland ranked world's happiest country

for seventh year," Deutsche Welle, 20 March 2024)

GERMANY

Government closes seven coal-powered plants after waning energy crisis

On 26 March, according to *Euractiv*, Germany will shut down seven of its lignite-fired power plants by the end of the month, after their decommissioning was earlier postponed in view of the energy crisis faced in 2022. The Federal Network Agency (BNetzA) has however ensured that the energy security of Germany would not be impacted. After limited supply of Russian gas and faltering of French nuclear energy supply, Germany postponed its decision by another winter in October 2023. COP28 in December urged countries to phase down the use of coal, the most polluting means to generate electricity. Germany has powered down the use of coal to generate electricity, from 33 per cent in 2022 to 26 per cent in 2023. Western Germany claims that it is prepared to achieve its carbon goals in 2030, but experts claim that lack of funding for accessing additional gas for power plants could cause difficulty in achieving the goal. (Nikolaus J Kurmayer, "Germany shuts seven coal power plants as energy crises eases," *Euractiv*, 26 March 2024)

Cannabis possession and home cultivation to be decriminalised from 01 April

On 22 March, *Politico* reported on the law decriminalising cannabis possession and home cultivation, passed in Bundesrat, the German chamber of federal states. According to the law, Adults over 18 years are allowed to possess up to 25 grams of cannabis and grow up to three plants at home. It also allows "cannabis clubs" to supply up to 500 members with a maximum monthly quantity of 50 grams per member. Cannabis clubs would also be subjected to regular inspections instead of annual inspections. Karl Lauterbach, German Health Minister remarked this law marks "the beginning of the end for the black market," and asked to use the "new option responsibly." Law garnered criticism stating

the permitted amount of cannabis possession to be high and the lack of prohibition zones around schools and kindergartens. The decriminalisation law will be followed by the setting up of state-controlled cannabis sold in licensed shops, after the setting up of municipal five-year pilot programmes. (Peter Wilke, "Cannabis will be legal in Germany within days," *Politico*, 22 March 2024)

Tesla's new working council assures wage changes

On 10 March, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* reported that the Tesla factory in Berlin will be electing a new works council. The election at Tesla's sole factory in Europe came to an end on 13 March. The works council has 39 seats with 234 candidates having contested the elections. With more than 12,500 people employed in the factory, IG Metall, Germany's largest metal union, wishes to increase its influence in the plant by demanding better working conditions. Tesla stated that several of the demands are already in practice and rejected a collective bargaining agreement. With Michaela Schmitz, the previous chairwoman of the council standing for re-election, Dirk Schulze, the district manager of Berlin-Brandenburg-Saxony, has accused the previous council as failing to side with the workforce. Schmitz rejected the allegation, stating that their council brought about an 18 per cent increase in salary without any collective agreement. Tesla has stated that they are willing to offer annual wage changes. ("Tesla has elected a works council", *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 20 March 2024)

Report finds shortage in military in aircraft, tanks and ammunition

On 12 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported that Eva Högl, the Bundestag's Commissioner for the armed forces, presented a report stating that the Bundeswehr, the German military, "had too little of everything." Despite having earmarked a special modernisation fund worth EUR 100 billion for the Bundeswehr two years back, Högl noted the need for improvements in infrastructure, equipment and personnel. The military faces shortages

of aircrafts, ships, tanks, spare parts, radio devices and other ammunition. Högl however has noted that the Bundestag approved defence contracts amounting to EUR 47.7 billion in 2023, also planning for the use of two-thirds of the special defence fund. According to the report, German soldiers are “aging and shrinking,” suggesting an increase in troop numbers from 181,000 to 203,000 in the next seven years. (“Germany’s military is aging and shrinking, says report,” *Deutsche Welle*, 12 March 2024)

Environmentalists protest against Tesla’s factory expansion

On 10 March, hundreds of environmental activists protested in Grünheide, against the expansion of Tesla’s factory outside Berlin following an attack on the power supply. The protests emerged due to risk of water contamination as Tesla’s proposal to construct the electric vehicle (EV) factory with an additional freight station, warehouses and kindergarten fell under water protection area. It also endangers forest near the factory as 100 hectares could be cleared. Earlier, the attack halted its production for a week after an electricity pylon caught fire prompting for an investigation. Germany’s Federal Network Agency called for securing the energy and telecommunication infrastructure. (“Germany: Protest against Tesla plans to expand ‘Gigafactory,’” *Deutsche Welle*, 10 March 2024)

DLR on alert over impact of space debris on earth’s surface

On 08 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Germany’s latest concerns over increasing space junk and debris from International Space Station (ISS). According to the report, debris including battery pack from the ISS three years before weighing 2.6 tonnes is reported to settle down over North American atmosphere. Found by the German Aerospace Center (DLR), the debris is expected to burn when reaching the earth surface with high possibility to merge into ocean. Although the risk is marked “unlikely” for Germany, the German Economic Affairs and Climate Ministry

(BMWK) is reported to closely monitor the effect of the debris to implement crisis measures. (“ISS space junk: Germany on alert for debris, risk minimal,” *Deutsche Welle*, 08 March 2024)

Rail and airline staff stage dual strike for hike in pay

On 07 March, Germany witnessed dual strike of worker staff from Deutsche Bahn and Lufthansa demanding increase in wages. The strike is expected to impact rail and air traffic till 09 March with only 10-20 per cent to operate on schedule. One of the operator spokesperson said: “The completely unnecessary GDL strike affects the plans of millions of travelers.” Apart from the wages, the staff also demand for reduction in working hours from 38 to 35 with no change in payment. Whereas those from Lufthansa, the Verdi union demanded for 12.5 per cent raise of EUR 500 more per month along with an inflation compensation bonus of EUR 3000. Earlier, the airline company announced doubling of profits and recovery from the Pandemic. (“Germany: Dual rail and air strikes affect ‘millions,’” *Deutsche Welle*, 07 March 2024)

Ifo finds work from home culture becoming a norm in service industry

On 04 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on a study released by the Ifo, a German economic research institute on work from home culture. According to the report, service sector had shifted towards working from home permanently post pandemic. The study found that 24.1 per cent of workers in Germany did their work from home in February, which was quarter of employees in Germany. Jean-Victor Alipour, Ifo expert said: “The proportion has been almost constant for two years.” This was a contrasting scenario in small and medium sized companies as the proportion was less with 20.5 per cent working from home. The highest share came from large companies and mostly among service employees compared to trade and construction industries. (“Germany: Working from home is here to stay, says study,” *Deutsche Welle*, 04 March 2024)

HUNGARY

Orban says Trump would not “give a penny” to Ukraine

On 11 March, Victor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister following his meeting with Donald Trump, former US President stated that the Trump would not “give a penny” for war in Ukraine. He disclosed his full support to Trump for the 2024 elections. Tagging to Trump's statement Orban stated that without the US and Europe support, the war will come to an end. He also added that Trump had clear plans on ending the war in Ukraine. The meeting with Trump has gained criticism from the EU leaders once again on Orban. (“[Trump will not give a penny to Ukraine - Hungary PM Orban](#),” *The BBC*, 11 March 2024)

ICELAND

Volcano eruption occurs for fourth time

On 17 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the volcano eruption on the Reykjanes Peninsula in Iceland, for the fourth time in three months. Iceland's Meteorological Office noted that the eruption caused the creation of a fissure almost three kilometres long wedged between Stóra-Skógfell and Hagafell mountains. The eruption was expected by authorities after witnessing signs of accumulating magma, and hundreds of people were evacuated from the Blue Lagoon thermal spa, a key tourist location. No flight disruptions in the airspace were reported. Iceland sits on a volcanic hotspot, located between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates. The country has 30 active volcanoes, being a popular country for volcano tourism, and therefore is experienced with management of volcanic eruptions. (“[Iceland: Volcano erupts for fourth time in 3 months](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 17 March 2024)

IRELAND

Simon Harris to become Ireland's youngest Prime Minister

On 24 March, according to *Le Monde*, Simon Harris is set to become Ireland's youngest prime minister at 37 after he acquired the leadership of the Fine Gael party after

receiving a series of endorsements from the party members. Simon Coveney, deputy leader of the Fine Gael party stated, “I think he's done a really good job in securing the leadership in as comprehensive a way as he has.” Harris, Ireland's Further and Higher Education Minister, would be replacing Leo Varadkar as Prime Minister who resigned the previous week. Harris stated his commitment to the government programme agreed upon by the coalition of Fianna Fail and the Green Party. (“[Simon Harris set to become Ireland's youngest prime minister](#),” *Le Monde*, 24 March 2024)

Prime Minister resigns claims personal and political reasons

On 20 March, according to *Le Monde*, Leo Varadkar, Ireland's Prime Minister, announced his resignation from the office and as the leader of the Fine Gael party in a surprise move, claiming “personal and political” reasons. Varadkar stated that he would resign the office of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) as soon as he finds a replacement, stating that he is no longer “the best person” to lead Ireland. He had earlier faced a defeat in what was deemed the ‘biggest ever referendum loss by a government’ in his policy to reform references for women, family and care. Experts have noted that the “unexpected” resignation ahead of local elections in Ireland and if the European Parliament will cause a “political earthquake.” (“[Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar announces shock resignation](#),” *Le Monde*, 20 March 2024)

Irish reject government's proposal to redefine make-up of family and woman's role

On 09 March, Irish rejected government's proposal to amend the definition of “make-up family and a woman's role within the household” in the constitution. Leo Varadkar Prime Minister of Ireland and major political parties support the changes but with considerable turnout, the people voted against the referendum. According to the proponents, the first amendment would expand the definition of a family by including the term “durable relationships” with marriage. The second amendment

would mean “the state would strive to support” the provisions where other member of the family can help or care for mothers at home. This was refused by most of the people due to two reasons. One, they argued it as scope for unintended changes to taxes and citizenship and two, the word “strive” was not well received as it does not hold the state fully responsible rather shift to private caregiver. (“[Ireland: Voters reject amendments redefining family, women](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 10 March 2024)

Double referendum to be held to make amendments to family and care

On 08 March, Government of Ireland started the voting process for a double referendum for making amendments to the constitution on “make-up of a family” and “Women’s life within the home.” All political parties are expected to vote in favour. The two proposals will change the “family amendment and care amendment” to the Article 41 of Ireland’s Constitution created in 1937. First amendment mandates the citizens to widen the definition of family from “those found on marriage” to add “durable relationships.” Whereas the second one proposed for replacement of traditional language on “mother’s duties” at home with including the care given by other family members. The significance of the vote is to ward away the influence of catholic voters. (“[Ireland holds referendums to update Constitution on women, family](#),” *Le Monde*, 08 March 2024)

ITALY

Officials report increasing security alert level post-Moscow terror attacks

On 25 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Italy follows France in increasing its security alert level through surveillance and checks ahead of the Easter holidays. As discussed in the National Security Council meeting in Rome, increased security is planned owing to the events planned for Easter at the Vatican. The increased security efforts are following the deadly terror attacks carried out by ISIS-K at a concert hall in Moscow. Matteo Piantedosi, Italian Interior Minister stated “Both surveillance

and checks will be increased, paying the most attention to the places of greatest aggregation and transit of people, as well as sensitive targets.” (“[Moscow attack: Italy joins France in raising security level](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2024)

LATVIA

Measures for Russian citizens and supporters in Latvia

On 26 March, *Eng.lsm.lv* reported on the number of Russian citizens in Latvia who supported Putin in the Presidential elections. “De facto,” broadcast by Latvian Television aimed to shed light on steps taken to reduce Kremlin and war supporters in Latvia. The residency permit to stay in Latvia of the eligible voters was checked, and four people were ordered to be deported as their permits had expired. State language tests are also conducted for Russian citizens to prove their Latvian language skills. Russian citizens are also required to submit documents stating their views on Russia’s occupation of Ukraine. Some 100 Russian citizens who did not complete these forms were banned from their stay in Latvia. Russian citizens reported lying on the forms and questionnaires regarding Crimea and Donbas receiving their pensions. Since the beginning of the war, Latvia has blacklisted 79 Russian citizens and has banned them from entering Latvia. State Security Service of Latvia has indicated cases of Russian propaganda and misinformation regarding Latvia’s public authorities. (“[What to do about Kremlin supporters in Latvia?](#),” *Eng.lsm.lv*, 25 March 2024)

NORWAY

Trial begins for the 2022 gay bar shooting in Oslo

On 13 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported that Norway began its trial against Zaniar Matapour, a man accused of shooting at a popular gay bar in Oslo, killing two and injuring nine in 2022. Matapour fired 10 rounds with a machine gun and eight rounds with a handgun, according to Sturla Henriksbo, the prosecutor, in the “London Pub” the night before Oslo’s pride parade, which got cancelled following the incident.

Matapour claimed himself to have sworn allegiance to the Islamic State according to prosecutors, in a case that has been claimed by officials as an “act of Islamic terrorism” with Norway raising its threat assessment to the highest level. Matapour refused to speak to investigators in the case that could sentence him to 30 years in prison. He questioned the judge on the trial overlapping with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which the judge perceived as a non-conflict. ([“Norway: Oslo terrorism trial for LGBTQ bar shooting begins,” *Deutsche Welle*, 13 March 2024](#))

POLAND

Government in dilemma between raging farmers and ending trade with Ukraine

On 07 March, an opinion in *Deutsche Welle* explores the pressure on Poland’s government from the farmer protests and how EU can intervene. Poland has witnessed massive protests in Warsaw resulting in block of roads for several hours. Gathered by NSZZ Solidarnosc union linked to the opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, has further challenged the latest government led by Donald Tusk. Farmers along with livestock breeders, foresters, beekeepers, transport employees and miner raged against EU’s green deal, reforms against climate neutral 2050 and mainly close of border with Ukraine. In response, Tusk has approached the EU to impose a full ban on grain imports from Russia and Belarus and also to bring back tariffs on Ukraine. To address the issue, the EU is ready to grant concessions on Poland’s demand but Poland stands on thin ice situation as closing of border with Ukraine or tariff imposition would mean end of trade surplus with Ukraine which accounts for EUR seven billion as of 2023. ([“Clashes in Poland as farmers’ protests get more political,” *Deutsche Welle*, 07 March 2024](#))

PORTUGAL

Luis Montenegro appointed as Prime Minister; Aims to form a minority government

On 21 March, according to *Le Monde* Luis Montenegro, the leader of the centre-right

Democratic Alliance (AD) was appointed as Portugal’s Prime Minister. AD won 79 seats in the 230-seat parliament followed by Socialist Party (PS) which won 77 seats. Montenegro would replace Antonio Costa from the Socialist Party as the prime minister. Although the Democratic Alliance has garnered the support of the Liberal Initiative party, it would still need to form a coalition with the anti-immigration party Chega to form a majority government. However, Montenegro aims to form a minority government, thus ruling out the coalition. Andre Ventura, leader of Chega has cautioned against rejecting the coalition as it would result in political instability. ([“Luis Montenegro appointed Portugal’s prime minister,” *Le Monde*, 21 March 2024](#))

Election campaign ends with polls showing PSD on lead

On 08 March, marked the last day of campaigning for Portugal’s legislative elections. The far-right Chega (Enough) party was under spotlight as it could be a major players in domestic affairs with third largest majority in parliament. André Ventura, who heads the party was elected in 2019 in the parliament proved to be a performer in policy shifts in popularising the Chega. The *BBC* reported on his campaign topics which focused on “chemical castration” for rapists, promises better pay for police officers and vouches reform in education, health and higher pensions. The snap elections being scheduled for 10 March, polls ahead show PSD-dominated Democratic Alliance (AD) to be on narrow lead ahead of Socialist Party (PS) while Chega’s support increased to 16 per cent from seven per cent in 2022 elections. ([Alison Roberts, “Portugal elections: André Ventura, ex-football pundit, shakes up vote,” *BBC*, 08 March 2024](#))

ROMANIA

NATO to expand its military base in Romania’s Black Sea port

On 19 March, Romanian Defence Ministry announced on NATO’s military expansion in the Black Sea port of Constanta as stronger security guarantee for Romania. This means NATO strengthening its eastern flank in the

military base of Constanta which is close to Ukraine's Black Sea zone. The project is expected to install a new military complex worth EUR 2.5 billion and will be functional fully from 2040. Commander Nicolae Crețu of the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base said: "A new runway, connections between the two existing runways, taxiways for aircraft and anti-aircraft protection systems will be built." (Ana-Maria Stancu, "[NATO expands its Romania Black Sea air base](#)," *Euractiv*, 20 March 2024)

RUSSIA

Soyuz rocket successfully launched to the International Space Station

On 23 March, *Le Monde* reported the successful launch of Soyuz, a Russian rocket carrying NASA astronaut Tracy Dyson, Roscosmos cosmonaut Oleg Novitskiy and the first Belarus astronaut Marina Vasilevskaya. The Soyuz rocket was scheduled to launch on 21 March from Kazakhstan but was aborted due to last minute voltage drop in a power source, as stated by Yuri Borisov, head of Roscosmos, Russian space agency. Due to the delayed launch, the space capsule would now take a two-day 34-orbit journey, compared to the 2-orbit journey. The space capsule is expected to dock at the International Space Station at 1510 GMT on Monday. ("[Russian Soyuz rocket successfully blasts off to ISS](#)," *Le Monde*, 23 March 2024)

Launch of Russian Spacecraft to ISS aborted On 21 March, according to *Le Monde*, the launch of the Russian spacecraft Soyuz MS-25 due to take off from Kazakhstan was aborted at the last minute. The spacecraft carrying three astronauts from Russia, the United States and Belarus was cancelled 20 seconds before the launch through an announcement by Roscosmos, the Russian Space Agency. Although there had been no comment from Roscosmos on the launch failure, a NASA broadcast elaborated that the failure of "engine sequence start" led to an "automatic command to abort the countdown." The crew on board was reported to be safe and had been transported to their crew quarters. The mission planned to launch Marina

Vasilevskaya, the first Belarusian astronaut into space. ("[Russian spacecraft aborts launch to ISS](#)," *Le Monde*, 21 March 2024)

South Korean national arrested under suspect of espionage

On 12 March, Russia's news agency *TASS* reported on arresting of a South Korean under suspicion of espionage. According to the South Korean media, the suspect had supported North Korean laborers in Russia's far east. Under Russian law, 20 years would be the minimum jail term for espionage. In contrast, South Korea's Foreign Ministry claimed on the person being assisted by the consulate since the announcement. It stated on conducting investigation but denied to give further report. ("[Russia arrests South Korean over alleged spying](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 March 2024)

Putin signs two laws on fishery and use of digital financial assets

On 11 March, Vladimir Putin, Russia's President signed a law withdrawing the 1956 agreement which allowed the UK sailors to fish in Russia's sea zone of Barents Sea. In line with UK's decision on 15 March 2022 to end bilateral trade with Russia, the decision was taken. In 1956, the USSR and the UK signed an agreement as a step to build diplomatic relations and the Barents Sea forms part of Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone fostered economic cooperation. On the same day, Putin also signed law approving use of digital financial assets and digital utility rights to include into international payments. ("Putin Signs Law Ending 1956 Fishing Treaty With UK in Russia's Barents Sea Zone," *Sputnik*, 11 March 2024; "[Putin Signs Law Allowing Use of Digital Financial Assets in International Payments](#)," *Sputnik*, 11 March 2024)

SERBIA

Elections to be conducted again in Belgrade

On 02 March, Serbia's officials announced a repeat of Belgrade elections under fraud allegations. The move comes after a meeting with the ruling government Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Although

Aleksandar Sapic, Belgrade's acting Mayor denied the allegations, he called it as lifting "the bar (legitimacy)." In response to the decision, the opposition Serbia Against Violence (SPN) called it as "victory." The elections held earlier in 2023 were accused of alleged violations by many opposition and civil society groups. This included OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and European leaders who raised concerns over the elections process. ("[Serbia to rerun Belgrade election amid controversy](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 02 March 2024)

SLOVAKIA

Subsidy payments to Slovak farmers delayed by state

On 26 March, according to *Euractiv*, the Slovak Paying Agency (PPA) delayed the payments of EU farm subsidies as direct payments to eligible farmers, with the EU claiming that the situation is out of its hands. Slovakia has paid less than one-third of a total of EUR 336 million received under EU agricultural subsidies to farmers that applied. The PPA is responsible "to pay 100 per cent of direct payments until 30 June 2024", according to Olof Gill, the European Commission spokesperson. Gill explained that while the system is set up by the EU, the member countries "are responsible for setting up a management and control system for payments that comply with EU regulations". Several farmers are facing debt with no salaries, forced to sell off their assets due to the delay in accessing subsidies, a situation described as "catastrophic" by Emil Macho, president of the Slovak Chamber of Agriculture and Food (SPPK). The SPPK earlier blamed the EU's "green fanaticism" for the farmers' plight, but now expresses its discontent for the Slovak government. (Maroš Koreň and Natália Silenská, "[Slovakia delays payments to farmers, EU can't intervene](#)," *Euractiv*, 26 March 2024)

Pro-EU candidate Ivan Korčok wins first round in Presidential elections

On 23 March, according to *Politico* Pro-EU candidate Ivan Korčok won the first round

in Slovakia's Presidential elections with 42 per cent support from 99 districts. Peter Pellegrini, came in second with 37 per cent. The runoff ballot is scheduled to take place on 6 April. Korčok has previously held the portfolio of foreign minister from 2020-2023, permanent representative to the EU, and ambassador to Germany and the US. Peter Pellegrini has previously served as Slovak prime minister in 2018 and the speaker of the parliament since September's general election. Pellegrini has agreed to hold multiple rounds of debates before the second round of elections.

Demonstrations spark over government's plan to control broadcasting

On 16 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the protests by thousands of Slovaks against the government of Robert Fico, Slovakia's Prime Minister, for planning to control the Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), the country's public broadcaster, which could threaten press freedom in the country. The demonstrations were planned by Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the two liberal oppositions to the government. Martina Simkovicova, the country's Culture Minister, drafted the plan to disband the RTVS and transform it into Slovak Television and Radio (STaR). A seven-member council that would be nominated by the government and the parliament would select the director of STaR, who could be dismissed any time without an explanation. The plan was criticised by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) which owns the RTVS. Demonstrations took place in Bratislava and Košice, Slovakia's largest cities. Fico's earlier plan to change the justice system also sparked fears among the public over a threat to the rule of law. ("[Slovakia: Thousands protest public broadcaster revamp plan](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 16 March 2024)

SPAIN

Study finds girls from 14 to 17 ages to be victim of sexual violence

On 20 March, *EL PAÍS* reported on a study by the University of Barcelona that found

that one in four girls in the age group of 14 to 17 years has been a victim of sexual violence in Spain, based on a survey of 4,024 respondents. 11 per cent of boys have also suffered from sexual violence. 17.8 per cent of adolescents in the specified age group have experienced requests of sexual nature through the internet, touching, penetration, oral sex and exploitation. The study found that women were at the receiving end of violence more than men in all categories, which included 14 variables. But men face very severe of violence more frequently, it notes. "The main victimisation is electronics," it noted, citing greater access to pornography at an early age. Pereda, one of the survey conductors, noted that such violence faced in the developmental stage could have "an impact on later stages of life," The report recommended proper sex education programs at a comprehensive level to be included in the school curriculums at a state level. (María Sosa Troya, "One in four girls aged 14 to 17 has been a victim of sexual violence in Spain in the last year," *EL PAÍS*, 20 March 2024)

Farmers continue to protest demanding ease of CAP rules

On 17 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the demonstration by thousands of Spanish farmers with tractors in Madrid, against the EU's agricultural policies that they claim are a financial burden. Organised by the Union of Unions, the march took place from the Ministry of Ecological Transition to the Ministry of Agriculture after the EU's proposal to ease the rules of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which they believe are not enough, their products more expensive than non-EU imports. Luis Cortes, a member of the trade union, warned the government to focus on environmental regulations rather than agricultural limitations, expressing frustration over European bureaucracy. ("Spanish farmers protest in Madrid despite EU concessions," *Deutsche Welle*, 17 March 2024)

SWEDEN

Greta Thunberg moved from entrance from protesting in the

entrance of the parliament

On 12 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported that Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist was removed from the entrance of the Swedish parliament along with other climate activists for obstructing the entrance to the parliament. The climate campaign reached its second day where activists demonstrated a sit-down protest against the effects of climate change outside of the Parliament. According to Stockholm police, activists had the right to protest outside the parliament but not to block the entrance which led to actions against five to ten individuals. Thunberg became a significant figure in the global fight against climate change among the youth due to her sit-downs outside parliament since 2018. She was earlier removed by the German police during a protest against a coal mine in western Germany. ("Greta Thunberg removed from blocking Swedish parliament," *Deutsche Welle*, 12 March 2024)

Receives accession invite from NATO

On 07 March, the White House and Sweden government confirmed the membership into NATO as the 32nd member. Ulf Kristersson, Sweden's Prime Minister stated the invite received from the NATO for accession on acceptance from NATO member states. Joe Biden, US President said: "Nato stands more united, determined, and dynamic." Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General added on the benefit of Sweden joining: "Capable armed forces and a first-class defence industry." Sweden's membership journey towards NATO breaking from neutrality began under prime ministership of Magdalena Andersson in 2022. 29 NATO member approved Sweden while Turkey and Hungary placed the roadblocks against few conditions. One being Sweden home to the Kurdistan Worker's party (PKK) and Hungary demand for Swedish fighter jets deal, both overcome by Sweden gained the vote approval to accede into NATO after two years. Meanwhile, NATO in no time laid its agenda in utilising Sweden once the membership procedure was complete. First being the military training exercise part of

the Nordic Response involving 20,000 soldiers of Sweden and Finland. (Miranda Bryant, "[Sweden finally joins Nato after nearly two-year wait](#)," *The Guardian*, 07 March 2024)

SWITZERLAND

FSO data reveals the highest life satisfaction for Swiss citizens

On 26 March, *Swissinfo* reported on data revealed by Switzerland's Federal Statistics Office (FSO) indicating Swiss citizens enjoy the highest level of life satisfaction in the entire Europe in 2022. According to the data, Switzerland reached the highest life satisfaction score of 8 out of 10, compared to other European countries, Austria (7.9), Italy (7.2), France (7) and Germany (6.5). Despite the high general satisfaction level in Switzerland, one in ten people face financial difficulty and one-fourth of the deprived people expressed that they are depressed or discouraged. The poverty rate in Switzerland was 8.2 per cent which accounts for 702,000 people and comprises mostly foreign nationals, single-parent households, and households with no education and employment. Whereas the poverty rate among the working population was 3.8 per cent accounting for 144,000 people. ("[Swiss life satisfaction 'the highest in Europe'](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, *Deutsche Welle*)

FSO reveals a rise in salaries while living costs remain higher

On 20 March, according to *Swissinfo*, the Federal Statistics Office (FSO) reported an increase in the median monthly pre-tax salary at 6,788 CHF in 2022, an increase of 123 CHF compared to 2020. The income gaps between different categories of earners, low, middle and top have been "relatively stable" while the report also indicated the gender pay gaps slowly narrowing. The gender pay gap was reduced to 9.5 per cent in 2022, compared to 11.5 per cent in 2018. Even as the salaries in Switzerland remain one of the highest in the world, the cost of living in Swiss cities such as Zurich and Geneva which rank as "most expensive cities" render such high incomes inadequate to meet living expenses. The tax and pension

deductions, costly average rents (1,412 CHF per apartment in 2022), and rising health insurance and transportation costs make a dent in one's salary. The report indicated that 14.5 per cent of the Swiss population is "at risk of poverty." (Domhnall O'Sullivan, "[Swiss salaries: high, stable, yet not enough for many](#)," *Swissinfo.ch*, 20 March 2024)

Jans calls for joint effort to strengthen the EU border management

On 04 March, Beat Jans, Swiss federal councillor and minister of the interior issued a statement to solve the country's migrations and international crime problem. On his visit to the EU, he highlighted the need for protection in the Schengen external border against migrations. He assured Switzerland to play a vital role in Frontex (Europe's border management) if human rights were taken into account. In countering international crime, Switzerland can adopt measures from the EU especially in data exchange, however negotiations are expected to kick start. ("Swiss minister seeks EU collaboration on migration and crime," *Swissinfo*, 04 March 2024)

Government approves increased payment for retirees

On 03 March, Switzerland government approved a referendum to increase retirement pension by adding 13th month payment. In the held vote 58 per cent voted in favour while 42 per cent were against. The vote comes under the proposal for "Better living in retirement" which was kept forward by trade unions against the rise in cost of living. Currently the pension amounts to EUR 2,550 per month for individuals but the country tops as the most expensive. Although the vote has been passed the government stands differed as it estimates the scheme to cost CHF four billion which might lead to increase in taxes. It also argued against saying the payment would go to many retirees who might not need it. ("[Swiss vote to boost pension payments](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 03 March 2024)

THE UK

Illegal immigrants increase in Britain, putting pressure on Sunak's government

On 28 March, according to *Euractiv*, the pressure on the government of Rishi Sunak, the UK's Prime Minister, increased as 4,644 people were detected arriving illegally via the dangerous English Channel in small boats, a record total in the first three months of 2024. The numbers increased from 3,770 in 2023 and 4,162 in 2022, the credit for which was claimed by Sunak amid concerns over immigration which could determine the election results in favour of the Labour Party. Sunak believed that his scheme to deport illegal immigrants to Rwanda will deter people from crossing into the UK, and the plan is due in parliament next month. ("Migrant crossings to UK hit new record, heaping pressure on Sunak," *Euractiv*, 28 March 2024)

Thousands of nurses quit to work abroad

On 25 March, *The Guardian* reported on the large number of UK-registered foreign nurses leaving the UK to work abroad. The number of nurses moving abroad in 2022-23 reached a record 12,400, where most of them move to the US, New Zealand or Australia which provide higher wages for nurses. UK's National Health Service is already understaffed and has around 40,000 vacancies which are usually filled by foreign nurses. According to the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), the increasing migration of nurses abroad is due to the decline in pay for nurses since 2010. Prof Pat Cullen, RCN's chief executive and general secretary expressed his worries about the patient needs being unmet, poor pay and working conditions and stated that "UK's healthcare services unable to compete on the world stage.. It's no joke that nurse pay in the UK is joint bottom of 35 OECD countries." Elaine Kelly, assistant director at Health Foundation's research centre stated the costly nature of this brain drain, as "it cost the NHS about £10,000 to replace each foreign recruit who then moved elsewhere." (Dennis Campbell, "Thousands of foreign

nurses a year leave UK to work abroad," *The Guardian*, 25 March 2024)

Wapsi group demands compensation over government's failure to inform of changes in state pension age

On 21 March, the *BBC* reported on the report by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) which stated the government's failure to inform women of the impact of changes to the state pension Act. Women Against State Pension Inequality (Wapsi) group, demands compensation for 2.6 million women affected by the 2011 Pensions Act. The 2011 Pensions Act increased the qualifying age of women for the state pension to 65 years from the earlier 60 years. Wapsi group believes that the changes were not adequately communicated to women, which resulted in longer work life for them. The act mostly affected the 300,000 women born between December 1953 and October 1954, who had to wait for an extra 18 months to reach their State pension age. Wapsi thus demands payment for those women who have attained the state retirement age and for women who await their state pension. This would amount to up to 36 billion pounds for the government. PHSO although cannot enforce compensation, it is responsible for investigating women's complaints against the government. PHSO has asked for parliamentary intervention on the same. (Jennifer Clarke, "Who are the Wapsi women, and will they get compensation over state pension changes?" *BBC*, 21 March 2024)

Strikes of junior doctors continue demanding pay rise

On 20 March, the *BBC* reported on the decision by junior doctors to continue their strike for the pay dispute. The British Medical Association (BMA) demanded a pay rise of 35 per cent for junior doctors. 98 per cent of the BMA members voted for further walkouts. Around 10 walkouts by junior doctors have been recorded so far since March 2023. The fresh vote means an extension of the strike mandate for a further six months. The government

deemed their demands “unreasonable.” Robert Laurenson and Vivek Trivedi, co-chairs of the junior doctors committee, urged the health secretary to make a new offer to prevent future strikes. A spokesperson of the Department of Health and Social Care called the vote “disappointing,” calling the BMA back from negotiations to strike a “fair deal,” since further strikes will “impede the progress” in tackling hospital backlogs. Junior doctors’ pay rise this year was a nine per cent average. The BMA’s 35 per cent demand is to make up for 15 years of pay rises below inflation rates. Junior doctors from Wales and Northern Ireland are also participating in the strikes. Since the strikes by doctors, nurses and other health care professionals began in December 2022, more than 1.4 million operations and appointments have been cancelled. But while other concerns have been resolved, the junior doctors remain concerned. The NHS is concerned that further strike actions will “inevitably lead to more disruption to patient care.” (Nick Triggle, “[Junior doctors vote to continue strike action](#),” *BBC*, 20 March 2024)

Rishi Sunak reject call for general elections

On 20 March, the *BBC* reported that Rishi Sunak, the British Prime Minister, rejected calls for immediate general elections, which would instead happen during the second half of 2024. Answering questions by Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour Party leader, during a session of Prime Minister’s Questions, Sunak addressed questions on the Tory MPs plot to replace him before general elections. Sir Starmer stated that the PM was “scared” to face the vote after his immigration policy and record on mortgage rates. The opinion polls suggest that the Conservatives have fallen far behind Labour after Jeremy Hunt, the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s tax-cutting budget. Sunak had achieved great inflation figures, claiming his plan for Britain was working. Sir Starmer questioned Sunak on the plot to replace him, hinting at the reported prospect of Penny Mordaunt, the Commons leader, or Tom Tugendhat, the

security minister replacing him after a confidence vote. Sunak jeered back with Labour not backing the Rwanda bill and not caring about “fixing” the immigration system, hinting at Sir Starmer calling his policy a “gimmick.” (Brian Wheeler, “[Rishi Sunak rejects Labour call for general election now](#),” *BBC*, 20 March 2024)

Giant trees thrive better than in California due to higher carbon absorption

On 13 March, the *BBC* reported that the giant redwoods, world’s largest trees native to the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, are flourishing in the UK, better than in California. The UK has around 500,000 of these trees compared to 80,000 in California, which are, however, shorter than their Californian counterparts. The latter can reach 90 metres in height compared to the former, the tallest being 54.87 metres. They could catch up with their 2000-years life span. Scientists have observed that the redwoods can absorb a considerable amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which could aid in tackling climate change. The trees in the UK, with a 45 metre height, have about 10 to 15 tonnes of carbon stored in them. The trees particularly grow in cool and wet climates, conducive in the UK. But with the effects of climate change causing a dry climate in California, the redwoods are under threat, which could be replicated in the UK too. (Rebecca Morelle and Alison Francis, “[Giant redwoods: World’s largest trees 'thriving in UK'](#),” *BBC*, 13 March 2024)

Government announce measure against rising anti-Muslim incidents

On 10 March, Government of the UK announced to provide GBP 117 million to boost security at mosques and Muslim sites across the UK over four years. The move comes as the Home Office experiences surge in anti-Muslim hate events since the war in Gaza. James Cleverly, Home Secretary said: “We will not let events in the Middle East be used as an excuse to justify abuse against British Muslims.” One of the organisations called Tell MAMA which monitors hate crimes, recorded more than 2,000 hate

incidents in past four months which was an increase of 335 per cent from 2022-2023 period. These included, threats, assaults, vandalism, hate speech and anti-Muslim literature. In February, Rishi Sunak, UK's Prime Minister pledged to give GBP 70 million for next four years to protect Jewish community sites. ("[UK: Government announces £117 million security funding for Muslim sites](#)," *Le Monde*, 11 March 2023)

Calais Group and France to partner to track down small boat material shipment

On 04 March, the UK along with the Calais Group of northern European countries announced a partnership with France to prevent supply of "small boats" into France. Such boats encourage migrants to cross the English Channel and under the deal, the countries customs will share information on those shipping materials for small boat. The group comprise of Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands apart from the UK and France aims to cooperation to counter illegal migration. This partnership will also explore ways to engage with social media companies and people smuggling agencies to track their activity. ("[UK announces customs partnership with France to fight illegal Channel crossings](#)," *Le Monde*, 05 March 2024)

Department of economy propose to raise student fee to the UK level

On 05 March, the *BBC* reported on the Northern Ireland official from economic department decision to increase student fees to the UK level. According to the report, raising would generate GBP 98 million but the draft is under consultation. Conor Murphy, Economy Minister contradicts this saying it might lead to reduction of student intake in universities. At present the tuition fee for an undergraduate level stand at GBP 4,710 per year while in the UK it is GBP 9,250. For the country to prevent cuts in other sectors reduction of funding to higher education is considered the way without generating additional income. For the draft to be approved assembly and executive approval would be required before 2026-27

year to notify students. (John Campbell, "[Raising Northern Ireland tuition fees could generate £98m](#)," *BBC*, 05 March 2024)

Seven-year girl reported dead in attempt to cross English Channel

On 03 March, the *BBC* reported death of a seven-year girl after an attempt to cross the English Channel in a boat. According to the report, 16 migrants were carried and the boat sank in the coast of Dunkirk. According to a local official, the boat was not capable of carrying many people and following the event those who travelled along were hospitalised. This comes after three migrants died on 29 February in a similar attempt to cross. According to Home Office, more than 2,000 migrants have entered the UK as of 2024. ("[English Channel: Girl, 7, dies after boat capsizes near Dunkirk in France](#)," *BBC*, 03 March 2024)

TURKEY

Istanbul elections to determine the fate of Turkey ahead of 2028 presidential elections

On 28 March, according to the *BBC*, several Turk voters voted on Sunday to decide the fate of Istanbul and thereby the national elections in 2028. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish President born in Istanbul, had lost it to the opposition in 2019 to popular mayor Ekrem Imamoglu, which the former intends to claim back. Istanbul's results can be observed as a crucial test for what happens in the 2028 presidential elections and if the opposition can pose a threat to Erdogan's AK Party. After Erdogan won for a third term in 2023, his main opposition, the secular CHP, aims to claim major cities including Istanbul, Ankara and Antalya. Seda Demiralp, a professor of political science at Isik University, stated that "there is still a strong link between winning Istanbul and winning Turkey". (Cagil Kasapoglu, "[Turkish vote: Battle to run Istanbul becomes key to country's future](#)," *BBC*, 28 March 2024)

REGIONAL

EU directs big techs to secure the EU elections through new tech law

On 26 March, according to *Politico*, the European Union ordered major tech firms including Facebook, X, YouTube and TikTok to aid it in securing its elections in June amid concerns over disinformation and online threats. The EU introduced the Digital Services Act (DSA), their new content moderation law, to help the bloc in fighting disinformation. New guidelines were introduced to prevent the circulation of false content, Russian bot campaigns and deepfakes, with firms failing to comply facing up to six per cent of their annual global revenue. Thierry Breton, the Internal Market Commissioner, stated that the EU expected “hybrid attacks or foreign interferences” which need more than “half-baked measures.” Big Tech firms have been asked to label AI deepfakes and political advertisements, with specialised teams asked to monitor potential threats in the 27 member countries. The online platforms are also expected to have algorithms that entertain diverse content without excessive polarisation, as was the case witnessed during Finland’s elections. (Clothilde Goujard, “[Europe wields new tech law to protect EU election](#),” *Politico*, 26 March 2024)

EU initiates investigations into tech giants Apple, Google, Meta

On 25 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the EU began a probe into the tech giants Apple, Google, and Meta based on their “non-compliance” with its Digital Markets Act. The law ensures that big tech companies provide consumers with more choices by practising fairer digital market rules. Thierry Breton EU’s internal market commissioner expressed that solutions adopted by Alphabet (Google’s parent company), Meta and Apple are not enough and should “respect their obligations for a fairer and more open digital space for European citizens and businesses.” These companies are liable to pay 10 per cent of their global turnover if found guilty in the investigation. The investigations have garnered criticism from the tech lobby as

the Computer and Communications Industry Association (CCIA) called it a “worrying signal,” and that the EU was rushing into investigations. Oliver Bethell, Google’s director of competition remarked, “We will continue to defend our approach in the coming months.” (“[EU probes Apple, Google, Meta under new digital law](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2024)

Data reveals France lagging behind the EU in accepting Ukrainian refugees

On 25 March, *Politico* reported on the data indicating the relocation of 4.3 million Ukrainian refugees to different countries of the European Union. EU’s “temporary protection” status allows refugees to live, work and study within EU borders. As of January, 64,720 Ukrainian refugees were present in France, whereas other countries like Germany and Poland had 1.2 million and one million refugees respectively. Data reveals that countries such as the Baltics, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria are hosting 25 refugees per 1000 citizens, far more than France hosting fewer than 1 per 1000 citizens. French language, geographical proximity to Ukraine, refugee financial support, and community networks are factors that determine refugee relocation and France seems to lag behind these aspects for Ukrainians. French paperwork and long bureaucratic processes also act as hindrances for refugees. (Hanne Cokelaere and Clea Caulcutt, “[Why Ukraine’s refugees aren’t going to France](#),” *Politico*, 25 March 2024)

Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, and Malta voice their “readiness to recognise Palestine”

On 22 March, according to *Euronews*, leaders of Spain, Ireland, Slovenia and Malta discussed their “readiness to recognise Palestine”, and released a joint statement expressing “that the only way to achieve lasting peace and stability in the region is through implementation of a two-state solution.” Robert Golob, Slovenian Prime Minister stated that the political backing for Palestine could be strengthened in the United Nations in the next week. On 21

March, the EU unanimously called for a ceasefire in Gaza. Pedro Sánchez, Spanish Prime Minister expressed that recognition of statehood for Palestine is one of his main priorities in his foreign policy. He also stated how these four countries represented multiple sides of the political spectrum, as Spain and Malta have centre-left parties Slovenia is governed by a liberal party, and Ireland has a centre-right party. (Mared Gwyn Jones, [“Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, Malta say they are ready to recognise the State of Palestine,” Euronews](#), 25 March 2024)

EU's nature restoration bill collapses as eight member states withdrew support

On 25 March, according to *The Guardian*, the EU's nature restoration law on reversing the damage to terrestrial and aquatic wildlife was shelved as the eight member states withdrew their support. Virginijus Sinkevičius, European environment commissioner stated that shelving the bill would destroy the EU's global reputation and most importantly highlighted that the EU would “risk going to Cop16 absolutely empty-handed.” Teresa Ribera, Spanish Environment Minister stated that the EU “cannot afford” to abandon its green goals and it would be irresponsible to do so. The bill which had been in the making for two years, lost its momentum as Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy and Hungary opposed it and Austria, Belgium, Finland and Poland decided to abstain. Opposing countries believe the nature restoration law would burden the farmers who are already protesting throughout Europe against the EU's green policies and trading practices. (Lisa O'Carroll, [“EU nature restoration laws face collapse as member states withdraw support,” The Guardian](#), 25 March 2024)

This Week In History: 25 years since NATO's air bombing of Yugoslavia

On 24 March marked the 25 years of NATO's air campaign on Serbian forces in Kosovo in an attempt to end the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. In Kosovo, one of its provinces, known as Yugoslavia, witnessed the first

humanitarian intervention pushed by the US. The intervention began after Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic denial to sign to agree on an interim autonomy for Kosovo due to concerns over deployment of international forces in Yugoslavia. While the UN Security Council called it as violation of international law, the refusal sparked NATO's intervention of 78 days till 10 June 1999. During this period, 14,000 bombs were dropped and 2,000 missiles fired, killing 2500 people and injury of 12,500. According to the statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry on 24 March, the interventions caused damage to many civilian infrastructures such as residential, hospitals, schools, mass transit vehicles and refugee groups. The intention of the air campaign was to force Milosevic to agree on ending the campaign against the Kosovo. By 10 June 1999, NATO's air campaign ended with signing of the Kumanovo Agreement and the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244. This resulted in ousting of Milosevic, withdrawal of all Yugoslav military forces and deployment of international peacekeepers. ([“Far-Right Activists In Serbia Mark 25th Anniversary Of NATO Bombing,” rferl](#), 25 March 2024; [“Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the 25th anniversary of NATO aggression against Yugoslavia,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation](#), 24 March 2024; Keida Kostreci [“25 Years After NATO's Intervention, Serbia, Kosovo and the War in Ukraine,” Voanews](#), 23 March 2024; Maja Zivanovic and Serbeze Haxhijaj, [“78 Days of Fear: Remembering NATO's Bombing of Yugoslavia,” Balkan Insight](#), 22 March 2019)

Report indicates lack of competitiveness for EU fisheries sector

On 21 March, *Euractiv* reported on the study presented at the European Parliament on the EU fisheries sector, which indicated the EU's increased dependency on imports of seafood products. According to the report, the EU fisheries sector faces a lack of competitiveness, challenges of unfair competition and increased imports from third countries. Experts attribute Illegal,

unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, increased subsidies and low labour costs in third countries as the reasons for unfair competition. Martin Aranda, co-author of the study, stated that “imported fishery and aquaculture products do not meet European environmental and social sustainability requirements.” The report emphasised the EU to ensure that imported products comply with conservation and management regulations as outlined in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). This demands “increased inspections at the place of origin to check compliance with European standards, as well as at the EU’s borders” as stated by Aranda. The scientists have urged increased support for research and innovation to achieve a more sustainable and productive aquaculture. (Hugo Struna, “[EU must protect fishing industry from unfair competition, study warns](#),” *Euractiv*, 21 March 2024)

Europe’s wind power industry confident on reaching EU’s targets

On 22 March, according to *Euractiv*, Europe’s wind power industry is “back on track” as stated by Giles Dickson, CEO of the industry association WindEurope as the industry concludes the end of instability and high-interest rates and prices ushered with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There has been a 70 per cent increase in the approval of permits in Germany and Danish company Vestas reaps profits, with the company installing two new factories in Poland and three foundation factories in Europe. According to Dickson, the EU’s new binding rules on emergency permitting for national governments have simplified the permit process. Germany’s conception of renewables overriding public interest has become reformative in Europe. (Nikolaus J Kurmayer, “[Europe’s wind power targets ‘back on track’](#),” *Euractiv*, 22 March 2024)

EU agrees to curb imports from Kyiv, post farmers’ protests

On 20 March, according to *Financial Times*, the EU agreed to curb imports of Ukrainian food items starting from 06 June as a result of domestic protests across Europe. According to a provisional deal, the EU will

impose tariffs on Ukrainian poultry, eggs, sugar, oats, maize, honey and groats if the quantity imported surpasses the mean average imported in 2022 and 2023. The EU is also planning to impose tariffs on Russian and Belarusian grains, which has been demanded by the Ukrainian and the East European governments. In Poland and France, the agricultural lobbies protested intending to increase restrictions on imports to lower the imports back to pre-war levels. However, their efforts were blocked by Germany, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands. Marc Fesneau, French Agricultural Minister stated that solidarity should not be “...at the cost of excessive destabilisation of agricultural markets.” (Andy Bounds, “[EU agrees fresh curbs on Ukrainian food after farmers protests](#),” *Financial Times*, 20 March 2024)

Commission recommends start of accession talks for Bosnia and Herzegovina

On 21 March, according to the *BBC*, the European Commission recommended that Bosnia and Herzegovina begin negotiation processes for its membership into the EU, eight years after it applied to join the bloc. The Baltic country was given a green light by leaders of the EU as Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, congratulated the country, welcoming them into their “European family.” Borjana Krišto, the Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, stated the importance of “mutual determination and effort” in having achieved the feat. Leaders of Germany and Croatia welcomed the country, which has over the past years passed laws focusing on democratisation as a criteria to join the bloc. (“[EU: Bosnia and Herzegovina to begin talks to join bloc](#),” *BBC*, 21 March 2024)

Grossi warns of global warming use of nuclear energy in Europe

On 21 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, Rafael Grossi, the Director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), noted the importance of the role of nuclear energy to secure the goal of low carbon emissions compared to fossil fuels, but

highlighted the challenges faced due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Grossi stressed on the “international consensus” reached to include nuclear energy in tackling global warming, especially for Europe. However, with Russia being a key supplier of fuel for nuclear power plants, the attempts at reducing the reliance on Russia by the US and Europe might take some time. Currently, “the majority of the market” for supply lies with Russia. He further emphasised on the dangers posed by the war to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in the front lines, a catastrophe that has so far been prevented due to certain guidelines by the UN Security Council. Grossi predicted that “probably within the next four or five years,” Western Europe and North America will witness the arrival of the first Small Modular Reactors (SMR), which have one-third the capacity of regular large nuclear power plants but which are cheaper and easier to install for regions with limited grid coverage. (Alex Berry, [“Nuclear energy offers fossil fuel alternative — IAEA chief”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 21 March 2024)

International Olympic Committee to bar Belarusian and Russian athletes

On 20 March, *BBC* reported on the decision by the International Olympic Committee to not allow Russian and Belarusian athletes to be a part of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Olympics. The qualifying players are however allowed to participate under neutrality. Till now, there are 12 neutral athletes with Russian and seven neutral athletes with Belarusian passports respectively. The decision to ban players from the two countries was taken after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The qualified players have however been instructed to compete without any flags, emblems or anthems of their country. Maria Zakharova, Russia’s Foreign Ministry spokeswoman expressed that Russia was “outraged” by the IOM’s decision, calling them “unprecedented discriminatory practices.” Meanwhile, Russia wants to host the ‘Friendship Games’ in September 2024, with a winter Games planned in 2026. Friendship Games was first organised by

the USSR and eight other states after they boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. The IOC called the decision a “blatant violation of the Olympic Charter” and a “cynical attempt by the Russian Federation to politicise sport.” ([“Paris 2024 Olympics: Russia & Belarus athletes will not be part of opening ceremony.”](#) *BBC*, 20 March 2024)

Bulgaria and Romania to join the Schengen zone by March

On 20 March, *Euro News* reported the joining of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen zone, which will officially take place on 31 March. The Schengen zone allows free movement between member states as part of the Schengen agreement. Both the Balkan states joined the EU in 2007, but were obliged to show passports upon entry into the territory of other EU states. But the decision to simplify borders would bring about several changes for the states, which haven’t as yet decided to adopt the Euro as their official currency. There are speculations as to whether the two countries will raise their prices like the recent Schengen entrant Croatia, which could affect tourism. Bulgaria and Romania are set to witness increased tourism and greater economic opportunities by joining the Schengen area. ([Saskia O’Donoghue, “The Balkan countries will officially enter the Schengen zone on 31 March”](#), *Euronews*, 20 March 2024)

EU signs EUR 7.4 billion multi-sector deal to ease economic and energy dependency

On 17 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, the European Commission announced a financial package worth EUR 7.4 billion to Egypt, to aid in stabilising its economy and reduce dependence on Russian gas. It also includes a grant to address the flow of migrants to Europe from the region. The EUR 7.4 billion was given in EUR five billion in macro-financial, EUR 1.8 billion in investments and EUR 600 million in grants from 2024-2027, to support Egypt’s declining economy. The EU-Egypt deal has boosted their relationship into a “strategic partnership” with aims to increase cooperation in energy, trade and security.

The Egyptian economy has been hit due to massive infrastructure projects, the conflict in Gaza as well as its implications on tourism and shipping through the Suez Canal, a key income earner for Egypt. The IMF agreed to offer it a USD 8 billion loan package. Further, the risk of economic instability in Egypt has prompted increased migration into Europe. The EU delegation's visit in Cairo headed by Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, also included Giorgia Meloni, the Italian Prime Minister, and Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Greek Prime Minister, who have been receiving the majority of migrants to Europe. Human Rights Watch, a US-based NGO, stated that the deal "strengthens authoritarian rulers while betraying human rights defenders." ("[EU to provide Egypt €7.4 billion funding package](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 17 March 2024)

EU demands firms to adhere to regulations to prevent environmental damage and forced labour

On 16 March, according to the *BBC*, many of the EU countries backed a legislation that requires companies to ensure that their supply chains does not cause environmental damage or employ forced labour. The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was backed by 17 out of 27 members without any votes against it. The directive aims at requiring European companies to adhere to environmental and human rights regulations and prevent any potential harm. Over several rounds of negotiations, a compromise was reached with only larger businesses with more than 1000 employees and a net turnover of at least EUR 450 million being affected. The original draft was meant to affect firms with more than 500 employees and a minimal revenue of EUR 150 million. Key objections were raised by Germany and Italy with multiple small and medium businesses, who feared that their economies would be hit with the legislation. The draft must be passed by the European Parliament to become law. (Kathryn Armstrong, "[EU backs law against forced labour in supply chains](#)," *BBC*, 16 March 2024)

Climate activists protest against exploration of fuel deposits in the North Sea

On 16 March, *The Guardian* reported on the action by climate activists across Europe to block access to the North Sea oil infrastructure in the form of a pan-Europe civil disobedience protest. Activists from Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have blocked refineries, ports and gas terminals in their respective countries, to show their disapproval of the exploitation of the fuel deposits in the North Sea. Activists in Scotland staged banner drops in areas considered as of "strategic importance." and actions are expected in Denmark. Activists began their protests after a report found that no giant fossil fuel producing country was planning to stop drilling into their facilities soon to meet the temperature targets set at 1.5 Celsius by the Paris Agreement. The UK, Germany, Netherlands, Norway and Denmark failed to align their energy policies with their climate promises, with Norway and the UK farthest away from the promises made in the Paris Agreement, according to the report. (Damien Gayle, "[Climate activists across Europe block access to North Sea oil infrastructure](#)," *The Guardian*, 16 March 2024)

Romanian President joins the race for NATO's next secretary general

On 12 March, *Politico* reported on the joining of Klaus Iohannis, the Romanian President, against Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, in the race to become NATO's next Secretary General. Iohannis announced his candidacy citing the lack of an Eastern European presence in NATO's decision making, becoming the first potential NATO chief from the former Soviet bloc. The Secretary General is chosen based on consensus from all 32 NATO Allies, and Rutte has failed to convince all 32, with significant opposition from Hungary due to Rutte's earlier comment on Hungarian democratic backsliding. Romania, Turkey, and the Baltic countries haven't yet expressed their support for him. The big four in NATO– the US, Britain, France and Germany– have supported Rutte's

candidacy, due to his skills as a consensus-builder, a much required skill provided the NATO sceptic Donald Trump returns to American presidency. Iohannis has claimed to be the harbinger of change in NATO, including mandatory defence spending of two per cent of the GDP, working with partners in the Indo-Pacific, and pitching NATO's digital transformation and increased investment in technology. (Stuart Lau, "[Romania's president launches bid for NATO top job against Mark Rutte](#)," *Politico*, 12 March 2024)

EEA warns climate extremities due to rise in temperature twice the global rate

On 11 March, the European Environmental Agency (EEA) warned over "catastrophic" consequences of climate change if no urgent action taken. EEA published its first Europe-wide analysis listing 36 threats relating to climate in Europe. Out of this, 21 were marked under immediate action and eight as "particularly urgent." These include "fires, water shortages and its impact on agricultural production." Apart from this the coastal areas were warned of experiencing "flooding, erosion and saltwater intrusion." Europe as a fast-warming continent is currently reported to be heating up double the global rate which is a major concern however northern Europe is excluded from the extremity. ("[Climate risks could be 'catastrophic' in Europe, EU warns](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 March 2024)

EU considers setting regulation to include Uber workers as employees

On 11 March, the EU member states labour and social ministers agreed on regulations to classify worker in Uber and Deliveroo as employees. This means, the Platform Work Directive would mention workers under the "gig-economy" as employees in particular cases. Workers can qualify when they are assessed electronically which mediates payment and working hours. Pierre-Yves Dermagne, Belgian labour minister said: "This is the first-ever piece of EU legislation to regulate algorithmic management in the workplace and to set EU minimum

standards to improve working conditions for millions of platform workers across the EU." On approval of the regulation, algorithms engaging in human resources will be made to be open along with granting workers right to "contest automated decisions." Although the regulation is yet to be passed in the European Parliament, Uber was reported to be lobbied against the original draft where the Commission would set the threshold to qualify a worker as employee. (Richard Connor, "[EU states agree to regulate Deliveroo, Uber workers' rights](#)," *Deutsche Welle*, 11 March 2024)

European Commission warns of future conflict due to water scarcity

On 06 March, *Politico* reported on the EU warning over risk of water conflict as temperature increase. The European Commission has issued a warning to pace up to tackle climate change. The warning comes as it found water shortages at critical with high risk to key aspects of life from food, drinking water, infrastructure for power and transport, economic activity and human health. According to the draft issued by the Commission: "These risks can manifest in multiple forms, some of which include ... increased competition over water resources across sectors and uses, including potential risk of conflicts..." This can be understood from the earlier examples of Spain and France which experienced severe drought and clash over water reservoir. The Commission warns that extreme water conditions such as floods and droughts are only one category of risk while 36 more remain with catastrophic levels for Europe. (Zia Weise, "[Brussels warns of water conflict danger in EU](#)," *Politico*, 06 March 2024)

Commission President announces maritime corridor to supply aid to Gaza

On 08 March, Ursula Von Der Leyen, European Commission President announced the possibility of starting a maritime corridor to Gaza. The move comes after the US announcement on setting a temporary port. On the same, the UN called for aid as it found quarter of Gaza

population to be on the edge of famine. Israel appreciated the maritime corridor initiative and stressed on other countries to join. In a press conference in Cyprus, Von Der Leyen stated that at the situation of “humanitarian catastrophe,” a maritime corridor was pertinent to deliver aid in mass. Joe Biden, the US President commented that aid to Gaza would make “massive difference” for humanitarian worker. He added: “Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip.” (Tom Spender, “[Maritime corridor to Gaza to begin at weekend - Von der Leyen](#),” *BBC*, 08 March 2024)

INTERNATIONAL

Germany’s top diplomat arrives in Egypt to ease humanitarian situation in Gaza

On 25 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on Annalena Baerbock, the German Foreign Minister’s meeting with Sameh Shoukry, the Egyptian Foreign Minister to discuss the deteriorating humanitarian scenario in Gaza. She urged Israel and Hamas to undertake concessions in the negotiations in Qatar. Baerbock gave the following statement before her visit, “Only an immediate humanitarian cease-fire that leads to a permanent cease-fire will keep the hope for peace alive — for Palestinians and Israelis alike.” She is scheduled for her sixth visit to Israel to meet Israel Katz, Israeli Foreign Minister. Expressing concerns about Israel’s offensive into Rafah, the southernmost city in Gaza, she highlighted the actions of the Israeli military and their consequences on the civilians. (“[Germany’s Baerbock in Egypt for Gaza crisis talks](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 25 March 2024)

US and UK accuse Chinese hacking group of “malicious” cyber campaigns

On 26 March, according to *Deutsche Welle*, US and UK officials accused the Chinese hacking group APT31 which stands for - “advanced persistent threat” for their involvement in malicious cyber campaigns. Oliver Dowden, UK’s Deputy Prime Minister stated that attacks by the hacking group had

been compromised by the electoral commission and UK parliamentary accounts however email accounts of UK lawmakers were not compromised. GCHQ, the UK’s intelligence agency confirmed involvement of the group in compromising UK Electoral Commission systems between 2021 and 2022. US Treasury Department reported sanctioning Wuhan Xiaoruizhi Science and Technology Company Ltd accusing their involvement in “multiple malicious cyber operations,” targeting US sectors such as defence, aerospace and energy. Dowden stated the UK’s sanctions on an entity affiliated with APT31. Lisa Monaco, US Deputy Attorney General stated that these hackers aimed to “repress critics of the Chinese regime, compromise government institutions, and steal trade secrets.” (“[US, UK accuse China-linked hackers of spy campaign](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 26 March 2024)

UK High Court delays ruling on Julian Assange’s extradition to the US

On 26 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the delayed ruling by UK High Court judges on Julian Assange’s extradition to the US and requested assurance that he would not be subjected to the death penalty in the US if extradited. Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, and whistleblower leaked some of the most classified documents regarding operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and NATO presence in these countries. The US government believes that his actions were beyond journalism and had risked innocent lives by publishing classified information. Out of nine issues appealed, the judges only recognised three issues; freedom of speech, concern regarding the disadvantages as he is not a US Citizen and the risk of the death penalty. Assange faces 17 espionage charges, one charge regarding computer misuse and would be sentenced to a jail term of up to 175 years if convicted. Australian politicians have appealed for Assange, who is an Australian citizen to be returned there. UK High Court judges Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson have adjourned the case until May 20. (“[Julian Assange can appeal extradition, UK High Court rules](#),” *Deutsche Welle*, 26 March 2024)

Violent farmers protest in Brussels

On 26 March, according to *Politico*, a farmers' protest with 250 tractors in Brussels turned violent with protestors using firebombs and throwing debris at law enforcement officials. Several tractors encircled the Place du Luxembourg outside the European Parliament, demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that they claim was destroying their business. Others halted the traffic along one of the busiest routes in Brussels- Rue de la Roi- and set piles of hay and tires on fire in addition to throwing eggs and burnt debris at police officers. Leonardo van den Berg, a board member of European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC), noted that the "farmers are desperate". Police employed the use of tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds. One person was arrested for throwing molotov cocktails at law enforcement and two police officers were reported injured. Annelies Verlinden, the Belgian Interior Minister, condemned the protests, calling "violence, arson and destruction" "unacceptable". (Claudia Chiappa, Bartosz Brzezinski, Paula Andrés, Denis Leven and Ali Walker, "Farmers' protest: Police use tear gas and water cannons to quell violent Brussels demo", *Politico*, 26 March 2024)

Blinken meets NATO's "close Baltic allies"

On 25 March, *Eng.ism.lv* reported on the meeting between Anthony Blinken US Secretary of State and the Foreign Ministers of the three Baltic states Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Blinken stated the budgetary contributions by the Baltic countries to NATO and also added that their support for Ukraine has been "absolutely vital." Krišjānis Kariņš, Latvia's Foreign Minister expressed "We're deeply united in our basic values - freedom, democracy, the rule of law." Referring to Russia's war in Ukraine, he underscored that combined efforts of the Baltic states and NATO will prevent evil from spreading. ("Blinken: Baltic states are "leading the way in NATO", *Eng.ism.lv*, 25 March 2024)

French Senate rejects CETA deal

On 21 March, according to *Euractiv*, the French Senate rejected CETA, the trade deal between the EU and Canada owing to its potential impact on French livestock farming. The bill was rejected by the majority of the Senate with 211 votes to 255. Although the commercial part of the deal has been implemented since 2017, the EU needs the approval of its 27 member states to fully ratify CETA. Franck Riester, French Minister Delegate for Foreign Trade insisted that the deal was "good for our economy, our businesses, our agriculture and our strategic relationship with Canada" quoting the 33 per cent increase in French exports to Canada in the last 6 years. However this claim was met with the criticism by Senator Laurent Duplomb of Les Républicains that the increase in exports was not in volume, but in value due to the inflation. The Veblen Institute highlighted that the trade between France and Canada had increased only 0.7 per cent in terms of volume between 2017 and 2022. The bill awaits debate and voting in the National Assembly which would determine if it gets ratified. Currently, 17 EU member states have ratified CETA, whereas Cyprus rejected the ratification. (Hugo Struna, "French Senate rejects EU-Canada free trade deal", *Euractiv*, 21 March 2024)

First aid ship to Gaza sent from Cyprus

On 13 March, the *BBC* reported that "The Open Arms," a Spanish ship, with 200 tonnes of essential food supplies for Palestinians in Gaza, has begun from Cyprus. Gaza has no functioning port, which prompted World Central Kitchen, a US charity, to initiate the building of a jetty to receive aid. The success of the Spanish ship will prompt several European and Emirati efforts to get the much needed aid into Gaza, which would otherwise go into a state of famine. While the quickest way to take aid is via road, Israeli restrictions prevent it. Israel has stated that a maritime corridor facilitating aid into Gaza is welcomed. (David Gritten, "Gaza war: First aid ship sets off from Cyprus", *BBC*, 13 March 2024)

Five European countries and India close the EFTA deal after 15 years of talks

On 10 March, India, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein signed European Free Trade Association (EFTA) an economic deal worth USD 100 billion. Under the deal, import tariffs on industrial products will be removed by India in exchange for an investment of USD 100 billion over 15 years. The deal was signed after 21 rounds of negotiations facilitates a modern, equitable and win-win deal for all signatories. This means Switzerland's 95.3 per cent custom duties of industrial exports and Norway's 40 per cent high import taxes will be waived off. The move also forms part of Narendra Modi, India's Prime Minister target of reaching a USD one trillion export by 2030. ("India, Europe's EFTA bloc sign \$100 billion deal." *Deutsche Welle*, 10 March 2024)

Biden speech starts steady on Ukraine but lacks assurance

On 08 March, *Politico* reported on Joe Biden, the US President State of the Union speech and how it shows tough stance on Ukraine. In his speech, he began with Russia's war in Ukraine, criticised Vladimir Putin, Russia's President and urged the Congress to approve military aid for Ukraine. Praising the NATO and inclusion of Sweden, showed sternness in addressing Ukraine's issue. Although this showed relief for Europe, Biden highlighted the World War II and expressed sharing of the European concerns in war in Ukraine. Although Ukraine was a good theme to start the speech, according to the report it was "a clear-cut case of good vs. evil." (Nahal Toosi, "Biden's Speech Thrills Ukraine Watchers. Others, Not So Much." *The Politico*, 08 March 2024)

EU fines Apple over breach of antitrust laws

On 04 March, *Deutsche Welle* reported on the EU fine of EUR 1.8 billion on Apple over breach of antitrust regulations. According to the European Commission, it found Apple to

have exercised restrictions on "app developers" not allowing them to notify iOS users on alternative or cheaper music subscriptions. It said: "This is illegal under EU antitrust rules." Apple was also reported to be charging 30 per cent of fee for sales done through the apps in its system and restricting other apps within to give links to external pages. In response, the Apple confirmed to appeal against the decision and criticised saying the move would benefit Spotify which hold 56 per cent share in Europe's streaming market. ("EU fines Apple \$1.8 billion over music streaming competition." *Deutsche Welle*, 04 March 2024)

EU strikes deal banning use of single-use plastics

On 04 March, the EU signed a deal banning the use of single-plastic for fresh fruit and vegetables. This means mini hotel and fast-food restaurants will not be barred from using and switch to more sustainable packaging practice. Under the new legislation, the EU aims to bring down the piling plastic which was 188.7 kilograms as of 2021 which is considered the biggest rise in 10 years. The larger effort is to make the packaging market of the EU to be recyclable by 2030 and mandate customers to bring own containers to buy drink or ready-made foods. According to Delara Burkhardt, a German MEP: "I think what we achieved is a good compromise. It's more ambitious than what the Parliament has put on the table, it gives more clarity in some aspects." A similar ban was attempted by the EU in 2023, where it banned all single-use packaging which imposed ban on beer brewers, winemakers, cosmetic businesses and paper producers but now with focus on single-use plastics few industries will get to ease. (Leonie Cater, "EU to ban single-use plastic in deal on new green packaging rules." *Politico*, 04 March 2024)

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